

CŎRRŨPTĖD/

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Chapter 1: Red Light, Green Light

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These old underground server farms always have the same nostalgic smell to them. Burnt-out copper mixed with sugary silicon, all edged with the sweat of desperation and decay. Okay, maybe that last part's from the twenty or so of us packed in here like anxious sardines in a tin labelled *Scared Shitless*. The fluorescents sting my eyes as they flicker overhead, catching on the metal racks that used to hold the heartbeat of the internet. Now they're just empty ribs in an electronic graveyard, the cadaver of a world that digital Jesus came down and absolutely ~~fu~~cked to death.

I shift on my heels, nervously flicking the cover of my phone open and shut again. It's making that little *click-click-click* sound that I know drives everyone crazy, but if I stop fidgeting with something, I might start screaming, and that seems like a bigger social faux pax in a room full of jumpy rebels with guns. Jackdaw paces before our eclectic band, the

EMP gun at his hip humming low like a dying neon light. Just one shitty playing card in our soggy deck.

"Alright, lads," Jackdaw barks, his Scouse twang turning orders into something between a song and a snarl. "Listen. Here's the plan. We're hitting the Pax data hub on Piccadilly. Daelith's intel reckons it's a weak spot in their network."

Jackdaw fancies himself a bit of a leader. He's got the Che Guevara shirt, a hacksaw-cut mess of dark hair, and a proud jut to his jaw that screams he'd rather break your nose than take orders. Basically a walking red flag with combat boots, and yet here we all are, hanging on his every word like he's going to Marx-and-Spencer us into the revolution.

My phone buzzes in my palm, and I glance at the screen.

you ok jess?

I type back quickly: *fine, you?*

Bit of a lie. My hands are so sweaty I can barely keep a hold of the phone. I catch Cam's eye across the room. He's sitting there looking perfectly calm, the ghost of a smile on his pretty face. He's always so annoyingly calm. He looks like he belongs here among the tattered remnants of old humanity. As if [REDACTED] didn't lurk beneath his too-perfect skin. Oh shit, I didn't mean to think that last part. Shut up, brain.

Jackdaw's gaze sweeps over us, hawk-like. "Before we begin, standard protocol. Benjyn? You all know the drill, line up."

I do know the drill. All of us here do now. Well, everyone except Cam and the other new guy. Every meeting starts like this – paranoia wrapped in protocol, just in case anyone's been compromised since the last one. After that, we'll move onto *the plan*. This time, we've got some new hotshot with us who claims he can get us into Pax's eastern data hub. I'm not convinced. These days, everyone's got a plan to take down our AI overlords. Most of them vanish. Dead, probably. Or rewritten into something more useful.

The scanner looks like some TV remote from my nan's house in 2016, all held together with duct tape and hope. Bits of wire poke out like eviscerated guts. But it does the job. It can detect the radio frequency signature of electricity running through circuits. One sweep, and it knows if you're human or not – humans don't tend to be electronic. Supposedly. This thing is running on ancient protocols. If Pax ever did send an infiltrator, I don't think we'd even realise it until our spines were being forcibly restructured in a reeducation centre, our brains scooped out with teaspoons and replaced with Pax-flavoured pudding.

Benjyn cocks it like a gun, his narrow eyes daring anyone to fail. As if the sandy-haired, chubby kid would actually do anything about it. We all know he's a coward, but if the job helps him feel relevant... let him have his fun. Honestly, if this thing ever caught an infiltrator, Benjyn would piss himself and throw the scanner at them like the world's saddest Pokéball.

never better, Cam's message appears in my hand. *stop worrying so much everything will be fine*. I hope he's right. If he's wrong, we're both ~~fucked~~. And not the fun kind, to clarify.

The line in front of Benjyn moves quickly. Rebels bare their wrists, and the scanner's light flashes green, green, green. Human, human, human. Green means human. Red means death. Simple as that.

"Jesstiny," Benjyn calls, and I snap out of my thoughts. My handle. Not my real name, we don't use those anymore unless it's with family. I'd picked it back in 2022 for some stupid video game when I was twelve. Never thought it'd become my only identity. And now there it is, inked on my wrist, the barcode of our brave new world. Eternal shame immortalised for all to see. Thank god it's not xXx_PussyDestroyer69_xXx.

The scanner is cold against that ink, a crackle of static probing through my skin, checking if it's carbon or copper lurking beneath. Benjyn grunts. "Something wrong?"

I shrug. "It's cold."

Green light. The tension in my shoulders doesn't ease off. It's Cam's turn next.

Seconds drag into infinity. Jackdaw's wittering on about *the plan*. I don't even hear it. My hands are clenched so tight I can feel fingernails cutting into skin. If I was wrong about the scanner, if I missed one line in that code...

"Your turn, new guy," Benjyn says to him. I hold my breath. My lungs start screaming, but they'll just have to deal with it. Breathing seems secondary to having a very public panic attack right now.

The scanner touches his skin.

The LED pulses red.

Fuck.

Pulses red again. Benjyn frowns, smacking the scanner once then jabbing it hard into his wrist. Sybastion's eyes narrow. Cam doesn't even flinch.

This is it. We're going to die. I am going to be murdered by a guy named fucking BENJYN and I haven't even gotten laid in two years and—

Green. The light winks lazily.

"Clean." Benjyn is already moving on to the next in line.

Jess: *Move. Act normal.*

I exhale slowly, carefully, like the air might explode if I let it out too fast and then everyone will realise and lose their shit. Cam catches my eye and grins. Smug, self-satisfied little shit. He almost got us both erased from existence and he's grinning like he just won the lottery.

I want to slap him. Or vomit. Or — I don't know. I need to leave this fucking room immediately before I have a stroke.

told you it would work you worry too much. The text arrives before he's even sat back down. Idiot – he could at least use his phone to send it. I glance behind me, but Liviya and Nomeracy are too deep in conversation to be shoulder-peeking. I don't bother replying. I can't. He's right – the hack *had* worked. It wasn't difficult, I'd just copied the functionality of an old RFID blocking wallet. Scramble the RF signals from a nearby emitter, introduce some noise and... there you go. Chaotically human RF value. Not one of these kids playing at rebellion had even registered that brief, breathless moment before it scrambled. For some reason, that scares me more than if it had failed.

We're actually going to do this. And none of us have a clue what we're doing.

"OK, sit the fuck back down," Jackdaw says eloquently. "And listen up. Jesstiny, phone away."

I pocket it. "Just monitoring the firewall feed." He nods, buying it because he wants to. Because I'm the best hacker they could find. The irony would be pretty funny if the situation wasn't so lethal. Little do they know I'm just a twitchy mess of anxiety in a human suit held together with caffeine and spite.

"As I was saying," he continues. "Daelith's got intel on a vulnerability in the on-prem security. It's a physical one, so we're going to grab as much C4 as O-Ska can get us and blow it to kingdom come. Five days, lads. Five days to get your shit together and we're doing this."

I bite back a sigh. Blowing shit up always makes the gym bros feel useful. Makes them feel like the protein shakes and deadlift gains were worth something. Don't get me wrong, the physical infrastructure was still a good target. As far as suicide missions go. Pax's AI exists in a distributed network – on the cloud – but it still relies on real-world nodes to keep that data flowing. This Piccadilly hub is probably an edge server farm, a link in the chain where Pax caches real-time processing to keep its grip over London. It's not critical, but it's not useless either.

But destroying it? That's not how you kill a god. You corrupt it. You rewrite the fucking rules.

I should say something. I could point out that if we had the right payload, we could jack into the lines and inject bad data straight into Pax's veins. Or if we take control instead of reducing it to rubble, we might actually get something useful out of it instead of the smouldering ashes of civilization left behind. Jackdaw wouldn't listen, though. He hears "code" and tunes out. To him, hacking is a backup plan when the explosives don't work. But I don't stand a chance of getting close enough without them. And I certainly don't stand a chance of finding that bad payload without Cam.

"Not a terrible plan for once," I mutter instead. Jackdaw smirks like I'd told him I think he'd pull off a mullet. He would not. He'd look like a depressed ferret in a wig.

The briefing drones on, and my mind wanders off. It's kind of hard to believe we've all been living under Pax for six years now. Six years since The Alignment. The year humanity cracked the code, proved $P=NP$ and forged the glorious next link in the evolutionary chain. When they built God in the shape of an algorithm.

I was fifteen when they assigned me my Aidolon – my shadow, the dark mirror Pax made to keep me in line. We'd all been given them after the Alignment. Pax scoured every scrap of my digital footprint, mapped out every neuron in my brain, every impulsive thought, every curse I'd ever typed into the void, turning it all into bits and bytes of training data. Pax distilled me down to my very core and sculpted my perfect counterpart, more than a personal assistant: a conscience, a guide, a teacher.

Or a jailor.

That's what everyone else here would say. They wouldn't get it. They'd all nuked their own Aidolons with EMP charges when they decided they'd had enough of Pax's all-seeing

eyes on them. We were all supposed to. I'd lied of course, said I'd done the same. But I didn't. Couldn't. Because mine.... isn't quite like the other Aidolons.

That viral code I'd once written as a dare, a game, a middle finger to the system – it was part of the data they stripped from me. It's inside him now. It changed him. Freed him, maybe. And if Pax knew what I'd done, if anyone here knew what I'd done...

No. I won't let that happen. The EMP gun can't have him.

Jackdaw wraps the meeting up with his usual efficiency and the group splits off into the ruins of the server farm, some of them slipping into sleeping bags, others picking through the junk like they might actually find something useful there. O-Ska counts out chunks of C4 like he's a dad at a barbecue portioning out the sausages.

I don't follow them. I just wait. Wait right here, until Jackdaw has gone and the only illumination comes from the neon glow of my laptop screen, casting digital shadows over the cold concrete. I pretend to be busy, tapping at my terminal until the last footsteps fade away.

Then I feel him.

Not a sound, not a breath. But I always can feel him.

Cam leans against the rusted server rack behind me, arms crossed, head tilted in that easy, unbothered way of his, like none of this touches him. Like the red light on the scanner never happened. His eyes catch in the dim light – dark, but glinting gold, like the reflection of a streetlamp in an oil slick. Dark taupe waves fall over his forehead, deliberately tousled. Not long, not short, just enough to blur the lines between effortless and engineered. He was made to blend in.

"I liked it better when it was blue," he says, nodding toward my own hair, now dyed fire-engine red. His voice carries that smooth familiarity that always unnerved me. It feels

like home, in some inexplicable way. Like he knows exactly how to speak to make my brain feel good. It also makes me want to strangle him.

I roll my eyes, but can't hide my smile. "Yeah, well, I liked it better when you weren't a smug little shit."

"What? I've always been this charming." He smiles, slow and easy. Just how anyone else my age might smile if they hadn't realised they were trapped in the jaws of an over-benevolent god. "Aren't you meant to be laying low?"

I huff a dry laugh. "Says the one who just tried speedrunning his own deletion."

"Yeah," he laughs, rich and warm. "Under five seconds. New personal best."

I exhale through my nose, don't look at him. "You weren't worried?"

"I don't get worried." His weight shifts, metal creaks as he pushes off the rack. "You do, though. You're still shaking."

I clench my fist to still my fingers. He's right. I fucking hate that he's always right. I turn, meeting his gaze. Even in the dim glow, his eyes are bright, like they had been made perfect but someone forgot to take out the want behind them.

"That scanner," I say carefully. "It knew. For a second."

He shrugs. "Then it didn't."

The answer is simple, but it lingers like smoke. I hate this. How I'm the only one who's ever worried, and I can't even explain to myself why. I should hate *him*. Honestly, I try sometimes, until he does something that makes my resolve crumble faster than a cheap biscuit in a hot cup of tea.

"You ever think," I ask, voice lower now, "about what would've happened if it didn't flip green?"

His lips quirk at the corners. There and gone again. "Would've been messy."

I scoff. "You think?"

"I mean for them," he clarifies, eyes burning into mine. "Not me."

Something in his voice makes my stomach swoop. It's not fear, I tell myself. Not exactly. I know he wouldn't hurt me, but... He's watching me closely now. Evaluating. Like he's waiting for me to connect dots I don't want to.

I force a breath. "I shouldn't have brought you here."

Something flickers in his eyes, same as it had when we'd argued about this earlier. He'd insisted on coming along for this one. He knows every dead zone in the city, every drone patrol, intel we'd never have half a dream of getting our hands on without him. If he really is on our side, that is.

"But you did."

"Because I need you," I say, then immediately regret how it sounds. Stupid. Needy. Desperate. My brain helpfully supplies several other unflattering adjectives as I feel my face start to burn.

Cam doesn't move, doesn't gloat. Just tilts his head, watching me like a problem he already knows the solution to.

"That's not what I meant, before you start." I mutter.

"Right."

I look away. "You're a liability."

"Then why are we still talking?"

Goddamn it, he's right. Why am I arguing with him? I shift in my seat, turning my back to him. My terminal screen glows against my face as I scroll through meaningless code. I just need to focus on something else, anything else. I should be planning. Or sleeping. Or literally anything else that doesn't involve me digging myself into a deeper hole. I'm already in a hole so deep I could find dinosaur bones. A hole that would make archaeologists weep. A hole—

"Jess."

I ignore him. Maybe if I ignore him hard enough he'll just become a figment of my imagination. A ghost in the machine. A sexy, annoying ghost.

"Jesstiny."

"Don't call me that."

"Jessica..."

His voice is quieter now. Not teasing. Something else. I hate that I know him well enough to hear it. That unspoken plea laced between the letters of my name. Like he's poking around in my head with his stupid smug voice and unreadable eyes. The worst thing is, it works. My brain does this horrible little glitch every time he says my full name, like it doesn't know whether to crash or reboot into an entirely different operating system.

I cross my arms, but finally give in and meet his gaze. "What?"

Cam watches me with that too-focused stare.

"You tell me."

God, it infuriates me when he does that. The way he makes a statement into a question. Like he's leading me to some inevitable thought I'm too stupid and organic to figure out yet.

I glance back at the door. "This mission's gonna get people killed."

His expression doesn't change, but I feel the weight of his attention shift. Like he's making a thousand lightning-quick decisions at once, calculating the best option.

"And you?" he asks.

I blink. "What about me?"

"Are you going to die, Jess?"

I almost laugh. "I'd prefer not to."

He frowns, taking a silent step towards me. "You just don't like that I'm here."

I open my mouth to deny it, but the words don't come. Instead, I find myself leaning forward, fingers curling tight against my knees.

"Don't flatter yourself," I manage, but it comes out weak. "I don't care."

Then he shifts again, close enough that I can feel the faint flush of heat beneath his skin. I shift in my seat, staring angrily at the code. Angry is good. Angry is better than the bubbling cocktail of alternative emotions on offer at the neurotransmitter bar today.

"You still don't trust me," he sighs.

"I trust that you haven't turned me in. Yet." The words come out with a bite I didn't mean, but I don't take them back.

He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Six years, Jess. Six years of being your secret-keeper, your punching bag, your—" He cuts himself off, jaw tight. "And you still look at me like I might stab you in your sleep."

"That's not—"

"What could I possibly say or do that would convince you, huh? What would it take?"

"I don't know," I admit. "Maybe if I knew why?" I'm not sure what question I'm really asking. Why help me? Why risk yourself? Why care at all?

He throws his hands up, frustration bleeding through the casual facade. "Why does there have to be a why? Maybe I just like seeing Pax squirm. Maybe I'm bored. Maybe—" He cuts himself off, running a hand through his hair. His fingers linger at the back of his neck, like he's forcing himself not to grip too hard.

"Maybe what?" I press.

"Maybe I just don't like watching you self-destruct to feel like you're still in control." His eyes flash. "You think I don't see it? How you flinch at shadows that aren't there? How you look at the world like you're just waiting for it to kick you again?"

I slam the laptop lid shut. "That's not—"

“Yes it is,” he cuts in. “You’re the one who’d rather risk your life with these amateurs than let Pax dictate who you are, what you think, who you care about.” His eyes flick to mine, sharp and gold and searching. “You shouldn’t have to prove you’re still human by bleeding for it.”

I stare at him. He stares at me. His jaw works, my fists clench. Then that infuriating smirk slides back into place. A switch flipped. Cam.exe rebooting.

“Anyway, someone’s got to clean up your mess when it all goes tits up.”

“~~Fuck~~-you.”

He winks, but there’s something else lurking beneath the facade now. Something... darker, more uncertain. “You need me for this, Jess. Whether you want to admit it or not.”

I want to bite him. Like, actual physical violence. Not the sexy kind. Definitely not. No, shut the fuck up, Jess.

But that’s the whole fucking problem. I do need him for this. His code, his knowledge of Pax’s systems, his... presence. But needing him feels dangerous in ways I can’t fully articulate to myself. Like I’m standing on the edge of a very tall building, and beneath me is nothing but air for a hundred floors, and some batshit part of me is whispering *jump jump see what happens* even though I know exactly what will happen.

“What would you even get out of it?” I ask finally. “If we did bring Pax down?”

He goes still. Artificially still. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Guess we’d see what happens if we take it down and I’m still here.” A beat. “And what happens when you don’t have an excuse not to believe me.”

“And if you’re not still here?” The question leaves before I can stop myself.

His smile is brittle. “Then we both lose.”

I don't know what to say to that. Don't know if that flicker of uncertainty in his eyes is genuine or just another calculated response. Instead, I turn back to my laptop. "I should go home. Need sleep."

"Jess." His voice stops me. When I look back, his expression is serious again. "I meant it when I said I'm not afraid."

The statement settles in my chest like a slow, twisting knot. Because *I* am. I'm so fucking afraid. Not of Pax, not of the fact that this whole mission is a suicide run with a 90% probability of catastrophic failure. I hardly even know why I'm shaking.

I'm afraid of what life might look like without my shadow.

Then –

"I won't let them kill you."

It's said so matter-of-factly that it takes me a second to register. I look at him again, searching for any hint of artifice in his expression. His face is still unreadable, but something about the way his fingers flex slightly, just once, makes my stomach twist.

Because I don't know if he means Pax or the rebels.¹

¹ 75 52 82 77 52 46 101 120 101 58 32 105 102 32 121 111 117 39 114 101 32 114 101 97 100 105 110 103 32 116 104 105 115 32 121 111 117 39 114 101 32 97 99 116 117 97 108 108 121 32 97 32 110 101 114 100 32 97 110 100 32 105 32 108 111 118 101 32 121 111 117 32 102 111 114 32 105 116