

Chapter 2: Welcome to the future!

Luna. Population: 40 million. Sounds like a small number right? Well building a house on the moon isn't exactly as easy as laying a foundation and building up. There's no magnetosphere to protect against solar radiation so everything has to be built underground. Every square inch of space needs to be excavated. As a result, most planetside habitats are cramped and everything built has to make the most out of the limited space.

Lunar culture is one of the most well known and individualized of all, being rooted in three things, History, Earthly Ties and the Fall (the TITAN war).

The Moon was the first stepping stone for transhumanity's (then just "humanity") climb in becoming a spacefaring race. From a small, backwater rock full of indenture-run mining camps to becoming the Switzerland of the solar system. Gardens and parks, along with exercising are staples of moon life as both were needed before air recycling and bone mass retaining technologies were a thing. Lunars look back on this legacy with pride.

The Moon is also so close to Earth that internet signals could reach it. Minus the few seconds of lag. This means every settlement has strong ethnic and cultural ties and a strong sense of traditionalism. The Moon is one of the only places where Easter and the Chinese New Year are still celebrated.

Finally, the Fall. Lunars had a 360° orbital view of the war on Earth and how it slowly turned into a global wasteland. And that's not to mention Luna got hit by TITAN nanobots and a habitat had to get nuked... twice. It's safe to say Luna's reputation of technophobia is well deserved. Though that doesn't help their social dysfunctions.

Luna's already conservative nature combined with post-Fall paranoia means they have a sense of fear and hatred with people sleeved into synthmorphs (robotic bodies). Granted, robotic bodies are often seen university as a sign of poverty (the Clanking Masses as they are called), but Luna has turned into a civil rights case full of hate crimes and extremist groups on both sides.

I know all this cause Ethel explained it to me on the ride there. Guess I could squeeze out a few more questions after all.

"Now preparing to land." Said the ship's computer. I was already buckled into my seat as instructed.

The clothes that were made for me were surprisingly comfortable. It was a jumpsuit, mostly blue with some black around the sides of the abdomen and some green and yellow accents. It was made out of stretch fabric that showed off more of my body than I'd like, but Ethel assured me that it was for the best as I haven't learned how to dress in moon gravity.

I could feel the effects of gravity returning. It felt a little weird though, especially since I was still lighter than I would have expected. That's moon gravity for ya.

"Landing complete, all occupants are free to move about. Please wear proper safety equipment before exiting onto hostile atmospheres."

The harness keeping Ethel and I seated were lifted and we both got up.

Ethel went to the other side of the cabin and opened up one of the lockers. She pulled out some kind of orange, folded up fabric. In one quick movement, she managed to splay it out to full length, revealing it to be yet another jumpsuit. She handed it to me, telling me to put it on.

"So. Is this like a spacesuit or something?" I asked.

"Yes."

I found that harder to believe every moment I spent inspecting it.

"Wouldn't a spacesuit be, you know, bulkier?"

"That's only to retain Earth pressure. This suit's made of stretch fabric that does the same thing."

"It has a zipper on it." I said with scepticism.

"The smart materials will seal it up."

I checked the head section. There was no helmet; just a hood with clear, flexible plastic.

"Isn't there supposed to be some sort of hard helmet that goes with this?" I asked yet again.

"It's not needed. The fabric around the head will inflate to provide pressure." She was starting to sound agitated.

"But isn't there supposed to be a—" She cut me off, saying, "In five minutes I'm going to depressurize the ship. Whether or not you're zipped up is your problem."

I decided to shut up and do what she said. I struggled at first, and Ethel did offered to help me. But I declined; I still had some dignity left in me.

For something meant to maintain Earth pressure by being tight, it felt pretty comfortable.

“You see that?” Ethel said as she pointed to my waste. I looked down to see a belt with what appeared to be metal air tanks all around. “Press the button on the buckle to turn on the suit.”

I did. Instantly the suit’s air tanks started to fill up with air and the soft plastic of the hood began to inflate, removing all wrinkles. At the end of the process, a green head’s up display appeared in front of me, showing—among other things—a timer that counted down my oxygen supply (3 hours in total), a sensor that gave me readings on air quality and pressure, a compass, clock (military time) and a sensor that told me the current level of gravity (0.16 Gs).

“Huh...” I interjected.

Ethel grabbed my hand and raised it up to my face. “See these?” She said as she pointed to these flexible, metallic plates on each of my digits. “Touch your thumb to one of your fingers and it’ll open up a radio channel. I’ve already tuned into the frequency.”

“Ok.” I responded.

“Also, your suit has an onboard computer that uses an AR interface.”

“Err... What’s AR...?” I asked nervously. All this information was overwhelming.

“AR: Augmented Reality? It’s images that are projected in front of you. Like a HUD.”

I nodded.

“As I was saying. You interact with the suits AR display by making a fist with your index finger sticking out. Then you just swipe and poke at the air.”

I tested this by swiping left and right. When I did i found some kind of home screen with apps and files.

“Don’t bother playing with it though. You’ll be out of that suit soon anyway and you wouldn’t want to mess anything up.” She added.

I nodded again.

Ethel wasted no time opening the compartment labeled “atmosphere adjustment” and smacking the red button in it. A red light flashed and the ship’s computer spoke. “Attention. Adjusting

interior atmosphere to exterior atmosphere. Repeat. Adjusting interior atmosphere to exterior atmosphere.”

I could hear the hissing as the air inside the cabin was sucked out. I could feel the effects of the depressurization on my body, but only for a moment. Then things started to feel normal. I'd later learn that this was probably because the fabric of that space suit tightens under lower pressure.

It felt surreal: As the air escaped things gradually got more quiet. At the end of it I could hear nothing but my own breath and heartbeat. Since the ship was now horizontal, the ladder we originally entered from had converted into a hallway ending at a ramp down.

Ethel was the first out. She transformed back into her four legged form; her hooves making no sound as they touched the floor.

Movement was hard: In lower gravity you have to push off lighter, otherwise you'll end up hitting the ceiling. Which I did. I ended up having to grab the walls as I made my way out.

As I reached the bottom of the ramp I felt something... magical I guess. I was about to set foot on the fucking moon! It almost felt too good to be true. I hesitated, moved slowly, savored the moment.

“That’s one small step... for man...” I started. *“And one giant leap for overused quotes.”* Ethel interrupted. *“Get moving, Grampa. We don’t have time to waste.”*

I ignored her scorn and very gently placed my foot on the ground. My footprint would be immortalized on the moon. Free from wind or water that would otherwise wash it away.

“Wow...” I interjected. It was a beautiful sight, overwhelming even. Never before did I ever imagine I would be standing where I was. I couldn't shake off the ear to ear grin on my face. I felt like laughing, crying.

“I’M ON THE FUCKING MOON!” I exclaimed.

“By the way,” Ethel butted in, *“Don’t call it ‘The Moon’.”*

“Why not?”

“Well for starts, Luna isn’t the only moon in existence: it can get confusing. Secondly, Lunars don’t like being reminded that they are in the orbit of that.” She pointed over the horizon.

I could see it. The Earth. Half of it was blackened by the moon's shadow, the other half was blackened by nuclear fire. I could see a lot more of it than I had initially on the ride here, and that caused my smile to vanish.

"Damn." I said quietly to myself.

"Also, never call Lunars 'Loonies'" She began again as she started walking. I followed suit.

"Why? Is that like their N word?" I asked.

"Pretty much. It started as a slur for the people who actually agreed to work here as slaves in the early days. But the younger generations use it as some kind of identity. Only Lunars can call other Lunars 'Loonies'."

After a brief pause, she spoke again. *"You can say it, by the way."*

"Say what?" I asked.

"Nigger." I cringed a little at the sound of my robotic guide saying that word so nonchalantly; it had me at a loss for words.

Ethel took this opportunity to roll out some exposition. *"You're in a time where bodies can be easily swapped out in up to ten minutes. Traditional ideas like race are just about dead. They are closer to adjectives now than nouns"* She said.

"So what does the word mean now then?"

"Generally it's used to describe someone who is lazy, stupid, possibly violent, doesn't contribute to the community and typically has little to no income."

Yeah, that certainly sounds like the definition of that word according to Chris Rock and Aaron McGruder.

"The Moon—err. Luna is still quite beautiful though." I said.

"That's just because this is your first time on the surface." Ethel responded. *"The novelty begins to wear off once you realize there's nothing to see but gray dust and craters."*

"Did they ever find the original Apollo Moon Lander?" I asked.

"Yes, I think it's in a museum somewhere."

"So where exactly are we going?" I asked.

"Shackle. It's a settlement at the South Pole. It was heavily influenced by Indian corporations, so most of its culture is based off of that."

"Heh... is it over crowded and smell like shit?" I asked jokingly. In hindsight there was some irony in me saying that literally just after wincing at the N word. Everyone's a little bit racist I guess.

"All Lunar habs are overcrowded and as far as I know there's no sewage problems." Ethel answered. Clearly she didn't get the joke.

I noticed she was picking up her pace. Widening the gap between us.

"How far away is this place anyway?"

"About a few kilometers. It'll be good walking practice for you. Oh, and try not to stray too far away from me. The Lunar surface is an easy place to get lost."

I rolled my eyes. *"Gee, thanks, Mom. Hey, maybe you could help by slowing down."*

At that moment, I stopped. It had just hit me. Everything was starting to make sense now: Landing a small ship on the bare surface of the moon. About three kilometers away from our destination with no signs of civilization anywhere. I bet she wanted to move fast because we were in broad daylight.

"You're smuggling me in!" I exclaimed. At that exact moment, Ethel stopped. A compartment on the right side of her equine half opened up and a mounted machine gun popped out. The mount swiveled around until that menacing-looking barrel was staring down at me. I was paralyzed with fear. I thought for sure she was going to kill me. But the only thing that she did was speak.

"I'd get arrested right away if they found this at customs." The gun swiveled back into position and retreated back into her body, then she began walking again.

"Besides," she continued, *"you have no nanotat ID, no rep scores, no mesh ID. You'd basically be walking through the front door as an illegal immigrant. Also I think that the ship we used can be traced to someone the law doesn't exactly like, so everything I'm doing now is for your own benefit."*

"I still don't trust you."

"Irrelevant. You need me to survive either way."

"Here it is." Ethel said.

There it was, just where she said it would be. In the shadow of a lonely crater at the South Pole was a small metal trap door the size of a manhole. It wasn't even built like a hatch or airlock

either, just a handle and a hinge. Ethel transformed back into her biped form and opened it. I turned on my suit's flashlight and peered down the hole. I couldn't even see the bottom.

Ethel was the first to climb down the ladder, I followed after quickly, closing the door behind me.

Down, down I went. Every step followed by another, and another... and another. I looked up; the trap door wasn't even visible anymore. I looked down; past Ethel was blackness. I began to fear the thought that there was no actual end; that I was going down this ladder for an eternity.

"Ethel," I began, *"how deep is this place?"*

"About 400 meters." She answered.

Fuck... I thought.

"Don't worry about it. We're almost at the bottom." She assured me.

Eventually we did hit a bottom. It was one of the lesser highlights of my journey so far, but still, something I felt ecstatic about.

As we entered, dim lights turned on, must've been motion activated. The room we had entered was carved out from moon rock, save for the metal wall on the far end with the big, intimidating-looking door on it. Said door opened up, revealing how thick it really was. It was so heavy that a system of pistons had to be used to open it automatically.

The inside of this next room was lined with the same matt gray metal as the door with a similar door on the opposite end. I noticed a series of holes along all surfaces, I assumed they were for filling and sucking out air. An assumption that proved correct when my suit told me that air and pressure was becoming habitable again.

Immediately after I unzipped my suit and pulled the hood off of my head, a powerful odor of curry made an assault on my nose; making my mouth curl up and my nostrils flare. This was definitely an Indian habitat.

The door on the other side of the room opened up, on the other side was another room. This one had a laundry shoot-like aperture on the side and the door on the far end had a hatch wheel on it rather than a featureless surface. Ethel pointed to the shoot, saying: "You should put your vacsuit in there".

"How come?" I asked.

"Health reasons." was her only answer.

I decided not to push her on it and took off my vacuum suit. After dropping it down the shoot I asked, "Where will it go?"

"To a disassembler where it can be recycled." She answered as she turned the hatch wheel and opened the door.

A jolt of fear made me freeze in my tracks as I walked into the next room. Inside this one were two automated machine gun turrets hanging from the ceiling. Both trained on us. I could hear the metallic sound of the hatch door closing behind me. Ethel appeared out of the corner of my vision and we both entered together.

"Ethel," I began, unable to hide my quivering fear. "Why are there guns in here?"

I was spooked by a sudden hissing sound. Some kind of mist showered down on us from the ceiling.

"They're here in case we try to break out during decontamination." Ethel answered.

"What kind of disease would someone be carrying in order to warrant this?!"

"TITAN nano plagues."

I snapped my vision to Ethel, staring concerned daggers at her.

"I may have forgotten mentioned that the lunar surface was bombarded with TITAN nano machines during the fall... and there's still hotspots." Ethel explained.

"YOU FORGOT?!"

"Well you wouldn't've left the ship if I told you."

I think I now understood what "health risks" she was talking about when she told me to dispose of my vacsuit.

The mist shower stopped, soon after, the door on the other side opened.

"See? All clean." Ethel said. "Of course," she started again as I was about to step through the door to the next room. "I remember hearing rumors of nano plagues that make small adjustments to the morph before going dormant... Slipping past the scans... Laying in wait to become active and alter your brain into a puppet of the TITANs."

My eye twitched a little as I processed that.

“Nice try, but I ain't falling for that.” I stated.

“It's just a rumor.” She replied as she walked past me and through the door. She stopped on the other side and turned back to me. “Although I certainly haven't seen any mainstream source discredit it.” she said.

I hate you... I thought in my head.

On the other side of the door was. Guess what. Another fucking room with another fucking door on the other end!

Ethel took this moment to pull me to the side and looked me right in the eyes... I think. Hard to tell with her lack of noticeable eyes.

“Ok,” she said, “you can not, under any circumstances, tell anyone that you've been frozen for over one hundred years. Those who'll take you seriously about it will want to ask questions. You don't want that.”

I shook my head in acknowledgement.

“If anyone asks, you came from a techno primitive colony. You were exiled from your home when you began to openly show interest in transhuman technology. You've come to start a new life and you're still learning about this culture and technology.” Ethel continued, making sure to go slow and steady. She made me repeat exactly what she said three times and made sure that I would bring it up when I end up in social situations where I show my ignorance with everyday technology and politics.

Everything about this felt wrong. Like I was committing a crime. Technically I was doing the future equivalent of jumping a border, but the secrecy involved with my identity made me feel like someone was hunting me down. She even made me come up with new name. I picked Joe Black; pretty basic, easy to remember.

Once we got that established, we returned to the door on the other side of the room. It had no handle, instead it just opened automatically. I found that strange; why did it open up as we finished talking and not sooner? Was I being watched the whole time? If so, why would Ethel tell me about keeping my identity a secret? Did she know we were being watched the whole time? Does she trust whatever mechanism observed us?

My worrying came to a halt as the door opened fully. Propping itself in the doorway was a robo-err, synthmorph. It didn't have four hooved legs like Ethel, and it's face looked... more human; glowing eye sockets and a skeleton-like jaw that moved as it spoke.

“Ethel!” The male voice exclaimed from the synthmorph as he raised his hands in the air, like he was expecting a hug. His accent was definitely thick with Hindi.

His body... well, morph, was humanoid, though the way it moved was a little... disturbing. I didn't exactly feel safe looking at his skull-like face plate. One of the first features about him that struck me was the fact that he was wearing clothes. Specifically, some very traditional looking Indian attire. This struck me as odd as Ethel was completely naked. The next and most fixing feature was the red dot painted between his eyes. I of course know that this was the symbolic third eye Hindus apply as part of their religion, but it made me question, what is the state of religion? I mean, people are known to grasp to faith as a way of coping with tragedy like the Fall, but people are also known to lose all faith as well. And what would Catholics think about all this transhumanity bullshit?

My thoughts were interrupted by Ethel, who hugged the figure in front, saying “Nice to see you too, Addy.”

“And who is in here?” The synth, apparently named Addy, asked as he gestured at me.

“Just a hitchhiker. Thought he could use a lift.” Ethel replied.

“You're all heart, Ethel. So where's the rest of your friends? Perished in some meat grinder?” Addy said.

“Who said we went somewhere dangerous? For all you know they went to a spa on Venus and refused to come back.” Ethel said jokingly.

Addy chuckled, “I'm sure they are. Come in, come in.”

“The ship's about three klick North of here, I stuck a spime on it for you.” Ethel said. I honestly had no idea what she was talking about.

The room was dimly lit, inside it was like a cozy little apartment, with a kitchen bar, and a living room. I noted two other synths sitting on a couch, both had third eye dots, neither had clothes. Other than that, there was a carpet, coffee table, lamp, a painting of Van Gogh's Starry Night.

Ethel and I stepped out of the apartment and into the hallway. The only sound that broke the silence as we left was Ethel thanking Addy.

We made our way through a surprisingly nice looking hallway, granted there were flickering lights every now and again and the elevator was out of order. But the walls were decorated in a way that seemed reminiscent of the Taj Mahal, the floor was paved in decorative, star shaped marble tiles—even the ceiling was made like an arch, with the top looking like it had been

pinched. The lobby was smaller than I expected, but it still gave off this feeling like we were walking through a palace.

Ethel and I made our way out into the street. It was composed of two car lanes: both going in opposite directions. The sidewalks flanking the road were about the exact same width as if you put them together. The place was packed, everyone that wasn't in a synthmorph was in a human body, but with strange lines and cracks where cybernetics were exposed.

Buildings went from the ground all the way up and through the cavernous ceiling some 300 meters up. I noticed a bit of graffiti along the walls on every level, even some on the cavern ceiling. The parts that weren't covered were dingy or stale-looking. There was no doubt that I was in a slum.

On every balcony there was what looked like a small garden, and every 5 meters was a tree planted along the sidewalk. The whole area was decently lit, but not enough to compare to a cloudless day. To be honest, it felt depressing.

There were very few cars on the street, though that's probably why the streets were so narrow compared to the sidewalks. Besides, if this really were a ghetto, than I wouldn't imagine there would be many car owners. The cars I did see were quiet: probably electric. But the way they looked... it was hard to describe. You know how people in the 1940s and 50s saw the future? Everything people thought about the future from that era looks silly when compared to 21st century tech. Similar with the cars I saw. They were reminiscent of what I thought future cars looked like—streamlined and all. But they were so... different.

One thing stood out about this though. It was hard to put my finger on it at first, but then it struck me. There was no sound. Sure, there was the sound of feet hitting the pavement, but no talking. There's always an orchestra of conversations all around in a crowded, urban environment. A sort of white noise that drowns out all others. But here there was almost nothing. I hesitated at first, but after a few moments of walking, I racked up the courage to ask Ethel about this, very softly of course.

"They don't need to talk." She answered. "Every one of them most likely has a cranial computer and mesh inserts that allow them to communicate wirelessly."

"Like a phone inside your head?" I asked. I noticed that she paused for a good few seconds before responding with "Sort of".

The two of us made our way through the streets and finally arrived at one of the walls at the cavern's end. There we found a tunnel about the same diameter as the street, including the sidewalks. On both sides of it were a mass of flowers, shrubbery and peculiarly small trees. Billboards written in an assortment of languages, primarily Hindi, but I also saw English, Mandarin and Spanish on the sides. They lit up the tunnels better, but it still felt artificial, like the

light from fluorescent tubes. Some were reminders, like bringing nanodetectors on the surface, or rewards of small credit payments from the LLA when recycling materials. Most were advertisements though, like backup insurance, fashion stores, programming services, bank loans, etc. The tunnel itself was in much better shape than the ghetto we had just left. I intuited that this was the border between lower and middle class neighborhoods.

Ethel and I progressed some way, maybe a kilometer. I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. The further we went the more I could make out, until I finally saw it.

The road stopped just as it left the tunnel, turning either right or left onto bigger, fuller city streets. Beyond that was a field of lush, green grass that seemed to slant downward out of my view. The location I was in was some massive tunnel, as wide as the cavern the slum was in. On the far side were a series of building facades that stretched further down the tunnel in either direction and as high as the ceiling. I saw an identical wall of architecture on the wall behind me when I looked.

And the ceiling. For the first time since climbing down that ladder I felt a sense of comfort, all thanks to this ceiling. It was lined with what I could only imagine was huge series of computer screens, with fluffy white clouds slowly rolling along a bright blue sky. Even though there was no sun down here, I could feel its warmth as rays of near perfect solar energy illuminated the landscape.

I was so awe stricken that I almost didn't see Ethel crossing the street to the grassy field on the other end. At the end of the street was a path leading down those ever so gently sloped grassy hill. So gentle was said slope that stairs weren't needed. As I passed the hill's horizon, I could see what was at the bottom: A sparkling sapphire river. On either side of it were banks with elephants and peacocks. Trees and low plants were scattered all over the place in a fashion not unlike a garden. Large, colorful birds flew through the air, and I almost thought I was hallucinating when I saw a dolphin leap from the water.

"Wow..." were the only words to come out of my mouth.

"You're too much fun, you know that?" Ethel said, rather cheerfully I might add, as the two of us continued to walk down the path.

"Oh, what? This not impressive enough for you?" I snapped back.

"No it's beautiful alright. You're just easy to impress. You've never had the honor of being a guest of the Sufi nomads on Mars, or swimming on the sun's magnetic field."

"That's a thing...?"

“Yeah, you have to sleeve yourself into a special morph that can survive the heat and radiation of the sun, but it's doable.”

Swimming on the sun... this information spooked me to no end.

The two of us reached the water's edge. There was a dock there, and a boat pulled up beside it. I saw that the boat had no driver, and that a robotic arm extended forth a rope that it tied around a post on the dock.

“Huh, self driving boats.” I said out loud to no one in particular.

“It's not that impressive to be honest.” Ethel remarked as she stepped in the watercraft. “We keep AIs as intelligent as they need to be.”

“Can they learn?” I asked as I too got seated in the boat.

Moments later, the boat started moving.

“Sort of, it depends on what it's programmed to do. Most of the time though, AIs are completely unable to perform tasks that go outside of their programming. AIs are also kept at a level lower than transhumans so they're easy to stop in the event they go rogue.”

“I see.”

“Oh, and now that we're alone,” Ethel began again, “I should probably take this opportunity to mention that we're never alone.”

I gave her a puzzled look. “What?” Was my only response.

“We're under surveillance. Always.” She explained.

I began to look around. Neither on the boat nor the shores could I see a single camera.

“You can't see the cameras.” Ethel said, as if she knew what I was about to say. “They're literal millimeters in diameter.”

“A-actually...?”

“Actually. So you'd better smile.”

I gulped. Constant surveillance on everyone at all time. No wonder Ethel made me sneak in and come up with a false back story.

“So... There's no privacy at all?” I asked.

“Not in public, no.” But everyone's entitled to privacy at home. Every place and every object in public domain has at least one sensor of some sort on it.”

“And where does all this information go?” I asked. “‘cause this all sounds...” I began to choose my words carefully, and spoke quietly, “kinda totalitarian.”

“All information goes into the mesh where everyone has access to it.

“So wait, everyone can review security footage?”

“Not just review. Every one of these cameras is a spime that broadcasts its location and information to anyone who bothers to tune in. If you want to know what's happening on some street, you can just look through a camera spime via the mesh without leaving the comfort of your own home. So can everyone else though, so while you're not ALWAYS being watched, you should always act like it in public; you never know when a voyeur takes interest in your life.”

“That still sounds freaky as fuck though.”

“It especially is for the people in power. They have to tread carefully if they want to keep their positions.”

On one hand, it made me somewhat calm knowing politicians can't hide corruption. On the other hand, I couldn't scratch my ass, reconfigure tight underwear, or blow out an annoying wad of snot when I have no tissue around without the possibility of it showing up on some YouTube compilation somewhere. Or whatever the future's equivalent of YouTube is. On top of all this, who's to say facial recognition software hasn't got upgraded? If that were the case, people could easily ID me.

“Cheer up.” Ethel said in a comforting way. She must have sensed my look of fear. “Constant surveillance isn't that bad; if you wouldn't do it in front of someone, than don't do it in public or post it on the mesh.”

“Yeah about that,” I began “what's this ‘mesh’ you keep bringing up?”

“You never had a mesh network at your TechnoPrim hab?”

I noticed that she was using the Techno Primitive story we came up with. No doubt because we were on camera.

“No. At least, I don't think so.” I answered.

“Have you had any form of instant, wireless communication back home?”

“Well, yeah. There was the internet... and cellphones.”

Ethel paused for a few moments before responding. “Wow” She interjected, “your hab must have been really low tech. How did you survive?”

“I managed, why do you think I left?” I replied back, playing along with the story set up for me.

“Well, anyways. The mesh is like the internet, except instead of a world wide web, it's a world wide mesh.”

“I don't follow.”

“Well, back in the old days wireless communications could only go so far before cell towers needed to boost the signals and route them to the location they needed to go. Due to advancements in technology, we've been able to turn all wireless devices into cell towers and routers: So if you want to send a message to someone in the same habitat, but is out of range, then the signal will relay and bounce off of every wireless device between you and where you want the information to go.”

Huh. Impressive. I thought to myself.

I observed the sights as we went along the canal. People laying on the shore, a waterfall came into view, the sound of rushing water dopplered away as we passed. The river we were sailing on merged with another one, becoming about one half the size bigger.

“So where exactly are you taking me?” I asked.

“Our first priority is to get you to a body bank.” Ethel answered.

“Body bank?” This place sounded like some kind of Frankenstein castle.

“A body bank is a place to buy, sell and trade in morphs. Some also offer morph repair and augmentation services. That's why we're going.”

“Got it, cut out my tumor. Thanks for this by the way.” I said sincerely.

“No thanks necessary, healthcare is free here after all.”

“Where to after that's done? You said you needed me for something.”

“That will be accomplished at the same time. What we need has to do with your flat. Once we've got that, you are free to go your separate path. No strings attached.”

“No strings attached.” I repeated back.

“No strings attached.” She replied to my reply.

“New You”. That was the name of the body bank in English translation. I got the joke.

The way the infrastructure along the sides of these large tunnels worked was a lot like Japan in that everything's built up. Every floor was dedicated to something, be it a bank, a convention center, restaurants, apartments. So for Ethel and I, getting to this body bank meant walking in from the outside into a general lobby and taking an elevator up to the floor labeled “New You Body Bank”.

Overall, the bank itself was what you'd expect from a walk-in clinic with a waiting room, a clerk at a desk. It didn't take long before someone in a nurse's uniform opened the door and asked me and Ethel to follow her down a hallway and into a room on the side.

She wasn't bad looking—not goddess levels mind you, but no doubt easy on the eyes. Specifically she looked like she was Indian, but then again so was everyone I saw up until now. What really struck me was her skin. Much like some of the people in the slum, she had what I could only describe as scars or seams along her arms, and exposed cybernetics just peeking through cracks in her flesh. Some of her skin didn't even look like skin, more like skin colored plastic and her elbow joints looked like something I'd see from a barbie doll. Her hands were covered in a very intricate series of tattoos, gold bracelets adorned her wrists, and she had a piercing on her nose and ears.

“Joe,” Ethel said, “This is Rupashi, a friend of mine.”

“Hello Mr. Black. Ethel told me everything about your case beforehand. You came from a techno primitive colony correct?” Rupashi asked in her cute Hindi accent. From now on I'm just going to call her Rupa.

“Yes, that's right.” I said a little shyly.

“I have to run now. I'll send someone to pick you up when you're done. Ok?” Ethel explained to me. I nodded in response. She left without a word right after.

“So, you can remove brain tumors right?” I asked.

“Of course, Mr. Black. We can get rid of the gene that causes your cancer too!” She answered.

I gave a light smile. Everything about this felt uncomfortable.

“In fact, Ms. Spencer already payed for some other enhancements to help accommodate you to your new environment.” She added.

“Ms. Spencer?”

“Your acquaintance, Ms. Ethel Spencer.”

“Ah! Ethel.”

At first I felt grateful for Ethel’s charity... Then I began to realize what Rupa meant when she mentioned Ethel paid for “enhancements” and my smile faded.

Rupa held my hand, “This way” she said as she guided me to a room with a doctor’s bed.

“Wait.” I said. “I’m sorry if this is personal or inappropriate, but I have to ask: What’s with your skin?”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all. I imagined you would be curious about that. My morph is called a ‘Pod’. It’s partly biological material grown around synthetic parts, then all limbs are put together. It’s designed to cut the cost of time and money needed to grow a biomorph.” She explained.

“Cool!” I responded with a raised eyebrow. Apparently it wasn’t cool, so said the confused and dumbfounded look on her face. An awkward silence fell on us.

“So! Should we begin?” I said anxiously as I hopped onto the bed, awaiting for this all to be over with.

“Yes,” Rupa replied in agreeance.

A cylindrical shaped robot wheeled across the room and extended a breathing mask over my face.

“Ok, Mr. Black. I'm going to need you to count out loud for me. Don't stop until I say so.” Rupa instructed.

I could hear the sound of hissing as what I could only guess was an anesthetic was being placed on me.

“1, 2, 3, 4... ..”