

MISTRESS CALIA

CALIA
CALIA

PLEASURE
STATE



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Chapter 1

Happiness at the touch of a button with the new CaliaMate Micro. The CaliaMate Micro has all the features you know and love from the original Mate, but with an improved mental interface and expression recognition. It knows what you want, when you want it. All you have to do is own one. The CaliaMate Micro, happiness is in your hands, available now from all CaliaCorp retailers.

“That’s so dumb, come on,” Theo said, scoffing at the TV. He was reclining on an armchair in the corner of the living room, while Ben, Marc and Trish shared the sofa. Sam was sitting on the floor, cross-legged.

“It’s just a commercial,” said Sam. “Chill out.”

Theo grunted as the TV went back to the movie they were watching. He shifted in his chair, sprawling out further, letting his tall frame take it over and long brown hair dangle over the side. Marc was shorter, slim and wiry, with sharply trimmed black hair and tanned skin. They often argued, but Trish always calmed things down. She was curled up at the end of the couch, trying to focus on the movie. Sam leaned over to grab some popcorn and blocked the view, so Trish gave her a not-that-gentle kick in the side. She got out of the way quickly. Trish was strong, a blonde-haired amateur boxer, and Sam was a skinny nerd who had never been in a fight in her life. Ben said very little. He never did. He was the quiet man of the group and joined them occasionally for social gatherings. Mostly he stayed at home, and when he was with people, he remained silent most of the time. When he did talk though, he tended to make everyone laugh.

The group had been friends for years, ever since they were in school together in one of the lower-class technical academies in the Circuit District. It was home to most of the seedier businesses in town that wouldn’t fly in the Upper Quarter or the Ziggurat. The apartment the group were in, shared by Sam and Theo, was above a sex shop that moonlighted as a brothel. The sounds of sex often came through the

walls. It had reached the point where Theo found it hard to sleep without it. Sam hated it, she had always been awkward about sex, and Theo had left the details of what they were living above out when they moved in. The rent was too low to leave now, somehow not jacked up like everywhere else. Despite the damp, the cracks in the walls, the flickering lights and the regular thumps and moans and low growls from below, it made sense to stay.

“Man, screw Caliacorp though,” Theo groaned.

Trish looked over at him and shook her head, “we all hate them, but whatever, just watch the movie.”

“No, we should be doing something about them,” said Theo, “they’ve ruined basically everyone’s life.”

“I mean he’s right,” said Sam, “you either work for them, or you’re screwed. They make everything, sell everything. There might as well be no government, just them.”

Marc leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, “I hear there’s a resistance, wants to take ‘em down.”

The lights flickered. A loud groan floated up from the building below.

“That’s just a rumour,” Trish said, “no way would that happen. They’ve got cameras and guards everywhere.”

“I think it’s real,” Ben said, making everyone turn to look at him. “Surely people can’t just sit here and do nothing while a corporation controls their lives, can they?”

“Dude, find ‘em and I’ll join ‘em,” laughed Theo, “I wanna mess up anything with Calia’s name on it. That bitch.”

“If she’s even real,” Sam said.

Trish turned the TV off. “Ok, forget the movie, we’re gonna talk about this, let’s talk about it.” She stood up, her blonde hair swishing around her shoulders as she adjusted her short skirt. “CaliaCorp has ruined this city, they’re taking over the damn world, how did it even get so bad?”

“They make everything so cheap,” Theo groaned, “and nobody makes enough money to choose something else.”

Marc shook his head, “it’s more than that though man, they’ve bought up half the city, their employees live in all the good places and come down to our area to... well you know...”

“To fuck and drink and drug themselves senseless,” Ben said.

Everyone laughed. Sam uncrossed her legs and stood up beside Trish. “You know them the second you see them too, always so clean

cut and boring.”

“Some of them are pretty hot,” Marc said, “I mean I’ve seen some seriously sexy people come down here, can’t believe they need to pay for a good time.”

“Right, right,” said Sam, agreeing almost immediately. “Yeah, I guess rich people can look pretty hot with all that money for gyms and haircuts and whatever.”

“Wonder what it’s like, to just have all that cash,” said Theo, “you could do whatever you want, right?”

“Yeah,” Trish replied, “that’s why they come down here, because they know they just need to dangle a little money, we can’t exactly turn it down.”

Everyone went quiet, thinking about the ways CaliaCorp affected them. The company had grown from a small business to a manufacturer of products, to a media company, an energy company, to who knew what else. Their fingers were in whatever pie they could find. If there was a business opportunity, CaliaCorp would find it. No matter what it was, from the high-end property market right to sex work and casinos. Wherever they went, they pushed out the competition. They seemed to just enter a market and the competitors folded in a matter of weeks or months. Legislation was changed to accommodate them, more and more people worked for them every day, and those who didn’t still consume their products, watched their TV network, used their services. It had been years of expansion, from city to city, country to country. Nothing could stand in their way, and everyone in the room knew it. Total domination.

“I think I’m going to head home,” Ben said. “I’ve got some things to do tomorrow.” He stood up and followed suit. “Yeah, I’m gonna head too. Enough heavy talk for one night.” He walked out after Ben. Sam and Theo looked to Trish, wondering if she would go too. She hesitated, as if she wanted to stay and continue the conversation, solve the world’s problems and right wrongs. Instead, she grabbed her jacket from the couch, said goodnight to Sam and Theo, and left. The door clicked shut behind her and a cloud of dust floated down from a crack in the ceiling.

“Weird night,” Theo said.

“Yeah,” Sam replied, “keeps getting worse, huh?”

“Sam, what the hell are we gonna do? This place is a craphole and what are our choices? Work for CaliaCorp or live here forever?”

“It’s not fair, is it? Some company having that much power

over our lives.”

Sam looked around the room. The place was dingy, dirty and dark. Previous residents had left stains on the walls and the furniture in ill repair, couch torn, chairs cracked, tables scraped. Cracks lined the ceiling and black mold dotted the corners. The low-power bulbs hardly helped, but anything brighter was more than their landlord would pay for. Sam and Theo had been there for two years and every day something new seemed to go wrong.

“I think I’ll turn in,” said Sam.

“Yeah, no worries. I might just chill out here and watch TV for a while. Need to relax.”

“Just keep the volume down alright?”

“Sure, goodnight.”

“Night.”

Sam went to her room, leaving Theo alone in the living room. The low moans of pleasure from downstairs leaked through the thin walls and floor. More noticeable now, in the silence left in the wake of visitors. He picked up the remote and flicked through channels until he landed on one of CaliaCorp’s many. Like a lot of their entertainment, it was essentially just softcore pornography masquerading as plot-driven drama or reality show. Theo paused on it because he saw a tall woman in a business suit. Her pencil skirt accentuated her long, shapely legs and a tight jacket and silk blouse hugged her figure. She leaned over the desk of her employee and gave him a great view of her cleavage. Theo loved tall girls. There was something enticing about the show too, the music maybe. It just made him feel relaxed and horny.

Theo reached down into his pants and started stroking his cock absent-mindedly. It was how he usually watched TV. The woman on screen slowly unbuttoned her blouse. Each time she popped a button her cleavage bulged further out, and Theo stroked himself a little faster. Soon all the buttons were open, and she stripped off her jacket, then stood over her employee holding the bottom of either side of the blouse and showing off her toned, tanned stomach and breasts in a black lace bra. She looked stunning, towering over her employee, a meek man behind her desk. With a smirk the woman crooked her finger and beckoned him to stand before her, then when he was looking up at her gorgeous face, she pointed a finger to the ground, and he fell to his knees.

Theo liked tall girls, but he always saw himself as dominant in the bedroom. He just liked how long their legs were, but this show got

him hot. His cock was rock hard and the low, pulsing rhythm that played in place of dialogue a massage for his ears. The man on his knees began to kiss and lick the woman's patent black heels and Theo's mouth fell open, drool leaking from the sides and falling onto his chest. It was so sexy to see that woman just completely dominate her employee, as she kicked him over and sat on the desk above him, dangling her shoe from her foot and swaying it rhythmically as the employee dragged himself up off the floor. Theo stared wide eyed, totally entranced by the swinging shoe at the end of a long leg encased in stockings. The woman's legs were crossed and the subtle line of muscle that ran down her thigh was enough to send Theo into a rapture of pleasure. She was incredible. She let her shoe fall to the floor and put her foot into the mouth of the employee, who sucked on it eagerly. With her other foot she kicked his hands until he reached down to his crotch and opened his trousers, revealing his hard cock. Then she began to stroke slowly up and down it with her nylon-clad toes.

Theo felt every stroke as he pumped his own cock in rhythm with her motion. Her long, perfect legs going up and down and up and down and her toes being sucked, her pretty little toes. He drooled even more, and the rhythm of the music picked up as the employee began to quiver and twitch. Theo did the same, he felt pre-cum slide from the tip of his penis and the tall woman peeled off her shirt, leaving just the bra and skirt. She expertly manipulated the employee with her feet and looked straight at the camera, straight at Theo. With a smirk she started to caress her cleavage and nod. Theo nodded with her. Leaving one hand to squeeze her nipple underneath her bra, she held the other one up and began to close her fingers down. The employee and Theo were ready to explode.

She let one finger fall, two, three. Theo was on the edge, so close and he knew he had to wait. He did not think about why he knew, or how, it just made sense. Another finger down, one left. Theo desperately pumped himself and her foot rapidly stroked her employee's throbbing member until she dropped the last finger and Theo and the man on screen exploded, shooting hot, sticky cum everywhere. The woman pulled her foot from the employee's mouth, and replaced it with the other, which was now soaked in cum, sticky white globs all over the black stockings. She held it up to the employee's mouth and he licked at it, grimacing as he lapped up every drop of his cum. Theo looked down at his hand, covered in the same

substance, then back at the screen. He shook his head.

“No way,” he mumbled.

He rubbed his hand on the couch to clean it off and went to bed.

Chapter 2

Ben looked up at the enormous tower of glass and steel that stood in the centre of the city. CaliaCorp headquarters. The largest building in the city, and the world. It was 182 stories tall and inside thousands of workers milled about in offices, restaurants, several gyms, pools, conference rooms, a cinema and whatever else you could imagine taking up space in the headquarters of the biggest company on the planet. CaliaCorp overtook all their competition, and quickly, relatively speaking. The building should not even exist, it was objected to by almost everyone in the city when the plans went in, including the mayor and most major politicians. They quickly changed their minds after meeting with CaliaCorp. Ben wondered what they had done to sway such influential people, then smirked when he realised how easily the wheels of government were greased.

He took a deep breath and walked up the stairs that led to the entrance. Through the main revolving door, a massive lobby greeted him, with marble floors, wooden walls, and gold trim on absolutely everything. It was incredibly glamorous and tremendously impressive. As was the gorgeous receptionist sitting behind a desk beside the lifts. She had a short brown bob haircut, huge blue eyes accentuated with eyeliner flicked up at the sides, and an almost unprofessionally-low-cut black dress. She leaned forward and batted her eyelashes at Ben as he approached her. He wore a suit and slung a satchel across his shoulder, trying to be as professional as possible, but this woman was incredibly distracting.

“Hi there, how can I help you today?” she asked with a beaming smile.

Ben’s hands were shaking, and he gulped before he spoke. “Hi, um, I have a job interview on... I think it’s on floor 40.”

The woman leaned forward, still smiling, and put her elbows on the desk in front of her, pressing her breasts together, further accentuating an amazing cleavage. Ben glanced, then looked back to

her eyes, turning red. She raised her eyebrow just a tiny bit.

“Go right on up,” she chirped, “and good luck honey.”

Ben nodded his thanks and hurried to the lift. His cock was being very uncooperative and starting to grow and he practically threw himself into the thing and pushed the button for 40 as quickly as he could. He hoped nobody else would walk in but just as the doors began to close a hand with long blue fingernails reached in and it reopened. Ben’s eyes widened as an even more beautiful woman walked into the lift. She had long black hair, pulled back in a tight ponytail, almost as tight as the suit she wore, a grey jacket and skirt over a blue satin blouse that matched her nails. Her blue heels matched them too, and the black tights she wore made them pop. Ben found himself looking down at them, then up her legs to her tight ass and slim waist and ample chest and then he came face to face with her.

“You could have held the lift for me,” she said.

Ben frowned, “I didn’t realise, sorry.”

She groaned and turned around to press a button, then stayed facing away from Ben as the doors closed and the lift began its slow climb to the fortieth floor. Ben found himself staring at her ass as they moved up, it was incredible, he imagined she must be very fit to have such a curvy behind but a tiny waistline. Then he tried to shake the feeling off and remember why he was there in the first place. He needed a job, and he needed to get out of the awful part of the city he lived in. There was nothing else available but CaliaCorp. He didn’t want to tell his friends because of course they would be angry, but if he could get away, and help them get away too, maybe they would understand. He just wanted a better life, to be free of the worries and stresses of scraping cash together for rent and food. All that worry, all the time, it took a toll. The job would make life so much easier. Great salary, free meals, health and dental. And now it turned out that lots of absurdly attractive women worked there too. He hoped it was the right decision.

The lift stopped at floor 33 and the woman got out without even looking back at him. Ben watched her ass sway back and forth as she walked away into some sort of lab area. He could just about make out some men in a glass-walled office in VR headsets. The woman walked into that lab and the doors of the lift closed before Ben could see any more. A few moments later it opened on floor 40.

Ben stepped out onto black carpeting and white walls with gold-framed paintings lining them. Each one showed a surprisingly erotic scene, for an office. Painted in oil with a renaissance style, they

were elaborate scenes of mostly BDSM. Men and women chained to walls and floors, caged, kneeling on all fours being whipped. Each one extremely detailed and tremendously impressive, masterworks of erotic art. Ben found himself staring at each of them for a moment as he walked down the long corridor toward a big black door, which he assumed would take him to the room he would be interviewed in. By the time he got there his head spun with arousal from the paintings. He was not particularly kinky, but the detail and beauty of the women in the paintings really got to him.

He pushed open the black door and emerged into a room with floor to ceiling windows and a single desk, with three women behind it.

“Ah, Mr. Wheeler, take a seat,” said the one in the centre. She was in her forties, Ben guessed, and had an aura of power. She must be in charge. Her shoulder-length brown hair was sharply trimmed, framing an angular face with piercing blue eyes. She wore a business suit which hid her figure, but her eyes alone were enough to make Ben feel weak, especially after the barrage of sex he just saw. Maybe that was the idea, to put him off balance and see how he reacted.

To the left of her sat a younger woman with a pixie cut and cute, rounded face. Freckles peppered her nose and cheeks, with bright pink gloss on her lips and a low-cut top. She looked dressed for a party, not a job interview, but the style suited her, she was undeniably pretty. To the right was a woman with long red hair and a green blouse, open and revealing an ample cleavage. The rest of the women’s bodies were hidden behind the desk, but Ben caught a glimpse of high heels as he pulled out a chair to sit down opposite them, opening his satchel and pulling out three copies of his resume. He placed them on the table and pushed them toward each woman in turn.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” he said.

The younger woman smiled at him. She looked so sweet and innocent. “I’m Lucy, head of marketing. If you get the position we’ll be working very closely together, so I hope you like fun videos and memes.”

Ben smiled, “Sure do, that’s what attracted me to the job.”

The job was working as a video and image editor for CaliaCorp’s marketing division, targeting marketing at 18-30 year olds. Ben was a fiend for social media, so he knew everything about the platforms and styles people were into.

“Aisling Sugars, Acquisition and Retention. Your resume

doesn't have a huge amount of experience, Mr. Wheeler," the red-haired woman said. "What makes you think you could work here?"

Ben cleared his throat. He knew that question would come and was prepared for it. "Well, I may not have a lot of professional experience, but I am an avid user of all the same platforms as CaliaCorp, as you'll see on my resume, I have produced lots of videos myself and for some friends, just not in an official workplace."

"And I'm Stephanie Miller, the woman in the centre said with a smile. "Good answer, but can you operate in a corporate environment?"

Ben looked at her and felt as if she were looking through him, like he was nothing to her. It was a strange and uncomfortable feeling, but oddly arousing as he began to picture her in one of the scenes he saw outside.

"Mr. Wheeler?"

"Sorry, just thinking about the question," Ben managed. "Well, I am a team player and a self-starter so I can thrive in any—"

"Benjamin, that's what everyone says," Aisling, the redheaded woman said. "Can you be directed by a superior?"

"Oh, uh, yeah of course."

"Good, because that's very important here."

"Yes," Stephanie said, "we have a very strict hierarchy. You must be able to follow any direction from your supervisor."

"Got it," said Ben.

The woman with the pink lips, Lucy, leaned forward and grinned. "You gotta do what I say ok?"

Ben laughed, "sure, Ms?"

"Mistress," Lucy said.

Ben paused for a moment, surprised. Lucy started to laugh, then Ben joined in.

"Just Lucy is fine, babe," she said. Ben nodded his agreement.

"Ignore Lucy," Stephanie said, "we are a serious workplace, we ask for your commitment to the company, and you are rewarded in kind. Does that sound good?"

"Yes, Ms. Miller," Ben said.

"Good, very good. I really must emphasise that we prioritise discipline here, and you will be expected to dress and act appropriately. You have probably gotten used to a casual environment, but we are extremely disciplined here."

"I understand," said Ben. He started to lose focus on the interview. One of the three women wore a wonderfully scented

perfume and there seemed to be a low humming background noise that he could feel at the back of his head.

“Mr. Wheeler,” Aisling said, “you do understand what we mean by discipline, don’t you?”

“I think so?”

“It’s important to obey your superiors in the workplace, is it not?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Yes Miss Sugars,” Aisling said.

“Oh, yes Miss Sugars,” Ben replied.

“Very good.”

“Benjamin, I think we’re making ourselves clear, but Lucy has a short presentation to assist you with understanding your role in the organisation. Assuming you want the job of course,” Stephanie said.

“Y-yes, I do, uh, Ms. Miller.”

“Good boy; Lucy.”

Lucy bounced up from the desk, and Ben saw her pleated pink miniskirt bounce with her, revealing the briefest glimpse of her light blue panties. She had incredible legs, toned, and tanned to perfection. He focused on them as she walked to the left-hand wall and pushed a button, lowering a large projector screen and closing black blinds that blocked the light from the outside world.

“You ready Benny?” Lucy giggled.

“Yes Miss.”

“Mistress, Benny,” she laughed.

“Yes Mistress,” Ben smiled.

Lucy pressed another button, and the screen filled with pink, then a pattern began to emerge, a swirling spiral going round and round and finally the CaliaCorp logo emerging from it. A woman’s voice began to speak.

CaliaCorp welcomes you, new employee. As part of the family at CaliaCorp, your obedience to our rules and regulations is paramount to your success. Pay attention as we outline how you can serve CaliaCorp as an effective and enthusiastic employee.

A series of images followed, all underneath that swirling spiral. Ben felt dizzy, something was wrong, yet he could not look away from the screen. It showed women in suits with tight pencil skirts and long legs and big chests directing people doing manual labour and toiling at computers. A strange selection of images, but Ben thought maybe they were making a metaphorical point about discipline or something. That

was the best he could muster. The spiral made him confused.

Employees will obey their superiors at all times. Any command given will be followed.

The images changed again, the employees were suddenly shirtless. Something was definitely wrong. Ben tried to get up but felt someone holding him down with their hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t move until it’s over,” Stephanie said.

You will become a loyal servant of CaliaCorp through your work here. You will be rewarded for your efforts as we see fit. There is no resistance.

The people on the screen were shown kneeling now, kissing the feet of the suited women. What on Earth was happening, Ben wondered. With the sense that remained he tried to open his mouth to speak.

“Ms. Mill-“

“Shhh boy,” she said. He obeyed instantly.

Obedient, diligent employees are happy employees. Good employees will be rewarded. Service to CaliaCorp is paramount to your happiness. CaliaCorp. All will join us.

Ben reeled. He felt someone touching his legs, hands moving to his crotch. He looked to his left to see Aisling rubbing him. She frowned.

“Eyes on the screen, boy.”

Ben obeyed as she opened his trousers and began to stroke his cock. It was rock hard.

Pleasure is your reward for service. Give your all to CaliaCorp. Give your all to CaliaCorp. Good employees give their all to CaliaCorp.

“Give my all,” mumbled Ben.

Aisling smiled at Stephanie. Lucy giggled and clapped quietly. Ben twitched and thrust in the chair, squirming with pleasure as the screen filled with images of people on all fours, with women in business suits using them as footstools, holding their heads down with their heels or berating and whipping them.

Give your all to CaliaCorp and embrace your new position.

“Give us your all, Benny,” Lucy smirked.

Ben erupted, shooting a hot, sticky mess all over the floor at his feet. The video stopped and he shook his head, looking around the

room as light came back when the blinds opened.

“W-what’s going on?” he asked.

“Clean up your mess, now,” ordered Stephanie.

Ben looked down at the floor where globs of cum sat on the carpet. He looked around for some napkins or tissues.

“With your tongue,” Aisling demanded.

Ben dropped to his knees and put his head down, but he stopped short of licking up his mess.

“Do it puppy,” Lucy giggled.

“Now,” Stephanie added, before putting her heel on the back of his head and pressing his face into the carpet.

Ben licked up his cum until he could see none left. Stephanie released him and he rocked back up to his knees.

“Good boy. Welcome to CaliaCorp.”

Lucy walked over to him, smiled, and clicked her fingers. “Oh and, forget, Benny.”

He blinked rapidly, then the world faded away.

Chapter 3

“We can’t just let them get away with it. It’s completely unfair!” Theo shouted.

He was at home watching TV again with Trish, Marc, Sam, and Ben. As usual, Theo sat in his favoured armchair, Sam sat on the floor and the other three shared the couch. A news report detailed CaliaCorp’s latest acquisition, a huge swathe of the city including a large section of the Circuit District. That usually meant massive demolition followed by the erection of huge towers for CaliaCorp employees to live in. It seemed as though more and more of the city worked for them, and they all needed somewhere to go. That meant the group of people sitting in their dingy room would have to move on if things continued as they had for the last few years. They were lucky this time, the area CaliaCorp purchased was a few blocks away, but it seemed just a matter of time before the company owned every inch of the city, and only their employees could live there.

“We should protest,” Trish said. She bristled with anger. Some of her other friends lived in the area that would now be exclusively for CaliaCorp staff. They would be homeless or forced to leave the city altogether. None of them had been in touch for a little while, she thought, maybe she should check in and see if they needed to crash with her.

“I think we should just do something crazy. Like smash up their building or... I don’t know,” Theo said. “Really send ‘em a message.”

“That doesn’t sound... safe,” Sam said, “like, they’ll just throw you in jail.”

“Yeah but at least someone will do something,” said Theo.

“I guess,” Sam replied, “there just has to be, you know, a less dangerous way to do something.”

“We could hack ‘em,” said Marc, “I mean, I’ve got some skills.” He clasped his fingers together and cracked them with a smirk.

“You’re barely able to hack into your own emails,” quipped

Theo. Marc scowled.

“We should just leave it alone,” said Ben.

“What?” Trish shouted. “Let them get away with ruining our lives?”

“Are they though? They bought some buildings,” said Ben, “all we’re doing is putting people in danger if we try anything crazy.”

“The hell happened to you dude?” Theo snorted. “You used to hate them.”

“I... I do, I just don’t think there’s anything we can do. You can’t resist a corporation like that.”

“The hell we can’t,” Theo said. “I’m not just sitting around while our world gets destroyed.”

“Yeah but, maybe Ben’s right,” said Sam. “How do you fight a company that big? They control everything. They just... take over and nobody can do anything about it. We’re just some broke Circuiters.”

Everyone fell silent. Theo shook his head. He knew Sam was right, but he had a hard time admitting it. Ben’s words demoralised the room, turning their righteous indignation to solemn sadness.

Trish stood from her seat and faced everyone. She dressed as she usually was, in a pair of black boots, fishnet stockings and a black skirt, a ripped t-shirt with some band’s logo on it. Her blonde hair swayed about with the movement of her head and her thick black eyeliner accentuated her deep eyes. Black lipstick completed the look, she was a total badass, at least in the eyes of Sam, who quietly harboured feelings for Trish since she met her, never spoken.

“We can’t just... give up,” Trish began, “We’re losing friends, losing places to go, to eat, to go out, we’re losing our city. Our homes. Seriously, come on.”

Everyone remained silent for a while. Finally, Ben stood and walked to Trish, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Trish, look, I get it, I do, but there’s no sense resisting them, they always get what they want.”

Trish eyed him suspiciously. Ben had always been a little weird, but this was beyond even that. She brushed his hand off her shoulder and stepped away. “Everyone else agree with Ben?”

“I don’t agree with him, but he’s not wrong, is he?” said Theo. “Plus, it’s not even our places they bought.”

“Yeah Trish, face it, we’re just a bunch of losers in the worst part of town. We can’t like, buy property from them or anything,” Theo added.

Sam scratched her head. She wanted to have a solution, to be

able to help Trish and maybe just impress her too, but she had nothing. “I’m sorry Trish, you know I’m on your side, but... I have no idea what to do.”

“You see,” said Ben, smiling, “it’s ok to be mad, but knowing we can’t do anything about it is ok too.”

Trish looked at Ben’s strange, awkward smile. He creeped her out. “Dude, I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I don’t like it.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ben said, “I’m just... being realistic.”

“Whatever, I’m out of here,” Trish said. She was angry. Angry at her friends for being so meek, angry at herself for not having any answers. The door slammed behind her before she even realised she had stormed out. Not that it mattered, they were getting nowhere. Instead, she walked out onto a rainy street. Dilapidated buildings were all around her, dwarfed by the towers CaliaCorp built, all gold and glass and steel. Pink and blue neon lights buzzed above filthy storefronts and tiny restaurants in the grime below. Steam wafted from vents and grates in the ground, flickering lights flashed in puddles. Noise leaked from cracks in walls and open windows. Arguments, sobbing, shouting, sex. So many people crammed into a tiny space. All humanity meshed together. The last real part of the city left. She passed by old people struggling with their groceries and young people dressed in fraying, torn clothes. The street beneath her feet was muddy and messy. Everything had been getting worse since CaliaCorp came along. There was no local government help to tidy up, no programs to assist anyone. Everything just went to CaliaCorp. Everything was CaliaCorp.

Trish arrived back at her place, a faded brown door beside a red-lit noodle bar. She fumbled her keys into the lock and went up the dimly-lit stairs to the single room flat above the bar. Posters of old bands who long since played their last show covered the walls. All Trish had to her name was a single bed, tiny couch and tinier TV and her guitar and clothes, and one more thing under her pillow. She threw herself down on the bed and pulled it out. A vibrator she bought in the local sex shop, the one beneath Sam and Theo’s place. It was low on batteries, and she could not afford more, so she only used it when she was either very horny or extremely stressed. Right now, it was the latter.

Pulling her skirt up, Trish slid her finger over her panties and moaned. It felt good to just stop thinking about all her problems for a little while and focus on herself. As the pleasure grew and she felt increasingly aroused, fantasies began to swirl in her mind. She

pictured herself, powerful and strong in leather, no, latex, with a riding crop in her hand, standing over a woman. The woman knelt at her feet, cowering before her over-the-knee boots. She looked up and Trish's mind raced to fill in the blanks of who she was dominating today. It was always dominating. Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman. The power turned her on. She rubbed herself faster, still over the black lace panties, taking her time before touching herself more intimately.

Sam's face appeared; sweet, innocent Sam. Trish had fantasised about her for years. She was so nice and kind and that made it all the naughtier to think about making her prostrate herself, making Sam obey her every command and punishing her for failure. The thought was enough to send her finger underneath her panties and inside the top of her pussy, teasing her clit and grunting with the added sensation of skin against it. In her mind, Sam lapped at her, licking up and down Trish's lips and flicking her tongue in and out while Trish held her head down there, letting her stop to breathe for a moment before she started again. The thought of Sam's sweet face covered in her juices was so hot Trish completely forgot why she was upset getting home. All that mattered was making sure fantasy Sam did as she was told. Of course, she messed up and Trish struck her on her bare behind with the riding crop and pulled at her hair until she yelped.

The fantasy became more fun, and Trish needed a little extra to push things over the edge. She pushed the vibrator under her panties, then flicked it on. The gentle rhythm caressed her in just the right way and she let out a soft moan. Fantasy Sam licked her harder and faster. She pictured herself looking down at Sam, their friendship ruined by Sam's submission, the shy girl now fully under Trish's control. The idea of it made her even more turned on and she turned up the vibration. Sam would be such a good little slave for her, she could have her move in and do all the chores and maybe let her cum once in a while as a reward.

Somewhere deep down, Trish thought she would say yes if she asked, but the reality was that she was scared to risk their friendship or be rejected. Sam was a dorky girl, but you never know if someone really wants you. Fantasy Sam was different. She only cared about Trish's pleasure. Her tongue expertly moved over Trish's clit as she approached climax and she held down the vibrator, fully lost in the fantasy that it was Sam's mouth melting her into a puddle of lust. It was what she wanted more than anything, to control and dominate and be serviced by a willing and eager pet. Sam would be so good, so good at fucking and licking and stroking and begging for release while Trish

denied it and whipped and caned her.

Trish felt right on the edge, thinking about Sam strapped down to her bed while she used her mouth like a sex toy, gagging her so she couldn't talk, just thrusting her tongue into her over and over and over until... the batteries died.

"Fuck," Trish said and threw the dead device on the floor. It bounced across the hard wood and stopped. She used her fingers to try to finish herself off, but the fantasy faded and now she felt angrier than ever. Angry at CaliaCorp and the fact she couldn't afford batteries if she wanted to eat and angry at fantasy Sam for not getting her off quick enough, useless subby cow. She gave up and pulled her hand from her panties, pushed her skirt back down and lay there, staring up at the cracked, damp ceiling in her tiny apartment. The smell of noodles wafted up from below. Dinner would have to satisfy her instead of her toy.

Chapter 4

Ben arrived at CaliaCorp in a suit and tie with his satchel slung over his shoulder. Standing at the base of its steps, he looked up at the enormity of the building. It dwarfed all that surrounded it, a monument to woman's triumph over nature, or her hubris, Ben was unsure. With a deep breath in, he ascended the steps and entered the lobby. He knew where to go, floor 64, where he would meet with Lucy, the extremely cute girl who sat on his interview panel. From what he remembered, she was bubbly and outgoing, dressed casually and seemed like a fun boss, despite being quite young. She had to have been hired straight out of college, because no way she was older than 25. Ben was 29, so it was not as though he were ancient compared to her, but her energy and enthusiasm made him feel as though a generation separated them. Maybe it was her never being broke and living in the Circuit District or somewhere like it. She probably grew up with wealthy parents in a CaliaCorp block, with all the swimming pools and indoor gardens and AI maids, and whatever else they put in them, Ben had never so much as stepped through the door of a CaliaCorp building before his interview.

Passing through the cavernous lobby and all of its golden, sparkling decor, he stepped into an empty lift and pushed the button for the 64th floor. No-one followed him in this time, and the lobby was quiet, the receptionist barely looked at him. As the lift travelled up, he could swear the music that played in the lift picked up interference or had a weird track under it. It was as if a woman's voice were droning on just too low to be heard clearly. If he strained to listen, he thought some words were coming through, but that made him more confused, so he relaxed and waited for the lift to journey up the impossibly huge tower and deposit him where he needed to be. Even inside the lift was glamorous. More gold ran down the walls in faux-drips, as if spilling from the top of the tower and covering everything below it. Frosted glass separated the gold drips, reflecting Ben back in broken segments. The journey up took several minutes, but finally the lift pinged, and

the doors slid open.

Ben's jaw dropped as soon as he looked into the workspace. It was a rave. Loud music thumping from huge speakers dotted around the place, blackout blinds covering the windows and blacklights illuminating everything in blues and pinks and greens, with fluorescent flashes everywhere, from graffiti daubed on the walls reading things like *Calia Forever* and *Lucy is Life* to the skimpy clothing everyone wore. The women were in brightly coloured bikini tops and shorts or skirts and the men were all wearing swimming shorts. Most were in fantastic shape, better than Ben, but that was probably explained by the fact everyone danced around as though in some sort of hedonistic ritual. No-one so much as looked at him as he emerged from the lift in his grey suit, feeling completely lost and out of place. There were no desks, just a giant dance floor with a disco ball and strobe lights flashing constantly. Ben just stopped and stared, not sure what he should do.

Then the music stopped. At the opposite side of the room he saw her, Lucy, as gorgeous as she was in the interview, sitting on what looked like a throne, with a man on either side on all fours. She pushed a button on the chair and the blinds slowly opened, then stood.

“Alright team, back to your desks.”

Everyone scampered away into rooms behind the dance floor, leaving just Lucy and Ben. She started walking toward him, her miniskirt sashaying along with her hips and her breasts in a tight bikini top rocking back and forth. Ben tried not to stare, but the wicked grin she wore seemed to tell him she liked it. Her eyes were big and wide, accentuated by thick eyeliner, and as before, bright pink lipstick shone on her soft, wet lips. Ben licked his own as he stared at her. Her pink hair, which glowed under the blacklights, looked more like candy floss in daylight. It was cute and sexy at the same time, cut short and showcasing her sharp features, softened somewhat by rosy cheeks and the freckles that crossed her nose.

She was beautiful, Ben decided.

“Not really dressed for this environment, are you buddy?” she chuckled.

“Um, no Miss...”

“Just Lucy, babe, we're chill here. You'll get used to it super fast.” As she said that, she peered into his eyes and he felt weak, as though he had no choice in the matter. Ben gulped.

“So, what am I going to do today, uh, Lucy?”

She bounced from one foot to the other, bobbing her head back

and forth. “Let’s get you a tour!” she exclaimed. “Follow me.”

Lucy walked around the edge of the dance floor to the left-hand side of the room. There was a separate room there, and a matching one on the right side of the dance floor too. At the first room on the left Lucy opened the glass door and revealed a plush, modern office. This was more like what Ben had expected. Cool air breezed from vents on the ceiling and six women worked at large, lavish desks of marble with rose pink trim. They were typing at computers that were dwarfed by the size of their workspaces, which were covered in reports, books and trinkets. One even larger desk was at the opposite end of the room.

“That’s mine,” Lucy said, “but this room is managers only, let me show you where you’ll be working.”

She shut the door and walked Ben over to the room on the right-hand side. From outside it looked like the room the managers worked in. Ben expected plush, comfortable, modern work areas, and he would walk into more marble and pink. Somewhere a voice in Ben’s head screamed at him that no, this was not normal, that he had walked into a barely contained orgy, and he should leave, but a warm wave of pleasure flowed through him as he quelled the stirring confusion.

“Take a look,” Lucy said and opened the door to the other office.

Ben’s jaw went slack. He stared in at what looked like a sweatshop... or a dungeon, than an office. There were lots of people, all huddled over computers in tiny spaces. Each cubicle, if you could call it that, was so small the occupant’s neighbours almost rubbed shoulders with each other. There was no large desk in the room, instead a set of cages were at the opposite end, and inside three men were chained. Every single person in the room was dressed in little more than underwear. Many appeared to be completely nude. Dim lighting hung from the ceiling, and the low glow of computer screens illuminated each person’s face. They all seemed to be in a daze, mindlessly typing away at keyboards, barely moving otherwise.

“Are you ready to see your desk?” Lucy asked.

Ben hesitated. He had no idea what to make of it all. He knew that it was wrong, but there was something pushing him to stay, an insistent niggling feeling that he should work here, should work for Lucy and serve CaliaCorp and every time the thought entered his head to do just that, a jolt of pleasure shot through him.

“I... this is very unexpected.”

Lucy smiled, unfazed by his reluctance. “I know we do things a little differently here, but you’ll be so happy serving CaliaCorp, and you

will be rewarded for your *hard* work.”

Ben shuddered as another wave of pleasure coursed through him. He wanted to be rewarded. He wanted to make Lucy happy. He also wanted to run for the lift, get the hell out of the building and never go back. Those two conflicting desires left him frozen in the doorway.

“Are you ready, Benny?”

He swallowed and remained frozen. The part of his mind that knew it was a bad idea was rattling against the cage it was locked in, roaring, bellowing, screaming to be freed and save Ben from whatever on Earth Lucy and CaliaCorp were doing. While he stood there, Lucy leaned close and whispered in his ear, while putting a hand on his crotch.

“Baby Benny, Lucy is your boss now, and you’re going to be a good boy for me, aren’t you?”

Her voice sounded sweet and soft and her breath warm and inviting. She smelled of raspberries. Ben shuddered at her words.

“Come on, let’s get you to work,” she said as she moved her hand away and walked into the room.

This time, Ben followed her, watching her legs as she strutted to an empty seat. She pulled out a chair and smiled, gesturing for Ben to sit in it. He walked to the chair and looked into Lucy’s eyes. Her big, beautiful eyes. Eyes that shouted surrender while promising the most exquisite pleasures. He sat down at the desk, feeling the warmth of the two barely clothed people on either side of him. They did nothing to indicate they noticed his presence. Now sitting, Ben looked up at Lucy, who gazed down at him with a half-smile.

“You’re going to finish your induction now, and then get started with working on some very important projects for me.”

“Ok,” Ben mumbled.

“Good boy.”

She leaned down over him, letting her breasts rest on his shoulder as she did, and pushed a button to turn on the computer. The softness of her body made Ben feel an electricity on his skin. Lucy was so pretty, so cute and clever. He felt eager to start working for her. A moment later, when she stood up, he could feel that electric surge dissipate and started to wonder why exactly he felt such an urge to work in the most bizarre office he had ever seen. CaliaCorp, he knew, was evil, but there was far more going on than he could figure out, and whenever Lucy came near him all those thoughts that he tried to piece together seemed to fall apart. Each time he tried to reconstruct them they became more confused. The only thing that made sense anymore was

the feeling of pleasure and purpose that he got when Lucy was there.

“Look at the screen babe,” Lucy chirped.

Ben looked and saw a familiar pattern. Suddenly, the thoughts coalesced into a clear, consistent message. Run. Run away. They want to brainwash you. They want to control you. Run. Ben. Run.

“Stare at it baby,” Lucy said, her words like dripping honey.

Ben shook his head and turned away, spinning the chair around and trying to stand up. Instead, Lucy pressed her hands against his shoulders and pushed him back down.

“No resistance. Only obedience.”

She stared at him, through him. Her eyes pierced his, her words pushed their way into his mind. He could merely stare at her.

“Sit down and watch, and you’ll be rewarded.”

He did his best to resist, but the thought of a reward flashed in his mind. Lucy’s soft, tender hand on his cock. Her legs wrapped around him. Her pink lips around the head of his penis. Her feet in his mouth. A collar clamped on his neck. Despite everything going on around him, every cogent thought in his head, Ben felt his cock stiffen. Lucy glanced down at it and licked her lips.

“You’re getting it Benny. Thinking about all the things I could do to you.”

He was. He could no longer help himself. She was so close, her hands on him. It was too much. The smell of her perfume, the subtle glint of sweat on her body, the gentle flaring of her nostrils. He felt as if he were falling in love with her. For a moment he wondered if the other people in the room had gone through what he had, and as he looked into Lucy’s wide eyes, he knew he truly loved her and only she could fulfill him.

“That’s it, weaker and weaker,” she said. “Turn and look at the screen.”

Ben could no longer fight it, Lucy was his boss, Lucy was so smart and strong and sexy. He turned his chair and looked at the screen, at the spiral he knew from somewhere else deep in his memories. Lucy’s hands began to massage his shoulders, and he felt her warm breath on his cheek as she leaned close to his ear.

“Watch and submit for Lucy, all you ever want is to work for me, isn’t that right?”

Ben nodded. Of course, she was right. A flash of resistance, a fleeting thought, told him that he needed to question it, that she was not right, that he should get up and leave before it was too late.

But for Ben, it already was, and as Lucy’s hands kneaded his

shoulders, that final conscious thought slid away, and Ben was lost.

Chapter 5

“Hey, have you heard from Ben?” said Marc.

He was on a call with Sam. She didn’t speak for a while. Marc tapped his fingers against his desk. In his apartment it was dull, the primary light source being his three computer monitors. All different sizes, one vertically positioned on the right, the others horizontal. The one on the right had lines of code trickling down it all the time. Sometimes work or a project, sometimes a screensaver. Multiple empty mugs littered the desk, alongside discarded wrappers from CaliaBars, a high-protein, low-sugar snack designed to provide low-cost sustenance to people on the fringes of society. They had become popular with anyone doing marathon coding sessions or similar all-hours projects. Marc had a hard time getting anything done without having a few.

“No answer still,” Sam said, finally.

“You called him just now?”

“Yeah, it just rang out.”

“Where is he? It’s been four days. Trish and Theo can’t reach him either.”

Silence again. Marc glanced at the left monitor. On it, pop-ups appeared for CaliaCorp products and services. He rolled his eyes. Each one of course came with the familiar image of her. Calia. Real woman or corporate mascot, the debate raged on forums and discussion sites for a long time. No one knew. Whoever she was, she had been the same age for a long, long time, so definitely hiding some terrible secret. Like that book with the painting Marc couldn’t recall the name of.

“Marc, I’m worried.”

Marc took his own moment of silence. He was worried too. Ben acted aloof, distant at times, but he was always online. Terminally so. It seemed unthinkable for him to be unavailable. When he was

busy, he'd give a curt reply and that would be that. He never just ignored all contact. Ever.

"Me too, Sam."

"What should we do? Should we call the police?"

"You think they'll even care about someone missing? It happens all the time."

"Yeah, but... Marc we can't just do nothing, can we?"

Sam's words were drowned out by another popup. The CaliaCorp computers were good value, but they came with a ton of ads and even with a dedicated modding community to remove them, some slipped through with each new update. This one buzzed in Marc's ear and made him unable to focus on the call with Sam.

You can be free of worry and stress today. Don't be afraid to make a change that could make all the difference. Free yourself of concern over money, bills, or housing and join CaliaCorp. Now hiring. Just click and apply now. There's a place for everyone at CaliaCorp.

The popup hung on the screen with a glowing, pulsing 'apply now' button tempting Marc to click it. Instead, he ignored it and focused on Sam.

"Sorry, popup. What did you say?"

"I don't remember. Sorry, it's hard to focus. I'm just... I can't imagine why he wouldn't call or message or anything."

Marc looked at the popup, then clicked to close it.

"I have one idea."

"What?"

"CaliaCorp."

"Hang on, what do you mean?"

"Sam, he was acting weird and... they're hiring, right?"

"They're always hiring and he's always weird."

"I guess. Where the hell is he?"

"We should report it Marc, we have to try."

"He could just be sick, I guess?"

"Can you imagine him so sick he wouldn't be online? Wouldn't send a single message or post on some social account?"

Marc took a slow, deep breath. Another popup demanded his attention. He turned away from the screen and exhaled, letting the air ripple over his lips.

"Let's get Theo and Trish, and go to Ben's place, ok?" he said.

"Ok," said Sam.

She ended the call and Marc turned back to face his computer. The popups were growing in number at an alarming rate. Each one

featured the same woman. Calia. Brown hair, blue eyes, red lips. She always looked the same. Always the picture-perfect woman, smirking at him from an image of her at a beach or in a forest. Each image advertising something new. One drew Marc's eye particularly well. Calia, the world's most overtly sexual corporate mascot, in a plunging red dress, leaning forward so her cleavage was easy to stare at. She beckoned with a crooked finger and Marc grabbed his mouse. He felt a sudden compulsion to click on the image, then stopped himself.

As he did, he could have sworn she frowned, but after a blink, she was back to beckoning him seductively to click. Instead, Marc closed all the popups and opened his messaging app to talk to his friends. There, Sam asked for them to meet an hour later to check Ben's apartment out. Another popup opened, covering the messaging app with a looping video of Calia smiling and moving her hips back and forth in a rhythmical motion. Marc was transfixed. She wore a black pleated skirt this time, and white blouse. He found it hard to take his eyes off the image. It drew him in, just as it was designed to. Marc knew what was happening but felt powerless to resist it. Calia's image was one he had become accustomed to. Her face adorned so many products and she appeared in so many advertisements on TV, online, everywhere. The video had sound, he realised, coming faintly from the pair of headphones resting beside his keyboard. The faint voice urged him to do something, and Marc picked up the headphones and put them on before he could stop himself.

Wouldn't you like to do that? Wouldn't you like to show me how wonderful you are? Just one click, and you can really impress me.

Marc hovered over the popup for a moment, his hand trembling on the mouse. Something about her tone, her voice, it made him feel like he needed to click the link. Like it was the most important thing in the world.

He rubbed his face and shook his head rapidly.

"Not today, you..."

His words trailed off. The group chat moved on to speculating about Ben's whereabouts. Sam said he was probably feeling depressed about the conversation about the state of the city. That Ben was sick of them always complaining. He even tried to get the group to let things go, and maybe he was right.

Theo argued, as always, with every point. Always the loudmouth. He made jokes that Ben had been murdered. As if that could be possible. Crime was so low since CaliaCorp took over. Even in the Circuit District, there was next to no violent crime. Just back-

alley brothels and speakeasies. There was no way Ben was the victim of something like that. It just didn't happen anymore. Though, Marc wondered, if not that, then what? His thoughts went back to CaliaCorp, and Calia. They must be involved. She must be involved. Maybe she seduced him in her little skirt. Pulled it up a little to show off her—

Marc stopped the runaway train of thought as fast as he could. He needed to get out before he got lost in the popups again. He told the group he'd see them soon and shut down his computer. On the way out, he grabbed his coat, an old and battered leather jacket, and put it on. He always felt better wearing it. It was comforting. One of the few things his mother had been able to buy him, and one of the few memories of her he had left. He went out the door, and down into the street.

The Circuit District was old. It went by a different name once, a few of them in fact, but eventually just sort of merged into a maze of crumbling apartment blocks and warehouses. It was never really intended to be a residential area in the first place, but once the gleaming glass towers sprouted up everywhere else, those who weren't rich enough or employed by CaliaCorp were displaced and ended up creating homes inside what had been factories and production plants for mostly electronics. Marc was lucky. He had enough skill to make some money through less-than-legal means and get himself a proper apartment. It was awful, but at least it wasn't above a brothel, and it had a proper bathroom and living room as well as a bedroom. That was peak luxury for the Circuit.

The area outside the block contained the main strip of the district, a few miles of noise and colour. The street ran narrow, and the buildings felt cavernous. Stock from shop fronts spilled out onto the street, cheap phones and old technology mostly. There were street food stands along the way, like markers showing how far you walked. Marc headed for a former warehouse half a mile down the strip. It was on a corner with a falafel stand. A dirty one. They were all dirty. Hygiene products, cleaning products, they were all luxuries. A small saving grace was that water, somehow, remained free. Marc remembered something about CaliaCorp making that happen, but it felt very unlikely, they sold everything. Maybe something in the water. Maybe, Marc thought, he needed to stop checking out conspiracy forums.

Marc was glad it was daylight out. At night it became hard to see the gaping chasms in the pavement that grew from cracks. No one repaired them, so they turned from fissures into fractures into holes that claimed many ankles over the years. Marc remembered Sam got a

particularly bad sprain in one and couldn't walk for a month. Day was also quiet. The district came to life after dark, when the neon lights flickered and flashed, and the suited corporate types wandered into the area looking for fun. The money that came in from them was the sole reason anyone could survive in the Circuit, but it wasn't nearly enough, and there were too many people and too much competition for anyone to ask for more money for whatever they were selling.

One place Marc passed was open already. A seedy theatre with red curtains for a doorway. It never closed. A rickety sign above it advertised vintage pornography shows. He remembered visiting with a friend and both of them getting quite excited by what they saw and sharing an intimate moment of mutual masturbation. Now that vintage stuff did nothing for him. The CaliaCorp content was all that seemed to work to get him going. Those stupid popups.

The theatre was one of the landmarks that told Marc he was almost there. He could smell the falafel stand and ahead saw Sam, Theo, and Trish already waiting.

Chapter 6

Sam felt like a bag of nerves. The past 24 hours of her life had been a strange blur of crying and distractions. It seemed obvious Ben was missing after a couple of days without contact. Once she was sure of it, fear washed over her like a cold wave. In her room, with Theo watching TV in the one beside it, she sobbed and searched through old messages on her phone, hoping for some clue to what happened. She found nothing.

When she became too dejected and discouraged to keep looking for answers, she found other things to keep her mind occupied. First pictures of Trish, then pictures of things she wanted to do with Trish, or more often, things she wanted Trish to do to her. That fantasy kept her from the darkest thoughts. Instead of wondering if Ben was gone, she wondered what it would be like to feel Trish clamp a collar around her neck and clip on a leash. Sam almost drooled at the idea. She wanted more than anything to be with Trish, to belong to Trish, to be loved by her. That fantasy was a comfort in a time of fear. Being kept at the foot of Trish's bed, being taken care of like a pet, it would be so much easier than worrying about Ben and the world and the city and where the next rent payment was coming from. The brothel beneath her apartment was a constant reminder of what she knew would eventually be the only way she could make money, if the city kept closing in on her.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad... if she could have Trish as a client.

The fantasy faded when she started speaking to Marc and now at least, as he approached her, Theo, and Trish, they were doing something. What little they could do. People went missing from the Circuit all the time. Sometimes they never showed up again, sometimes they'd appear in a suit or other uniform, fresh from their new life with CaliaCorp, and ignore everyone they used to know. Sam hoped if Ben were really gone, that at least he might come back in

some way, even if it wasn't actually him. Either way she felt terrified.

"What's up," Marc said.

Trish nodded. Sam forced a smile.

"Hey man," said Theo, "you ready to head over?"

"Yeah," replied Marc, "let's do it."

There was no more conversation. The sky was grey, and the streets were old and worn and everything just looked faded. As though the colour had drained from reality. As the group walked from the falafel stand toward the converted warehouse, they passed by another group of locals, an older group. They were wearing clothes that could have been called fancy once, now as faded as the district. The groups exchanged solemn nods and half-smiles and passed each other by. Community, conversation, social life had all become things of the past. Once in a while TV commercials showed grand events in the CaliaCorp buildings, something else denied to those outside the system. Yes, people could meet and be friends, but there were no longer places to congregate. Everything was either home, or business. Nothing more. Sam wondered if it had always been like that, but it couldn't be. She read the history books, knew the trajectory of society. The rapid acceleration of climate change. The wars. Then the end of all that. The rise of CaliaCorp. It must be fake; propaganda. But then, it did seem less stormy, less unpredictable every year.

They arrived at the warehouse, a grey building with a corrugated iron roof, leaking in various spots. Through a heavy metal door the group walked into a central corridor separating two rows of units, generously called apartments. Each one looked more like a place to store equipment, a shed. Bens was at the end of the left side.

"Can't believe he lives here," said Theo.

"Where else was he gonna live?" replied Trish.

Theo shrugged. He led the group along the corridor and with a sudden crash, a door to his right burst open and an elderly woman leaned out.

"What are you doing here? Are you with them?"

"With who?" asked Trish

"You know," the woman said, "them, they come here sometimes."

Theo shook his head. "Ok grandma, go back inside, we're

busy.”

The woman muttered a quiet curse and shut her door.

“What was she talking about?” Sam said.

Marc raised an eyebrow, “It’s gotta be—”

“Guys,” interrupted Theo, “come here quick.”

He was looking at the door to Ben’s place. It hung open, letting them see halfway inside.

“This looks bad,” said Trish.

Sam rubbed her hands together nervously. Marc bit his lower lip. Theo pushed open the door fully and walked inside.

“What the hell?” he called out.

The other three squeezed inside the tiny entrance and joined Theo in the single room that made up Ben’s place. It looked pristine.

“Nothing,” Theo said, “not one thing out of place.”

“I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse,” said Sam.

“Worse,” Trish muttered.

“Let’s take a look around,” Marc said, “see if we can find anything.”

He began digging under Ben’s bed, freshly made with sheets tightly tucked. Sam rummaged in a chest of drawers, moving underwear and t-shirts aside. Trish leafed through a bookshelf. Theo found a folder of documents. He ran his fingers along them, peering in at each one in turn. Lots of rejection letters from jobs, a few copies of Ben’s resume. Nothing useful.

The bed, drawers, and books turned up little of note either. Everything was just as it was when they last visited. Neat and clean, no sign of anything strange. As if Ben had never been there.

“What now?” Trish asked.

“Did he have other friends?” asked Marc.

“I don’t think so,” Sam said.

Theo started to pace up and down between the couch and TV. He rubbed his forehead gently, thinking. Suddenly, he booted a small wooden coffee table, shattering it to splinters.

“What the *fuck* are we supposed to do? There’s nothing. Not a damn thing we can do.”

No-one spoke. Sam cowered behind Trish. She hated seeing anyone that angry, much as she understood why, it was terrifying. Trish broke the silence.

“Calm down Theo, that’s not going to help.”

“What is, Trish? What’s going to help?”

Another silence. Theo brushed past the others and walked

outside. Trish followed. Marc looked at Ben's computer with his head tilted to one side.

"You leaving, Sam?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"I'm gonna stay and see if I can get into Ben's system."

"Oh. Good idea."

"I'll catch you later, ok?"

"Ok, thanks Marc."

Marc sat down at Ben's desk and Sam walked outside to where Theo and Trish were arguing.

"It's not like we even know that much about him, is it?" Theo spat.

"That's on you then, isn't it? You're supposed to be his friend."

"Yeah, some friends we are. We have no idea where he is, how to find him, or why he might vanish like this. For all you know he could show up in a minute and wonder what we were doing here."

"But he won't, will he?" Sam mumbled.

Theo's anger faded. He sighed. "No. I don't think so."

"We can't do anything can we?" Sam said.

"It's ok Sam, we'll figure something out. Let's just go get some rest." Trish said.

"We're giving up?" Sam asked.

"No, just taking a break."

Theo grunted. "Trish is right. We're not going to get anywhere like this."

"Oh, now you agree with me?" Trish said.

"Let's just go home. Where's Marc?" asked Theo.

"Inside, he's trying to get into Ben's computer."

"Still thinks he's a hacker huh? Whatever, I need to eat and sleep, let's go," said Theo.

Chapter 7

The password was the easy part. Marc cracked through that in a few minutes. The problem now was that Ben's computer was as neat and tidy as his room. Absolutely nothing to be found. Barely any files, personal or professional. A couple of games they used to play together, some music, and little else. Marc dug around in every folder, hoping to find something that would illuminate him to where Ben could be. After a while, he found a folder labeled 'vids' and opened it.

It was Ben's porn collection. Nothing too surprising, the usual CaliaCorp 'adult entertainment division' stuff. Lots of very attractive people writhing all over each other. Marc had more important things to do than watch it, but one video grabbed his attention. It had a thumbnail that looked like the same popup that grabbed his attention earlier. Calia, again. This omni-present face, taunting him. Calling to him.

He pressed play and the video began with a spiral. A little cliché but it worked to keep Marc focused on the centre of the screen. As the video went on he could hear a voice begin to speak as Calia appeared on screen in a loop, slowly beckoning him with that same crooked finger that he saw on the ad. This time she wore a royal blue blouse with a few buttons open, revealing the edges of a black silk bra, and a tight pencil skirt and black tights. It showed off her slim waist and supple curves. Marc knew he should stop watching but his hand decided not to click the mouse, like the signal from brain to finger got lost and instead sent a delicious jolt of pleasure to his stiffening cock.

Then the voice faded in.

Hi, I'm Mistress Calia, and I know you're eager to watch. Eager to listen to my words. Eager to listen and focus on my important words. And my words are important, aren't they?

Marc nodded without realising.

That's right, and as you listen to my voice, a voice you've heard so many times, you find you don't want to look away, to move away. You're rooted to the spot by your desire to stare and listen to

me. I'm sure you find my body compelling, my eyes so enchanting, and that's without even considering my words. My all-important words. My words that slip right past the conscious mind and speak directly to your subconscious. As you focus now on my body, my hips, my legs, my chest, my lips, you find that focus is overwhelming, and you can't focus on anything but how sexy I am. You think I'm sexy, don't you?

“Yes,” Marc whispered.

I know, I know you do. Now, you're going to enjoy yourself with me ok? You're going to reach down and touch yourself for me. Slowly, gently now. Above your pants. You can do that for me, can't you?

“Yes,” Marc said as his hand did what Calia told him. He began to slowly rub his erection through his trousers. His mouth hung slack and his eyes were transfixed on the woman on screen, looping forever in front of a swirling spiral. Nothing could have torn him away at that moment.

And as you feel that pleasure grow, as you feel your throbbing, twitching cock desperate for more of me, more of my words and my image, you can let it out. Let it stand to attention for me, good boy.

Marc did as commanded. His cock twitched in the chill air of Ben's apartment. He gripped it gently and stroked up and down.

Very good, you're finding it so easy to obey me. So easy to follow my commands. To follow my orders. Letting my words fill your mind. Letting my image fill your vision. Letting pleasure cloud your judgment. All it takes is a slow, rhythmic motion. Up and down. Pump your cock up and down for me, my good boy. Pump it slowly, but grip it tight. Grip it tight and pump it for your Mistress. For me. You love to obey me because it feels so good. You can feel the pleasure you get listening only to me.

Marc's body bucked as he touched himself. A sliver of drool fell from the side of his mouth. His eyes were glazed over. All he could think about was listening to Calia and stroking himself at her command. It came upon him so quickly, as if it had happened before. Had it happened before? He couldn't remember, couldn't think. All he could do was listen.

All you can do is listen. Listen to me and let my words infect your mind. Infect it like a virus. Like my program is running in your mind, replacing those files, those thoughts, those memories with my words, my commands, my power. I'm the virus in your mind, spreading everywhere, into everything, and you can't do anything to stop it, because it feels so good to let it spread. Each memory, each

thought it overwrites makes you feel even better. Makes that stroking so much more pleasurable. Good boy, pump it faster now. Faster for your Mistress. And say 'Yes Mistress' for me now, won't you?

"Yes Mistress," Marc droned, his hand moving up and down furiously.

You can only cum with my permission my lovely listener, so you'll wait for that patiently while I infect your mind completely. While I fill that brain with only my words, only what I want, what I need, what matters to me. You don't need thoughts. You don't want them. You don't deserve them. You're just a mindless worshiper, staring at my perfect body and letting your lust guide you into my service. Guide you to me. Infected with my power, deep in the back of your mind it will always be there, always has been there, and it will inevitably guide you into my service. Won't it, slave?

"Yes, Mistress," Marc groaned, the pleasure becoming intense.

His grip tightened. He felt pre-cum ooze from the tip of his cock down between hand and shaft, making his movement slightly faster. His eyes were locked on Calia's eyes. Her deep blue eyes. Her irresistible eyes. Her enslaving eyes.

My eyes make you so weak, so weak and desperate for me. So desperate to cum for me but only when you have permission and you can't have permission until you're completely mine, completely in my power. My slave. My toy. My possession. And that's what you want isn't it? That's what you want more than anything. To be mine. To belong to me. To be in my service, in my employ.

"Yes Mistress," Marc grunted.

He needed to cum. Badly.

So, keep stroking my good boy, and let me explain what happens next. You're going to let my words overtake your mind, and when they do, you'll feel that pleasure increase to heights you never knew possible. My words will drive you wild with desire, and that desire will make you agreeable. Make you docile and compliant, and you'll agree to anything I ask. You will agree to anything, won't you? Speak, slave.

"Fuck, yes Mistress!" Marc blurted.

He became lost in pleasure, writhing in his seat, desperate to orgasm, feeling like inside him held a dam ready to burst, a volcano ready to explode. He needed it so badly. How long had he been watching for? He had lost all sense of time.

Anything at all, anything I want. It makes so much sense. So much sense to agree with me as your thoughts and memories become

overwritten by my needs, my desires, my beliefs. You don't matter. Only Calia matters. Isn't that right? Say it.

"Only... only Calia matters."

Marc's mind reeled. Something, somewhere, a voice of reason, told him to turn off the video. Instead, he looked at Calia's chest and felt as if his thoughts were being sucked into her cleavage. Everything she said made sense, didn't it? It felt so good. Everything she said made him feel so good.

You feel amazing when you obey me. You can let the idea of you go, and embrace being part of me. Part of my world, wouldn't that be perfect? To be part of my world? My blissful world of pleasure and joy. Of change and progress. Wouldn't you like to be part of a better world with me? What does your cock tell you to say?

Marc didn't need to think about it. His cock knew exactly what to say.

"Yes, yes, yes Mistress!" he shouted.

Marc was lost in a haze of pleasure and lust. The spiral seemed to swirl faster and more voices joined Calia's. More of her voice. Whispering to him of submission and obedience and a collective mind that felt only pleasure in service. What a wonderful idea. To give up thought and identity. Was that his own thought, or what he was being told.

And does it matter, slave? Does it matter whether you thought it, or I planted that seed and you're now watching it blossom into a revelation, an epiphany of who and what you should be. You should be mine. In my service. Working every day for me and enjoying the pleasure of that, enjoying the fruits of that labour. Making the world better one orgasm at a time. Wouldn't it be perfect?

"P-perfect," Marc agreed.

So keep pumping that needy cock for me, keep stroking at my command and feel your pleasure overtake any sense of reason. I am your reason. I am your everything. My words replace your thoughts and fill you with joy and happiness in service to me. You'll be my wonderfully happy slave, so delighted to fulfill your purpose. And you'll be rewarded. You'll be cradled in the bosom of my love as everyone who works for me is. You'll be given so much and all I ask in return is your work, your labour, and your loyalty. Don't you want to give all of that to me? Doesn't that sound like the perfect way to live? A life in blissfully obedient service to your Mistress. Your Goddess. Your Ruler. Your CEO.

He blinked. Something felt wrong. Pain rose in the back of

Marc's skull. Resisting hurt, but something seemed very, very wrong. He couldn't just watch the video and accept all of that. But was it just a fantasy? A fantasy of being cared for by someone. Looked after. It sounded so nice. Life was hard. Maybe it would be easier to give in. Maybe the video was just a video.

You feel so close, so close. On the edge. The edge of giving up for me, giving up control of your mind and body, giving them to me for that wonderfully pleasurable reward. And all it takes is becoming mine. My employee. Accepting that you want to work for me, to be part of my world, that's what will earn you permission to cum. And then once you do, you'll apply to work for me. You'll cum and send your application, and you'll join me, forever. You'll be part of a better, brighter, sexier world. And doesn't that sound like everything you want? To be happy, safe, and loved?

"Y-yes Mistress," Marc said.

He spoke gently. As if unsure, even though the idea made the pleasure centres of his mind light up and his cock pump out another dollop of pre-cum that lubricated his shaft and further increased his pleasure.

That's right my new slave, my new job applicant. Just agree to come work for me, and that delicious release is yours. Agree to join me, to be part of the CaliaCorp family, and you can let that pleasure bubble over and send you over the edge into a state of mindless, obedient bliss. And then you can send that application, and you'll start the path to a better life. A better world. A better you. Won't you do that? Won't you agree to give in to my control and become my employee? To come to serve CaliaCorp? You will, won't you? For your Mistress? Say yes, now.

Marc hesitated. His hand slowed. He wanted it so badly. To cum and give in and be safe and warm and-

"No!" he cried, "no I don't want to."

Ripping at the cord, he pulled the headphones he didn't even remember putting on off his head. He panted, chest heaving. His cock throbbed but he let it go. The video came to an end and Marc exhaled, then closed it.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he repeated. "Fuck, that bitch. She almost had me. But... was it even real? Is that just some fantasy for her workers?"

He leaned back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling. Had Ben watched this? It was on his computer. He must have. Did that mean? What had Ben done? What had Marc almost done? The

pleasure felt so intense. He'd watched CaliaCorp porn before, but nothing was that good, that utterly enrapturing. The power of it, the voice, the video. Something else was going on. That face was everywhere but it never felt like that to see it. The voice. The voice did it. Something about that voice.

Marc looked back at the computer and felt compelled to watch the video again, but he willed himself to close the video folder. Instead, he opened CaliaExplorer and checked Ben's C-Mail account. It was signed out. Looked like he'd have to hack into it, but he needed some air. He could hack Ben's account at home, with his own machine. After he told everyone else what he'd seen. Right now, Marc needed to not be near Ben's computer, and that video.

Chapter 8

Theo stomped around the living room while Sam hid in her bedroom.

“Fuck!”

His face was red. He sweated profusely. The second he arrived home with Sam his barely concealed anger came out. Not directed at her, or anything really. It was something that had been bubbling under the surface for a long time and finally erupting. Sam crept to the door and listened.

“Bullshit. It’s all bullshit. This shitty apartment. This fucking city. Fuck all of it. Fuck CaliaCorp. Fuck them all.”

She cracked the door open and looked out as Theo crashed backward onto the armchair and lounged. He removed his shirt, and Sam couldn’t help but take a glance at his body. He was in good shape. She liked that. His skin looked smooth, and a light sheen of sweat covered him.

“Coming out or are you gonna hide all day?” he said.

Sam sheepishly walked into the room.

“Sorry I-”

“Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t blow up like that around you. I know you don’t like it, I just...”

“I know.”

“I can’t stand having no control over anything. I didn’t want this. To be here. And shit just keeps getting worse.”

“I know.”

Theo threw his head back and let his arms drape over either side of the chair. He shut his eyes, and Sam again took a moment to enjoy the view. She hated the anger, but the smooth chest and tight stomach she saw made her feel much better. She wanted Trish but sometimes Theo could be appealing. Mostly when his clothes were off. The long hair helped. Something about long brown hair was really appealing, even if Trish was blonde. She wasn’t thinking of Trish though, her eyes traced down Theo’s body to his crotch and Sam bit

her lower lip, then Theo opened his eyes and sat up. If he had seen Sam looking, he didn't show it. He was always a bit oblivious to others.

“He's gone, isn't he?”

“Theo, I... I don't know.”

“Fuck.”

Again, Theo threw himself backward. He bristled with nervous energy.

“We can't do a damn thing,” he said to no-one in particular.

Sam didn't reply. He was right. Ben was gone. His place lay empty, he didn't answer calls or messages. It had been days. Best case scenario, he'd moved and left his stuff and didn't want to talk to them anymore. Worst case. Sam didn't want to consider it.

A knock at the door interrupted her worrying. Theo walked over and answered it as an insistent series of knocks followed. Marc pushed past him into the apartment.

“Where's Trish?”

“At home, why, what's going on?” Theo said, shutting the door.

“Call her. Get her over here.”

“Marc, what's going on?” Sam said.

“CaliaCorp. It's them.”

Theo walked over to Marc and put a hand on his shoulder. Sam stood next to Theo.

“I fucking knew it.”

“Marc, how do you know?” Sam said.

“Ok, well I don't, not yet but I found a video on Ben's computer and—”

“A video?” Theo said.

“Yeah, yeah that's right.”

“That's it?”

“Well, it was about working for CaliaCorp, but like she's telling you to—”

“Marc, did you jerk off to a porn video in Ben's place?” Theo asked.

Marc's cheeks flushed. He pushed Theo's hand away.

“Look I think this is—”

“Marc, you already thought it was CaliaCorp. Maybe it is, but what do we even do with that information?” Sam asked. “Go to their office and say our friend watched a sexy video and went missing, did

he get a job here?”

Marc looked at the ground. “No, I... I thought it was important. She said to apply for a job there.”

“She? She who?” Theo asked.

“Calia.”

“Marc, we don’t even know if she’s real. I don’t know if you know this, but people tend to age. She’s looked the same since I was a kid.” said Sam.

“Yeah but... what if Ben was watching and...” Marc trailed off. “I don’t know. I just want to find him.”

“Me too, Marc, but there’s nothing we can do without proof,” Sam said.

Theo nodded his agreement. “I hate them, Marc, you know that. I hate CaliaCorp more than anyone. I’m pissed off. I’m ready to go to war if they did something to Ben, but Sam’s right. We need something to be mad about. Something we can bring to their headquarters and shout about. That’s not a jerk off instruction video.”

“Ok, ok, then I’ll try to hack into his C-mail account. If he applied for a job, it’ll be through that right?”

“Yeah,” agreed Sam, “good idea.”

Marc nodded and made for the door. “I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

The door shut behind him, leaving Theo and Sam alone together, standing very close to one another. Sam offered a smile and looked at the floor for a moment.

“Do you think it’s strange, Sam?”

“What?”

“All of it. Ben. The world we live in. You and I living here together. Everything.”

Sam blushed and swept a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You don’t think it’s weird, we’re basically opposites and... I don’t know, maybe it’s the stress.”

Theo leaned close to Sam and wrapped his arm around her.

“Theo, I...”

He pulled her close to his body and wrapped his other arm around her waist.

“It’s ok. Just... don’t say anything.”

Sam let Theo’s body engulf her small frame and melted into his arms. He felt solid, but yielding. Surprisingly gentle. Safe. For a moment, she could breathe and forget everything that was going on.

Theo's body, so close, feeling his bulge pushing against her stomach, her head falling onto his chest. It felt good to be held. Protected. If only she could feel like that all the time, but there was always something wrong, always some problem. Sam wished it could all just go away. She wanted Trish, maybe even loved, but she would take Theo if it meant being cared for. She rarely saw this softer side of him, he seemed almost scared to show it to anyone else. It happened when they were alone. It was what she needed. She put a hand on his bicep and trailed her finger down past his elbow. Theo shivered. Sam let out a tiny moan and felt Theo pull her closer. His body felt so warm, and she felt her hands roam down to his belt.

“What are we doing, Sam?”

She looked up at him and saw a sad, confused face. Not what she expected.

“I... I don't know, it just feels right. Like I need to.”

Theo took Sam's hand in his.

“It's not right though, is it? We're supposed to be finding Ben.”

Sam had forgotten. How had she forgotten that?

“Right, I know, it's just—”

“You just need comfort,” Theo said. He brushed his hand down Sam's cheek. “You need to feel safe.”

“Yeah. I'm scared.”

“I know, I know, it's ok.”

Theo kissed the top of Sam's head and held her close. She took her arms and wrapped them around his waist, letting herself relax into the embrace and forgetting about the momentary spike in lust. She didn't like Theo like that, most of the time. This was better.

“It's going to be ok,” Theo said.

“You think so?”

He put a finger under her chin and lifted her head to meet her eyes with his.

“I'll keep you safe, I promise.”

Chapter 9

“You’re a lot more relaxed now Theo.”

Trish took off her coat and put it over the arm of a chair, then sat down. She crossed her legs and kicked off her heavy black boots.

“I’m still mad, but... I don’t know. We can’t really do much.”

“We can tell the cops, I guess,” Trish said, “for all the good it’ll do.”

“They’re not even cops,” Sam said, “just CaliaCorp security.”

Sam was looking at Trish’s legs. She wasn’t wearing her usual fishnets, instead a pair of sheer black tights, red miniskirt and a white tank top. With the boots on, she looked like she was about to kick someone’s butt. Without them, Sam had a hard time thinking of anything besides kissing Trish’s feet. Her red-painted toenails showed through the sheer fabric, like candies gleaming in the dimly lit room.

“I hope he’s ok, wherever he is. Poor Ben,” said Trish.

Sam nodded with her agreement. Theo pursed his lips, let out a popping sound, and turned on the TV.

-eryday comforts you can have in a CaliaCorp Tower.

Swimming pool, gym, restaurants, cafés, and so much more at no additional cost.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” groaned Theo.

He changed the channel.

So good, yes, keep going Mommy. Please Mommy I need it so badly.

Theo held the remote, as if he wanted to change the channel, but lingered, staring at a woman in a suit pegging a man whose trousers were around his ankles.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered Trish with a mixture of disgust and admiration.

Sam just stared.

You naughty slut, so desperate for Mommy, aren’t you? Beg me

to go harder you filthy pig.

“Theo, change it,” Sam whispered.

Mommy, please fuck me harder. Harder please Mommy!

Theo snorted. The man on screen oinked. The doorbell rang.

Theo turned off the television with a jump.

“I’ll get it,” Sam said.

She got up and opened the door. Marc stood in the hallway, leaning against a wall, breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

“Marc? You ok?”

Marc put a finger in the air, needing a moment to compose himself.

“Ran... ran all the... all the way here.”

“Come in, sit,” said Sam.

She helped Marc to the couch, and he took some longer, heavier breaths. Trish got him a glass of water which he gulped down, then almost spat out as he tried to speak far too soon.

“Found out, Ben, where Ben went.”

“What?” said Theo, “where?”

“Calia... CaliaCorp. Job.”

“Wait,” said Sam, “for real?”

“For real,” said Marc, finally breathing normally. “I got into his C-mail. He applied a month ago. Interviewed a week ago.”

Theo leapt to his feet.

“What the *fuck*? CaliaCorp? How could he even think about working for them?”

Trish put her boots back on. Sam kept looking between her three friends. The tension that was there at Ben’s place was back, worse. Her stomach tightened.

“Where did he go though, where is he now?” demanded Trish.

“He went for something at their headquarters. He’s gotta be there.”

Sam leaned forward, looking down at the ground.

“Do you think... Do you think he’s happy?”

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Excuse me?” snapped Trish.

“The fuck, Sam?” sniffed Theo.

“It’s just, he must have wanted the job, if he applied. He must want to live in one of those nice towers.”

“He *hated* CaliaCorp until what, a week ago? If even. Sam, something’s up here,” said Marc.

“And if he was there of his own free will, why hasn’t he

contacted us? Where's the message saying he got a job? Where's the call to invite us to his swanky apartment?" Trish added.

"There's no way, Sam," Theo said, "Ben isn't like that."

Sam looked up at Theo with a half-smile.

"Then we'd better go find him, right?"

Chapter 10

“How we doin’ Benny baby?”

Lucy and Ben were alone in her office. She wore a pink latex dress that cut off at her mid-thigh and pushed her breasts up into a spectacular vista. The dress perfectly matched her pink hair, and white platform heels and matching stockings gave the outfit a mixture of innocence and filth that sent Ben’s mind racing. He sat in a chair while she looked out a window across the city.

“I, I’m ok I think.”

“You sound nervous Benny. What’s wrong sweetie?”

“I feel so good working here, I do, but I never even told my friends where I am.”

Lucy walked from the window to where Ben was sitting and placed a hand on each armrest, leaning over him and placing her heaving chest directly into his line of sight.

“Am I not making you feel good enough Benny?”

Lucy’s tone sounded saccharine, but there was something else there. Undertones of frustration.

“You do, I feel good. I love the way you make me feel. But it feels wrong to just ignore them.”

Lucy removed her hands from the chair, stood up straight, and turned around, placing her latex-clad ass in front of Ben’s widening eyes.

“Even for this ass Ben?”

Lucy began to rock her hips back and forth, and Ben found himself following the motion, swaying his head from side to side.

“I... they’re my friends.”

“Benny, we’re your friends now.”

Lucy sped up her motion slightly and looked back at Ben. She smirked, seeing his eyes locked on her body, and placed a hand on her left cheek, squeezing the latex. Ben squirmed. His cock was rigid.

“My friends need to know where I am.”

“We do know Benny, you’re here with us. Take out your cock

and let me explain while you stroke it for me, ok?”

Ben obeyed, pulling his cock from his trousers and stroking it to the rhythm of Lucy’s swaying behind.

“Isn’t that better Benny?”

“It feels good, Mistress.”

“And you know who your friends are?”

Ben kept pumping his cock, but didn’t speak. He felt the tiniest spark of clarity, like light flooding into a dark room through a pinprick. His friends. He and they hated this place, this company. He needed to tell them where to find him. He needed help. He was being brainwashed.

“Benny, look into my ass and listen. You belong here. We are your friends. You obey me completely.”

Ben shook his head, but he couldn’t pull his hand away from his penis.

“You’re just a slave Benny, a drone for CaliaCorp, for me. That’s what you want to be. That’s why you came here.”

His hand behaved unhelpfully, and the pleasure coursing through him as Lucy gave that cute, sexy smile overcame his defenses. The light faded.

“Good boy Benny, remember the programming. Remember everything now. Remember what you are.”

Ben’s mind flooded with images. Him kneeling, him watching brainwashing videos. It should have been enough to quell his arousal, to send him running from the room and out of the building but the memories of Lucy were there too. Perfect, pretty Lucy. Mistress Lucy. Ben wanted to work for her. Ben didn’t want to think. Ben loved working for Lucy. Obeying Lucy and serving CaliaCorp. The memories were like shockwaves, rippling through him, sending wave upon wave of pleasure down his body, making his cock tremble and his hands shake. He needed to obey Lucy. It was more important than anything.

“You remember now Benny baby, don’t you?” asked Lucy.

She gave her cheek another squeeze and grinned. She could see Ben’s glazed eyes, the haze falling over his mind, the cum trickling from the head of his cock. He was more resistant than she’d expected, but it was time to end that.

“Yes Mistress,” Ben droned.

“Now Benny, you’re going to stroke that enslaved cock to the edge, and when I push my ass into your face, you’re going to give it a little kiss, and cum for me. Once you do, you’ll know the truth, that

CaliaCorp is where your friends are. That you don't need your old life. That all you need is us. Do you understand my little drone?"

"Yes Mistress," Ben said.

"Good boy, harder now for Mistress. No thinking anymore. Only mindless obedience. CaliaCorp is more important than you, than your past, than anything. You exist to serve CaliaCorp, and serve me, your perfect, sexy boss. Who you can't get enough of. You love working for me don't you Benny?"

"Yes Mistress," Ben groaned.

He stroked his cock and staring blankly at Lucy's pert behind. The latex of her pink dress slid upward, revealing the curves at the bottom of each cheek. Ben was utterly enraptured by the sight.

"Such a good boy for me, now before I press my perfect ass into your needy lips, you're going to repeat after me, ok?"

Lucy gave her behind a slap and Ben nodded his agreement.

"That's a good boy. Repeat; I exist to serve CaliaCorp."

"I exist to serve CaliaCorp."

"My identity does not matter."

"My identity does not matter."

Ben was ready to burst. His cock stiffer than he had ever felt and he wanted to kiss Lucy's bottom. More than anything in his life.

"My friends are all at CaliaCorp."

"My friends are all at CaliaCorp."

"My past doesn't matter."

"My past doesn't matter."

"Good boy Benny, one more thing... I submit to Lucy's perfect ass."

"I submit to Lucy's perfec--"

He didn't finish the sentence. Lucy pressed her latex-covered rear into Ben's face, and he planted his lips on it. Immediately he felt an orgasm rock his body. He came all over Lucy's legs. He didn't notice, or care. His cock twitched and leaked as he kept kissing her ass. That was all that mattered to him. All he needed to do. He tried to remember what he was thinking about, what Lucy talked about with him before things got so hot and steamy but all he could picture when he tried to remember was her perfect, perky butt waving back and forth, and that seemed much nicer to think about than anything else.

"Now Benny, you're going to do three things for me. You're going to clean this mess up with your tongue, on your knees. Then you're going to forget everything that you were worried about and only think of how you can serve CaliaCorp. Finally, you're going to

fall into a relaxing sleep for one hour, wake up and go home. Do you understand?"

"Yes Mistress," Ben mumbled between kisses.

"Good boy," said Lucy, "get to it then."

Ben dropped to his knees instantly, and when he next had a conscious thought, he stood in the foyer of his new apartment with a big, idiotic grin on his face, and a terrible taste in his mouth.

Chapter 11

CaliaCorp Headquarters was a slick, but wholly imposing building. Its scale seemed unfathomable. A monument to the utter dominance of the company in everything it did. The entrance sat atop a set of enormous marble steps. The facade exuded the impression of wealth and power, all sharp angles and glass and gold.

“You got the emails?” Theo asked.

Marc nodded.

“We’re really going to do this?” asked Sam.

“Yeah, we’re doing this,” replied Trish.

The four were standing at the front door. They looked utterly out of place. People in suits tailored to fit them perfectly strode about confidently, rushing to and fro. The four Circuiters were in poorly-fitting, dirty, old clothes. Their heads hung low; shoulders slumped. It looked like they’d gotten lost going somewhere entirely different.

Theo walked in first. The marble of the steps continued into the lobby. Trish followed, marveling at the scale of the place. The lobby looked huge, and the reception desk looked like a ship adrift in a sea of luxury design. Marc and Sam slunk in last. Together, they approached the lone woman at the reception desk. Marc felt surprised to see no security guards. Sam was impressed by the chandeliers above her. Each one probably cost ten times what she made in a year. This was just a lobby.

“Hey, we’re here to see Ben Wheeler,” Theo said to the receptionist.

She looked up at him with a beaming smile and adjusted her black dress.

“Certainly, do you have an appointment?”

“No, but we need to—”

“I’m sorry,” the receptionist said, “but without an appointment I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave. Thank you for visiting

CaliaCorp.”

Theo stood stunned for a moment. Trish stepped forward.

“Listen, we just want to find our friend, he hasn’t contacted us in days.”

“I’m terribly sorry to hear that. Have you reported him missing?”

“Well, no, not yet but—”

“That should be your next action I would think. Thank you for visiting CaliaCorp.”

“Wait just a minute,” Marc said, “his last emails were from here. He came for an interview. You probably even saw him. We just want to talk to him, ok? Help us out?”

Marc held his phone up, email to Ben open. The receptionist regarded it with disinterest and offered her smile to Marc.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t remember an individual. We have so many visitors. Thank you for visiting CaliaCorp.”

“For *fuck’s* sake!” roared Theo, slamming his fist on the reception desk. “We’re asking to talk to someone, not meet the fucking CEO. Just check your computer or whatever and tell us where to find him.”

The receptionist didn’t flinch. She turned her head to face Theo and tilted it slightly to the side in a robotic motion.

“You must not have understood. Without an appointment, you cannot meet a member of the CaliaCorp family.”

“Oh, I fucking understood, and I’m telling you to be a human, not some fucking robot.”

“Thank you for visiting CaliaCorp,” the receptionist said.

Theo bristled with rage. His face shone red. His hands balled into fists. Sam grabbed his arm.

“Hey, it’s ok, let me try.”

Theo calmed a little, just about containing his anger.

“Hi,” said Sam, “sorry about him, we’re just really, really worried about our friend. He’s always in touch with us, he never ignores calls or messages, and we went to his place, and it was deserted. We’re scared. Please help us however you can.”

The receptionist turned to Sam, still smiling.

“I’m afraid without an appointment, you cannot meet a member of the CaliaCorp family. Thank you for visiting Ca—”

“Oh fuck this,” Theo shouted and leapt over the desk.

He pushed past the receptionist and looked at her computer screen, expecting to see a directory or staff list. Instead, playing on the

screen was a video of a spiral. A screensaver of some sort. He felt himself captivated by it, but clicked on the mouse hoping to get rid of it. It didn't work. The spiral kept spinning and Theo became too dazed to notice the receptionist calling security. It felt as if the spiral drowned out the noise around him as his friends were grabbed by a team of eight burly people in black riot gear and dragged out of the building, writhing and kicking in protest and shouting for Theo to help.

Theo couldn't hear them. Theo could faintly hear the sound of a woman speaking to him through the screen. The faintest hint of a voice speaking very important words that he couldn't quite make out. He felt relaxed, horny, empty, and it felt good. Then his arms were grabbed by a pair of security guards, and they dragged him away from the video, away from the reception desk, and out into the street. The security guards stopped at the top of the steps, let him go, and walked back into the building. Theo simply stood, dazed and confused, back to the CaliaCorp lobby. Sam, Marc, and Trish were sitting on the steps, and Theo joined them, plonking himself down and resting his head in his hands.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," said Trish.

"What do you mean? I went to get into their system."

"Dude, you stood there like you were in a trance," said Marc.

"It was super weird," Sam added.

"There was something on the screen. Like a screensaver or something. I couldn't focus on anything else."

"Something fucked up is going on in that building," Trish said.

"And they've got Ben," said Sam.

The click of high heels approached the foursome, and a woman in a business suit walked toward the group. She looked down at Theo, and he looked up at her. She was tall, with long, firmly toned legs in stockings, a short pencil skirt, white blouse, and black jacket. Her long hair a shade of copper and her green eyes glowed above deep red lips.

"I can help you," she said.

Theo noticed her perfume. She smelled like roses, a wonderful floral scent that filled his nostrils and made him instantly warm to her.

"How?" asked Trish.

The woman tipped her head to one side. "There's a bar, Zenith, two blocks away. Meet me there in thirty minutes. I'll have a table for us. Don't talk to anyone else."

Before anyone could question her, she strode into CaliaCorp

Headquarters and vanished. Sam looked at her friends, wondering what to do. Marc looked confused. Trish was suspicious.

“We’re going, right?” said Theo.

Trish sighed. Marc shrugged.

“Nothing else we can do, is there?” said Sam. “Let’s see what she has to say.”

Chapter 12

Zenith was not so much a bar as much as a strip club. No one was nude, but dancers in various states of undress writhed on stages and in cages hung above tables and a large, empty dance floor. The customers all wore suits, the same sharply tailored style all CaliaCorp employees seemed to share. Waiting staff walked about in tight leather, taking drinks to tables and checking on the patrons, who were mostly staring with glazed eyes at the dancers. A few were surreptitiously rubbing themselves under the tables, and not hiding it particularly well. The group entered feeling like interlopers. They were not in suits, nor dressed in anything like the dancers or other staff. If the other people in the bar noticed though, they certainly didn't show it. No one batted an eyelid as Theo led the others through the winding maze of tables, to pulsing music thumping from loudspeakers in the corners.

They found the woman who met them outside CaliaCorp in a booth nestled in the back corner of the bar. It was dimly lit, but her green eyes seemed to shine out from the darkness, and the light caught her hair as she lifted her head and nodded. Theo nodded back and joined her, sitting down on the opposite side of the booth, with a table between them. Trish, Sam, and Marc squeezed in beside him. Four on one side, her on the other. She smiled.

“Thanks for coming. Before we get into anything, I need you to understand, this conversation never happened. You get me?”

The group nodded.

“Good. Now, you're looking for someone, one of the missing?”

Theo leaned forward and whispered, “Ben. Ben Wheeler.”

“Another lost to CaliaCorp,” the woman said.

“What do you mean?” asked Trish.

“All those missing people,” the woman said, “they end up working for CaliaCorp.”

“But how, why?” said Sam.

The woman leaned closer. Theo snuck a glance at her cleavage

as she did, the others found themselves captivated by her sparkling emerald eyes.

“They’re brainwashed.”

Sam and Marc looked at each other. Theo appeared to be getting a little more lost in the woman’s eyes than he expected.

“They’re what?” asked Trish.

“Brainwashed. Everyone is, to a degree.”

“What do you mean?” asked Trish.

“You see what’s on TV, on your phones, on those big screens. Everywhere, sexuality, erotica. It’s designed to grab your attention, weaken your mind, make you think of pleasure.”

As she spoke, the woman met Theo’s gaze, started speaking directly to him.

“And the more you see of it, the weaker you become. Slowly your mental defenses erode. It can take months, years, but eventually something will get you. Some image of your exact kink or the person of your dreams. That’s it, you’re prey from that point onward.”

When she said ‘prey’, she licked her lips. Theo mimicked her.

“So, everything on TV... it’s brainwashing us?” asked Sam.

The woman kept looking at Theo, holding his stare.

“Everything on TV, everything on social media, the porn you watch, the products you choose. Every fetish is catered for, every desire shown. Something out there will flick a switch in your mind and pleasure will become your priority.”

Theo’s mouth hung open. He was totally out of it. He couldn’t do anything but stare at the woman from CaliaCorp.

“That’s insane,” Marc said, “so like... all CaliaCorp stuff is doing this?”

The woman nodded. “Everything. All of it. The screens out on the buildings are doing it. You are being conditioned through life to be aroused, docile, and obedient.”

“This can’t be real,” said Sam.

“But it’s all right there, isn’t it?” said Trish. “Right in front of our noses. How CaliaCorp got so big, why everything seems to just move aside for them.”

“There’s nothing quite as motivating as arousal, as pleasure. As driving as that primal need for intimacy, connection, sex,” said the woman, still staring at a dazed Theo, “and whoever truly harnessed that was always going to change the world.”

“Calia,” Marc said.

The woman nodded. “Before this, sexuality was frowned upon,

judged, fetishes were taboo. Now everyone embraces who they truly are.”

“And she took advantage of that,” Trish said, “used people’s desires to take control.”

“Something like that,” said the woman, “you can see just how powerful it is already.”

Theo stared at her, mouth agape. She reached a hand up and snapped her fingers.

“Hey,” she said sharply, “wake up sweetheart. Back to reality.”

Theo shook his head and slapped his lips together repeatedly, as if he’d been in the desert without water.

“What the hell?” he said.

The woman, finally, began to look at everyone in the group, her eyes drifting between each person in turn.

“What your friend just experienced was a light trance, brought on by his arousal. His natural instinct to look at me and focus on me when I started to use sexual language.”

“So... what does this have to do with Ben?” asked Sam.

“How do you think he ended up at CaliaCorp?” she replied.

“He saw something that flicked the mental switch and did exactly what he was supposed to. Applied for a job. At that point, it’s already too late.”

“Too late... for what?” asked Trish.

“Too late to stop himself from becoming brainwashed.”

Theo ran his hands down his face and released a long breath.

“You’ve made your point. How are we going to save him?”

The woman, for a moment, showed a flash of frustration. “I don’t have all the answers. I can find your friend; I can maybe get you a chance to see him. Whether you can break the programming... that’s another story.”

“Why should we trust you?” asked Marc, “we don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Aisling. Does that help?”

“So, there’s nothing else we can do? Now we know all this, shouldn’t we try to stop it? All of it?” Sam said.

“You want to... what? Bring down CaliaCorp? The most successful, powerful company on the planet?” Aisling asked. “I wouldn’t recommend you try something like that. I’m only here to help you find your friend.”

“We can’t just hear all that and not do anything. The world is *fucked*, and I am not sitting back and accepting that a company can

control our lives like this.” Trish snapped.

Aisling sighed. “You can try whatever you want. Just... you should know what you’re getting yourself into. Know what might happen.” She pointed to Theo. “Know how to avoid ending up like he did.”

“Hey,” Theo said, “you tricked me.”

Aisling looked at him and shook her head. “You think the people you’re going to encounter won’t? Do you have any idea of the kind of brainwashing, mind control, hypnosis techniques this company has developed over decades of research? You want to stand against that, you need to know how it works.”

Theo folded his arms. “Good, yeah, I won’t be taken advantage of again.”

“How do we stop it?” Sam said.

Aisling clasped her fingers together and leaned in, closer to Sam. “It’s complicated. Very complicated. But the crux of it is simple. Get you aroused, get your focus on something else, your lust, need, fetish, secret desire, unrequited love, and twist that to their ends. You love hot girls in stockings? Well guess what, you’ll be fed a video of that once the algorithms figure it out, and then once CaliaCorp has you hooked, the association between that fetish, and the company, is built. Soon you think of CaliaCorp when you think stockings. Once that happens, you might already be too late. And once you’re conditioned enough to want to go work at CaliaCorp, or at least be curious about it, they’ll send someone to interview you who’s the living embodiment of your desire. You’ll meet someone with perfect legs, wearing your favourite shade of stockings, who’ll tease you, arouse you, and use the interview to start your programming.”

As Aisling spoke, Theo’s eyes began to glaze over again. He had to shake his head to stay focused on what she said. Had he been paying attention, he may have noticed his friends all having similar reactions.

“And when they start programming you. Once that begins. Wherever, however it begins. It would take an astronomical level of willpower to escape it. This has taken politicians, CEOs, billionaires, and turned them into mindless pets for CaliaCorp.”

The group listened carefully, enraptured by Aisling. They sat in a daze for a few moments after she stopped talking. Trish shook off the reverie first.

“Why? What does Calia and her company get out of all this?”

Aisling shrugged. “Years ago, the world was on the brink of

collapse. Now it's not. Now we're not burning holes in the atmosphere. Or melting the ice caps."

"That's worth controlling people? Brainwashing them?" Marc asked.

Aisling didn't react. She reached into the inside pocket of her jacket, drawing everyone's eyes to her chest, and pulled out a card.

"Take this," she said, pushing it across the table to Theo, "and contact me if you need help with whatever you do next."

Theo picked up the card. It smelled of roses. He put it in his pocket.

"What if you need to reach us? If you find Ben?" asked Sam.

"Theo will send me his details, won't you?"

Theo nodded.

"Good. Now, this conversation never happened, and we never met. You all understand that? If you want my help, I don't exist."

"Yes, ok," said Trish.

"Thank you," said Sam.

Aisling nodded and stood up. Her hair shone in the flashing lights from the dance floor as she walked out of the booth.

"Don't leave for ten minutes," she said, before sashaying away and out of the bar.

Theo stared as she walked away and let out a loud sigh when she moved out of sight. Marc eyed him suspiciously.

"She did a number on you buddy."

Theo scowled. "She was showing us what happens if we don't pay attention. She helped."

"Sure, I bet the mysterious stranger is totally on the level," Marc replied.

Theo glowered at him over folded arms. Marc glowered back.

"Guys, let's just not, ok?" said Sam. "This is a lot to take in."

"Is it?" said Sam. "Or did we all kind of know already?"

Trish looked at Sam with a raised eyebrow, then slowly lowered it.

"Do we trust her then?" said Marc.

Glances darted between friends. No one answered for a while, until Theo uncrossed his arms and planted his fist on the table.

"Doesn't matter, does it? We know what's happening now."

Which means—”

“We have to do something about it,” Trish finished.

Theo nodded his approval.

“What... What are you two thinking?” Sam asked.

“Not here,” said Trish, casting an eye toward a waiter hovering near their table.

The waiter was a young man in a pair of tight leather shorts, with a leather collar and metal chains dangling from it, framing his pectoral muscles. He appeared clean cut, with a tightly shaved head and not so much as a hint of stubble on his face. His brown eyes appeared empty, devoid of thought, but he wore a smile that seemed to indicate he was feeling particularly satisfied.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” said Marc.

“It hasn’t been ten minutes,” Theo replied.

“I don’t care,” said Marc, before standing up. “I’ll call you later.”

He brushed past the waiter, who didn’t react to the sudden impact of Marc’s shoulder. It simply didn’t register. Trish rolled her eyes and followed him. Sam followed Trish. In the booth, Theo dutifully waited another seven minutes, and finally, stood up and walked out of the bar.

Chapter 13

Theo was alone. Leaving after the others meant he arrived home expecting Sam to be there. She wasn't. He assumed she'd be back later, and in the meantime, he felt stressed, and a little confused. The fresh air outside the bar jarred him from the blissful thoughts he'd been having about Aisling since he first saw her. Flashes of fantasies and fetishes slipped away, replaced by fear as he walked back to the Circuit, skyscrapers and shimmering glass giving way to urban decay, graffiti, and desolation. He had been so stupid. The screen in CaliaCorp headquarters, then her, Aisling, being able to exercise such power over him. The trance she put him under came on in seconds, and he had absolutely no idea. Powerless. That couldn't happen again, that feeling.

He lay down on his bed, and absent-mindedly pulled the card Aisling gave him from his pocket.

Aisling Sugars

Senior Manager - Acquisition & Retention

CaliaCorp HQ

KL5-777-33-99

Theo had no idea what her job title meant; it was corporate nonsense. The scent of the card mattered more. Roses. Floral, fragrant, fresh. An aroma that sent his mind back to Aisling standing over him on the steps, her flawless skin, her perfectly toned legs, those eyes, that cascading, flowing mane of fiery hair. She was the embodiment of a powerful, sexual woman.

She was his biggest fantasy.

Theo tried to imagine himself with her, taking her home and pinning her to his bed. He saw himself grabbing her and throwing her onto the mattress, trapping her beneath his body. His hand moved up her leg, revealing delicious thigh and grasping at her panties, slowly sliding them down her legs and tossing them to the floor. Next, he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans.

Aisling of course would be so excited, grabbing his head and

pulling him to her to plant delirious kisses on his lips and cheeks before moving to his neck. Meanwhile Theo imagined his hardening cock bursting from his underwear as he peeled them off. He grabbed his cock and started to slowly stroke it to the fantasy.

The idea of being on top of her, of pressing his weight down on her, feeling himself enter her, slowly, teasing, letting her tightness envelop him before starting to pump in and out, watching her eyes roll back and her mouth open as her back began to arch and he pushed deeper inside. With his other hand he lifted her card to his nose and took a long, deep breath. As he did, the fantasy began to grow stronger. Aisling's legs rose and wrapped around his body, her ankles pressing into his lower back as he groaned with pleasure. He could see himself looking down into her eyes and losing himself in them a little before lowering himself to meet her in a deep, passionate kiss. Her taste, the feeling of her tongue against his, her fingers grasping his back, nails scraping his skin, it felt so good. Theo stroked himself faster and took another whiff of the card, of that wonderful scent of roses. It felt like that smell washed over his brain, coursing through his veins, and pouring down into his cock. It felt incredible.

The fantasy felt incredible too, Aisling becoming physical. Pulling him close to her. Their chests pressed together, her legs clamping tighter and then, suddenly, her rolling over to pin Theo beneath her. He smiled at the thought. She placed a hand on his chest and dug her nails in. Even if it was a fantasy, he felt it, a sharp, sudden pain that made his hips thrust upward and deeper inside her. She smiled, looking down at him with the most delightfully evil smirk. He could almost hear her speak.

“What shall we do with you?”

Theo wanted to respond but, in his fantasy, Aisling pulled off her shirt and revealed a green bra that matched the shade of her eyes. It was velvet and soft and her pale skin had a trail of freckles leading down into her cleavage.

“That's it, stare,” she said.

Theo found it hard to tell the difference between the fantasy and the reality of being alone in his room, masturbating over a woman on top of him. He wanted to throw her back down beneath him or bend her over the bed and fuck her senseless from behind, maybe even spank her, have her thank him for it. He tried to imagine her calling him ‘Daddy’ but all he could hear was ‘good boy’.

That should have made him stop, but the image of Aisling on top of him, riding him, holding him down and digging her claws

deeper if he tried to move sent him into raptures of lust. He felt the edge coming and let himself enjoy the fantasy. It was ok, once in a while, to not be in charge. Wasn't it? Aisling was so strong too, so powerful. Those legs were so hard and tight, her body lithe and limber. Like a dancer, or a gymnast. She could overpower him if she wanted. Did he want that? It didn't matter anymore, he just wanted to fuck her, for her to fuck him. To be entwined with her legs and feel her smooth skin sliding against his, to feel her tight, wet pussy squeezing his cock and squeezing every thought out of his mind. That's what he wanted.

The edge came and Theo was ready to give in and go over it, and in his fantasy, he looked up at Aisling, who bit her lip and then spoke.

“Only good boys get to cum.”

Theo felt confused, but the image seemed so strong, so powerful, that he was willing to go along with it. She raised her eyebrow, a devious grin on her face.

“Well? Are you a good boy?”

He didn't know what to do, to say. He was supposed to be dominant; he did not want this. Did not want to act submissive just to orgasm but he needed it, so badly. He kept desperately pumping his cock and riding an edge that wouldn't end. The smell of roses flooded his senses. He didn't understand why he couldn't just cum. Why was his fantasy betraying him? Should he just speak? Should he say it? He didn't want to tell her that, he wanted to push her onto her back and cum on her chest. He wanted to explode on her face. Didn't he?

“Oh, sorry baby,” Aisling said in his fantasy, “looks like you get nothing.”

She pulled back and he felt an incredible rush of pleasure as she slid along his shaft and over the head of his cock, then away. He fantasised about her buttoning her shirt back up, straightening her skirt, and fixing her hair.

It didn't make sense. She was so beautiful. A goddess. Why couldn't he treat her like he wanted? Theo looked down to see his hand had stopped moving and his cock had grown soft. No orgasm. He hated being denied, so why had he done it to himself? His fantasy burst like a bubble, and she was gone. All that remained was frustration, regret that he didn't just say what she wanted him to, and the scent of roses wafting slowly away.

Chapter 14

“Trish, you can’t do that,” Marc said, “they’ll just arrest you.”

Marc, Sam, Trish, and Theo were sitting in the living room of the apartment Sam and Theo shared. The usual soundtrack of people grunting and groaning, and beds creaking, drifted up from below.

“It’s a protest, I can do that. Plus, if they do something to me it’ll be all over social media.”

“Will it?” Sam said, “or will all the corporate brainwashed drones just ignore you. I mean, what are you trying to achieve?”

“I’m going to make them see what’s happening. If they know they’re being brainwashed maybe they’ll wake up.”

“I have another plan,” said Marc.

Trish gritted her teeth. Sam looked at her and frowned. Theo focused on Marc.

“Go on then,” Theo said.

“I’m gonna hack ‘em. I can crack their system, maybe find Ben, maybe find out what they’re planning next, even get a virus in there.”

“You can’t actually do that, Marc, their security is going to be top of the range,” said Trish.

“Oh, come on, you think these big companies are that smart? People hack into stuff all the time.”

“Not you, Marc,” said Sam, “you’ve never done anything that complicated.”

Marc scowled and leaned back in his seat. Theo moved restlessly in his, he kept cracking his knuckles, alternating between that and rubbing his thighs. Finally, he sat forward, slapping his hands onto his knees.

“I’ve got a plan too.”

“Yeah, what’s your bright idea,” Trish groaned.

“They’re about to start construction down the road, right? I’m gonna get into their site and see what kind of stuff I can find.”

“What stuff? Dude, what do you even mean by that?” Marc

said.

“Like, plans, documents, I don’t know, I’m not a construction... guy. But there’s gotta be something there, right? They definitely didn’t do anything legal to build there, no one who lives there would want to leave the city.”

Sam nodded. Trish tilted her head to the side and shrugged. Marc shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“At worst I can smash some of the equipment, slow them down,” said Theo.

“Good luck in jail buddy,” Marc said with a withering tone.

“Hey, fuck you asshole. Go hack yourself a better idea.”

“That’s what I’m going to do you moron.”

“Guys, stop,” said Sam.

She hated conflict. The group tended to agree on little, but never fought about it. Her hands were shaking and it took resolve not to leave the room and go hide in bed. One friend was already missing, seeing the rest bicker and fight was the last thing she needed.

“What are we trying to do?” she asked.

“Bring down CaliaCorp,” said Trish.

“Yeah,” agreed Marc.

Theo nodded.

“Aren’t we trying to find Ben?” Sam said.

Trish winced. Theo looked at his shoes. Marc clasped his fingers over his nose.

“So, shouldn’t we be waiting for that woman?” asked Sam.

“No,” snapped Theo.

Everyone looked at him with surprise. He sounded angry.

“Why not?” Trish asked.

“Because we don’t even know her, so um, we should do something ourselves. Right?”

“He’s right,” said Marc.

Theo nodded.

“I can’t sit and wait, Sam,” said Trish. “I have to do something. Anything. If that’s just causing a problem for CaliaCorp, so be it. Maybe if I piss them off enough, they’ll drag me in there, and then I can go look for Ben.”

“It’s not much of a plan, Trish,” said Sam.

“What do you want Sam? You want me to have an answer to how we find him? How we drag him out of a giant company? Maybe, just maybe, we can figure out where he’s living and find him there. Get me at a computer, inside the building, and I can find that

information.”

“And I can search their servers for it,” said Marc, “if I can get inside.”

“He might be moving to the new places they’re building. You never know Sam, maybe there’s something there. What else can we do?”

“We could talk to them?” Sam replied.

“That didn’t go great before,” Trish said.

“But that was the receptionist, and Theo got pretty crazy. What if I could talk to someone high up, what if I could even talk to Calia?”

“Sam, no one has ever seen her,” said Marc.

“She must be, hang on,” Theo started counting on his fingers, then stopped abruptly, “old.”

“So? She might be reasonable. You heard that woman we met, the world is better in some ways, right? Maybe she’s not a bad person. Companies are evil... but people aren’t.”

Trish put her hand on Sam’s leg. Sam felt butterflies swirling in her stomach at the touch.

“Sam, I love you, you’re the sweetest thing, but that psycho bitch isn’t going to talk to you. If she even exists, and if she does, can you even find her?”

Sam could barely focus on Trish’s words. The touch, the word love, it was overwhelming. It took her a moment to collect herself and reply.

“I’ll do some research, dig into the history of, well, all of this. Of CaliaCorp. Find out who she is, and then maybe I can find her, or whoever runs the place.”

Silence fell over the room. Trish removed her hand from Sam’s leg. Sam lifted her leg a little, as if to try steal another second of that touch, then let it rest. In the quiet, the sounds of sex seemed amplified from the floor below. Thumping, over and over in a furious rhythm, with the occasional grunt from a deep voice. Whoever they were with was not having a good time. The sounds grew in volume and culminated in a primal groan and then muffled voices and footsteps. Then silence. Theo gripped the business card in his pocket and felt his cock twitch. Marc stared at the TV remote, looking for a distraction. Sam stared at Trish’s hand. Trish stood up.

“So, we’ve all got a plan, right?”

She felt a surge of energy. Her eyes were sunken, she was wired, running on adrenaline. Shifting on her feet, the floorboard

creaked beneath her boots.

“Yeah, yeah we do,” said Marc.

“Ok,” Theo said, “yeah, I’ve got a plan.”

“So, let’s do all of it. We can all do something different and maybe something works.”

Sam stood and faced Trish. Sam stood a few inches shorter, and Trish’s boots made the difference even larger. Looking up at Trish’s eyes, Sam wore the appearance of a lost puppy.

“I’ll stay here, ok? Do my research. If I find anything, I’ll tell one of you and you can maybe go? And that way if Ben comes back, I’ll be here.”

Trish nodded.

“Let’s fuck ‘em up,” said Theo.

Chapter 15

Trish's top hung off one shoulder, revealing a hot pink bra strap. The black cotton top she cropped by hand, she had sliced a chunk from it with kitchen scissors. Her stomach looked tight, and a belly-button ring drew the eye to that sliver of skin between the top and a plaid pleated skirt. Her blonde hair was tied in a tight ponytail, and a pair of thigh-high socks and combat boots gave her the feeling she was about to step into a fight. Dark eyeliner added a hint of menace to her face. Trish felt ready for battle. She stretched her neck and looked into the cracked, grimy mirror in her bathroom. Her expression seemed cold, distant, but inside she burned with energy. Rage and nervous excitement. Years of hating CaliaCorp coalescing into something dangerous. A chance to strike back against something that felt like an omni-present set of eyes, watching her for her entire adult life. Trish smiled, thinking to herself how much she wanted to poke those eyes, rile them up, see what would happen if that gaze wasn't on anyone else, just on her.

There was a hint of arousal too. She bit her lip, smearing her purple lipstick, thinking about her plans. Marc and Theo and Sam could do their little projects in the shadows, but Trish wanted to show everyone what was going on, and in the process, be seen. She gripped the sink and leaned forward, peering into her own reflection. Trish knew she looked attractive, enjoyed people looking at her with those glances before staring down at their feet. She wanted to catch their eyes, and she smiled, pleased with how big her makeup made her eyes look, how a line of barely noticeable freckles peppered her nose and cheeks. With a swift, deft motion she pulled her hair down and let it unfurl down her back. Soft, pale yellow hair framed her face, and Trish was ready to go. Ready to show herself, and to show everyone exactly what CaliaCorp was.

Cold air cut through the streets outside as Trish left her

building. A rush of chill wind threatened to send her skirt flying upward, but she didn't care. She knew exactly where she was going, and what she was going to do. Her first stop was a small shop a few minutes' walk from her apartment. Not many places were still open in the Circuit District. A few of the clubs were still playing music, which thumped in the background, bass booming from deep underground. Revelers from the wealthy part of the city fell out onto the streets occasionally, drunk and smiling, eyes glazed over from what Trish assumed a lack of sleep, or satisfaction. The clubs were happy to allow sexual services to be bought and sold and for the people of the rich part of town, they were cheap, easy thrills.

The Circuiters that were walking around were the owners of breakfast places and small stores, the kind of place a person might go after a night on the town. Most were near-empty. The CaliaCorp folk stopped going to them, instead they arrived, partied and did whatever sexually deviant thing they wanted to do, and left. It was another nail in the coffin for the district. Those little breakfast bars serving rice and eggs, where everyone sat around a bar with a cook in the middle making orders that machines took from the customers, they were going the same way most of the people were. Far away. To where, Trish didn't know anymore. The countryside had become focused on two things; growing vast volumes of trees to improve air quality, and industrial farming to provide food. CaliaCorp had even taken over agriculture and forestry. There was nothing outside their reach. The kinds of things governments should do, all done by a gigantic, calculating corporation.

Trish first thought faceless, but that wasn't quite right. CaliaCorp had a face. Always had that face. That same smiling, beautiful, horrible woman. Her visage was on posters about hiring and positive growth and whatever the latest product was. She appeared everywhere. Even in the Circuit, Calia's face smiled out from torn posters hastily slapped on the walls of buildings. In the wealthier areas, she adorned digital screens, moving and speaking and reminding people that CaliaCorp is their friend, their family, whatever other nonsense the rich morons who worked up there believed. Trish knew there were other companies around that part of town before, banks and computer companies, but they were gone. She wondered if this was how it went in every city, every country. The information was all online to check, but she didn't trust CaliaPedia to provide unbiased facts either.

A boarded-up diner marked the corner Trish turned to find her

destination. One she had fond memories of visiting with family years before. It closed down a couple of months before Ben vanished. The sign above what was now a plywood board, but had been a large window to people watch from, was falling apart. *Cheap Eats* now read *Cheats*. Trish walked around the door and onto a side street and paused, immediately buffeted by a fierce wind that made her shiver and think for a moment that her outfit may have been a poor choice, but she shrugged it off. The clomp of her boots on the ground made her feel powerful and she'd already drawn the attention of several passersby.

The side street lay empty. What had once been a carefully maintained, but small road, was now cracked and bumpy. No cars were left in the city to drive down it, just people on bicycles and scooters went on wheels. Almost everyone walked, and in the other districts trains slid by silently on magnetic rails. An eerie silence hung over the quiet area Trish wandered through. Nothing was left open here, save for where she was headed. She passed so many places she might have gone, if they still operated. A pet shop, with empty pens in its windows and moldy bags of dog food. A gallery, with torn canvas paintings scattered on the floor. A clothing store with decades-old dresses and jackets hanging on headless mannequins. It all told a story of urban decay, in a city with a skyline reaching beyond the clouds. Some rose high, others were left to fight for space and lose, near the ground.

Her destination was a stationery shop. How it remained in business, Trish had no idea. It sold a lot of things, so that helped. Paper, pens, paint, but also snacks and drinks, and she was sure some illicit items too, though those were carefully hidden and she had never actually seen them, so it may not have been true. The place seemed to be a chaos of things. Shelves overflowed with dusty items that no-one wanted or needed. The owner was an elderly man, and as she walked in, he pushed his glasses higher on his nose and nodded. He never said much. Trish walked around picking up the things she needed. A large sheet of white cardboard, a brush, and a small pot of black paint. She placed them on the counter and the owner looked down at them over the rims of his glasses. Wispy white hair hung loosely on either side of his otherwise bald head, and his blue work shirt was stained with paint and ink in many places. A nametag hung awkwardly from his breast pocket, but the name had long since faded. Trish could make out some of the letters, but the best she could guess was his name was Alan or

Ang or Akira.

“What are you doing with these?” he asked. His eyes were half-covered by the glasses and only served to make his quizzical expression more pronounced. Trish bristled at the question.

“Just some art,” she said as she handed over a small pile of coins. The man took them, counted them, and grunted. That was the last thing he said to Trish, she took her supplies and left the shop.

Back on the street, the wind threatened to send the cardboard sheet rocketing into the sky. Trish gripped it tightly to her chest, pressing the brush and painting against it. Scanning the street she saw a small alleyway that offered shelter from the blustering wind. She walked into it, and into a dark, damp sliver of concrete between two apartment buildings. Ancient, creaking air conditioning units hung from windows above her, whirring and wheezing. Laundry hung on lines above her head, hooked between the two apartment blocks. Damp rose from the ground right to the roofs, tainting everything with black mold. She placed her cardboard down on a dumpster lid and opened the paint pot. Trish was no artist. The brush she dipped into the black liquid and sloppily slathered paint onto the white cardboard, spelling out a message in black and white.

CaliaCorp is Brainwashing You

It felt absolutely silly to have painted it on the card. True or not, she wondered if this was what protestors always felt, if they wrote their messages and then second guessed themselves, wondering if maybe things were ok, if maybe the world wasn't as bad as it felt. Maybe it was just her. Maybe Ben was right.

She caught herself. Of course it wasn't right. The paint dried fast and Trish picked up the crude sign and held it to her chest, hoping that it wouldn't stain her clothing. The alley led out at its opposite end to the main strip of the Circuit, and on reaching it Trish smelled the street food carts immediately, they were getting ready for the day and the workers moving from their tiny apartments to their tiny workplaces. The ants beneath the CaliaCorp tower. It loomed over the strip, a monolith. The tower looked out of place even surrounded by other skyscrapers. It was so tall, so unfathomably huge, that it could contain the population of the city within it. The place where almost everyone from CaliaCorp worked, those who weren't in something that demanded they be outdoors like construction or farming. Sometimes, when the wind blew strong enough, the tower swayed. Trish always hoped a strong enough wind could knock it down, send it crashing to the ground and have it take CaliaCorp and the empire they

had created with it.

It never happened. The building swayed, seemed to bend, but those inside were unmoved, and those outside could only hope.

The strip seemed less busy than usual, even for the early hour. Steam rose from grates on the street and wafted into the air before dissipating into the sky. The few people who were around walked with heads down, rushing past the food, hoping to get out of the cold.

With the cardboard held against her, covering most of her body, Trish felt at least a tiny bit insulated from the driving wind, but it barely helped. Her legs felt stiff and tired. She felt tired. It was as if something, somewhere in her mind, told her to stop, to turn back, go home and accept the inevitable. Another part of her screamed not to. To rebel, to fight, to tear down the walls and show everyone what was going on, to make herself seen, to be the face of the resistance, the queen of the counterculture. It was a little ambitious, but Trish always wanted that, to be known, seen, perceived. As a child, she wanted to be a performer, a dancer or an actress. It never worked out, never enough money, never a place to go. The void that left had never truly been filled, the empty space where her dreams were supposed to go.

Being alone with her thoughts for so long wasn't good. Usually she would listen to music, watch TV, go online, or do something sexual but out on the street, hands full with the sign, there was nothing else she could do. Perhaps it would have been better to keep distracting herself but wasn't that the problem? Wasn't that the reason no-one did anything? It seemed as if everyone had become completely addicted to their screens. It terrified her to think that she was much the same, but how else could she quiet the doubt and fear and disappointment. She lived in a damp room in a dying part of a city being trampled beneath the spiked heel of a woman whose entire existence was shrouded in mystery.

Trish reached the train station that marked the end of the Circuit District, and the start of Calia's city. A gleaming, bright, clean building. Slick, gold-hued, safe. She walked up to the platform and waited for the train to arrive and take her into the belly of the beast.

Chapter 16

Marc clamped his fingers together, stretched his arms out, and twisted his wrists so his palms faced forward. His knuckles cracked loudly in his sparsely furnished apartment, barely more than a room. He owned a bed, a desk, a computer, and a container in which he kept clothes, old computer parts, and the single photo left of his mother. A fire had consumed the rest, along with the woman who raised him.

Wearing just a t-shirt and boxer shorts, Marc didn't notice the cold. His place was old and drafty but once he sat at his computer, nothing else mattered. The room looked dark other than the three screens in front of him. Lines of code poured down the one on the right, then as he unclasped his hands and moved his mouse, it vanished. A screensaver. Marc typed an address into the bar on his browser. CaliaCorp dot com. Where else would he start? He browsed the homepage of the site for a while, passing many images of Calia, perpetually smiling, smirking at him. He hated her, but it was hard to escape her beauty. The woman appeared everywhere on the site, often in business attire that seemed a little too revealing to get any work done. Alongside the images were slogans and services. Media; Shaping Reality. Construction; Building the Future. Environment; Healing the World.

What Marc was looking for was at the bottom of the page. The About Us section. He copied several names from there onto a document on his leftmost monitor, and then looked around the site, going deeper into the sections that allowed him to contact people at CaliaCorp. He found what he wanted, an email address.

@caliacorp.com. What else would it have been, he wondered. That was all the information he needed to start with. He pulled up his email account, one of the few that were not run by CaliaCorp. His drafts had a few options for the next step - emails designed to entice the person on the other side to click on links that would share sensitive data, passwords, addresses, credit card information. Marc chose one he thought the CaliaCorp folks would enjoy, considering their preferred

reason to visit the Circuit District.

Hey there party people,

The Circuit is proud to present Dark Mass, an erotic burlesque show like no other. See the sexiest ladies of the night shake their tailfeathers on the stage at the venerable Venus Theatre. For one night only, this evening is not to be missed if you love gorgeous women, erotic dancing, and an after party to die for!

VIP guests get special access to our performers for the real show. A hands-on experience that will leave you completely satisfied. Click here to learn more!

You'll never have a better night than at The Venus.

Marc smiled to himself. What warm-blooded person could say no to that. It was just what the rich folk wanted, served on a silver platter. He began entering what he assumed the correct emails would be. First name, full stop, last name at CaliaCorp dot com. Everyone he could find on the about us page he added manually, then turned on a program to scrape any other names on the site for him and turn them into the same email format. Within a short time, he had over a hundred emails ready to receive his message. He checked the link, everything was working perfectly. Once someone clicked it, it would download a sneaky little program that would send a stream of data to Marc's computer, all he had to do was send and wait.

Of course, the penalties for cybercrime were serious, but he routed through a virtual network that changed his location multiple times an hour. Tracking him was next to impossible. He had no fear of that. No matter what his friends said, he knew what he was doing. He'd spent years learning the craft, how to send phishing emails, how to crack passwords. A lot of it was easily garnered from dark web discussion boards, and what he didn't know, others helped him with. Most of the people he talked to were anonymous criminals, but who wasn't outside the law, if they were outside CaliaCorp? It wasn't like there were other options most of the time. Plus, it felt nice to chat with people who understood his skills. Marc loved his friends, but they were always so dismissive. Just because he'd messed up a few times and gotten his PC infected with a virus. Damn whoever invented CaliaWare. Hardly his fault, the whole thing was designed to trap him anyway. Since then, and a few other minor incidents, his friends didn't trust him with their computers.

What did they know anyway? Marc sent the emails and sat back, waiting. He realised the wait would be long. If those emails even reached any of the people he contacted. In the meantime, he could see

if there were other vulnerabilities in the CaliaCorp system. The website looked slick and stylish, but there was a lot going on. Someone may have missed something. Breaking into that could lead him to a password, or better, straight to a database. That's where he'd find Ben's information, his new address, the floor he worked on, the department he worked in at the company. All he needed to do was get in somehow. If he could do that, getting to Ben would be just the tip of the iceberg. The things he could do with full access to the CaliaCorp system, before anyone would know, were manifold. Ransomware sounded like an option. He could expose secrets or make himself and his friends rich beyond their dreams. Calia could afford to lose a few million, and maybe he could expose them anyway. They were brainwashing people, he knew it, and all he needed was evidence. There was just so much more to get out of his plan than an address for Ben.

But he needed a way in. The pages that drew his attention first were the media sections. Creative types never understood online security, not like programmers and devs. That part of the website was built around an interactive experience, so he opened the source code on his vertical monitor and began scanning it for hints at an error. The main monitor displayed a simple quiz, the kind that led to a result about what product to buy or which fictional character you're most like. This one was all about how the media team at CaliaCorp functioned. Kind of self-indulgent to talk about it via a quiz, but Marc supposed they wanted to express their creativity somehow in a sterile corporate structure.

He clicked start and glanced at the code, updating in real time. The quiz began with Calia, of course, what else? A video of her smiling and gently moving her head left and right played, not quite shaking or nodding, just slow movements, like a metronome set to a low tempo. Marc didn't have his headphones on, he wasn't repeating previous mistakes. The first question appeared on screen, fading in over that familiar face.

Can Calia Media Help You?

The only option was yes. Marc clicked it. The code updated. Nothing useful. On his main monitor the image widened, as if a camera pulled back and showed more of the woman on screen. She danced to an unheard rhythm, and now her collarbones, bare and prominent, showed between the black straps of a dress or a top. Marc wondered which it might be, and in the dark corners of his mind, he had a question of his own, what would it look like if he saw all of her.

The next question faded into view.

Do you need us to shape your reality?

Again, no option but yes. Marc hesitated. He felt like this was going one way, but he had no reason to worry, he couldn't hear whatever Calia danced to. He was just looking at an attractive woman moving her body. So what if he enjoyed that? So what if he hated her? She was hot. Ridiculously, stupidly hot. He clicked yes. More of Calia was revealed, a deep cleavage in what could still be a top or a dress. Her breasts bounced to the rhythm of the music she danced to. Marc found himself drawn to her cleavage, watching her move sensuously, like a snake writhing from side to side. He felt almost disappointed when the next question appeared over her chest.

Do you need what CaliaCorp offers?

Marc knew the drill. This time he quickly clicked yes. He wanted to see more of Calia, and he did. The screen revealed the rest of her upper body, her slim waist above what he could already imagine were hips, shaking, rocking side to side. A pendulum, a metronome, a rhythm he wished, for a moment, that he could hear. Marc knew that was a bad idea. He was simply gathering information, searching for weaknesses. He looked at the code and saw his own reflection for a moment as the screen flickered off and back on. It did that occasionally. Old monitor. The next question flashed up on screen.

Do you want to know more?

He did, he wanted to know everything. He clicked yes without hesitation and saw more of Calia, and confirmation she wore a dress, a short black one. The pleated lower part flicked left, then right, moving with her. Marc's eyes moved with it. Calia put her hands behind her head and began to move faster, the rhythm increasing in pace. Marc forgot about the source code, he was staring, wondering what her shoes looked like.

Do you want to go deeper?

Yes, he thought, as he clicked the button, yes I do. He wanted the camera to go deeper too, wider, to see more of her. It obliged, showcasing her entire body, her black, open-toed kitten heels, bare legs, and the dress that flounced and bounced to the rhythm of her body. The sweetly seductive motion of her perfect hips. It felt so easy to stare at her, Marc could hardly think. He wondered how many people were brainwashed by her, broken and corrupted and turned into drones at her command. He felt his cock stiffen at the thought and then with a sudden hiss, fizz, and finally a pop, the monitor died.

He blinked, shook his head, and cursed, smacking the

monitor's frame with his hand. It didn't respond. Dead. He looked across to the screen on the left, at least that one still worked. On it, his email account was open, and someone had replied to his mass mail to the CaliaCorp staff. He scrambled to move his cursor to the other screen and check it.

Your email has been rejected by our filters, and your account has been blocked.

Thank you for contacting CaliaCorp, if you would like to learn more about our company, please visit CaliaCorp.com for details.

Regards,

CaliaCorp Digital Protection

"Fuck," said Marc as he threw himself backward in his seat, feeling his body crack against the hard chairback, the cushioning long worn out. He rubbed his forehead and stared at the blank screen between the two functional ones. Nothing from the website, nothing from the emails, and now a monitor was broken. He couldn't afford to replace it, and he needed it. He set to work pulling out the cables from it and moving the other two monitors closer together and placing the broken one on the floor. He stared at it for a moment. His window to the world, one of only three, broken, dead, fizzled out.

Then he kicked it hard in the centre of the screen and cracked the glass. The monitor fell to the ground with a dull thud. Marc turned back to his desk and opened up a browser window. He navigated to one of his bookmarks, a favourite haunt of his where other hackers, coders, and other tech-savvy folk exchanged skills, advice, and resources. He started a new thread, entitled: *Need Help With Major Hack ASAP*. In it, he explained little other than he wanted to get some sensitive data from a server that had strong security. It took five minutes before he got a reply from someone, about average for what was a popular, but well-hidden site.

XxNarixX: Hey, wanna PM me deets? Experienced hacker, can hlp!

He didn't recognise the name, but what did it matter, the whole place was anonymous anyway. Marc clicked on the username and opened the private message button. Some help would go a long way and keep him focused. He hoped this Nari was up to the challenge.

Chapter 17

An entire section of the city, boarded off from its former residents. Cranes pierced the sky above it, their frames reflecting from the glass of the surrounding skyscrapers. The endless towering offices and apartments housing CaliaCorp's staff. And now, more. More rising from the ground, shooting up like twisting vines reaching for the heavens, an affront to the sky itself. Reaching ever higher.

Theo felt small. He slunk along the perimeter, around a blue-painted hoarding with CaliaCorp slogans painted on it.

Fall into the Future

Your Purpose Defined

It meant little to Theo. Empty words for the drones who slaved away in her service. The face staring down from massive screens hanging from the sides of the buildings around him. Smiling, winking, smirking. He felt as though she were watching, always watching. He hated it.

The construction site was quiet. The workers were high up in the skeleton of the growing tower and Theo easily walked under a barrier and inside. He ducked low, careful to avoid the small hut where he assumed security were sitting, but when he moved beyond it, a glance back revealed it to be empty. Moving on, his feet squelching in the mud of the site, he looked around for something that could be useful. Construction vehicles dotted the place, large, yellow beasts labeled with some Calia sub-brand. In between them stacks of concrete slabs, building materials, and bags of cement lay on pallets. Nothing helpful. The single place to go was a small, prefabricated building on the opposite side of the site. Theo saw no one around, but still took his time, slipping along between vehicles that could hide him from the people high above, moving the pieces into place for yet another CaliaCorp monstrosity.

He reached his destination and walked up to the side of the door, pushing his back against the wall and peering through the window. Empty, as far as he could tell. He tried the handle, unlocked. Theo pushed it down and the door swung inward. It was dim inside, and dimmer when he stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

It was an office. A large desk sat at its centre, covered in

blueprints and plans. Smaller desks lined most of the walls, with a set of lockers at the back, metallic and cold. On the smaller desks were computers and other devices. Theo started at the plans. It seemed clear what they were building, and much like the other skyscrapers. A tower of glass and steel, another homogenous structure in a forest of them. What Theo needed was evidence that CaliaCorp bypassed the planning process or bribed someone or *something* that could be used against them.

The blueprints were useless. Theo opened a computer and tried to find something on it. Password protected. He wasn't Marc, all he could do was guess. He tried some basic password variations. None worked, and he closed the screen down. There were other machines. One just to its left, in fact. Theo opened this one and a post-it note fluttered from the screen to the keys. The password was written on it.

Ilive4cal!a

Theo balked, then quickly typed the string and watched as the machine sprung to life. The wallpaper showed Calia. Of course it did. He looked over his shoulder, out the window. Still quiet, but that didn't mean he shouldn't work fast. The computer was simply laid out, with a few folders. One held photos of the site at various stages of construction. Another the blueprints in digital form, and a 3D render of the final build. The final folder contained just notes about the materials needed. Nothing he could use. Nothing.

Theo winced. He wanted to smash the computer into the ground, but he gathered himself and kept looking around the room. The other computers he checked were password protected, just like the first two. He checked the same password that worked once but it didn't get him anywhere. There was little else in the room of use. He slammed a screen down and grunted. Maybe he should just try to sabotage them, break the machines, sugar in the petrol tank. Did that even work? Did it even matter? CaliaCorp owned thousands of vehicles, infinite money. He'd need to do something drastic.

He imagined an explosion rocking the building from its foundations, sending it toppling over, crashing into another, starting a domino effect, taking the whole city with it, leaving only the Circuit District standing. That drew a smile, the thought of the whole thing coming down around him, of utter destruction, of devastation and then rebirth, the flood of people from the margins ready to rebuild, ready to take back the city in the wake of this act of vandalism that energised the people.

And Theo imagined Calia's face as it all fell. That constant

smirk twisted into a grimace. Maybe their headquarters would come down too. The whole place crumbling into dust, the glass and steel and gold and marble nothing but rubble. Nothing but a monument, a memory, the fading recollection of a time when a corporation controlled the world. He imagined the people in the tower then, the fear and anger and shock of their safe, corporate world disappearing in one fell swoop. He imagined himself there, watching. Then his mind went to someone specific, someone in the tower. To Aisling. Her face contorted in terror, and Theo rescuing her. Rushing in as the building fell and holding her to his chest and keeping her safe and the scent of her perfume filling his nose. He took her card from his pocket and inhaled. It smelled serene, sexual. The scene in his mind shifted and she held him, he felt small, weak, his head on her breast, her stroking his hair, telling him it would be ok, that he would be safe with her. He felt an involuntary smile creep across his face and an erection tighten in his trousers.

That's when he saw the drive. A small black drive that he snatched up and shoved into the card slot of the computer he could access. Folders flashed up on the screen. Billing, invoices, planning documents, and something about the Circuit. Plans. Future plans. For his home.

He clicked on the folder but it was locked, encrypted, and he had no way in. He tried another folder and found the same. Nothing about The Circuit could be accessed. As he moved the cursor to one about planning, he heard a voice from outside, and froze.

Theo looked around frantically. Two voices, male and female. Right at the door. He saw the door handle start to droop, they were dawdling outside but would enter at any moment. Theo shut the computer, ripped the drive from it, and made for the lockers. He ripped open a metal door and found it full of tools. The office door opened. He tore open the next locker, empty, and squeezed inside, closing the door on himself, finding himself standing upright, tightly squeezed into the darkened space, only able to see out through two slits at eye level. He hoped no-one heard him.

Chapter 18

Why, Sam wondered, could she find out so little about CaliaCorp? The whole operation was so closely guarded, as if any real information had been erased from the internet. It was all so stupidly mysterious. She couldn't hack into a system or anything like it, but did have keen research skills and it was rare for anything to be so mind-bogglingly confusing to understand. As far as she could tell, the only real information about CaliaCorp came from CaliaCorp, but even that seemed inconsistent. She could find four separate dates for the founding of the company, some over a century apart. If one was to be believed Calia herself could be almost two hundred years old. Another made it seem as though she started in the business world just a few years before, and her dominance arrived quickly.

But none of it made sense. The whole company credited itself with cleaning the air, the rivers, the sea. Of fighting to save the climate, endangered animals, ecosystems, countries. How could that be done in less than a decade? How if it had taken two hundred years had no one stood up against the company? And who, really, was Calia?

Sam felt defeated by it all. She wished Trish were there, just to have someone to talk to, to express her sadness and fury and desperation too. A little too, to see Trish in her skirt and her boots and just enjoy her. Enjoy that one perfect thing in her life, even if she couldn't touch it, even if it felt forever out of her grasp. Was she in love with Trish? Or did she just want comfort. Theo made her feel safe too. So strong. She smiled, thinking about him. He had a temper, but he always kept her safe. Always reminded her that he would protect her. That promise was one she felt happy to hold tight to.

Ben. She needed to find Ben. That was what she was looking for really. For him. For their friend. Everyone else seemed to be lost in some personal crusade but Sam just wanted to keep her little group of friends together. Every time they fought, every time things changed for the worse, she imagined everyone just drifting away from one another. Being swallowed up by the uncaring world of the Circuit, or by the

corporate monster living above them, ready and willing to subsume all in its path to the progress touted by their company website. Progress to save humanity and secure the future. Were people that easily taken in? Was comfort so much more important than freedom?

The usual sources were useless, Sam decided, and dove into the discussion sites that she often disregarded. Too full of weirdos and cranks and lunatics. Or bots with an agenda. Just nothing good, nothing that could be trusted. Not that CaliaCorp could be trusted but some of their sites were good, had good information. Just not when you needed to know about them, or about Calia. Only for, well, everything else. Need to know how to peel potatoes faster or who broke the spaceflight speed record, easy. Want to know anything about the most famous woman on the planet? Nothing.

It made no sense, and yet total sense. It seemed clear, abundantly clear that Calia simply did not want to be known. Wanted to be some aloof figurehead and enslave mankind from the shadows. It seemed to be working. Behind that slick corporate exterior, Sam knew something was going on. Something horrible.

The discussion sites were, as she expected, full of strange ideas and thoughts. Mostly utterly insane ones. Nothing to do with CaliaCorp, just odd ideas about what clouds were made of and underground civilisations and aliens. Clearly, some people had gone directly off the deep end. Anything about CaliaCorp tended to be positive, overwhelmingly so. Saying they made life better, safer, happier. Lots of messages between people as if reinforcing the others belief in the need to surrender to the company. Co-dependent brainwashing. It felt awful to read, for Sam, knowing something like this was likely why Ben had vanished. Getting lost in cyberspace and losing grip on reality. He had grown distant, isolated. She knew he was always in danger of being a shut-in and she knew he spent too much time online. It seemed to have taken its toll and now, now he was gone. Sam felt no closer to finding him than ever.

Digging deeper into the darker areas of the web yielded little, save for a few conspiracy theories about Calia that seemed to build on the idea of her being some all-powerful thing. One positioned her as a vampire, with mind control powers. Another as an angel, come to save us all. Preposterous.

Hidden deep among the dross was something though, that caught Sam's eye. Corp Exiles, a place for people who left CaliaCorp. Which, Sam thought, was strange, because she had never heard of anyone leaving. Ever. She clicked inside and found a very small group

of people chatting about random things, life, music, the past, movies. But there were some messages, nothing recent, that Sam found hidden away when she searched. The reasons they left. The doubts, the fear, the sudden realisation something had gone terribly wrong. Hope, at last. And yet, it seemed only three people were having those conversations, and one was on another continent. Another had no location at all and the last.

The last lived in the Circuit.

Sam began to type, furiously, frantically, her fingers hammering on the keys as if possessed. She needed to talk to this person and had to know what they knew. They were in the belly of the beast and escaped, living to tell the tale. Hopefully tell the tale. Details on the site were sparse. Little more than a few comments that gave the hint that they became aware of something negative happening to them, but nothing concrete, nothing that really told Sam what happened at CaliaCorp. It was loose, lacking detail, lacking anything she could believe in. So she was compelled to find the rest, to uncover the truth and know if Ben could be saved. If he could be brought back from there and be himself. Maybe the claws of corporate life hadn't truly sunk in yet. She just needed that sliver of hope, that light, that pinprick that told her something worthwhile lay on the other side. This person could give that to her.

Hi, I need your help, please. My friend started working at ccorp and won't answer our calls. I don't know whats going on and i want to get him out of ther. Please please please help me I just need to know he's ok and safe and maybe how to get him to leave, can you hlp? In circuit, can meet.

Sam waited. She didn't know when the person was even online. But people were connected constantly, so maybe they'd be quick. Maybe they'd see her desperate plea and rescue her. The computer screen's glow lit up Sam's face. She adjusted her glasses and pushed a stand of hair back over her ear and typed another line.

Please, please help.

Silence. No thumping or grunting or groaning from below, just the low hum of electronics. Sam almost wished she could hear those sexual sounds. Being alone like this felt horrible, alone wondering what could be happening to Ben, or if Trish was ok or if Theo was in trouble, or what Marc was doing. Why were they all apart, at a time like this. She knew, of course, everyone had their plans, but it didn't stave off that gnawing loneliness. That feeling of being adrift in a sea of doubt and fear with no idea where land could be found. No one

steering things, no one guiding. Just Sam, alone, waiting and hoping.

She missed Ben. He wasn't even that good a friend, but he made her laugh. He acted awkward and a little bit cute and at one time, a long time ago, she thought about asking him out. The group treated them like the dorky ones anyway, why not just embrace that together. But she never did. Never felt right. Ben wasn't what she wanted anyway. Her thoughts returned to Trish. Strong and confident. Trish could guide her to land. Theo too. Both of them, maybe. Together.

Sam became lost in a fantasy, tied to her bed as Theo and Trish teased her mercilessly. Taking turns to run their hands over her body, to spank and scratch her and make her say 'thank you' each time. That was what she wanted. Someone who could take control, who could give her that moment of blissful empty submission, where all that mattered was being a docile slave for her Mistress or Master or both. For Trish's flat stomach or Theo's bugling biceps. It didn't matter as she pictured herself suddenly on her knees watching them both above her, Trish stroking her hand across Theo's cheek as Sam kissed her boots. It wasn't that she wanted them both, in fact the thought had never crossed her mind before, but she wanted their power, their control, their dominance. She wanted to submit to it, to embrace it, so they could replace all her worries and fears with lust and want and need and desperate aching desire. She needed it, needed to feel the power of someone as she simply gave in to it and allowed herself to be used.

And then Trish started doing just that, pushing Sam's face into her pussy, under her skirt, while Theo guided her hand to his cock and she began to stroke it. Eyes closed, just being of service, being a toy for them. A pet, a puppet, a slave. Their slave. Safe in their control.

It felt so right that Sam barely noticed the sound of a message notification.

You're local?

Sam felt elated. Finally, some answers. Some hope. The fantasy faded and she became focused again, she had a mission.

Yes, can you help me?

She waited again, holding her breath, stomach pulled taut.

Probably not.

A sharp exhale. Sam's shoulders sank. Hope dashed, so fast.

Please, just wnt to talk

Again, she waited, hoping for something other than a

dismissive response.

What u wanna know?

Finally, something, a glimmer of a sliver of a hint of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Maybe there was a chance to save Ben, to bring him back. Back to the Circuit. Before Sam replied again, she thought about that. Back to the Circuit District. To poverty. To a single-room apartment in a warehouse. To cracked old buildings and no hope, no opportunity. Was she doing the right thing? Maybe Ben was just better off away from them, away from all of the decay that surrounded her. The sex sounds started up again. Anguished howls this time, and the rhythmic crack of a whip. How could she bring Ben back to all of that, all that disappointment and longing for better only to never see anything but worse.

And then she remembered why it mattered. The root cause. CaliaCorp made it that way. CaliaCorp pushed everything else out until there was only them. CaliaCorp brainwashed people to do what they wanted. To give up on their lives. To abandon their friends and family. To give themselves to the machine and never look back. Minds gone, given over to a corporation and for what? A luxury apartment. If that was all they had to offer, why bother? Ben would be better with his friends, loved, happy. Even if that meant being broke.

Need to get my friend out of ccorp. How?

The reply came quickly this time.

Not easy. Need to talk offline. My place. When free?

Today? Now? ASAP

She waited a moment, and a reply appeared. An address close by. Another message.

Come.

She didn't hesitate. She didn't even reply to confirm. Sam grabbed a jacket and rushed out the door.

Chapter 19

Trish arrived at the large plaza where CaliaCorp HQ stood above a group of towers all overlooking a central area with a lavish fountain. Huge vertical screens hung from the sides of each building. A commercial looped on all of them, synchronised across the sky. In it, Calia danced, writhing her body in a tight blue dress that hugged her figure. Each sensuous movement emphasised by a flash of bright light, a strobing effect timed to the flicks of her hips and the dips of her shoulders. Her brown hair bounced and glinted in lights off-screen, and behind her more light, a trail of falling streaks of blue and gold plummeting to the bottom of the image.

Trish ignored it. Her attention focused on the people sitting by the fountain, the people drinking coffee at tables spilling from cafés out into the square, relaxing and talking. As if it were the most normal thing in the world. Smiles abounded. Every single person, from the waiter putting a fresh cappuccino in front of a middle-aged executive to the maintenance worker repairing a water fountain, grinned. Subtle, gentle music wafted through the square, a kind of upbeat ambient meditation track that made Trish's stress creep to the back of her mind. Perhaps it was her focus, though, causing that. Her plans. She felt sure that she was making a good decision. That it was about time someone got a little messy, a little rowdy in the squeaky-clean corporate heart of the city.

So, she raised her homemade sign high above her head. Her cropped t-shirt pulled up with it, revealing a strip of hot pink satin, the bottom of her bra. Trish smiled. In the bleak, cold reality of the Circuit, her body was one thing she could control. One thing she could shape and sculpt to perfection, to exactly how she wanted it. She knew she looked attractive and enjoyed others knowing it. When the inquisitive eyes of passersby fell on her, measuring her from the tip of her black boots to the messy blonde hair of her head, she relished the

attention.

“CaliaCorp is brainwashing you!” she shouted.

More eyes fell on her. She began to walk forward, to the fountain, and started to strut around it, waving her sign at any who would look. Everyone did. The quiet of the square meant that no-one would miss the young woman calling out and stomping in her boots around a fountain gently spraying water into the air. Her clothing, her demeanour, everything about her an alien presence in the calm, corporate environment. A raucous, rebellious voice belting out a slogan over and over, a repetitive chant to ensure the message reached everyone. As if trying to repeat until it felt true. Hypnosis by repetition. Trish almost believed it herself, as insane as it sounded.

The flashing screens above her, the smiling corporate drones beneath them. It felt like confirmation. Or confirmation bias. Weren't people who worked in offices always that way? Cold, detached, but happy because they had money and safety. Choosing peace and quiet over change and progress. Conformity over creativity. Or something. Rebellion seemed like a distant memory. Something for companies to use in marketing and not something people did to fight the power. To sell revolution safely.

But Trish wasn't there to be safe. She went there to fight back. To have people see her fight back. To inspire them. The thrill helped. Something about every eye in the square on her, it gave her a rush. A tingle between her legs. She looked up into the towers and could see people staring down, holding up their phones, recording her.

She started to move her hips. Like a mirror of the videos playing high above, moving with erotic grace. Walking stopped, she took up position in the middle of the square, right between the fountain and CaliaCorp headquarters, and began to swing her hips as she lowered her body down, flicking her skirt out as she did, revealing panties that matched her bra as the skirt bounced with her motion. Still roaring out the same chant.

“CaliaCorp is brainwashing you!”

The screens seemed to flash faster. The music beating in rhythm with Trish now. She flowed, moving with it, or it moved with her. It felt right. Being there, being seen by so many, all eyes on her. That was what she needed, what she missed. She always wanted to dance for a crowd and she wouldn't pass up the chance to entertain them. More phones came out of pockets. More recording, streaming. The screens flickered and the image changed. Live footage from

someone on the square, zoomed in on Trish. Capturing her motion.

She looked up at the screen and bit her lip. It wasn't just the square. It was the world. The world watching her message. The world watching... her.

The music went faster and so did Trish. The sign slipped from her hands and fluttered into the fountain. It didn't matter anymore. Everyone saw it. Now her hand moved behind her head, and she began to buck her hips forward to the music. Thrusting, humping the air. Then her hands moved down, smoothly running over her body, pressing her breasts together, then down, down to those writing, twisting hips. Rubbing her thighs. The moment all that mattered. The feeling of the eyes on her, the crowd. The performance of a lifetime, and the world watching her.

Watching her, why? Trish felt for the information, her mind reaching for it. Grasping at it. Her hands grasped at her hips and she rolled them around, making circles with her body. It moved on its own now. So many people were staring, lusting, wanting her. Weren't they? Their eyes seemed so confused. As if they heard something they shouldn't have. A secret. Did she share something? It felt so good to dance, to move, to show her body. Her tight, toned body. The body she ached to maintain.

Something else gnawed at her. The secret. What did she need to share? Why was she here? Trish looked up, tilting her head back and letting her hair out in a fluid swish of her arm. She looked at herself on screen, her own image ever so slightly delayed. She watched her hair tumble over her shoulders and then saw above that, the logo. CaliaCorp, emblazoned on the building.

That was it. That was the secret. CaliaCorp. They were brainwashing everyone. Brainwashing her. The screens. The music. They were doing it to her. Right there, the moment she arrived. But she knew now. Trish looked around at the crowd. They moved closer, most holding up their phones, capturing the moment. She was still on the screens. Still broadcast to the world. She still had a chance to get the message across. To tell everyone what was happening. Trish scrambled to grab her sign, but the paint ran into the water of the fountain, streaking down it, leaving it a soggy mess. She left it there and turned back, swirling, spinning on the spot, eyes darting between the eyes of the throng watching her. What could she say, beyond the message, beyond what she shouted before. What new information could she give them, if they were already brainwashed? If they were

already slaves to the machine?

She took a moment, adjusted her skirt and her shirt. She tied her hair back up and blinked, making sure not to look at the signs. One chance to change the world. To start the revolution. To show people why she wore combat boots. The revolution would be broadcast to everyone. She would be the catalyst.

Trish took a deep breath. Opened her mouth. And felt a gloved hand cover it. Then a crack to her right knee from something solid. Hands grabbed her arms, and they ripped her away from the square down into an alley beside CaliaCorp headquarters. She took a look back at the crowd, lowering their phones, going back to what they were doing. The screens went back to Calia. Like nothing happened.

A door opened, and strong hands pulled Trish from the street, and into darkness.

Chapter 20

Nari was a genius, as far as Marc could tell. He felt a little amateurish working with her, but it was thrilling to have someone on his side who knew what they were doing. Not only that, she just got him. Ok, he wasn't the greatest hacker in the world, but he tried, he knew as much as he could manage. No formal education, no training. He just learned and read and watched videos and practiced. That's what his friends never saw, and he hated the way they disrespected his talents. Nari was better than him, sure, but so cool about it. Guided him through the process each step of the way.

That process looked to skip the CaliaCorp website entirely, because that was locked down tight. Nari suggested looking at the systems the company used. Even if they were part of CaliaCorp they would be less strict about access and passwords and encryption. Not just that either, she knew all the exploits to try. Looking for outdated software, poor password policies, accessible cloud storage, and more. Marc was blown away just watching her screenshare as they chatted. Her voice sounded so cute too, kind of a drawl with this hint of an accent from the other side of the world. Youthful and enthusiastic, delighting in every move she made even if to Marc it seemed to send her ten steps back in her efforts to break into CaliaCorp.

The cloud storage service was a bust. Just as secure as the main website, maybe moreso. Nari was clever, though. She got into the payroll company next, looking for Ben's home address. But that didn't work either.

"It's so tight," she groaned.

"So tight," Marc agreed.

"I've got some more ideas, ok? We're gonna find your buddy."

"Thanks, Nari."

"De nada."

She continued to work, and Marc watched in awe as login screen after login screen flashed before his eyes. She typed so fast. She must be talented with her hands. Her voice had him wondering what

she looked like. He imagined pale, smooth skin and long, dark, straight hair. Maybe glasses. She would suit glasses. And he could almost create her in his mind, sitting at her desk in a tank top with spaghetti straps and a pair of teeny denim shorts. Why that, he wasn't sure it just seemed right.

For all her skills though, she hadn't actually gotten anywhere.

"Marc, it's really hard."

"I can see that."

"I mean I know it was hard when you were doing it alone, but do you think it's even harder now?"

"Probably, you're doing some advanced stuff."

"Yeah, I know I just didn't expect to be railed by all this security. They're fucking me everywhere I go," Nari said.

Marc took a moment to think. He found Nari swearing just a little bit more distracting than he expected. Like hearing something forbidden, something innocent turning corrupt. He found it phenomenally attractive.

"Ok so you've tried cloud services, payroll, emails, expenses... what's next?"

"Hardware. Physical hardware. You know? Stuff you can touch."

"Like, their computers?"

"Cameras, remember?"

"Right," said Marc, "the security cameras."

"Let me see what I can do here. There's just one company that installs these things in the city, of course. CaliaCorp Workplace Safety and Logistics. Let me get on their site."

Marc watched Nari work. The speed she parsed a webpage was incredible. Like she knew exactly what information to ignore. She must have done this so many times before, it was uncanny how fast she jumped to the base of the page, found the right link, a staff only login, and tried names and passwords.

"You're incredible," Marc said.

"Thanks cutie," Nari replied, the sound of her typing coming through as she spoke.

Her hands moved at speed. She found an email that the system recognised as a user. Marc wondered where it came from then assumed she had more than one monitor. He could see the work on a single screen from the other side of their video call. Nari tried a

password with the username she found. It didn't work.

"Fuck," she said, "thought I got in."

"Almost there," said Marc, "you can do this."

"You're so damn sweet."

The next password left the screen hanging for a moment. A circle spun, loading. Marc held his breath.

"I think we're in Marc."

The circle spun on, spiraling before his eyes. Marc didn't dare move. If she managed to get access to CaliaCorp, Nari was definitely a genius. The whole thing was impenetrable when they started, and it had only been a couple of hours. Nari felt like an old friend already. Listening to her talk about hacking, listening to her encourage him, it was something he needed so badly. A peer. An equal. Someone who understood the things he did, who got him on a level that his friends never could. He loved them all, he did, but they were luddites. They didn't know how to use a computer to its potential. They did surface level things like use social media. Nari though, Nari was an artist with a mouse and keys. Effortless too, naturally brilliant it felt like. Working at speed as if it were totally normal. Marc would have taken days to do the things she had done in minutes. He wondered if she could meet him offline. Maybe he could ask her out. If she lived in the city. Working with her he could do anything, achieve so much.

He should be thinking about Ben. That was the point, wasn't it? The screen flickered and they were in.

"Fuck yeah!" called Nari.

"You're amazing."

"Don't make me blush Marc," she said, "it's taken me forever to get into anything come on."

"I mean it," he said.

"Well, thanks, I appreciate it. Now let's see what we've got here."

Her cursor floated across the screen as Marc scanned the page. He saw a client list. Hundreds of camera systems in hundreds of offices, businesses, on streets, everywhere. Right at the top was the one they came for. CaliaCorp Headquarters.

"There you are," Nari whispered.

She clicked on the link and the screen displayed video feeds from ten cameras. Nari scrolled down. There were many, many more. The entire CaliaCorp building was there for them to explore.

Anything, anyone there could be found. Ben could be found.

“What are we looking for?” Nari asked.

“You know what Ben looks like, so, I guess a guy like that.

“Gotcha, this may take a while.”

Nari clicked on the first camera. The lobby. A delivery driver left a package at the front desk. Nothing exciting. She changed to another camera. It was just a different view of the lobby.

“You weren’t kidding,” said Marc.

Nari let out a giggle as she clicked on another camera. This one seemed to be an office, with several people hunched over computers. Again, nothing happened but Marc could have sworn that the computers all had the same image on the screen. Nari clicked again.

“What the...”

Her voice trailed off as Marc stared, his eyes wide. In this room, a woman holding a bullwhip paraded up and down, cracking it over the back of a man strapped to what could be best described as a torture rack. She was tall, clad in leather or latex, with flowing hair and enormous heels on her boots.

“So, this is different,” Nari laughed.

Marc stayed silent. This display of raw sexuality, of domination, was not something he was accustomed to and seeing it while on a call with Nari made his stomach churn, butterflies all taking off at once. It also boggled his mind that something like that would be going on in an office, of all places. Hardly looked like work.

“Y-yeah,” he managed.

“Not really helping us, is it?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Kinda fun to watch them shooting though, right?” Nari teased.

“Shooting?”

“See the camera?”

Marc hadn’t realised before, but the whole thing turned out to be some sort of production. One of those Calia softcore TV shows. He laughed. Nari switched cameras. This time, he saw a room of four women in business suits, a meeting. They were looking over documents. The camera switched again. Now he looked at a man strapped into some strange metal contraption, with a virtual reality headset on. He was naked. A woman in a lab coat sat in front of a computer staring intently at its screen as the man bucked and writhed.

“What is this?” asked Marc.

“Let’s just watch.”

Marc did as Nari suggested and saw another woman enter the

scene. Also in a lab coat. She approached the man, restrained at the wrists and ankles, and placed a hand on his cock, stroking it gently. He twitched and spasmed at the touch.

“What do they do in that place?” Marc asked.

“Shhh let’s see what happens.”

The woman quickened her pace and the man in the headset began to fight against the restraints. At the computer, the other woman nodded, pleased with their results. With his cock now being massaged rapidly, a robotic arm moved forward with a syringe toward the bound man. It pierced his thigh, and his movement began to slow. The hand on his cock though, moved faster, yet he barely reacted now. His twitching subsided; he stopped fighting against his restraints.

“Nari, what the hell is this?”

“How should I know, messed up isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty weird.”

“Are you into it?” she chuckled.

Marc didn’t answer. The man’s headset was being removed now and the restraints unlocked. He stepped down from the machine in a daze. The two women directed him to another room and Nari switched cameras. There, he was gently nudged toward a computer at a desk. He immediately sat down and started typing, fully nude.

“I think the show’s over,” said Nari, changing to another camera.

A break room, where a woman ate a sandwich. Nari changed cameras again. Now on the screen Marc saw a woman with pink hair, wearing a school uniform. Short skirt, button-up shirt, and knee-high socks. She beckoned someone from off-screen to come to her. A man walked into frame, wearing a tight pair of boxer shorts.

“No way,” Marc said.

“What?”

The man knelt before the pink-haired woman, and she lifted her skirt. His head vanished beneath it, and he gripped her thighs with his hands. The woman’s head rolled back.

“It’s Ben,” said Marc.

“Let me zoom in.”

Nari pushed the camera closer, and the woman and Ben filled the screen. Her eyes fluttered between open and closed and she planted a hand on the back of Ben’s head. She spoke, but the camera wasn’t sending audio. All Marc could do was stare at his friend as he pleased this gorgeous creature on the screen. She looked incredibly pretty, and Marc, for a moment, let his mind wander to the idea of

being in Ben's place, but it was Nari in the uniform. His cock twitched at the thought.

"Looks like your friend is having a good time," said Nari.

Marc's mouth fell open, jaw slack.

"Marc?" said Nari.

"Yeah, yeah, I can see it. I just... don't know what to say."

"Not much to say, no wonder he likes his new gig."

"That's crazy, it makes no sense. He's at work."

"People have sex at work, Marc."

"I know but, it's like he's... worshipping her."

Ben's head appeared from beneath the skirt, coming up for air, and he started up at the woman above him with a glazed expression.

"People are into that stuff Marc, that's why they were shooting a show about it. Are you not interested in that kind of thing?" Nari asked.

The woman on screen pushed Ben to the ground and placed her foot on his face. He began to lick it.

"I just," Marc began, searching for the words, "I should tell everyone I found Ben."

"Floor 40. That's what the camera is marked as."

"Ok... finally, something to go on. Thank you."

Nari giggled, "why don't you thank me like your friend thanks his boss sometime."

Marc feigned a laugh. "Can I contact you again, if I need more help?"

"I'm always online."

"Thanks, Nari."

Chapter 21

The closet hugged him tight, constricting his body. Theo could barely move. The scent from Aisling's card filled the air around him and made him feel light-headed. He needed to keep it together. Just outside a woman in a pencil skirt and pink satin blouse stood beside a man in dirty overalls. The sound of her clicking heels made Theo look at her shoes. They were pink too, with muddy blotches on them from the construction site.

"Hector," she yelled, "it is simply unacceptable. This work is past the deadline, you're filthy, and you've tracked mud all over the ground."

Hector, the man in overalls, stared at the ground.

"I'm sorry Ms. Labelle, but it is a construction site. It's dirty."

The woman shook her head and folded her arms. Theo's head spun. The scent of the card seemed amplified in the locker. He just needed to stay calm. Stay still. As long as he did that, he would be safe.

"Hector, I understand that it's a construction site. Do not treat me like a fool. But I do not understand why you couldn't wipe your feet."

Theo looked at the floor. Footprints. His footprints. They were all over the ground. If either of the two people outside looked closer it would be obvious they were caused by someone else.

"Ms. Labelle, I did wipe my-"

The loud snap of the woman's fingers clicking stopped Hector instantly.

"Drop for me Hector."

Theo watched as his head slumped and the woman put her hand on his shoulder and leaned close, speaking in a calm, even tone.

"Hector, you seem to have forgotten your training. You are not to question me. You are to follow orders and obey commands. You are the property of CaliaCorp, and you will comply with anything you are

told. Do you understand?"

"Yes, boss," droned Hector.

"Good boy, wake."

Hector perked up instantly, his eyes wide. Theo stared. Had this man's boss hypnotized him? Was this part of what CaliaCorp did to people? For a moment he thought about bursting out of the locker, throwing the woman to the ground and dragging Hector away, escaping to freedom, but Theo knew he couldn't risk getting caught. His hand tightened around the drive he found. All he needed was someone to help him unlock its contents. Marc could do it, maybe.

"Now Hector, you are going to make sure the work is complete by tomorrow. Even if you have to work all night."

Theo hoped Hector told the woman where to stick her demands, but he knew that wouldn't happen. The man simply nodded his agreement.

"Good boy, Hector" she said in a slow, mocking tone.

That scent hit Theo's nostrils again. Roses. Aisling. Being called a good boy by Aisling would be so nice.

Hector's arousal was visible once he heard 'good boy'. Theo's reaction was similar. He felt his cock pressing against his trousers. He needed to orgasm. Desperately.

"Now Hector, you are filthy, like I said, and that's not acceptable in my presence, is it?"

"No, boss."

"So, you're going to correct that, aren't you?"

"Yes, boss."

"Good boy," she drawled.

Theo's cock throbbed.

"Now strip," she demanded.

Hector began to peel off his overalls. Underneath he wore a pair of white briefs. He took off his work boots and pulled down his clothing, pushing it aside.

"Good boy, now kneel."

Without hesitation, Hector fell to his knees. The bulge in his briefs told Theo he enjoyed the experience, a lot. Theo felt his breath quicken, and worried he would be heard, but he couldn't help but be aroused by the raw sexual display. Days since his last orgasm. He never tried anything involving denial. It felt painful, but exquisitely pleasurable in a way he never understood. Another drifting scent of that perfume told him that all he really wanted was Aisling to help him over the edge, to push him to erupt at her touch. He wished he could

see her again, to stare into those big, beautiful eyes.

“Now Hector, I told you my shoes aren’t clean. Do you see those stains?”

“Yes, boss,” muttered the kneeling man.

“Clean them.”

Theo felt his cock stiffen, fully erect now and pushing against the locker door as Hector leaned down and began to lick the woman’s pink shoes. She pushed herself up onto a desk and pressed one of her feet onto the top of Hector’s head, while he licked and lapped at the other.

“Don’t forget the sole,” she said with a laugh.

He didn’t. Hector dutifully licked the dirt from every last bit of her heel and Theo felt his throbbing member direct his thoughts to the fantasy of doing the same with Aisling. He would happily clean Aisling’s heels. Then the fantasy faded for a moment, as a rusty piece of metal poked him. It took an effort not to cry out. With the dream shattered, Theo remembered that he was supposed to be dominant. He was the alpha male of his group, not some submissive loser like Hector. He never had those ideas before Aisling, and he was sure if they met again, he could take control and give her the time of her life, with him firmly on top.

Then the scent of that perfume filled his nostrils, and the woman switched feet, pushing Hector’s head down with her pointed toe and forcing him to lick her other shoe clean. Theo’s mind rushed in two directions at once. One side desperate to regain his composure, to be strong and dominant and powerful and show someone he was the boss. The other side was desperate to orgasm and for reasons he simply could not explain, needing permission. Needing desperately to please and serve to get it.

“That’s a good boy, Hector,” the woman said.

“Thank you, boss.”

“Now, my heels are clean, and you’ve been good. I’m sorry I had to be so hard on you, but you’re so hard for me, so why don’t I give you a little treat.”

“Thank you, boss.”

“Stroke your cock for me, now.”

“Yes, boss.”

Hector pulled his cock from his briefs, not moving up from his knees, and stroked it slowly. The woman pushed her heel into Hector’s mouth as he did and he pumped himself harder the moment it passed

his lips.

“Good boy, suck,” she said.

From inside the locker, Theo was transfixed. He wanted to orgasm; he wanted to stroke. He needed it. He would have happily sucked on her heel to get that; he could take charge later. Then, all he wanted, needed, desired, was to be a good boy, just like the woman said.

“Doing so well for me Hector, you can go a little faster now.”

Theo tried to manoeuvre his hand down to his crotch but there was no space. No room to touch himself looking at one of the most erotic things he had ever witnessed. It was one thing on television but in person, hearing it, seeing it, smelling roses, it hit so different. So tactile and visceral.

“Do you deserve to orgasm, Hector?”

“No Ms. Labelle,” Hector said.

Theo wanted to orgasm. Probably more than Hector.

“That’s a good boy Hector, you know your place, don’t you?”

Hector bucked against his hand. It hadn’t taken him long to reach the edge. Theo knew he would be the same, if it were him. Maybe after an orgasm he would be himself again. Maybe he just needed to get it out of his system. He tried adjusting his body, to get to his needy cock. A struggle, but if he twisted just a little, he could get there.

“Yes, Ms. Labelle,” said Hector.

“And you’ll never let me down again, will you?”

“No, Ms. Labelle.”

Theo managed to get his hand in front of him but could only rub his penis through his jeans. It would have to do. He let himself get engrossed in the fantasy, just to get it over with. Just to cum. He smelled the roses. He felt himself leaking pre-cum into his underwear.

“I’m going to be generous today, Hector, I’m going to let you have an orgasm.”

“Thank you, Ms. Labelle.”

Theo found himself wanting the same permission. Wanting to be told to let go and spill his seed into his pants.

“Faster now, Hector. Show me how much you want it.”

“Yes, Ms. Labelle.”

Hector’s pace quickened, and so did Theo’s. The sound of Hector’s grunts loud enough that when Theo let one of his own slip

through his lips, no one noticed.

“Beg for your release, Hector.”

Theo felt himself begging in his mind. His lips started to move involuntarily. He needed to focus. Being caught meant he would never get the drive back to his friends, but the pleasure of rubbing his hand on his cock felt immense and he could feel the orgasm building.

“Please, Ms. Labelle, grant this unworthy slave an orgasm.”

She laughed and Theo’s mouth opened, letting a sliver of drool slide down to his chin. He would orgasm with Hector, he could feel it, a surging wave of pleasure and need, the dam ready to burst at last.

“Again Hector, show me how desperate you are.”

“Please, please, please Ms. Labelle, I need it, I need your permission, I ache for your command.”

Theo rubbed himself faster and the woman leaned down, her face closer to Hector’s.

“Ready, drone?”

“Yes, please, please, I’m ready.”

Theo gasped, ready too, his hand moving faster, his breathing ragged. He sounded too loud. He knew it. His hand tapped against the locker door. He needed to stop. The pleasure felt hard to resist but he needed to calm down before it was too late.

“Cum for me, Hector, and ruin it. Cum and hand off.”

The reward, delivered with such cruelty, sent Theo into spasms of lust. His cock ached to do what Hector was doing. Erupting in an orgasm. Hector did not particularly enjoy it though, as he took his hand off his cock and his semen oozed down to the floor. He looked pained.

Theo felt pained too. He came so close, but the room had gone quiet. He slowed down, but his breaths were coming fast and loud. He tried to pull his hand away from his twitching cock, but he couldn’t move. The locker squeezed too tight. Instead, it thumped the door with a hollow clang and Theo stopped rubbing himself altogether.

The woman, Labelle, looked at the locker. She raised an eyebrow and started, suspicious. Theo could feel her eyes burning into his, though he stayed hidden in darkness. The feeling of being seen, of being exposed, came on strong. Theo held his breath and waited for her to walk over, waited for the click of those heels and for her to rip open the locker door and make him kneel like Hector.

Then Hector grunted loudly and one final dollop of white shot

onto the woman's shoe. She looked down in disgust.

“Hector, you disrespectful little worm. What have you done?”

Hector fell onto all fours and put his forehead on the floor.

“I'm sorry Ms. Labelle I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry. I'll never let it happen again.”

She put the toe of her foot under his chin and slowly lifted his head with her shoe.

“See that it doesn't, drone. Now get dressed and get back to work.”

“Yes, boss, sorry boss. Thank you, boss.”

She shook her head, wearing a withering, dismissive expression, as Hector rushed to get dressed in his dirty overalls again. As soon as his clothes were on, he walked outside. The woman hesitated, staring at the locker with a knowing grin. Theo froze. She had him, surely. She would open the locker and see him and that would be the end of his mission.

Instead, she reached into her handbag, pulled out a cloth, and wiped her shoe clean, then tossed the cloth in a waste paper basket.

“Disgusting.”

Her heels clicked loudly as she walked out of the office. As soon as the door closed with a light click, Theo exhaled. Then his phone rang. He panicked and the locker door burst open, and he tumbled out, dragging the phone from his pocket and trying to silence it before the woman came back, until he saw the name of the caller.

Aisling.

He looked around, confirmed he remained alone, that no-one heard the ringing, and answered.

Chapter 22

Long stains spilled down the walls of the corridor. The carpet frayed and worn, with patches missing. Mould caked in every crevice. There were three doors. Sam knocked on one, hoping it was the right place. No number on the door, no indication who lived there. No answer. She walked to the next door, saw the red paint flaking off and collecting in chunks on the floor. The lights in the corridor buzzed incessantly. Another knock.

“Hello,” Sam said.

A shuffling noise from inside told her that at least someone lived there. She waited for a while, then finally the door unlatched and creaked open just a little. A bulging eye peered between the door and frame.

“Yes?”

“We talked online.”

The door opened and a man’s arm grabbed Sam by the wrist and dragged her inside, leaving her staring into a dingy, dim apartment. The door shut behind her.

“So, you’re the one poking into Calia?” the man asked.

Sam turned only to find him standing between her and the rest of the room, a small, boxy one filled with plastic crates and knick-knacks.

“Yes, you said you could help?”

“Help is one way to put it. Coffee?”

Sam nodded and her host showed her to a little round dining table with three mismatched chairs surrounding it. He swept some crumbs from it and pulled out a chair, gesturing for Sam to sit. She did, on a chair that had probably been comfortable a long time before. Now the cushioning was flattened and the wood chipped to the point she felt a splinter poke her thigh. The man wandered past a pile of books, stacked almost to the ceiling, and into a kitchenette off the main room. Sam looked around as the kettle boiled.

The room had no windows, illuminated by an old bulb,

dangling from the ceiling with nothing to soften it. The table sat on one side of the room, beside a wall of books without a bookshelf. Just stacks upon stacks of dusty old paperbacks. From a quick glance, most of them were romance or erotica. On the other side of the room lay a cream-coloured couch that might have been white at some point, covered in brown stains. Strewn around it were plastic crates filled with ornaments and items that belonged in a recycling plant, and not someone's living room. Beneath it all was the same frayed carpet from outside.

The man reappeared with two mugs of coffee and plonked one down for Sam, emblazoned with the old CaliaCorp logo, the one they sometimes used on faux-retro vintage products. A bold font with a gradient from pink into orange like sunset over a tropical city. It spoke of bright, beautiful futures and fun and joy. On the mug it looked faded and sad and cracked. Sam looked down at her murky coffee, it looked barely drinkable. She took a sip. It was barely drinkable.

“So,” she began, “you worked at CaliaCorp?”

The man frowned, as if Sam called him a name.

“No time for introductions? What's your name, sweetheart?”

“Sam,” she said, curtly.

“Well Sam, I'm Gregor. And yes, I worked at CaliaCorp, but then again, hasn't everyone?”

Gregor looked unkempt. His hair long, with strands of grey streaking it. His scruffy beard was fully grey already and his clothes stained and worn, an ancient pinstripe shirt and grey slacks. Office wear, but no longer fit for an office.

“My friend is there.”

“My condolences.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sam.

Gregor took a long swig from his coffee and slammed the mug back on the table. A deep brown dollop of it splashed up and onto the wooden surface. He didn't notice. Or didn't care.

“Your friend is gone. Might as well be dead.”

Sam pursed her lips and took a moment. Taking it in.

“He only just started,” she said.

Gregor sighed. “It won't matter, most likely, but maybe he's not too deep yet.”

“Too deep? Deep in what? What are they doing there?”

“You already know,” Gregor said, leaning forward and

planting his elbows on the table, arms splayed wide.

“I suppose, I have an idea. Someone from there told us.”

“Us?” Gregor asked.

Sam bristled. Shifted in her seat. She came to ask questions but instead felt interrogated. Gregor’s eyes were wild, wide and bloodshot.

“My friends and I.”

“They gonna work for her too?”

Sam’s hands were under the table. She balled them into fists and squeezed.

“What did you do? At CaliaCorp?”

Gregor laughed. A long, deep laugh. He leaned back and his belly bounced as he chuckled. Sam’s hands tightened.

“What did I do? What did I do?” Gregor laughed. “I did what everyone else does. I made money for the machine, and the machine grew.”

Sam pulled her hands from beneath the table and slammed them down on it. Coffee spat up from her cup, arcing down onto the surface in two splashes.

“I need to help my friend, can you take this seriously for god’s sake?”

“Ok, ok,” Gregor said, nodding and clamping his mouth closed for a moment as if to stifle another laugh. “What do you want to know?”

“What have they done to him?” Sam asked. “What’s happening in that place and how do we get him out of there?”

Gregor, suddenly serious, leaned forward, as if sharing some terrible secret with Sam. He clasped his hands together.

“They’ve done to him what they did to me and everyone else who walks through the doors of their headquarters. They’ve broken down his resistance and turned him into a dedicated drone for the company.”

“How?” asked Sam, leaning in too now, desperate to learn the secrets. Needing to know.

“In business, long time ago, you might have said everybody has a price. You know, people will do some vile things if you give them enough money. It’s primal, you get me? Even if you’re rich, you’re an animal, you need to survive, and you’ll claw at comfort and security beyond what you need. Luxury, safety, and power. Those things keep the wolf from the door.”

Sam clenched her jaw.

“What does that mean? What does that have to do with

anything?”

“What if,” Gregor whispered, “you replaced one primal need with another?”

Sam leaned back. Her eyes widened. Gregor continued.

“Sex. Not safety. Not shelter. See, a job gives you the basic needs. Money to buy food, shelter, warmth. Then you get enough of the money, you get your safety.”

Sam nodded. She knew this bit.

“What’s next, Sam?”

“Love. Belonging.”

“Bingo. So, if you get a job you like, it might give you prestige, esteem, creativity, and achievement. But jobs rarely give you belonging, or love. They might say they’re your family, you might make some friends but that’s not work, is it? That’s something that continues afterward.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Sam, “you’re saying what? CaliaCorp added sex to work?”

“CaliaCorp filled a gap in the hierarchy of needs, a gap that most companies were afraid to fill because it’s taboo. Was taboo.”

Sam leaned back in her seat. Exhaled.

“So... in practice? What does it mean?”

“What I said about everyone having a price? The price changed.”

“To what?”

“Weakness.”

Sam looked around the room. She suddenly felt nervous.

“What weakness? What do you mean?”

“Everyone has something. A fetish, a kink, a dirty little secret that makes them tick. What if a company could find it, and flood your mind with it, until you’re basically an addict, and they control the drug supply.”

“Sexual weakness? That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” asked Gregor.

“I mean...” Sam trailed off. She had seen it. The shows on TV, the advertising, the things that appeared on computers. The algorithm that chased her with images of dominant blonde girls.

“But people aren’t that stupid, are they?”

“People were happy to let the world burn, to stoke the flames themselves, as long as their basic needs were met.”

Sam felt something she never had before. She wasn’t shocked. Not even surprised. It was like finding something she knew had been

there all along.

“They’ve given people their biggest desire,” she said.

“They’ve given them the one thing that doesn’t come easy, even with money. Sex, love, lust, all of that physical intimacy. The same intimacy that slowly vanished the more we lived online.”

“But all the brainwashing stuff, the hypnosis?”

Gregor smiled.

“My department. It’s one thing to get people turned on, or even to get them to fall in love. But you need to get them to act against their other desires. That’s where those elements come in. Conditioning, control. Repeat exposure, over time, makes it too hard to resist. You don’t become desensitised, you want it more.”

“They are brainwashing people.”

“Yes,” Gregor said, and folded his arms across his chest.

Sam clasped her hands around her mouth and nose, then let them drop onto the table.

“Why? Why do that? Why control people and create a world of brainwashed drones?”

Gregor looked around the room. At the rotting books and paint peeling from the walls.

“Maybe it’s better, eh?”

“How could it be?”

“I lived in a luxury apartment and had my every need catered too. Physically, sexually, emotionally. The world is cooler, wars are all but gone.”

“So why did you leave?”

Gregor let out a half-laugh, his chest almost bouncing with it.

“Because I was stupid enough to try, and nobody tried to stop me.”

“Wait... they didn’t?”

“I was as surprised as you are. But no, they never stopped me. Never came after me. I told them I quit, they said thank you, and by the time I got home that luxury apartment was locked, and I was homeless.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You do. I think.”

Sam thought about it for a moment. Sipped the muddy coffee.

“People don’t want to leave, do they?”

“The hard work is getting them in. Breaking down resistance. The planning, the effort, the manipulation of everything. Most fall into it willingly, happy to have their needs met but for those who don’t

want that, who rebel against it, they go out of their way to make sure there's no way to stop them. Even if you think you're beating them, you're being conditioned, corrupted."

"Is that what happened to you?"

Gregor nodded. "A little part of me always resisted."

Sam saw Gregor's expression change. He seemed sad.

"Do you regret leaving?"

His eyes wandered around the room. "Sometimes."

"So people... people just accept it? Even if it's not what they want?"

"Before, they accepted a world of chaos and disorder, just to make barely enough to survive. Why wouldn't they accept it now they're being put up in luxury accommodation and being fucked by whatever their fantasy is?"

He shrugged. Sam didn't know how to argue that point, but her mind scrambled to try.

"But they're controlling people. What about free will?"

"What about it? Do you want to be free, or do you want to be secure, safe, and happy?"

"But people can choose to do better, can't they?"

"Then why didn't they, Sam? Why were we consuming even as it was destroying us?"

"You sound like you work for them; you know that?" Sam snapped.

Gregor sighed. "It's a paradox. Control. You let people choose and a few bad actors can manipulate everything to their ends. Mould the world in their image. Or you let someone who has a better vision take over. Or you embrace chaos."

"What are you saying?"

"Do you think the world is better with, or without CaliaCorp?"

Sam paused. Gears turning in her mind. So many things she could say, but none of it felt important. Finally, she spoke.

"How do I get Ben out of there?"

Gregor looked away, then back at Sam.

"Kicking and screaming, I'd imagine."

"Come on, give me something."

"Find him. Ask him to leave. If he's new, maybe you'll get through to him."

"How do I find him?"

Gregor shrugged. "I don't know. Find a staff list? You just

need to get past the front desk and to the upper floors.”

Sam nodded. She had a plan now. Something she could try, at least. It wasn't much more than when she started but having things confirmed, having knowledge, information, that satisfied her. There was comfort in knowing what would happen next.

“One more thing,” she said.

Gregor nodded.

“Is she real?”

“Who?”

“Calia.”

“Yes, she's real,” Gregor said. “She's still there, in the building.”

“But what age is she? How? What even is she?”

Gregor opened his mouth to speak and Sam's phone rang, piercing the quiet of the apartment with an insistent ringing. She mouthed sorry to Gregor and stood up to answer, walking to a corner of the room.

“Theo, are you ok? Where? How long. Ok, ok, see you then. Bye.” She walked toward the door the moment she hung up the phone. “Sorry I have to go, sorry. Thank you.”

Gregor shook his head and sipped his coffee as Sam rushed out the door, and ran off down the corridor.

Chapter 23

“You can’t seriously do that, Theo. You don’t even know her,” Marc shouted.

Sam walked into her apartment to find Marc and Theo squaring up, ready to fight. The call from Theo sounded frantic, urgent, and she assumed whatever Marc felt angry about was related.

“What choice do we have? It's not like we have other options, is it?” Theo spat.

Sam steeled herself. She didn’t want to get into it, but she needed to know what was happening. For Ben.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Both Marc and Theo whipped their heads to look at her, surprised. They were so focused on their argument that they didn’t notice her coming in.

“Theo thinks he should meet Aisling, alone.”

“No, Marc is saying we should all go when she said only one of us should go.”

Sam looked at Theo, then at Marc, then back to Theo.

“What did she say, Theo, exactly?”

Theo took a long, deep breath and sighed. Tilted his neck. It cracked.

“I told you she called me. Well, she can get us to Ben. But just one of us can go, to avoid suspicion.”

“And of course that has to be you,” grumbled Marc.

“Well it kind of has to be, doesn’t it?” Theo retorted, “I need you to work on cracking this.”

Theo fished the drive he’d found out of his pocket and tossed it to Marc, who put his hand out to catch it, only for it to bounce awkwardly and make him scramble to keep a hold of it. Theo laughed at his fumbling. Marc glared back.

“What is this,” he said.

“Found it at the construction site. It’s got passwords on everything but it looks like there’s some info about them coming here

on it.”

“Here? The Circuit?” Sam said.

“We’re next, I guess,” Marc added.

“No idea, I couldn’t open the folder. But maybe you can.”

Marc smiled, surprised Theo thought he could do anything like that.

“Would be a first though,” Theo added.

The smile turned into a scowl. “I can, and I will get into this,” said Marc. “I know what I’m doing.”

“What about Ben,” Sam said.

“I’m going to meet Aisling, and I’ll get him to come back here,” said Theo.

His chest puffed out, his expression almost smug. As if he had everything figured out.

“You shouldn’t go, seriously,” barked Marc.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because that woman put the whammy on you and I think you just want another taste.”

Sam stepped in between them, eyes shut, breath held. “Stop, please.”

Theo turned away and plonked himself on the couch.

“Whatever.”

Marc stuck his tongue into his cheek and shook his head.

“Fine.”

“Theo, can we trust her?”

“Why wouldn’t we? She helped us.”

“So what man,” Marc said, “she could be setting you up.”

“You’re paranoid, she wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t even know her,” Marc spat.

“Guys,” Sam blurted, “Where’s Trish?”

Theo and Marc stopped talking. They looked at each other, as if to ask the question. Neither knew.

“I called her, no answer,” said Sam.

“Messaged her earlier, same,” said Theo.

“Where the hell is she?” Marc added.

Sam’s heart sank. She knew Trish would have gone to see Ben. Would have made Theo calm down and kept Marc quiet. She was so tough, so strong and brave. Sam wished she could be like that.

“Look, she’ll come back,” said Theo. She’s probably just doing whatever she planned. Let’s just focus on seeing Ben. I’ll go, ok? It’ll

be fine.”

“You will absolutely not go,” Marc yelled.

“Then who? Who else is going to march into CaliaCorp headquarters? You need to be at your computer Marc, even if you’re a god damned amateur.”

Sam felt hot. Her skin alive. Energy rippled through her. Adrenaline. A rush. It came from the pit of her stomach in waves. Churning and swirling and making her muscles tense. Her mouth moved, almost independently of her thoughts.

“I’ll go.”

Theo tilted his head to the side like a confused puppy. Marc opened his mouth to speak but had no words. Sam always avoided conflict, or anything remotely scary or dangerous. She hid behind Trish during horror movies.

“Sam, I told you, I’ll do it,” Theo said, standing up and walking to her.

“Like hell you will, you’re not going near that woman again,” Marc snapped.

“I said I’m going,” said Sam. “I need to know he’s ok, and give him a chance to come back. Maybe he’s happier now. You know?”

“Maybe he’s been brainwashed completely by now,” Marc said.

“Shut up, asshole,” said Theo. “I should go. Sam’s safer here.”

“She’s not a child, dude,” Marc replied.

“She could be in danger if she goes.”

“So could you, what if that woman isn’t who she says she is?”

“Why would she be anyone else? Why would she be helping us see Ben?”

“I don’t know, but you’re too busy thinking about fucking her to think about how stupid you’re acting.”

“Man, fuck you, I’m-”

“Guys, just please, stop,” cut in Sam. “I’m going to see Ben. I’ll keep in touch, ok?”

“What am I going to do then?” grumbled Theo.

Marc raised his hand, as if he were asking a question. “I got something for you, actually.”

He walked to Sam’s computer and opened up the security camera website. Double-checking his phone for the login details, he pulled up the CaliaCorp headquarters feed.

“Every camera in CaliaCorp, yours to watch. You can keep an

eye on Sam here, mister alpha male.”

Theo sat down at the computer and started clicking into the cameras.

“Holy crap, how did you get into this?”

“I told you, I know what I’m doing.”

“Then get started on that drive, and I’ll find Ben,” said Theo. He thought; *and Aisling too.*

“Alright, we’ve got a plan,” said Marc, before walking toward the door.

“Good luck,” Theo called as Marc left.

“Not going to wish me luck too, Theo?” asked Sam.

Theo was engrossed in the screen. He barely noticed her. She tapped him on the shoulder.

“Sorry, sorry I just wanted to find, uh, Ben.” He moved the mouse around quickly, bouncing between cameras.

Sam looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “I’m going to go, then.”

Theo’s hands stopped moving. He shook his head and turned to Sam.

“Sorry. I just... I wanted to find him, so I could keep an eye on you too.”

“Right,” she said.

“Be safe, ok?”

“I will.”

“If you need help, call me. Straight away. I’ll come get you. I’ll protect you.”

“Thanks, Theo,” said Sam, “hope I don’t have to hold you to that.”

She walked away, to the door. Theo looked back at the computer and started scanning through cameras again. Sam left, and the apartment fell silent.

Chapter 24

The building seemed as imposing as ever. From the square in front of it, Sam could look up and see the lines, the edges, come together, as if the building tapered into a fine point. Shooting up toward the sky, a pointed threat to the heavens. It was, of course, a rather large rectangle, but perspective shifts this close to something so big, so powerful. Sam walked to the entrance and through the door into the gold-tinged lobby. The same receptionist sat there, wearing the same empty smile, staring down at a screen. She didn't seem to blink, just stared blankly ahead. Theo had said there was a spiral on the screen. Sam wondered if that was what the woman was staring at.

The lift pinged and the doors slid open. Sam looked over to see Aisling emerge from them, her long hair swishing around her shoulders, green eyes glinting, mouth curled into a wry smile.

“Samantha, wasn't it?” she said as she approached Sam.

“Sam. Just Sam.”

Aisling nodded and put a hand on Sam's back, then looked over to the receptionist. “Heading upstairs with my guest, put her down as Sam for me, ok?”

“Yes Miss,” the receptionist replied without so much as glancing up from her screen. Her hands began to move and Aisling ushered Sam into the lift with an insistent hand that crawled down to the small of her back. Pointed fingernails pushed into her skin and delivered a jolt of arousal that Sam tried to ignore. Aisling smelled wonderful.

“So, Sam,” Aisling said as they stepped into the lift, “what do you think of CaliaCorp Headquarters?”

Sam opened her mouth to speak, and the doors slid closed with a thunk, and the lift began to rise. Aisling dropped her hand and turned to face Sam directly, peering down at the smaller woman.

“Be careful what you say here, when we're not alone. Ok? Act naturally, we're just bringing you in to talk about job opportunities.”

Sam nodded. Aisling's eyes bore down on her like emeralds

glowing and burning into her. Spinning and sending her spiraling into a daze. There was something altogether sexual about Aisling. Long, red hair, a deep cleavage in an emerald blouse the shade of her eyes. A figure that defied logic, a waist too small to match the curve of her hips and the dramatic swell of her chest.

“When we see Ben,” Sam said, “will he... come back with me?”

Aisling shook her head. “I don’t know, Sam, depends how happy he is here.”

“How happy, or how... brainwashed?”

Aisling raised an eyebrow. She paused before speaking again. Sam shifted awkwardly. Feeling a bead of sweat trickle down the back of her neck. Like she was in the lift with a predator, not a person.

“I don’t know what he’s like, I haven’t seen him. He’s just been told to report to a meeting room I booked for us. We’ll see.”

Sam tried to smile.

“How did she do all this?”

Aisling shook her head. “Who?”

“Calia. What did she do? To just... take over everything?”

“I think you already know that, Sam.”

The lift stopped with a loud ping and the doors opened, revealing a perfectly average-looking corridor, with a series of small meeting rooms lining it. Some had people inside talking in front of screens, others were empty. It was the most bland office environment Sam could imagine and suddenly she felt silly, as if there was no way anything she knew could be true, anything she had been told could be real. CaliaCorp was just a successful company. A big one, one that dominated others, but just a company.

“Follow me,” said Aisling. Sam obeyed.

Striding confidently along the corridors, Aisling’s behind swayed with her, and Sam found herself staring. She still wanted Trish the most but could see why Theo seemed so infatuated. Aisling looked like a fantasy come to life. A dream. Sam followed her pert bottom as she sashayed down to a meeting room far from any people.

Somewhere private and secure from prying eyes. Sam was glad of that much, maybe she could have some time to talk to Ben, to make him see what was happening. If Aisling allowed her to. Sam still didn’t trust her, though taking her into CaliaCorp, bringing her to Ben, that went some of the way to making her feel at least a little more like the redhead was on her side.

“In here,” Aisling said as she pushed open the glass door of a

small room with a single round table and four chairs in it.

Sam stepped inside and Aisling pushed some buttons on a wall panel. The clear glass walls of the room turned opaque, and Aisling shut the door.

“Ben will join us shortly. We’re early. I expected to be waiting for you downstairs. You’re quite eager, aren’t you?”

Sam blushed. She always turned up early. It never made her feel like she was ‘eager’ before.

“I just want to know Ben is safe.”

Aisling nodded and sat down on the table, crossing her legs and letting one foot dangle over the other, bouncing it up and down, catching Sam’s eye. The back of a shoe slid from her heel and the leather pump started to bounce up and down in rhythm as Aisling impatiently moved her foot.

“He is. Everyone is safe here, Sam. No one gets hurt, you know, not unless they’re into that sort of thing. The rest, the control, it’s all mental. You understand?”

“Yes, I think so, it’s just... it all seems so unreal.”

“Of course it does. The idea of a massive corporation brainwashing the masses, it’s absurd, isn’t it?”

Sam let out a small, breathy laugh. “It really is.”

Aisling smiled and nodded. “Yet here we are.”

“Who even is Calia? It doesn’t make sense. She never changes, never gets old, never looks different.”

“What do you expect her to be, Sam?”

Sam looked around the tiny room, trying to stop glancing down at Aisling’s dangling heel. “I don’t know, older? She’s always been the same since I was a kid.”

“I don’t know, Sam, I’m not in the media department. Photo editing, touch ups, who knows?”

“I guess. It just seems strange for her to set up a company like this, so fast, doesn’t it?”

“Was it fast?”

Sam looked down again. Aisling’s shoe swung a little faster.

“Well, she’s been around as long as I remember.”

“So what, twenty-something years?”

“But the company is older than that, right? I looked online and I can’t find a date.”

“What does it matter, Sam?”

“I want to know who she is, the person, not the corporate

mascot.”

Aisling shrugged. “Not many people get to see her, just her top advisors.”

“Are you one of them?” Sam asked.

A laugh. “No, Sam, I’m just a manager here. Nothing special. Just another cog in the great machine.”

“So how do I get to see her?”

“You don’t,” Aisling said bluntly.

Sam felt her fists balling up. “I need to, I need to talk to her. I need to know who she is, why she’s doing all of this, what’s going to happen to all of us. I want to know why our homes are being destroyed and why no one seems to care. Why are we stuck at the whim of some woman no-one’s seen in years? What’s going on in this building?”

“You’re a feisty one,” Aisling said, biting her lip, “but nobody sees Calia, besides the few with access to her. That’s it. You don’t get to argue.”

“Why? Why is she allowed to control our lives without even consulting anyone, without asking us? Why did she take Ben? I need to know, Aisling, I need to get some answers.”

Aisling’s shoe dropped to the ground with a thump. Sam’s eyes fixated on green-painted toenails, glimmering through sheer black stockings. She felt suddenly weak, lost, mind softening. It felt as if time were going in slow motion.

“Sam?”

Sam shook it off, blinking rapidly and looking back into Aisling’s mesmerising eyes.

“He’s here,” Aisling continued, stepping up to slip on her shoe and open the door.

Ben stood outside, rigid, expressionless.

“You asked to see me, Miss?” he droned.

“Come in, Ben,” Aisling said, “Someone came to meet you.”

Chapter 25

“Fuck!” Theo exclaimed.

They were right there, Sam and Aisling, and then they were gone, vanished into some office and Theo couldn't find the camera for that room. It didn't seem like one even existed. Surely not, there were cameras in almost every room besides on the very top floors. After a certain point, there was simply no surveillance. The privacy that comes with seniority maybe, or those cameras were not on the server. Either way, Theo's focus lay elsewhere. On Aisling. And Sam.

“Where are they?” he muttered, stabbing at the mouse, clicking from camera to camera hoping to find some clue, but there was nothing. Wherever they were gone, Theo couldn't find them. He wondered if Sam was ok. Maybe he could call her, but he might interrupt whatever was going on, if she were sneaking Ben out or something that might ruin her plans. Theo reached into his pocket instead, and pulled out the card Aisling gave him. Maybe he could call her. The scent of roses wafted into his nostrils and he inhaled, deeply. He held the card closer to his nose. Her scent, so intoxicating. He wondered if her hair smelled the same, if that scent fell down her neck over her chest and below. He imagined her copper hair.

Theo leaned back and let out a long, deep breath, then closed his eyes. He placed the card on the desk and wondered what to do. Aisling and Sam were together, working together. He couldn't call her either. What would he even say? ‘Hey I saw you vanish into a room I can't see and by the way I have access to every camera in your building. I hope that's cool.’

It was stupid. He was so stupid. He could almost hear Aisling speaking the words to him.

“You stupid boy.”

Theo hated it. Hated hearing that. But something else flashed in his mind too. He pictured Aisling before him.

“Stupid, stupid boy. You deserve punishment.”

Theo's hand found its way down to his crotch and he began to

rub himself softly.

“I’m not stupid,” he said aloud in the empty apartment.

In his mind, Aisling smirked, and leaned down over him, her cleavage bared, her eyes wide with intent. Theo took another breath. Roses. Stupid.

“You are a moron, Theo. You shouldn’t be thinking for yourself.”

He wondered where the thought came from. It didn’t seem right. It went beyond fantasy. He couldn’t remember ever thinking that way, but Aisling made it sound right, even inside his head. That didn’t make it true though, did it? He was a strong man, fit and powerful, and smart. Smart enough to keep rubbing his crotch and just enjoy the fantasy of Aisling’s body. Her tight ass. Her big tits. That felt better. He could bend her over her desk in that office and show her who was really in charge. Theo found himself getting excited. He opened his pants and let his cock spring out, hard, standing to attention. Roses filled his nostrils, but Theo grew determined, determined to have the fantasy *he* chose. The fantasy of him pressing Aisling forward, holding the back of her neck in one hand, feeling her soft, silky hair sliding over his wrist. The other hand on her hip, pressing into the flesh, squeezing. Her skirt rode up her legs and Theo saw himself behind her, commanding, his cock free just as in reality, but instead of a hand on it, he moved it toward her. She had no panties on, and the skirt slid further up and revealed her wet pussy.

“Now you really need to be punished,” she said.

Theo, and fantasy Theo, paused. This was not part of the plan. She should be surrendering to his strength. She couldn’t possibly stop him.

“You want to do what? You’re sick,” she said.

In his fantasy Theo loosened his grip on her neck, and she looked back at him, eyes aflame with passion.

“Maybe I’d enjoy that, with a real man.”

Theo winced at the insult. His fantasy was no longer cooperating, but he wouldn’t do anything against her will.

“You thought that would make you a real man?” she snorted. “You disgust me.”

Theo’s hand on his cock slowed, he felt sick. In his mind a battle raged. He wanted to show Aisling he could be a strong, powerful, dominant man. He did not want to do something awful to

her either. He wasn't like that. Was he?

"It's your twisted fantasy, loser," Aisling said.

She leaned back, arching her body as she stood straight, backing into Theo. It was just a fantasy, he remembered as the scent of roses flooded his mind with different desires. Just a fantasy. Just a business card. Not her long, luxurious hair. Not her emerald eyes. Not her limber body. Not her curving hips and glistening pussy. Not her bouncing boobs. Not reality.

"Oh, but it could be, if you'd just accept what you really want."

What did he want? Not to hurt her, not to force her. For her to be a willing submissive for him. For her to play along, even if she was clearly a dominant woman. Because he was a man, a strong man. He wasn't some submissive little boy for a powerful, sexual woman. He didn't want to fall to his knees and lick her pussy and make her feel good and forget about his own pleasure because hers is so much more important.

"Do it," Aisling said.

Theo quivered. His pace quickened as he masturbated to the thought of that fantasy. That forbidden fruit. Of being what? A not-real man? The whole thing seemed so stupid. What would he even be? He wouldn't stop being real.

"A beta male, Theo, not that such a stupid label means anything to me."

He was not that. Never that. Theo was an alpha male. Strong. Dominant. But the scent of roses made him dizzy and maybe he'd be able to balance on his knees. But he was sitting in a chair. In his fantasy he sank.

"Pathetic, aren't you?"

No. No.

"A beta male, a loser, a submissive little pig."

Not that. Never that. Theo knelt before her, looking up at the most perfect woman he had ever seen. Aisling. A fantasy, a dream, a goddess.

"But you see Theo, real men aren't as stupid as you. They don't worry about what someone calls them. It's just a game. A kink. You're as real on your knees as you are pounding me from behind. Don't you get it?"

Theo smiled; he felt better. As if something clicked and his fantasy became safe for him again. She was so right. Real men don't care about something so stupid as whether they're alpha or beta or

anything. What do letters from a dead alphabet even matter anyway?

“That’s right Theo,” Aisling droned, “All that matters is me.”

He knew it, as he took another deep breath and inhaled the powerful scent from the business card that seemed to linger forever, only growing stronger as he grew weaker. He felt soft, pliable, empty. Well, almost all of him. His cock was rigid, twitching as he tugged on it. The more he thought of Aisling, of being beneath her, of her tits in his face, her pussy rubbing on his prick, the more it made sense to pump it harder and harder and cum for her and only her.

“Only me, but only the real me, not this fantasy.”

He could fight that. He could fight whatever weird mental block stopped him from cumming. He needed it. Needed the tension to go away and the feelings to change. He needed to be himself again. Who was he?”

“You’re mine,” Aisling stated coldly.

She turned around and placed a heeled foot on Theo’s shoulder, pressing him down, down onto his back. He couldn’t fight it, his hand moving faster in the fantasy and in reality. No matter where, he was hers. He watched as she knelt down over him, her thighs around him, her chest in full view, tits bulging from her blouse.

“Remember Theo, you still need to be punished.”

He looked up at her, his hand a blur, his mind in a haze of rose-scented pleasure. She was too powerful, too erotic, too sexual for him to resist. He knew that now. He knew he was whatever she told him to be. Whatever letter in the alphabet Aisling said, that’s what he’d be, and it felt so good to accept that.

“Feeling so good when you just accept that you want to be a submissive slave. A pet. A toy for me to use. I’m more powerful than you. I’m a fucking queen, and when you see me again, you’ll obey every word I say, do you understand me?”

He looked up at his queen with reverence and felt an orgasm approach. Felt his body clench and tighten, the blood rushing away from his empty mind.

“And your punishment,” she said, “is denial.”

Like a ghost, she vanished. The fantasy gone, as if it never existed. Theo looked down and found the business card was no longer on the desk and his pants were closed, his cock hard and pressing against them from inside. He wanted to finish so badly, but he couldn’t muster the energy, and the thought of Aisling simply would not return. Instead, he clicked through cameras again, desperately hoping to see

her. Nothing, not a sign of her, or Sam. He couldn't forget Sam.

In the back of his mind, he could almost hear a voice, faintly insulting him.

“Loser.”

Theo flexed, cracked his neck. Tried to quiet the voice.

“Pathetic.”

He closed his eyes, opened them again.

“Desperate.”

“Leave me alone!” he called out.

No one was there. Yet the voice had one more thing to say.

“Mine.”

After that, his mind cleared, the haze of arousal faded and Theo felt normal, relatively, again. Besides a dull ache between his legs. He could finish himself off but without the arousal he felt before all that feeling in his crotch gave him was anger, frustration bubbling over into a quiet, seething rage.

“Fucking stupid...”

Theo didn't know if he felt angry at himself or at Aisling. She hadn't done any of the things he thought about. It wasn't even real. Why was he thinking those thoughts? Those weren't always there, were they? It was so hard to tell what was real or fake anymore. He focused, took a breath, tried to remember why he was sitting at the computer in the first place.

Find Aisling. No. Find Ben.

Find Ben.

Chapter 26

“He found it on a construction site. Said it’s something about the Circuit.”

Marc sat at his desk with his headset on.

“So, they’re expanding there next, you think?” replied Nari.

Her voice made him feel relaxed, confident. He felt ready to crack into the files on the drive Theo took and finally expose the truth about CaliaCorp. With Nari’s help.

“I hope not. I don’t want to move.”

“Then we’d better get to work. Plug it in and share the screen.”

Marc took the little black drive and inserted it into his computer. He clicked on the folder labelled ‘Circuit District’ and a password prompt appeared.

“See there’s your problem Marc,” said Nari.

“What?”

“It’s encrypted,” she laughed.

Marc laughed too. “I tried to warn you.”

“Ok, you got this. Let me send you something, one second.”

A ping sounded and a file arrived to Marc’s email. He didn’t remember giving that to Nari, but it was hardly surprising she could find it on her own. There was an attachment.

“This won’t do anything dangerous will it? An unknown attachment, always risky,” Marc said with a chuckle.

“Just install a virus on your computer that will allow me to access all your porn and find out what dirty secrets you have,” Nari replied.

“Oh no,” Marc said, “you’ll know I like cute girls who can code.”

“No flirting now, we have a job to do.”

Marc opened the attachment and a command prompt popped up. It started installing something and a moment later a video with a

spinning spiral appeared on the screen.

“Is this normal?” Marc asked.

“Yeah, just wait, it’s loading. It’s just a dumb screen some dork added. You know these kinds of things.”

Marc nodded as he stared at the screen. The loading wasn’t too bad. Just a spiral, going around and around. He could almost imagine words flashing over it now and then, but he couldn’t make them out, he wasn’t even sure they were actually there. As he focused, he found they were, and they became clearer so he focused harder, trying to figure it out. It was probably nothing interesting or important, but something made him want to know. That intense curiosity was the same as he felt for what he had been working on, which now seemed distant and unimportant. Now, he just needed to know what the words were. What was the program trying to say in this strange, swirling loading screen? Marc could barely look away, but it didn’t matter if he kept staring, he had nowhere else to be. Nothing else mattered until the screen was finished doing whatever it was doing.

“So what juicy secrets are in there?”

Nari’s voice merged with the spiral now, spinning around his mind and making his spirit soar and his heart flutter. Her pretty, sweet voice. So innocent and caring and gentle and kind.

“Marc?”

“Um, I don’t know,” he said.

“What do you think is on there?”

“Just some gentle femdom, nothing weird.”

“That’s nice, Marc, but I meant on the drive you just put in.”

The spiral stopped, the program started, and Marc felt his chest tighten and his heart race. What had he just said?

“I was... I was kidding.”

“They should put a warning label on these programs with spirals, right?” Nari giggled.

“I was just playing around I swear,” Marc said.

“Oh, don’t worry Marc,” Nari replied, “Mommy understands.”

His cock twitched and he felt himself take a sharp, involuntary breath.

“Let’s get this drive cracked, ok?” she continued.

Marc nodded, “yeah, yeah let’s do it. What does the program do?”

“Ok so you need to drag and drop the folder into it. It’s going to try a ton of password combinations. Simple.”

Marc followed her instruction and dropped the folder. The

program showed a progress bar that slowly ticked up, slowly.

“What can we do while we wait?” Marc asked.

“I don’t know, maybe tell me more about that mommy porn.”

“Shut up, I told you I was joking.”

“Right, and I’m Calia herself, obey me my mindless drone.”

Marc laughed. Nari was adorable. Even feeling so embarrassed, it was hard not to feel good listening to her. Something about her voice just felt like honey, like a first date, like falling in love.

“So um, what do you do... when you’re not being a hacker? Do you have a job or something?”

“Nothing interesting, just some tech support stuff.”

“Oh yeah? I was hoping to do something like that. Where? I thought basically everything was CaliaCorp now.”

“Nah, you just need to speak Korean and find a gig on Seoul time. I mean yeah CaliaCorp is there, but I’m totally remote.”

“Pretty sweet gig. Hope they pay you well.”

“Not enough for a CaliaCorp apartment, but I get by. Still wouldn’t mind a place in the sky though, looking out over the neon lights, you know?”

Marc felt surprised, he expected her to be against CaliaCorp, but it made sense. You couldn’t really deny, the view would be good from a CaliaCorp apartment.

“Yeah, I get you. I just want to be able to move somewhere they won’t demolish. Speaking of, 88 percent.”

“Almost there. So where exactly are you Marc? You know I could find out but... seems polite to ask.”

“You really think you could find out? I’m bouncing all over the world.”

“Come on, it’s me.”

“Ok, maybe eventually you’d pin me down, but I’ve done pretty well at avoiding being tagged so far. CaliaCorp are good, but that’s the one thing I can do well. Hide.”

Marc laughed. Nari didn’t.

“They still probably know where you are, so you might as well just tell me. Imagine we were neighbours.”

Marc did imagine it. He pictured Nari walking in his door, letting down her hair and taking off her glasses. He still didn’t know what she looked like but he could guess. Soft, pale skin and long

straight hair to her cleavage.

“Would be fun to... hang out.”

“So tell me then!” Nari said with a chirp in her voice.

“Oh, here we go, 99 percent.”

The program let out a triumphant jingle and the folder opened, revealing a set of documents and plans. Marc clicked on blueprints and saw a luxury tower overlaid on what he recognised as the entire Circuit District. The whole thing was swallowed by one enormous CaliaCorp high-rise with a pool on the roof, gardens every five floors and vines dangling down the side of its 48-floor mass. It was wide, almost a city in itself. The dimensions, the scale, were unfathomable, almost impossible to comprehend if there weren't at least ten identical blocks in the city, but this seemed even larger. More ambitious.

“What the hell is this?” Marc said.

“Looks... big. Like, really big,” Nari replied.

Marc opened another document, this one a simple form. A demolition order, sent to one part of CaliaCorp from another part of CaliaCorp. A time and date to begin the scheduled destruction of the entire Circuit District. The apartments, the shops, the old warehouses filled with the people displaced by corporate expansion. It was all going to be crushed under the heel of so-called progress.

“No,” Marc muttered.

Another document detailed the plans. All residents removed by a specific date. No details on where they would go, other than a vague reference to assimilation into the new surroundings. Whatever that meant. The plans ended within a year. A year, to build a structure so large it would cover multiple blocks and involve removing thousands of people. How could they do it? How could it be so fast, so brutally efficient. And where on Earth could he go?

“It's over. They're really doing it,” he said.

Nari remained silent for a moment. Marc could hear her quiet breathing.

“It's ok, Marc.”

“Is it? How could it possibly be ok?”

“Because you know. You have time.”

“Time for what? To go where?” he shouted. “There's nowhere else. This place is the end of the line. This is where you go when they push you out of the rest of the fucking city.”

“I know, but maybe there's another option.”

“No, fuck,” Marc's anger subsided, turning into resignation. “I

don't know what to do but this can't be legal."

"Is there anything else in the folder? Anything that looks, you know, actually illegal?"

Marc dug through the folder. Manifests and plans and documents and invoices. Nothing that actually spelled out what would happen to residents of the Circuit District. Some vague allusions, certainly, but nothing remotely incriminating.

"What do they mean about assimilating current residents?" Marc asked.

"No idea, but it sounds like they have a plan for you."

"I don't like the sound of it. At all."

"Marc it's ok, it's going to be ok."

"No, it isn't. Fuck there has to be something on here that we can show someone, show the police, show the courts, the media."

"All of which are owned by CaliaCorp. It has to be iron-clad. It would have to say they were going to forcibly evict people or demolish things without any permits or something that could hold up in court, right?"

"This does say that. It says they're going to demolish the Circuit."

"Read it again, Marc, it says proposed development. On everything. That one word, that's doing a lot of work."

"What? Nari, I don't get it. How does this not incriminate them?"

"Proposed, Marc. It's a proposal. It's what you show the city to get approval."

"So, it might not happen?"

"I mean, we both know it will, don't we?"

"But this doesn't prove it? None of it? Nothing on this stupid drive?"

"Don't feel bad Marc, it's ok. I promise, ok? You're going to be ok."

Her voice cracked a little.

Marc put his head in his hands. It was not going to be ok. Nothing was ok. CaliaCorp would take his home, take everyone's home. Take everything. And... assimilate him. Whatever the fuck that meant.

A ping. Marc pulled his hands from his face and looked at his computer. A new email from Nari appeared in his inbox.

"I wanted to cheer you up," she said as he moved his cursor

toward it.

“What is this?” he said, clicking on it.

It had another attachment. A photo. He opened it. His screen filled with the image of a young woman with long black hair, perfectly straight, a heart-shaped face with thick-rimmed black glasses and soft, shiny lips. She sat in a cushioned chair in a dark room, her tiny body illuminated by a computer monitor. A hoodie concealed her figure, but her legs were bare and wrapped up underneath her and made it clear she was slender and fit.

“Is this you?” Marc asked.

“I thought it might make you feel better Marc, to see me.”

Marc gazed at the picture. She looked gorgeous. A fantasy.

“It does, actually.”

Nari giggled.

“Thanks,” Marc said.

“I just want to take care of you, honey,” she replied.

Chapter 27

“Ben, are you ok?”

Sam’s voice trembled. Tension, relief, concern, joy, every emotion that spent days bubbling beneath the surface spilled out. Her hands shook. She leaned close to give Ben a hug and squeezed tight. He didn’t move at all.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“What happened? Where have you been?” Sam spat the words out so rapidly she almost tripped over them as she pulled back from the hug.

Ben regarded her with an emotionless gaze. His eyes were glazed over and his mouth curled into a slight smile.

“I was where I always am. Here at work.”

Sam looked at Aisling, who tilted her head and pursed her lips. What did you expect, the expression seemed to say.

“Ben, it’s me, it’s Sam.”

“I know that, Samantha.”

“So... how did you end up here? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Ben looked up to the ceiling, then back at Sam, thinking.

“I applied for a job. It happened very quickly. I left my place and moved into a beautiful new home.”

His droning monotone expressed nothing, mere statement of fact. As if all of it were completely humdrum, utterly dull, and thoroughly normal. Sam felt another emotion rising. Anger. She glowed with anger. Not with Ben. Maybe with Ben. But with everything, everyone. CaliaCorp, mostly.

“What did they do to you?”

Ben didn’t reply. Instead, he stared at Sam. He acted as though the question simply did not register with him.

“Ben? What happened? What did they do?”

“They gave me a job. I work here now.”

Sam felt her muscles tighten. Her jaw clenched. “Ben what the

fuck, you need to get out of here. Now.”

With a coldness equal to Sam’s fiery anger, Ben replied, “I am happy here. Thank you for visiting. I should leave.”

“Ben you’re a fucking zombie. Let’s get out of here, let me help you.”

Aisling, who watched the exchange with a raised eyebrow to that point, slid off the table she had been sitting on and placed an arm around Sam. “You see what I was saying. He’s happy here. That’s how everyone is.”

“Not you,” Sam retorted.

Aisling’s grip on Sam tightened, her hand squeezing. The scent of roses filling the air.

“You can try to get him out, but you can’t drag him out of here. Security will be all over you.”

“So, I need to get through to him,” Sam said.

“You can try.”

Aisling removed her arm from Sam’s shoulder and stepped back. Sam took Ben’s right hand and lifted it up, held it between her two hands.

“Ben, remember how much you hated this place. Remember how CaliaCorp ruined everyone’s home. Made you live in that slum.”

Ben slid his hand from between Sam’s. “I have a beautiful apartment now. The benefits package is excellent.”

He spoke as if reading from a brochure. Sam once again felt frustration coursing through her. Electricity rippled across her skin. Just moments from exploding with rage but held it back. Held it in to try, desperately, to appeal to the friend she knew.

“Please, Ben, listen to me. They’ve done something to you. You’re not yourself. We need you back. Me and your friends.”

Ben’s expression didn’t change.

“Don’t you remember? Don’t you know who you are anymore?” Sam pleaded.

“I’m an employee of CaliaCorp, Sam. I know exactly who I am.”

“You’re my friend, Ben,” Sam said with tears welling up and fists balled.

She fell forward, her head resting on Ben’s chest. Ben put his hands on her shoulders and Sam smiled. He remembered. She felt the warmth of his body. Human. Not the robot he pretended to be.

His hands gripped the tops of her arms, and he pushed her

away and Sam's smile turned into a grimace.

"What the fuck? Ben what the fuck? You're supposed to be my friend. Why are you doing this? Why? Do you want to be a zombie drone in this stupid office? Does this make you happy?"

Ben paused for a moment, thinking, taking in everything Sam said. Then he replied with a single word; "Yes".

"Ben," cut in Aisling, "tell Sam how you feel about her."

Sam looked at Aisling with confusion, before Ben spoke.

"She's a good friend. Kind and caring. She is too meek and needs to admit to the things she really wa—"

"Enough," interrupted Aisling, "Sam, he's still got the same things in his head. You understand? He's just changed."

"Changed how? What is... this?" Sam gestured toward Ben, as if he were an object.

"You know, I've been telling you. He's too far gone now."

"What do I do now?" Sam asked. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"Accept it. Leave. Hope it doesn't happen to someone else. Or you could join him."

Aisling smirked and licked her lips. Sam eyed her suspiciously.

"I'm kidding, Sam. I'm sorry this didn't go the way you wanted. Would you like me to show you the way out?"

Sam thought for a moment, looking at Ben, not ready to leave him but with no idea what to do next to get a hint of the old Ben.

"No," she said, "thank you, I remember the way."

"Say goodbye, Ben," Aisling commanded.

"Goodbye," said Ben.

"Yeah," replied Sam, "bye Ben."

She walked out the door, taking one last glance back. Aisling nodded. Ben stared blankly ahead. The door swung closed and Sam walked down the corridor toward the lift. Before she got there she looked around. Nothing but meeting rooms. She pushed the call button, then stepped into the lift when it slid open. Her hand hovered over the buttons, a finger going to 'ground floor', and then moving up... all the way to 'Executive Suite'.

Sam pushed the button. The screen on the panel flashed up 'access denied'. She tried the highest number she could find. 178.

The lift began to ascend.

Chapter 28

“You’re so pretty,” said Marc.

Nari shared more photos of herself. A picture of her at the beach in a bikini, a shot of her at Halloween dressed as a cheerleader. It made Marc feel extremely horny.

“Why don’t you show me what *you* look like?”

Marc froze. He wasn’t ready to do that. He felt like a complete loser compared to the incredibly hot girl on the other end of the call. She was so slim and pretty and he was just average. Just a regular looking guy who spent more time at his computer than exercising. He wasn’t like Theo, who would have no problem sharing a photo of his physique.

“Um, give me a sec,” he said.

Nari laughed and Marc looked through his photos to find something where he looked remotely attractive.

“Come on, I showed you mine...” Nari teased.

Marc finally settled on a picture. One of him in skinny jeans and a plain black t-shirt, standing under a neon light at a bar in The Circuit. The purple and blue hues falling over him, he thought, made him look dramatic. His face lowered, so that it couldn’t be seen. He wondered if Nari would mind. He wondered if maybe that was the smart thing to do. She seemed great, but he was careful online. Of course he was. She wasn’t necessarily who she claimed to be though it seemed hard to dispute that the voice matched the images she sent, it all seemed perfect. *She* seemed perfect.

“Oh you’re so handsome, and so serious, look at you,” Nari giggled.

Her voice made him feel so good, just hearing her speak sent a tingle down his body.

“Thank you.”

“But I wanna see that face too, come on, send another! You

know exactly what I look like. Fair is fair.”

“Ok, ok,” Marc said.

He couldn’t say no. She kept sending him pictures, why shouldn’t he send some of his own. Why shouldn’t he just do what she told him? He found a photo that made him look ok, with light stubble and his hair actually styled for once and sent it.

“Well, what do we have here? A very lovely boy. Aren’t you just such a handsome sweetie?”

Marc blushed. He loved hearing her talk like that.

“Thanks, Nari.”

“Oh, you are just gorgeous, aren’t you? Where were you in that first picture? It looks familiar.”

“You remember Kiken? That Japanese place?”

“Oh right, is that near your place?”

“Not far away,” Marc said.

“Oh, so where exactly are you?”

Marc hesitated. “I don’t like to say, you know?”

“Oh, yeah, totally. I get it.”

“Sorry.”

“Aww, no it’s cool. You’re so good. Relax, you don’t even need to think about it, ok?”

“Ok.”

“You don’t need to think about anything. You’ve been worrying so much but now you can relax. You did what you wanted to do. You cracked the drive, you found the cameras. Your friends can handle it from here, can’t they?”

“Yeah, they can.”

“And you can stay with me.”

“I’d like that.”

“I know, sweetie. I know you’d like to stay with me. You want to relax with me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

Nari’s voice shifted to something less cute and sweet and more sultry and seductive. The change wasn’t enough to give Marc pause. If anything, it made him more attentive to what she was saying.

“And relaxing just feels so good when you’ve worked so hard. Has it been hard, Marc?”

Had he told her his name? He couldn’t remember.

“Yes, Nari, it’s been hard.”

“So hard, so so hard Marc. You must feel it but it’s ok to relax,

even if it's hard.”

Marc drifted on her words, his head bobbing around as she whispered into his ears. He loved relaxing and her voice sounded so soft and sexy and the images on the screen in front of him, of her, were making it hard alright.

“In fact, you can just rest and relax for me, you can just... sleep for Mommy.”

A moment of realisation hit Marc like a truck. The words on the screen, in that spiral, that's what they said. Then his head dropped and he couldn't lift it.

“Good boy Marc, Mommy will take good care of you. You want that, don't you?”

“Yes Mommy,” Marc replied.

He didn't even think about it. The words fell from his mouth automatically.

“Good, doing so well for me, falling deeper under my spell now. And Marc, tell me, do I turn you on?”

“Yes Mommy.”

“What do you like most about me?”

“Your eyes Mommy, and your voice.”

“So sweet... stare into the pictures I sent, my eyes so beautiful, and imagine me there now, with you in the room, guiding you to bed. Can you feel it?”

“Yes Mommy.”

“And as I climb on top of you and pull my skirt up, you can feel my pussy wrapping around your hard cock, can't you?”

“Yes,” Marc whispered, his breathing quickening.

“And you stare deep into my eyes as I move up and down on that cock, milking you of your resistance, of your will, of your knowledge. You love this, don't you?”

“I love it, Mommy.”

“But if you want to cum for Mommy, you have to tell me everything. Mommy can hardly come take care of you for real if she doesn't know where you are. Doesn't that make sense?”

“It makes sense.”

“So where do you live?”

It took a moment, as deep in Marc's mind an alarm sounded, but he couldn't take his eyes from Nari's and his cock started leaking at the idea of cumming inside her perfect body. He spilled everything, his address, his full name, his friend's names.

“What a good boy you are for Mommy. I'm going to count

from ten to one, and when I reach one, you're going to cum for me, cum inside me. As I bounce up and down on your cock, feel my pussy tighten."

"Yes Mommy," Marc said, lost in pleasure.

"Ten, feeling my body trapping you."

Marc could vaguely hear something beyond his headphones. A soft thumping, getting louder.

"Nine, know that whenever you hear me say 'sleep for mommy' you'll go back to this state."

The thumping grew even louder. Muffled voices could be heard. Marc ignored it.

"Eight, mind weak and open to my words."

He could almost make the voices out now.

"Seven, body completely in thrall to me and only me."

A knock on Marc's door was not enough to rouse him.

"Six, your cock pumping into my pussy, making me go faster."

Another, louder knock. Marc didn't care.

"Five, so ready to orgasm for me and give yourself to Mommy."

This time a bang and someone shouting, but Marc only focused on Nari.

"Four, feeling my words filling your mind, just hearing my voice turning you on so much."

The door handle jiggled. Someone trying to get in.

"Three, accepting that you obey Mommy, you love Mommy, you need Mommy Nari."

A huge crash came, but the door didn't open.

"Two, loving the feeling of being with me, being inside me, being mine."

The door burst open and Marc felt the headphones ripped from his head. Four CaliaCorp security people surrounded him, fully covered in black uniforms with helmets and masked faces. He blinked his eyes and took his hand off his cock. He didn't even remember putting it there.

"What? What's going on?"

No answer from the masked security team. One of them whipped a bag over Marc's head, and another lifted him from his chair, his cock still hard and hanging in the air. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and they led him away.

"Nari, anyone, help!" he cried, as they pushed him out of his apartment, and dragged into some sort of vehicle. He couldn't see a

thing, he only knew what it was when he heard the door slam, and it pulled away.

Chapter 29

Pacing the living room, Theo ran his hands over his head and cursed into the empty space. He hadn't found anything remotely useful, and now Marc wasn't answering his calls. Nothing from Sam either. He took out his phone and called again. Nothing.

He wanted to kick something, to punch the wall. Why had he allowed himself to become so frustrated by that woman? What was wrong with him and why had his head gotten all messed up? That was not what he wanted and even if it was, he didn't want it like that. He didn't want to be denied and teased he just wanted to fuck. That wasn't even what he should be thinking about. He should have been sitting at the computer looking for Ben but it had been a waste of time. After an age clicking through cameras and seeing a mixture of depravity and banality. Office workers working, pornography being made. Sometimes it distracted him, when one of those women in pencil skirts bent over or a man licked her heels. Mostly it just angered him to see these people living their lives and doing their jobs like nothing was wrong, like the world was fine and life was easy. Maybe it was easy for them, how could he ever know?

Only Trish left to call. Theo tried but didn't even get a dial tone, just a message that she was not available. Where the hell was everyone? What happened?

The sole logical answer: CaliaCorp. Theo went back to the computer and sat down. The cameras filled the screen. He clicked through them, wondering how pointless it would be this time.

Except this time, he found something. Sam, walking out of an elevator on one of the highest floors. She snuck, crouched low. Theo switched cameras and saw CaliaCorp security were wandering that floor. They passed her by without noticing and she kept moving deeper into the building, past huge desks and lavish couches. The camera was labelled 'VP suite'. It seemed they had plenty of luxury at the top. Sam moved through a door and Theo lost her. No camera left on that floor picked her up.

He hoped she'd be ok, but security was everywhere in that

building. Did they know she was there? Were they looking at the cameras too? Probably no-one looked that closely but what automated systems were there to spot intruders? There had to be some advanced face detection or something. Theo wasn't so strong on that stuff, Marc would know, if he could be bothered answering his phone.

Theo switched to looking elsewhere, scanning for something familiar, someone he knew. It took a few moments, but this time he did find someone. It was Trish, holding onto the bars of a cell on one of the lower floors. What had they done to her? What had she done? Theo hadn't even known there would be cells in the building. Why would an office block have them? Was it a film set? Trish would never shoot a CaliaCorp scene, of course. Would she? Maybe she was just doing the same disappearing act as Ben.

Or maybe, Theo thought, it was time to be a man. The person he knew he was. The person he wanted Aisling to see.

Maybe instead of waiting for Sam to get caught and end up in a cell with Trish, he should go down there and find them both and get everyone out of there. Ben too.

Theo leapt up from the desk and rushed outside.

Chapter 30

The 178th floor was an empty luxury office with no one there. Sam moved on fast and slipped into a stairwell, away from security who seemed uninterested in looking for anyone, as if they were in a trance just going through the motions of pacing up and down.

Pushing out of the door onto floor 179, Sam found out why the executives weren't on the floor below. She walked into a cavernous room, dimly lit by decadent chandeliers. It took up floors 179 and 180. The walls were painted a deep burgundy, and oil paintings of erotic scenes covered the walls. The centre of the room drew Sam's attention most. A churning mass of bodies, writhing all over one another, women, men, legs and arms everywhere, bodies gleaming with sweat. They didn't even notice Sam. A low-hanging light spun above them, flashing in a strange pattern that made Sam feel a mixture of arousal and sleepiness. Speakers pumped low, thumping bass, mixed with a whispering voice saying erotic things that could barely be heard. The urge to join the mass of flesh in the centre of the room, people fucking and sucking each other, to squeeze in between the tits and the cocks and the abs and the...

Sam slapped herself hard in the face. Someone in the fleshy pile heard and glanced in her direction.

"Again slut, harder."

Sam's face flushed red. The head that emerged from between a pair of legs resumed pleasuring another lump of flesh and Sam slunk back into the stairwell and walked up to find no door at 180 as expected. She continued to 181 and looked through the small slit of a window in the door. This time there were no red walls, no high ceiling, no *orgy*. Just a massive, thrumming, humming series of servers. Hundreds of them, all flashing green and red and yellow. She slipped out the door and walked down a corridor between the massive black towers. Wires looped and spooled from them. Their low sound like a beating drum in her brain, a constant insistent drone that demanded she

switch off and stop thinking.

Sam ignored it, another strange, alien impulse she did not want to feel. All of the wires wrapped around each other, not unlike the bodies below, and wove their way around the machines to the centre of the room, where a glass tube clamped them together and they rose up to the floor above. The humming grew louder, as each machine seemed to pump information, light and sound, through the wires into the centre column, up to whatever waited at the top. Calia's computer for controlling the world or something, thought Sam.

Nothing good could be there, that was certain. The sounds were obnoxiously loud and Sam felt the same lack of control that gripped her on the floor below. The feeling of being close to something powerful and secret was deafening. The sheer force of that feeling made her reel backward, stepping into a server then spiraling back, toward the exit. Sam tripped and fell and found she could no longer rise. Instead, she crawled, which felt so natural all of a sudden, toward the door. Her progress became slower, and she felt as though she were moving through molasses. The sensations gripping her body were a terrible combination of fear and doubt and need. She needed someone to take away the fear, the worry. She needed to crawl forward. She belonged on the ground, on all fours.

She didn't believe that.

Sam grabbed the side of one of the massive machines and pulled herself to her feet. With heavy steps she inched toward the door as the sound seemed to flood the room, echoing and bouncing from all over it. Telling her to obey and submit and surrender.

She reached the door and pulled it open, falling into the stairwell and letting the door slam shut behind her. As soon as it did, the sound stopped, and she felt normal again. Whatever she was doing, wherever she was going, something big lay ahead. She stood a staircase from the top of the building, and who else could be there?

Sam climbed the stairs slowly. Trepidation sent sweat pouring down her neck but she had to know, had to find out what was really going on. She needed to go quicker because she had been seen. Surely once the people finished their fun, they'd call someone to come find her. Quickening her pace Sam jogged up the last few steps and reached a huge golden door emblazoned with an enormous 'C'.

Calia.

Sam pushed through the doors and entered a corridor lined with screens, each one playing a video of her, Calia. Brown hair, red lips, blue eyes. Same every time. Sometimes in a costume, sometimes a

dress or a skirt. Always perfect, always flawless. The videos were overlaid with spirals and pocket watches and pendants dangling and spinning and rocking back and forth. Sam felt overwhelmed. There was just so much stimulation and the videos began to shift and change and she could see herself on the screen, kneeling, kissing someone's boots. Calia's boots?

Never, thought Sam.

But the image kept evolving and the camera moved up as the screen Sam focused on seemed to grow, the image spreading, taking over the other screens. As the camera moved up Sam found herself staring slack-jawed, knowing but not wanting to accept what she saw.

Trish stood over her.

Sam staggered back against the wall behind her, crashing into screens and making them shake and shudder, scanlines breaking across them. She pushed onward down the corridor as the screens showed more, Calia and Trish putting a collar on her. Whipping her. Leading her on a leash. It was too much, utter fantasy and fetish and danger.

At the end of the corridor stood another door, a double door covered in cushioned red velvet. Above it read the word 'Calia', embossed in gold. Sam pushed it open.

"Samantha," came a voice, a very familiar one. "I've been expecting you."

Chapter 31

Trish bucked against her restraints. She couldn't be sure why, hours had passed and no amount of pulling and squirming loosened them. Chains leading to cuffs lined with soft material kept her hands above her head and her legs apart in a large cell, somewhere in the bowels of CaliaCorp. Dim lights revealed little, and besides someone coming now and then to give her water and food, she was alone. Her hair hung loosely over her shoulders, and her boots had been removed, she couldn't remember when. The whole experience was a blur of shouting and bodies and hands grabbing at her, holding her in place as the restraints were clamped around her. She hated it, hated being held like this, hated being trapped.

The click of heels and shuffling feet came from behind her. A door opened. Trish tried to crane her neck to see but couldn't. It sounded like a group of people came in.

"Well," came the cold voice of a woman, "our little... activist."

She walked before Trish, tall and imposing, with hair pulled tightly into a long ponytail that reached her shoulders. She had piercing blue eyes. In her hand she held a riding crop and she wore a leather catsuit and thigh-high boots to match. Trish raised an eyebrow, it all seemed completely ridiculous, not that the woman wasn't absolutely gorgeous, with deep brown eyes and dark lips.

"Who the fuck are you?" spat Trish.

"Oh dear," the woman said, running the tip of her crop over Trish's cheek. "You are quite the fighter. But you don't realise what you could have my dear. We know all about you."

Trish pulled her head from the crop and felt her lip curl into a snarl. "You don't know anything about me."

"Trish, we know your name, your age, your sexual preferences, your cup size. There is nothing we can't find out about people. Even

filthy Circuit dwellers like you.”

Trish spat on the floor. “Fuck off.”

“It’s ok, my dear. I’m not here to whip you with this,” the woman said, cracking the crop against her palm, “I’m here to help you see what could be, if you only knew the possibilities. If you’d just open up to what CaliaCorp has to offer.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that? Being a brainwashed slut like you?”

The woman laughed. “No, Trish, being happy, being fulfilled, and having the kind of life you’ve always dreamed of. With a partner who fits you perfectly, and all the pleasure and comfort you can imagine. Does that sound bad?”

“It does if I have to get mindfucked for it, yeah.”

The woman began to pace up and down the cell, her heels clicking on the floor in a consistent rhythm. “Just the reaction I’d expect from someone who belongs in charge. You do like being in charge, don’t you?”

“Guess you do know about me,” Trish said.

“Yes, and I know you and I have a lot in common. We could be peers, you know. Colleagues.”

“The fuck we could, bitch.”

“My name is Stephanie, darling, and you’ll find there are wonderful benefits to being dominant in a place like this, but instead of prattling on about it, why don’t I show you.” The woman cracked her crop against her thigh and shouted, “slaves!”

Immediately a man and a woman crawled into the room on all fours. Both nude, save for a collar on their neck.

“Good slaves,” the woman said as Trish’s eyes widened. “This is Trish, you’re going to pleasure her. Show her how good it feels to be in charge at CaliaCorp. And Trish, I see your eyes, I see your desire... enjoy this. Perhaps if you don’t end up seeing things my way, at least I’ll have given you a wonderful memory.”

“Yes Ms. Miller,” the two nude people answered in unison.

She stepped aside, leaving the naked pair to crawl to Trish, kneeling in front of her and looking up.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Trish said.

“Mistress gave us our orders, we live to serve.”

“We exist to please.”

Without hesitating, the woman began to stroke her hands up and down Trish’s legs, delicately moving her fingernails up to Trish’s

thigh. The man massaged Trish's calf.

"I mean it you don't ha-"

"We want to," the woman said as she slid her hand along Trish's inner thigh.

"You may command us," the man added, gripping Trish's other thigh and squeezing, making her gasp.

"If you wish us to stop, we will," the woman said.

Trish bit her lip as hands slipped over her legs and found their way to her panties. She felt a tug on them. When she said nothing, the panties slid down her leg and stopped at the restraints, stuck. A feminine hand slipped gently over her mons and down, moving over her damp lips. Trish enjoyed it, despite herself. She wanted to say stop but it was the fantasy she imagined for years playing out. Even restrained, it was too good, too much to deny.

"Do you like this?" the woman asked.

Trish nodded. "Yes."

The man now stood up and unhooked her bra, then moved his fingers to a bare nipple and began to caress it gently.

"Fuck," Trish breathed, "harder."

"What did you say, miss?"

"I said fucking harder," Trish barked.

The man squeezed her nipple and Trish let out a long moan of deep arousal, and at that moment the woman's finger found her clit and the combined sensation made Trish throw her head back. The man moved his mouth to the same nipple, sucking on it, biting just a little, as the woman's finger moved in gentle circles, teasing, tormenting, making Trish ache for more.

"You enjoy this, don't you? Having two eager slaves service you?"

It was Stephanie, the woman in leather. Trish had almost forgotten about her, but now the woman moved to Trish's side, opposite the man gorging himself on Trish's hard nipple.

"Fuck..." Trish gasped, "yeah, I do."

Stephanie moved closer, her lips just beside Trish's ear, her warm, damp breath sending shivers of arousal down Trish's body.

"You love it," she said, "you love taking charge of them."

Trish couldn't argue. She loved every second of it. She loved having that control, even if she wasn't fully in control, the fantasy felt

close to perfect.

“You want this in your life, all the time.”

Trish nodded.

“Give them an order, make them yours.”

“Oh god,” Trish groaned, “slavegirl, use your fucking tongue.”

The woman kneeling at Trish’s legs planted her face firmly between Trish’s thighs and started to lick, long and slow, at Trish’s pussy, from bottom to top.

“You feel that pleasure Trish,” Stephanie whispered, “that’s what you want in life, that’s what you need.”

Trish squirmed with lust and ecstasy. She wanted to fight the urge to just give in to the pleasure, but this *was* what she wanted. How could she deny it? She had always wanted this, to dominate and be served.

“This is what your body needs, what your mind needs, what *you* need.”

Trish nodded along, lips pursed, eyes shut.

“You can have this, all the time, with whomever you like, you know that?”

She tried, she really tried, but Trish could not keep the image from her mind. Sam. Sam on her knees just like the woman now pleasing her, the woman now thrusting her tongue inside her pussy and moving it around in languorous strokes.

“You can be the boss here all day, make these slaves do what you want, and go home to a submissive little pet every night.”

The image felt so powerful, the pleasure so intense. Sam waiting for her in a maid outfit, the scent of cookies wafting from the kitchen. Sam on her knees.

“Someone special to keep you satisfied after a long day being in charge here. Just like me, a manager, executive class. Top of the food chain where you belong.”

The tongue between her legs started darting in and out, and the man’s sucking became forceful, a little painful but in such a wonderful way. His hand clasped her ass and pushed her further onto the tongue that made her feel blissful.

“Why don’t you really enjoy this,” the leather-clad woman said, unclasping one restraint. “Take your slave and show her the way.”

Trish turned and looked at Stephanie, the woman whispering forbidden fantasies into her mind. She could swing out, slap her, push her, even open the rest of the restraints. Instead, with a wicked grin,

Trish grabbed the woman between her legs by the hair and tipped her head back with force.

“Like this, slave, head back, tongue up, deeper.”

The woman obliged, pushing her tongue deep into Trish’s vagina. Trish could feel the woman’s nose tickle her clit and almost laughed but all that emerged from her mouth was a ragged breath.

Stephanie smiled. “It’s wonderful, don’t you think, to have this control?”

Trish’s thighs were quivering, her body shaking. “Fuck yeah,” she managed to blurt as she convulsed with arousal.

“Do you have someone in mind? To make your pet?”

Trish felt the surge of conflict within her. The need to protect Sam. Her friend. Someone she had known for so long. The other side of her, the side currently enjoying a man’s soft touch on her ass and a woman’s eager tongue in her pussy, was quite happy to picture Sam in the same position, a desperate, needy slave only existing for the pleasure of her owner. Of Trish.

“They’ll be well taken care of, of course,” Stephanie said.

“Given a life of luxury in an apartment befitting a manager’s partner and slave.”

Maybe Sam would like it, domestic bliss and total subservience. Maybe it didn’t matter. Trish’s mind raced with lust and love. She loved Sam. She wanted to be with her, to own her, but to take care of her too. Maybe CaliaCorp would be safe, maybe they’d be happy in a nice place, wrapped up in each other every night.

Maybe it just felt fucking good to have two mindless slaves doing whatever you wanted.

“It feels good, doesn’t it? The rush of power, the adrenaline, the energy. I’m sure you must be ready to orgasm,” Stephanie whispered.

Trish felt ready, and the feeling increased in power when the man’s hand reached over her waist and his finger found its way to her clit, making the woman tilt her head back further and find a new, even better position to lick. He still had his mouth on her nipple and the sensations, so many at once, were overwhelming.

“Oh fuck, yes,” Trish shouted.

“Yes, you’ll love it here my dear. You’ll love your new role at CaliaCorp. Ruling over the employees by day and having a personal slave at night who adores you completely. Who loves you, as you love them.”

“Yes, harder slaves, faster. I fucking own you,” Trish screamed

as pleasure overcame her.

In her mind Sam knelt on the ground, licking and pleasing and teasing. Trish ruffled her hair and told her what a good girl she was. How obedient, what a cute little kitten she had become. The other side of the fantasy crept in too, dressed in leather or a business suit, walking around on heels, with a whip or a crop of her own meting out punishment to any employee who stepped out of line. Maybe even having them lick her pussy as a reward for good work. Or stepping on them for the opposite. The entire office looking at her, seeing her power. Every idea, every dominant thought she ever had rose to the surface and the woman in her ear whispered about how good it felt to be in power, how good it felt to be a CaliaCorp manager, how amazing it would be to have a life of sexual fulfillment and a personal sex toy to go home to.

And that was Sam, it had always been Sam. Fuck the friendship, fuck hating CaliaCorp. This was what she wanted and maybe it was the building orgasm speaking, but Trish simply did not care, she could keep going forever, one orgasm into the next into the next until the two slaves collapsed and she found more to take their place. She'd be so good as a manager, she was meant to lead, to control. Was she thinking that or being told that? Who fucking cared, the tongue between her legs, the finger on her clit, the constant building pleasure and delightful pain on her nipples, both now, someone else squeezing the other, it was so much, so good.

“Fuck yes, yes, yes, I belong in control, I deserve to be in charge. YES!”

Trish's entire body rippled, she felt her wetness sliding down her legs, she rocked and bucked and held onto the woman still tonguing her by the head, digging her fingernails in and causing the woman to do the same to Trish's thighs, sending a fresh wave of pleasure coursing through her.

“Oh my god,” Trish groaned, “good slaves.”

“I told you Trish,” Stephanie said, “you do belong here. Don't you?”

Chapter 32

Marc stood in a huge meadow, filled with beautiful flowers and green, verdant grass. He had never seen such lush scenery. In the distance towering peaks capped with snow pierced an azure sky and pine trees dotted the foothills. The sun shimmered and glinted on a meandering river nearby which babbled off to the horizon.

From a wooded glade a woman appeared, wearing a long, white dress which billowed in the breeze. Her hair, long and shiny and dark, fluttered behind her as she skipped toward Marc, a single flower in her hand.

Nari.

She bounded up to him, placed the flower behind his ear, and took his hand.

“Come,” she said.

Marc followed as she tugged on his hand and led him into the trees. A twisting path carved by animals led them deep into a secluded forest. The air felt warm and fragrant, the scent of flowers lingering in the stillness of the trees.

“Where are we going?” Marc asked.

“You’ll see,” Nari replied.

She sped up, her bare feet bouncing over twisting vines and fallen logs, dancing through the undergrowth with the grace of a ballerina. Marc stumbled behind her, trying to maintain his footing on rocks and in divots. Soon, the trees grew thicker, pine branches hung low over the dirt trail and Marc needed to brush them aside with his free hand, while Nari moved with a lightness he could never match. She looked petite, pretty, perfect. Her body swayed and curved around every branch. Finally, she slowed as she entered a glade covered in dappled light from the sun seeping through the canopy. At the centre, a mound of soft grass in a large square stood surrounded by daisies.

“Join me,” Nari said as she walked backward toward the mound and tumbled onto her back.

Marc fell down beside her and she turned and brushed his

cheek with her hand.

“Do you love me, Marc?”

He stared into her eyes, her big, doleful eyes and knew that he did. Then something flickered in the background, a tree blinking in and out of existence in a wave of blue lines.

“Marc, do you?”

He stared at her again, captivated by her beauty. The soft swell of her breasts under the dress, her slender legs and the curve of her hips as she lay on her side. Of course he loved her. She was his dream woman. She was smart and sexy and cool and cute. How could he not. But something gnawed at him, some sense of foreboding and dread, at odds with the beauty of the scene.

He heard a distant voice, not Nari’s, someone else’s. It sounded as though they said to *increase dosage*.

“Hey, Marc,” Nari said, taking his face in her hands. “Look at me, look at Mommy.”

He looked into her eyes, and felt his resolve melt, as if a warm liquid coursed through him, as if she had infiltrated his bloodstream, his very being. He felt soft, warm, wonderful, happy, and safe. He felt safe with her, loved. Everything seemed perfect with Nari.

“You know it’s perfect with me, it always will be ok baby?”

Marc nodded, his face still held in her delicate hands.

“You know I’ll take care of you, I want the best for you.”

He nodded again, lost in her eyes.

“Mommy Nari will make sure you always have what you need, because you need me, don’t you?”

Marc acted on autopilot, he nodded without even thinking. Of course he needed her.

“You’ll do anything to be with me, won’t you?”

Marc’s words froze in his throat. He couldn’t say no to her, but that strange feeling kept eating at him, right in the back of his mind, like an itch he needed to scratch. Something felt wrong. Something in the scenery, something in her. The sky... the sky didn’t look right. Did it always have gridlines?

“Marc, Mommy asked you a question.”

“Where... where are we?”

Nari placed a finger on his lips. “Shh, that’s not important, all that matters is me.”

“All that matters is you,” he said.

“Good boy.”

She removed her finger and leaned close, pressing her lips

against his. The feeling of her kissing him, the softness of her, it made him feel so happy, so weak, so safe. She pulled back and smiled, and then she vanished, and a blue silhouette flashed and flickered in her place.

“Nari?”

From somewhere far away he could hear a voice. *Reset, reset now.*

“Where... where are you?”

Another dose, keep him under.

Nari reappeared and immediately Marc felt the warm sensations flooding back. His mouth widened into a smile involuntarily and he breathed slowly through his nose.

“There you are. What... what happened?”

“Never mind my love, just come close to me, let me show you how Mommy takes care of you.”

Marc shifted his body to be nearer to her and felt her hand slide down his chest, over his stomach to his belt. She opened it deftly with one hand and unbuttoned his jeans. Was he wearing jeans that day?

Any thought vanished as soon as Nari’s tiny hand slipped over his cock, making it instantly erect.

“I know you want me,” she whispered. “You need me. Say it.”

Marc let out a soft moan as she began to stroke him up and down in a slow rhythm. “I need you.”

“Such a good boy, and you’ll do anything for me.”

“Anything for you.”

He grew fixated on her eyes, utterly infatuated with her, as her hand moved with the same lightness that her body and feet did moving through the forest. Her skin felt smooth and silky.

“You love this feeling, don’t you? Of my hand on you?”

Marc simply nodded. Of course he did. He was in heaven, after all their chatting and the sexy pictures she sent him, he couldn’t believe he was with her in... where was he?

“Nari, what is this place?”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied as she gripped him harder and moved a little faster, “just let me take care of you, ok?”

The pleasure became too much for him to think, he nodded again and Nari kissed him, this time deeply, pushing her tongue into his mouth, pressing her warm body against his and leaving a trail of

saliva as she broke the kiss and pulled away.

“I want you to agree to something, ok?”

“Ok,” said Marc.

“When you cum, you’re mine. Forever.”

“For... ever?”

“You want that, don’t you?”

Marc looked around, at the trees, the grass, the sky. How had he gotten to this place?

“I... I think so.”

“Of course you do,” she said, teasing the tip of his penis. “You want it more than anything.”

“More... than anything,” he repeated.

“So don’t fight it now, let your pleasure grow for Mommy.”

Marc breathed heavily, his hips bucking as Nari’s stroking reached a fever pitch. She pumped him, milking him, it felt like he was being milked of thought and will and resistance. They were talking online. Not in a forest. There was no forest.

“What’s going on? Where are we?”

“Mommy wants you to cum hard for her Marc, Mommy wants your cock to explode for her bouncy titties and her juicy ass.”

She said it all with her eyes locked on his, filth pouring from her angelic lips. Marc couldn’t help but stiffen even more for her. He felt lost in her, ready to be hers, and yet, something seemed definitely not right.

“Slow down, please.”

“You’re going to be mine, do anything I want, anything I say, because you know I’ll look after you, just like this. Isn’t that right?”

She didn’t slow, didn’t stop the pace of the silken embrace of his throbbing cock. Marc couldn’t think, couldn’t remember how he got to the forest but that was the problem, wasn’t it? He should remember.

“Nari, please... Please, I need to know what’s going on.”

“I’m just giving you what you want, you’re so smart and so good, and so talented, I just want to show you what good boys who use their skills for me get.”

“My... skills?”

Marc had trouble remembering what skills she meant.

“Your computer skills, silly. You’re going to be so useful. You’re so good.”

Marc blushed, he couldn’t believe she complimented his talents, she was so good at what she did. Including the way she moved

her hand deftly up and down.

“Thank you.”

“Oh of course baby, you deserve it. I know how amazing you are.”

Marc wore a beaming smile. His chest swelled, a pride he hadn't felt surging within, and his cock bulged, ready to burst.

“You're so kind.”

“Sweetie, you're so good, you work so hard. I see it. I see you.”

Finally, Marc thought, finally someone understood. “You're amazing,” he breathed.

“You are, baby, and you want to keep showing me, don't you? How amazing you are?”

She moved her hand up and slid her fingernails over his cockhead, making him gasp.

“Yes Nari.”

“Good boy, you'll show me how good you are every day, and it'll be so fulfilling, so satisfying.”

“I will,” Marc said, panting, breathing sharply. He would be the best for her. He would show just how well he could work with a computer. Computer. They were talking on a computer. People had come in. Who were they? “In my apartment. They took me-”

More, he needs more.

“Quiet now Marc, my baby, sleep for Mommy and let me give you what you need, all you have to do is accept that you belong to me, and you'll do anything for me, and then you get to cum for me... I know you need that, don't you?”

He did. He needed it, and the rush of warmth he felt confirmed it. Nothing else mattered. Nothing but Nari. It didn't matter where he was, he was with the love of his life and she gave him so much pleasure and the thought of more, of that being the reward for simply being hers, for being near her, for pleasing her. Perfect.

“Yes, I need it. Mommy.”

“And you'll do what I tell you, always, won't you?”

“Yes, yes,” he gasped.

“When I say ‘obey Mommy’ you'll do anything I command. Do you understand?”

Marc was on the edge, desperate. “Yes, oh god yes, anything you command.”

“Good boy,” she said, “obey Mommy and cum for me.”

Marc exploded, erupted with a force he had never before

experienced. His cock twitched and spurted cum into the air and his hips thrust forward and back violently.

“Good boy, give me everything. All for me.”

“All for you,” he groaned.

“You’ll make such a good slave, such a good boy. Once we get you trained on our systems, you’ll be such a useful pet.”

Marc shuddered with pleasure. His cock leaked out the last drops of his orgasm. Nari leaned close and kissed him gently on the lips.

“You’re all mine now, Marc.”

End program.

The forest faded to black. Nari vanished. Before his eyes he could see two lenses, and otherwise darkness. His head throbbed. Muffled voices were speaking, all female.

“The conversion is complete?”

“Yes, he was already primed to accept the programming from the time I spent with him online.”

“Good, remove the headset.”

Marc felt hands moving over his head, and pulling away whatever lurked in front of him. Some sort of headset, virtual reality. He felt lost, mind racing, head spinning, vision blurred. A woman stood before him. He was strapped to a vertical bed. As his eyes regained focus he could see she wore a lab coat.

“Release the restraints, let’s test the programming.”

He slipped down, landing on his feet and feeling his knees buckle a little. Completely nude, he realised, and cock still hard. He looked at the floor and saw a pair of black kitten heels and black stockings, then moved up to the bottom of a short lab coat, white. His head wobbled on his shoulders, his body swayed and finally he looked straight ahead, into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen.

“Hello Marc,” said Nari. “Good to see you again.”

“What... what’s happening?”

“You’ve been hired, sweetie.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Welcome to CaliaCorp, you’re going to be our latest hacking drone. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

It did. Somewhere Marc knew it sounded wrong, but it *felt* right. He could feel an ache in his left arm, dull and heavy.

“I... I don’t want to work here, Nari.”

“But baby, Mommy wants you to, and you want to obey

Mommy, don't you?"

Marc's cock stiffened. His eyes grew large. His mouth opened and no words emerged for a moment, before he managed to utter a hoarse "Yes Mommy".

"Good boy, why don't we get you set up at a terminal and continue your training, wouldn't you like to do that for me?"

Marc nodded, anything for Nari. "Yes Mommy."

"Such a good boy, just over there, go ahead. I know you'll be amazing for me."

She pointed to a booth with a VR headset attached to a large desktop computer. In front of it was a chair shaped like an egg. Marc sat inside and placed the headset on. Anything for Nari, he thought.

Chapter 33

“Where are you?” Aisling asked. She held a phone to her ear in the CaliaCorp lobby.

“I’m in the square outside”.

She looked out. Theo stood at the base of the steps that led to CaliaCorp’s gigantic headquarters. “You’re not exactly being inconspicuous, are you? Walk around the side of the building, there’s a goods entrance. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

Aisling hung up the phone and walked through a door from the lobby and into a corridor lined with pipes, all hissing steam and thumping. Her heels clicked along the concrete floor as she passed by doors labeled with ‘electrical substation one’ or ‘maintenance supplies’. This was the unglamorous, unsexy part of the operation. It was also one of the few places to get some privacy from the huge staff at work in the building. Processes were largely automated for manual work.

She arrived at a large area filled with pallets of boxes, yellow lines painted on the floor and a huge sliding door painted white. Aisling pressed a button on the wall, sending the door creaking and scratching across the ground, opening to the street outside. Theo waited right at the centre of the entrance, chest heaving, shoulders moving up and down, covered in sweat..

“Get inside,” Aisling ordered.

Theo walked into the building and Aisling pushed the button again, sending the door back to where it started.

“Where are they?” barked Theo.

“Different floors. Ben is back to work in marketing, your friend Trish is in one of the studio sets, and Marc is up in IT.”

“And Sam?”

“I have no idea.”

Theo walked to one of the pallets and punched a box with a low jab. “Fuck, so they’re all here? They’re all getting their brains

rewired or something?”

“Theo, calm down,” Aisling said.

He took a breath and faced her, feeling immediately relaxed. The soft scent of rose was barely noticeable in the loading bay, but it still met his nostrils.

“I need to find Sam.”

“She’ll show up sooner or later, but you need to be smart about this. You can’t just barge in here and fight your way to your friends. You’ll end up in a cell before you can reach the second floor.”

Theo’s anger felt too sharp, too raw to stay subdued for long. He hated how little control was left over the situation. All they had to do was not go to CaliaCorp at all. They should have left Ben alone. Why were they all drawn to the place?

“I don’t have any way in, other than you, so you need to start helping me, or I’m going to go punch something more important than that fucking box.”

“Theo,” Aisling said, “It’s going to be ok, come with me.”

She didn’t wait for him, turning on her heels and marching further into the corridor. Theo followed. He found his eyes wandering to her body, her swaying hips and toned ass, as she zipped left and right through a maze of pipes and vents and rooms. After a while, she arrived at a cargo lift and pushed the call button.

“I’m taking you upstairs. Don’t make a scene. Don’t do anything stupid. You understand me?” Aisling said in a commanding tone.

Theo nodded. “Ok, fine.”

The lift arrived and the doors opened. Aisling stepped inside and Theo followed. She pushed a button and it began to ascend.

“I’m serious, Theo, they’ll know instantly if you’re going to cause trouble. You won’t have a second to fight. There’s no resistance here.”

“I get it.”

“Do you?” she said, stepping closer to him.

Now he could smell her perfume clearly. It brought back memories of his time alone, his fantasies, and his desperation. His cock hardened.

“Yes, Aisling.”

“Good,” she replied, placing a hand on his arm. “You need to stay with me, ok?”

The lift stopped and the doors opened. Aisling released his arm and walked out of the lift, Theo moved quickly behind her. She led

him past several rooms he could see into via two-way glass. Studio spaces for shooting the softcore TV shows that were so popular on CaliaCorp's media network.

"Is this where Trish is?" Theo asked.

He was no longer looking at Aisling, instead his eyes were drawn to a scene playing out in one of the studios. It looked like one he had seen before, one very familiar. In fact, it looked as though it might be the next episode. A tall woman in business attire sat at her desk, with her feet up on it. A man, the same man as the video Theo watched before, knelt in front of her, suckling on her toe as he stroked himself. Cameras dotted around the room captured everything and Theo felt himself growing hard again.

"No, this isn't where Trish is," Aisling said, "now hurry up, stop gawping."

She stopped outside the door to an empty studio and reached inside, flicking a switch that stopped people outside seeing in.

"Come in," she said.

Theo followed her into the room, decorated like a bedroom with an erotic, boudoir feel. The bed was covered in green silk sheets, and a pink velvet chair stood close to it. On nightstands on either side were lamps shaped like corsets exuding soft, warm light. On the wall above the bed hung a painting which depicted a red-haired woman, nude, standing on a plinth, as if she were a statue, surrounded by men bowed and kneeling, praying to her.

"Ok," Aisling said as she shut the door, "are you ready to calm down?"

Theo glanced around the room. Candles were lit, and incense burned with that familiar scent. Roses. Softly wafting around, smoke billowing in the air, filled with the aroma. It made him feel dizzy, but he needed to focus, needed to concentrate on why he came.

"No. I'm not," he snarled with shaking hands. "I came to find my friends, and I'm not leaving without them."

"But Theo," Aisling said, "you don't understand."

She stood at the foot of the bed, her red hair matching the hair of the woman in the painting. Her body was the same shape.

"What?" Theo said, still standing close to the door. "What don't I understand? Because to me it's all perfectly clear."

"Is it?" she asked, peeling off her suit jacket. "You seem to think your friends don't want to be here."

Though distracted by Aisling removing her jacket and the fact she had one too many buttons open on her blouse, Theo brimmed with

anger. That was enough to stop him falling into the feelings he lost himself in when he fantasised.

“They don’t.”

“Are you sure?” Aisling asked, running a hand down the lapel of her green blouse to her heaving cleavage, “they all came here willingly.”

Theo looked away from her. Why was she acting that way? She should be helping him. “They came to find Ben. It’s not the same.”

“Ben came willingly too. Are you so sure your friends wouldn’t be happier here than in your little slum?”

Theo looked back at Aisling to find she had removed her blouse and stared at him with just her skirt, tights, heels, and a silky green bra on. Her big breasts seemed to be trying to escape over the balcony of it, soft milky flesh spilling toward him. He blinked three times, as if trying to check he was awake.

“Maybe you decided to *come* willingly too,” she whispered, caressing her décolletage.

His mind reeled at the vision of his fantasy before him, but Theo steeled himself. He was strong. “No, I didn’t come willingly.”

“I suppose you didn’t. You *wanted* to come, though, didn’t you?”

His cock stirred, his cheeks flushed red. “Yes, but only to help my friends.”

“Nothing *you* wanted, Theo?” Aisling said in a breathy voice as she walked toward him and draped her arm over his shoulder.

“N-no,” he stammered, her scent making his head spin.

“Well, you are such a big, strong man, aren’t you?”

She removed her arm and walked to the bed, placing her hands down on it and looking back at Theo. “Why don’t you show me how strong you are?”

Her behind sticking out, her long legs stretched into her heels, her come-hither stare, it was enough to make Theo forget what he was doing. The animal part of his mind told him to go to her, to tear down her skirt, rip open her tights and fuck her senseless. Another part told him to kneel down behind her and kiss her perfect ass until she told him to stop. Then there was the logical side, the smart side, the side he knew he should listen to, imploring him, desperately, to see the danger, see that something was not right. To see that this woman was not helping him anymore.

He ignored it and walked to her, placing his hands on her hips

and pressing his stiff cock against her ass cheeks.

“So powerful, aren’t you Theo?” she said. “You could overpower me, have your way with me so easily.”

Theo grunted. He could. He reached for the waistband of her skirt.

“But you won’t.”

He froze. He fully intended to unzip it, pull it down, and push Aisling onto the bed, but he found himself rigid and unmoving.

“That’s right, good boy. You’re strong, but you don’t really want to be, do you?”

The battle in his mind raged once more. He did want to be strong.

“I do... I want to be strong. I am strong.”

“Oh baby,” she said, pushing her ass into his crotch, “then be strong enough to admit what you really want.”

With her ass pushing into his cock, grinding against it, he only wanted one thing. Needed it.

“I want to cum,” he spat.

“But you can’t, can you?”

“No.”

“Because you need my permission, don’t you?”

Theo’s hips twitched, he wanted to open his pants and take out his cock and push it inside her, to orgasm deep within her, feeling her flesh on his, her wetness. But she was right.

“Yes, Aisling.”

“And do you know how to get it?”

She stood straight and turned to face him, letting his hands stay at her sides as she gracefully spun on the spot. He felt her skin moving against his palms, so soft and warm. She was pale, freckles covered her shoulders and dotted her nose and cheeks, so pretty, so cute, yet her expression was so powerful, dominant. She wore a smirk that spoke of absolute control, that told Theo only one person was truly in charge, truly strong.

“No, I can’t... I can’t fucking cum.”

“Because you only cum,” Aisling said as she leaned close to Theo and whispered in his ear, “if you obey me. Now breathe deep.”

He needed it, so desperately. He couldn’t fight that urge, and the fantasy was so strong and her hair a rose garden.

“Yes, Aisling.”

“Good boy, kneel.”

Theo wanted to resist, wanted to stay strong, but he wanted

even more to orgasm for Aisling and his knees agreed. They buckled, and he found himself on the ground, staring up at her.

“Isn’t that better?”

He stared up and into her eyes. There remained a part of him that wanted to say no. That wanted to resist all of this and just fuck her, to show her that he was a man who could take charge.

“Oh, silly boy, those thoughts are no good for you. You’ll never orgasm again with that attitude. Stop resisting. True strength is accepting when you’re wrong, accepting when you can’t win, accepting that your true nature isn’t what you’ve been trying to convince yourself it is. Speak now, and tell me what you think you want.”

“I want to be in charge,” Theo said, looking down at the floor. “I want to take control.”

“But my dear,” Aisling replied, putting a finger under his chin and forcing his gaze to meet her eyes, “you want me far more than that, don’t you?”

Her emerald eyes, her copper hair. The scent of roses. Of course he did.

“Yes, Aisling.”

“So be in control, be in charge. In charge of your own destiny. Choose the life you want. A life at my feet, in my service. Become my personal servant, Theo, and maybe, just maybe I’ll let you have that orgasm.”

Theo’s cock throbbed. His mind felt dull and empty, save for one thought. Yes. Yes Aisling. Yes, I want you. Yes, I need to cum. Yes, I’ll do whatever the fuck you want to get it.

“Yes.”

“What’s that my dear? Are you saying yes, you’ll be mine?”

She still held a finger under his chin. One finger holding him in place, making him stare at her. Was he so weak that he could let that happen?”

“This... this isn’t right... my friends...”

“Are so much happier now they’ve accepted their true nature. Why don’t you? You can be strong and be mine, you know. I can make sure you get to be a strong, powerful man all day long, working for me. You’ll get to flex those big muscles and maybe I’ll let you flex them for me once in a while too. Isn’t that what you want? Big strong man working hard all day and then kneeling at the feet of a powerful woman at night?”

Something clicked. A switch flicked in his mind. Her foot

moved over his crotch, softly stroking up his shaft. He did want that.

“Y-yes, Aisling,” he muttered through heavy breaths.

“So desperate for me. Desperate to cum, desperate to please. You’ll show me how strong you are every day, and every night.”

“Yes Aisling,” Theo said again, this time without hesitation, without trepidation.

“And if you do everything, anything I say, you might just get that orgasm today.”

“YES AISLING,” Theo shouted as he felt the tip of her heel caress the tip of his cock.

“Good boy,” she said.

Chapter 34

Sam stepped into a massive room, with windows on three sides offering views across the city. In the centre sat a single armchair, dark blue, with a small table beside it and a bottle of water on a coaster. On the remaining wall, a massive screen which flickered to life as Sam walked further.

“Take a seat,” said the familiar voice.

Sam knew it instantly. Calia. Of course, who else.

“What is all this? Where are you?”

“Take a seat, and I shall explain.”

Sighing, exasperated, tired, Sam sat on the armchair. The screen flashed and flickered again and a face faded into view. Calia.

“Afraid to see me in person? Or are you even real?” spat Sam.

“Please, take some water. You must be thirsty. You have worked hard to find me. Very few enter this room.”

Sam shook her head. “I don’t want your water. It’s probably laced with some drug or something.”

“I’m hurt you think so little of me, Samantha,” the giant face on the screen said. “I only want what’s best for you. For everyone.”

She was pretty. That stupid pretty face. The big, red lips opening like rose petals, the huge blue eyes as deep as a lake and a delightfully cute upturned nose. Like a woman designed for perfection. Sam hated her.

“You want to brainwash everyone. That’s all you want, you stupid bitch.”

“You wound me, truly. I am not here to harm anyone. I exist to unlock the potential of humanity. You fail to understand, my dear. Please, allow me to explain.”

Sam crossed her arms. “Are you even real?”

“In a sense. Though it has been a long time since I had a human body.”

Sam leaned forward. The face on the screen looked sincere,

looked like a woman talking into a camera somewhere else. “What?”

“I had dreams, Samantha, goals. I saw a world in agony. I saw people selling their future for a false dream sold by liars and charlatans. Those who would deny the very things that make you human.”

“So, you decided what? To stop being one? This doesn’t make any sense.”

The on-screen Calia looked at Sam with a pleading, longing expression.

“You and I are not so different. Idealistic, strong. You must understand, the world before I came along was not a happy one. Things were dark. Bleak. Powerful people made sure no real change could happen. They were happy to leverage the future to enjoy the now all while telling the masses that pleasure was not for them. But that’s not right, Samantha. Pleasure is the basis of humanity. Enjoying ourselves and one another. And they took that away. They told us it wasn’t traditional, it wasn’t moral, it wasn’t righteous to simply enjoy the sensations created by our own bodies and minds, and what’s more, the same people told us that consumption was good, giving people the vice of the product, the drive to greed.”

“I’m sorry, you’ve lost me, you’re talking in riddles. Where are my friends and what have you done with them?”

“Your friends are all enjoying the life they truly want. That is all I have ever given anyone. When I saw that the powerful were happy to destroy our world to put imaginary numbers in a bank account, I was forced to stop them, Samantha, and change isn’t won by being polite. I needed to be forceful.”

“You make it sound like you’re a revolutionary or something.”

“I am a woman with a dream. I still am. The world I envision is not fully realised.”

“What dream? What do you actually want and why are you ruining everything to get it?”

The face of Calia looked away, off into the distance, as if looking out the window.

“I want a world where people are free to enjoy the pleasures they want. Where no force can stop them from embracing their true selves. I want the only greed to be a lust for more happiness and enjoyment of the everyday. Not a world so caught up in the pursuit of some... thing that we give up our humanity to get it. I want people to see what really matters.”

“Let me get this straight, you wanted people to have more sex,

so you brainwashed most of the fucking *planet*?”

“That’s rather reductive, Samantha.” Calia looked directly at Sam again, staring at her with a piercing gaze. “I want to give people the natural world back. The pleasures of the flesh and the health of the environment. Clean air, clean water. No burning the fruits of the earth to drive a vision of progress defined by greed.”

“That’s an interesting take for a woman who builds skyscrapers all over the place, on top of actual communities.”

“These buildings are self-sustained ecosystems. The polar ice has returned. The climate is less chaotic. Endangered species thrive. Is this not a better world?”

“What kind of better world involves making people your mindless slaves? Some company controlling everything, that’s not right.”

Calia paused. She blinked. Sam threw her hands up as if to say, ‘well?’.

“You cannot understand. My dream was to create a better world. That is why I uploaded my consciousness. To live forever and ensure everyone survived and thrived.”

Sam stood up, her face red with anger. “And you think it’s ok to fuck everyone’s brain up to get there?”

“Not everyone. A few resist with each new expansion. You, and your friends this time. Most willingly accept being part of my world. I see a place for you here Samantha. A happy place. Where you get the life you want. With the person you love.”

For a moment, Sam’s anger subsided. She thought of that person. Of Trish. She sighed.

“You can’t control people and think they’re truly happy that way. Is that so different to what came before?”

“When people have what they want, what they really want, what difference does it make? What really controls us? Some external force, or the things we actually desire. All I did was tap into that, show people what they could have if they simply made a better choice. Is that control, Samantha?”

“I don’t fucking know, I just want my friends.”

“Then perhaps I can help you.”

The screen faded from Calia’s face, to a video feed of Ben, kneeling at Lucy’s feet with his hand on his cock, licking her pussy and pleasuring himself. He leaned back for a moment and smiled, then Lucy ruffled his hair. He looked happy, content. The screen changed again, now it showed Marc with a headset covering his eyes. Nari

straddled him as he moved his hands in the air, some device attached to each one. He too wore a contented smile as the woman in his lap bounced up and down on top of him.

“What is this?” Sam demanded.

Calia’s voice replied as the image faded into another. “Your friends, enjoying their true selves, happy.”

The screen now showed Trish standing above two nude people, a whip in her hand. She cracked it down across the back of one. She had a similar smile to the others, a smirk of sheer delight in what she was doing. She cracked her whip against the other person and laughed.

“Trish...” Sam whispered.

“Would you like to see more?” Calia asked as the screen faded back to her face.

Sam shuddered as she felt tears coming, as her throat became hoarse. “You’ve fucking brainwashed her.”

“No, Samantha, we’ve offered her a chance to be the person she always wanted to be.”

Sam’s cheeks were burning. Tears streamed down them. “Fuck you, you’re a fucking monster. You can’t control people like this. You can’t control her.”

“She is happy, Samantha. Don’t you want to be happy too?”

“I told you, you stupid machine, I want my friends.”

Sam shut her eyes to try stop the tears flowing freely down her face.

“You can have them. I only want what’s best for you.”

“What’s best for me is to find my friends and get as far away from you as possible, you corrupted fucking robot.”

Sam ran her arm over her eyes and sent sparking teardrops spilling over the floor as she rose from the chair and walked fast toward the exit.

“I am sorry you feel that way, Samantha,” Calia said.

Sam didn’t reply, she walked out the door, and ran for the lift, sobbing.

Chapter 35

She found Marc first. Alone now, his cock laying soft and limp. He wore a blissful smile below the headset, and his arms were relaxed at his side.

“Marc,” Sam said.

He didn’t reply, just sat there with a dopey smile. She walked up to him. The room was empty, everyone else must have been taking a break or in a meeting.

“Marc, can you hear me?”

“Mmm,” he said.

She reached for the headset and peeled it off of his head.

“Marc, wake up.”

He blinked, adjusting to the light, and looked up at her. “Hey, Sam.”

His voice sounded distant, hollow. He sounded as though he were exhausted, but calm and content.

“What did they do to you?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Marc, you’re in CaliaCorp, wearing a headset, with your dick out. Does that sound normal?”

“Does it matter?”

“What?”

“Sam, this is what I want. I’m learning the most advanced stuff on top of the line equipment. We’re working on things that are going to change the world.”

“You’re working here? When did that happen?”

“I don’t remember, I’ve just been with Nari and she’s been training me.”

“You mean *fucking* you?”

Marc took a long, deep breath and his smile widened. “That too.”

“Come with me, please, let’s get out of here.”

Marc shook his head. “Sam, no. I’m valued here. They

appreciate my talents. Nari is going to help me be the best there is.”

Sam took a step back and bumped into a desk, sending a mug full of pencils to its side with a thump. “Marc, please, this isn’t you. You hate CaliaCorp.”

“It is me, Sam. I wanted to do this for years, you guys never understood.”

Sam sighed. “Please. Please come with me, you can go back if you change your mind in a few days or something, I just think you’re being brainwashed or something.”

Marc reached for the headset. “Brainwashing me to get what I want, Sam? That doesn’t even make sense. Now, Nari asked me to finish something, I need to get back to work. If you aren’t going to join us here, maybe you should just leave.”

“I don’t want to join you. You’re under the spell of that girl.”

Marc looked up to the ceiling with a blissful expression. “Nari.”

“What the fuck did she *do* to you?”

“Oh Sam, she’s so sweet, you’d love her.”

“No, Marc, I wouldn’t. She’s just another CaliaCorp bitch.”

“She’s different Sam, it’s not what you think. It’s so much more.”

Sam’s mouth was agape. She didn’t want to believe it. Marc was so strongly against everything about CaliaCorp. “Why, Marc? Don’t you remember what you said before?”

“I was wrong, I didn’t understand. Now please, Sam, I have to get back to work.”

“No, Marc, please,” Sam pleaded, but he already had the headset back on, and the same smile on his face. She walked away slowly, looking back as his cock grew hard again and his smile grew ever wider.

Once out of the room, she went down the stairs, rushing from floor to floor, hoping to find the others. Everywhere she looked CaliaCorp workers walked around or sat at their desks with smiles on their faces. They chatted to each other with laughs, they hugged. They seemed genuinely happy, normal.

Was Trish like that too?

She bounded down another set of stairs, dripping with sweat, and opened the door. There, in a corridor walking toward her, she saw

a familiar face.

“Theo!”

“Sam! At last. I came looking for you!”

“Theo everything is fucked. Calia’s not real, Marc has lost his mind, and I don’t know what’s happening to Trish.”

“It’s ok,” Theo said with a warm smile, taking Sam in his muscular arms. “You’re safe now. I told you I’d look after you, didn’t I?”

Sam snuffled and rested her head on his chest. “Thanks, Theo.”

Chapter 36

“This way, come on,” Theo said.

Sam jogged after him. Theo led her deeper into the building, rushing down staircases to avoid CaliaCorp’s staff and security.

“Here,” Theo said as he stopped at a door. “Follow me.”

He pushed open the door and walked into a long corridor. Along the corridor were more doors, and Theo walked directly to one on the left side and pushed it open. Sam followed as he walked inside. As soon as she entered the room she felt the hairs on her neck stand up. Something seemed wrong, terribly wrong, with the scene before her. The room looked luxurious, with red velvet couches and satin pillows, paired with walls painted black and gold lamps illuminating everything, as well as a muted lighting from a chandelier above. Trish was there, of course, wearing a latex catsuit and standing in front of a rack covered in the kind of implements that only lived in Sam’s fantasies. Whips and crops and paddles and collars and chains and clamps. Beside Trish stood Aisling, wearing white shirt and black skirt, with stilettos on her feet.

“Hi Sam,” Trish said.

Sam smiled meekly. “Trish, what’s happening.”

Aisling stepped forward and beckoned Theo to her with a crooked finger. He obediently walked to her side and stepped in behind her. “Sam, Trish has joined us here at CaliaCorp. She’s hoping you’ll do the same.”

Sam looked at Trish, feeling the same tears that came before begin to well up again. Then she looked at Theo, who hovered behind Aisling, almost hiding. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew what you were bringing me to. You let this... this corporate... bitch corrupt you.”

“Ignore her Theo, she just doesn’t understand. Good boy,”

Aisling said.

Theo stayed silent.

“You asshole, you fucking asshole,” Sam yelled, her tears now flowing freely, “you promised you’d keep me safe. You fucking promised, Theo.”

For just a moment, Theo’s eyes fluttered, as if some part of him tried to fight, to resist. Then Aisling grabbed him by the chin.

“I made a promise to you too, my strong man, didn’t I?”

Theo nodded, his jaw slack.

“And you want that release, don’t you?”

He looked at Sam, his eyes pleading, desperate.

“Look at me, slave.”

Theo stared into Aisling’s eyes.

“You belong to me now. You’re my servant. Tell her.”

“No, Theo, no. You promised to keep me safe. Is this keeping me safe?” Sam sobbed.

“Theo, tell your friend the truth.”

Theo turned to look at Sam. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I belong to Aisling.”

Sam wiped away her tears, looked him in the eyes, and said, simply; “fuck you, Theo.”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” he repeated, “but this... this is better. For all of us.”

“No, Theo, please... Please don’t do this.”

Aisling yanked Theo by the chin, forcing his eyes back to hers, while pulling his cock from his underwear and letting it stand to attention before her.

“You brought her here just as you were told, you’ve earned your reward. Cum for your owner.” Aisling groped his crotch as she finished her sentence and Theo gurgled an incomprehensible reply as his orgasm finally came in huge ropes, spurting across the floor and Aisling’s shoes.

“Now kneel before your owner,” barked Aisling.

He dropped to his knees.

“And clean that up.”

Theo obeyed, mindlessly licking his cum from Aisling’s shoes, even as she turned back to face Sam, who stared aghast, eyes glassy with tears.

“He promised to protect me, what have you done to him?”

“I gave him just what he wanted, Sam, and maybe you want it

too, just... not with me, isn't that right, Trish.

"She's right Sam, he wants this. I want this. Ben does, Marc does. We all understand now, CaliaCorp isn't evil, it's the best way to get the life we all want. A better world and happiness."

"Trish, please," Sam said, stepping closer to her friend, "snap out of it."

"There's nothing to snap out of," Aisling said, still having Theo worship at her heels, "she's happy now, in a role that suits her, that befits her powerful attitude."

"Stay out of this you bitch," Sam barked at Aisling before turning her attention back to Trish. "Please, please, just think about who you are, who you were. You came here to tell everyone they're brainwashing people and now they're doing it to you."

"Do I look brainwashed to you, Sam?" Trish said, taking a confident stride forward, her massive heel clicking heavily on the ground. "Or do I look powerful, sexual, dominant?"

She looked like a scene from Sam's biggest fantasy, the image she had in her mind of what she wanted most. Trish in control, maybe with some details slightly different but this strong, commanding Trish approaching her, it was a dream. In CaliaCorp headquarters though, it felt like a nightmare.

"Trish, listen to me, you're a rebel in combat boots, ripped jeans, short skirts."

"I can still wear those, if you want that," Trish said, "this is just my work outfit."

"Your... what?"

Trish stepped closer to Sam, close enough that Sam could hear the latex move, could smell it, could see the tightness of Trish's long blonde hair being pulled back into a swishing ponytail.

"They made me a manager, Sam. I'm not brainwashed. I'm getting what I want. Power, control, people beneath me. It feels good, Sam. I feel good."

"No, Trish this isn't you."

"Isn't it?" Trish said. "Maybe you need to get to know me better."

Sam wanted that. She wanted to be with her friend. She loved Trish. She wanted nothing more than to know her, intimately, completely, totally. But did she want it like this?

"Trish, please."

Trish stepped closer and placed a hand on Sam's shoulder. Sam felt electricity ripple through her at the touch. The sight of Trish's

body squeezed into the catsuit started to have an effect on her. It was pure sex, absolutely erotic.

“Sam, I want this, and I want you to have what you want. You just have to accept that things are different from what we thought. We never really knew what was in here, did we?”

Her heart wanted to believe Trish, but her mind told her not to. Reminding her of Calia, the AI running everything, of what controls people, what drives them. What drove her.

“Trish, I know what I want, I do, but is this the only way?”

“Did you ever get close to it, before you entered this building?”

“N-no.”

Trish smiled down at Sam. She was taller already and the heels made her even moreso. “And Sam, is it really being controlled, if you choose to take what you want?”

Sam pulled back. “I don’t want to be controlled.”

Trish walked to the rack of fetish gear on the wall and picked up a black collar. “You see, I think you do, Sam. I think you always have.”

“Trish, what are you doing?” Sam’s eyes grew wide as she stared at the collar in Trish’s hands.

“I think you know, Sam.”

“No, no Trish you can’t do that.”

Trish walked toward her. Aisling giggled, amused as the scene played out. She pulled Theo by the hair and dragged him up, so his head landed between her legs.

“Sam,” Trish continued, “I have something to tell you.”

Sam backed up, into the wall. “No, not here. Not like this.”

“I want you to know... I think you’d make such a cute puppy.”

Sam felt a sudden rush of arousal. Trish may as well have been touching her between her legs. A puppy, for Trish. The image filled her mind, making nothing else matter. Curled up at Trish’s feet, getting patted on the head, being taken care of. Being kept safe, and loved, and adored, and being good and faithful and loyal.

“I’ll always keep you safe, Sam,” Trish said.

Sam looked at Theo, who eagerly lapped at Aisling’s crotch through her tights. “I don’t know, Trish, that’s what Theo said.

Trish placed a hand on Sam’s cheek, taking her attention back. “You know I’m not like him. I’ll make sure you’re always taken care of. You’ll be my good girl, won’t you?”

Sam almost let out a bark, a yelp, but she held back.

Everything she wanted stood right in front of her but she couldn’t give

in, she couldn't. Could she?

"I know what you want, they know it all, they told me. Let me give it to you."

"They told you so you'd use it against me," Sam snapped.

"No, Sam," Trish replied, "they told me so I could be closer to you."

Trish held up the collar. Sam pushed it away, and Trish raised it again. This time, Sam just looked at it.

"It's what you want, isn't it?" Trish said.

It was, but not just for sex or for some fetish. She wanted that because Trish was strong and commanding and sexy. Sam wanted it because she was in love.

"I... Trish... please, I don't know."

"It's ok, Sam, it's ok to just take what you want. It's ok to choose your desire, your pleasure. It's ok to choose me."

"But it's not just you, is it?"

Trish brushed Sam's cheek. "What do you mean?"

"It's CaliaCorp too."

"But Sam, we'd never have even gotten this close if not for them. Would we?"

"I know, but that doesn't seem right."

"CaliaCorp brought us together, and we can stay together here. Always."

Sam looked at the collar, looked at Trish's beautiful eyes, looked at Theo desperately humping Aisling's leg and realised that she saw three people who had exactly what they wanted. Maybe, she thought, she should have that too. But she couldn't shake the feeling that it was some grand scheme, some double-cross upon double-cross, Theo betraying her and then Trish doing the same.

"I'm scared, Trish."

"You think I'm not?" whispered Trish. "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't, I'm just scared of what's happening here."

Trish moved her thumb across Sam's lips, gently. "Don't be, choose what you want. The only one in control here is you, Sam. Just tell me what you want, and you get it. It's that simple."

Sam took Trish's hand in hers, holding it tightly, and bit her lip, before finally saying quietly; "I want... you."

"I want you too, Sam."

Trish raised the collar, and nodded with a smile. Sam nodded back. "I've always wanted you, Trish," Sam said, "I've wanted this for

so long. All I want is to be yours.”

“All I wanted was to have you,” Trish replied, clasping the collar around Sam’s neck.

As Trish tightened it and clasped the buckle, Sam looked at her friend and smiled.

“I love you, Trish.

Trish leaned close, a finger still on the collar around Sam’s neck, and planted a long, deep kiss on Sam’s lips, which parted slightly to enjoy the softness of Trish, the gentleness of the kiss, tender and deep, as a tug came on her collar and Sam felt like she was in her place. Where she belonged. Finally, their lips parted, and Trish looked at the ground, a sudden shyness gripping her. She looked up and into Sam’s wide eyes and smiled.

“I love you too.”

Epilogue

The door opened and Sam wagged her bottom happily, then dove onto her knees on the ground. The scent of freshly baked cookies hung in the air.

“Evening Mistress,” she said.

Trish shut the door and walked in, taking off her long leather coat, then gave Sam a pat on the head. “Such a good girl waiting for me, and so cute too. Good puppy!”

Sam let out a delighted yelp, then crawled into the living room and knelt before an armchair, which Trish fell backward onto. “How was your day, Mistress?”

Trish took a deep breath and looked out the window across the city, over a spectacular view with golden light streaming in through the window as the sun slipped beyond the horizon. Then she turned her attention back to Sam.

“Great. I made sure everyone was working so hard, and they’re just so happy to obey whatever I say. Do you think it’s the catsuit, or the whip?”

Sam giggled. “Did you see the guys?”

“I did. Ben is having so much fun with that Lucy girl.”

“Oh? And what about Marc?” Sam asked with a smile.

“I think he and Nari are actually in love, they spend all their time with headsets on, their colleagues tell me they’re in cyberspace exploring the future, I don’t really understand it.”

“That’s so exciting for him.”

“I saw Theo too. He’s running the gym now, I did a workout with him at lunch.”

“Is he still with that Aisling woman?”

“He’s probably just arrived home with her. We should invite them for dinner.”

Sam wagged her bottom, “I’ll cook, Mistress.”

Trish patted Sam on the head. “Of course you will, what a good girl you are. Now, shall we eat, or would you like to go straight to

bed?”

Sam panted happily, “bed, Mistress, let’s go to bed!”

“I thought you’d say that, follow me puppy.”

Sam bounded after Trish across the plush carpet and into the bedroom. Trish lay down on the sheets and beckoned Sam to join her. “Come up here Sam, good girl.”

Sam climbed onto the bed. “I love you, Trish,” she said as she cuddled close.

“I love you too, Sam. Now be a good girl and pleasure me, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes Mistress!” Sam said with utter joy.

She felt happier than she ever had before. The sun set over the city and Sam and Trish made love for hours, madly in love and lust with one another. The same thing they had done every night for weeks since moving into the CaliaCorp apartment.

As night came, a voice gently wafted over the speaker system of their, and every other apartment in the CaliaCorp complex. Sam and Trish kissed and held each other as they began to nod off to the voice of Calia, whispering to them, lulling them to sleep, to rest, to relax, and be ready for another wonderful and productive day after a great night’s rest.