



# REINTEGRATION

Eden S. French



# CHAPTER 1

Music droned beneath her, a sonic lure that held the promise of drinking, dancing, and sex. The crime lord who owned the club below was one of Lexi's regular associates, and the bouncers never gave her any trouble, even though she caused plenty of it herself.

The distant music coaxed her down a hall plastered with posters from a bygone century: musicians long dead, films banned and burned, world tours to countries that no longer existed. She slinked into the lounge, blinked at the strobing confusion of the dance floor, and caught an incoming high-five.

"Yo, Lexi!" said the high-fiver.

Lexi squinted to make out the grinning face of the man who'd accosted her. He was a scrawny gangster with bad breath and a stupid nickname Lexi could never remember—the Cobra or the Viper, something dumb like that. "How you doing, Anaconda?"

"Viper." The gangster—it was hard to think of him as the Viper, no matter how charitable Lexi might be feeling—scratched his tattooed cheek, his grin already replaced by a peevish frown. "C'mon, you knew that."

Behind him, the dance floor teemed with shadows and bodies twisting together within a thick hum of bass. Colored light broke the darkness at erratic intervals, bright enough to spill into the lounges and dapple the faces of patrons drinking and chatting in booths and on couches. Any of them would be more interesting company than this guy.

"Sure, I knew that," said Lexi. "Tell me, is your girlfriend here tonight?"

"Yeah, yeah. She's here."

"What's she look like?"

The gangster's grin returned with enhanced smugness. "Tall brunette, black minidress. She's got the tightest ass in the city." He made a cupping gesture with both hands to emphasize the tightness of the ass in question.

"I'll bet she does. Where's she at?"

"Over by the bar with... Oh, hell no. Lexi, don't you hit on my girlfriend. Don't you fucking do that to me. Come on."

Lexi smirked. "Later, Mamba."

She strode toward the dance floor, ignoring the gangster's increasingly desperate protests. Of course, she wasn't really going to hit on his girlfriend—unless he wasn't exaggerating about her ass, in which case all bets were off—but he had good reason to be worried.

As she crossed the seedy carpet of the lounge, heads turned and appreciative gazes lingered. Lexi slowed to a cocky saunter, giving her admirers all the time they needed to soak in the view.

She'd never gotten the hang of humility, and who could blame her? Her handsome features drew attention wherever she went, as did the way she wore her hair—dyed snow white, gelled into loose spikes and shaved on the left side. Of course, clothing mattered too. Tonight, she'd matched a dark leather jacket with a white dress shirt and a clinging pair of black jeans that flaunted her narrow hips and long legs.

The scents and sounds of the dance floor enveloped her. The haze of cheap perfume and body odor she could have done without, but the music had the kind of sensual rhythm that made hips move of their own volition.

Tempting though it was to stop and wiggle, Lexi wasn't the kind to dance alone, and she pressed through the mass in the direction of the bar.

It was busy tonight; every stool occupied and the bartenders struggling to keep up. A bouncer waited nearby, a fist in a suit with another ridiculous nickname—the Shark, or maybe the Dolphin, who the hell knew?

As Lexi neared the silver curve of the bar, the Marine Animal advanced toward her, moving with all the speed of a shifting continent.

“Lexi,” he said. “You know our boss has been looking for you?”

“Is that right?” Lexi folded her arms as the bouncer lumbered to a halt. “Why doesn't he just call me?”

“He's looking for you.” It seemed the big guy wasn't interested in the finer details. “That's all. Wants to see you as soon as possible.”

“I'll get around to it.” Lexi looked up into the meaty slab of concentration that constituted his face. “What's your name, anyway?”

“The Squid.”

Classic. Among all the city's gangs, the Menagerie was definitely the stupidest. “Why? Because you're good at escaping from little plastic mazes?”

“He wants to see you. Just remember.” The Squid slunk back to his corner and stood there wrapped in idiot menace.

Whatever his brain-dead employer wanted, it could wait. Lexi descended upon the bar, and a chorus of excited voices greeted her.

“Lexi!” A fragrant, wobbly young woman caught her by the arm and stared into her face, blinking at manic speed. “Are you here by yourself?”

“Not for long.” Lexi eased the woman’s hand from her wrist. Damn drunken, grabby clubbers. “Do you usually sway on your feet like that?”

“My friend is here!” The clubber indicated a group of equally inebriated young women clustered at the end of the bar. “Her boyfriend broke up with her. We’re drinking to cheer her up.”

Lexi steadied the clubber, who was tilting at an alarming angle. “And how’s that working out for you?”

“It’s awful!” The clubber leaned closer, exhaling alcohol and exuding perfume. “She’s really upset, and we don’t know what to do!”

“Who are we talking about here?”

“Her! My friend!” The clubber pointed to a dazed young woman wearing a yellow party hat. It had slipped to her forehead, giving her the appearance of a mournful unicorn. “I promised to cheer her up, but it’s not working. We bought her so many drinks, yet she just sits there.”

It was unlikely Lexi had ever met this unsteady, babbling person, but it didn’t matter. She thrived on this kind of spontaneous entertainment.

“I’ll take care of it.” She patted the woman on the shoulder. “Leave her to me.”

With one glance, Lexi identified the heartbroken girl’s first problem. Far from commiserating, her friends were making the most of their night out, drinking and giggling while the girl watched them in a resentful stupor. Lexi’s augmented senses picked up the emotions spilling from her—traces of grief, anger, and envy, diluted by the effect of the alcohol.

“Hey, girls.” Lexi reclined against the bar and rested a heel on the wood-textured plastic. “Having fun?”

“Hi, Lexi,” said one of the women. Her shy voice was familiar, but as usual, Lexi had long discarded the name. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Lexi grinned. *Can I buy you a drink?* was the second-most-common phrase directed at her, just behind, *Don’t stop*. But she had to stay focused. She was here to perform a good deed.

“You should be saving your drinks for your friend here.” She placed a hand on the girl’s bare forearm. “I heard you had a bad day.”

The girl seemed lost for words, unable to do anything more than stare.

“It’s hard to believe anyone could be so stupid,” said Lexi, meeting her disoriented eyes. “Breaking up with a girl as beautiful as you.”

There it was—the first blush of the night. “Um.” The girl averted her eyes. “Uh.” The first stammer, too. No surprise. They usually came as a package.

“You shouldn’t sit here and just get drunk.” Lexi shifted the girl’s hat to the top of her head. “You’ll just feel worse.”

“I do feel worse,” said the girl. “I wish I’d never come.” There was a murmur of reproach from her friends, none of it convincing.

“Put the glass down and come dance with me. That’ll make it better.” Lexi extended her other hand. “Up you get.”

The girl grasped Lexi’s hand and allowed herself to be helped upright. By some miracle, she remained on her feet unassisted. She was attractive, albeit bleary, with a round, trusting face darkened by her petulant mood. If the evening went well, it was possible Lexi might even ask for her name.

They found their way to an open space at a safe distance from the booming speakers. The music had a sexy current to it, a sly, dirty rhythm buried beneath layers of dreamy fuzz. Just right.

Lexi took the girl by the waist and drew her in. “Oh,” the girl said, her eyes widening. “You want to dance close.”

It was cute when they were naïve. “I only ever dance close.” Lexi moved with the music, and the girl followed her lead, even resting a tentative hand on Lexi’s hip. “You have bad taste in friends, so I imagine your boyfriend was a loser too.”

The girl gave a nervous laugh. “I guess so.” She had become a dim shape illuminated by infrequent splashes of color, but her face, upturned and wondering, was visible enough in the ambient light.

The music suggested they dance slower and a little closer. Lexi obeyed. The grip at her hip tightened as the girl’s breath came more quickly.

“You’re really good-looking,” the girl said. “My boyfriend was handsome, but not nearly as handsome as you. You’re like pretty-handsome, you know?”

Lexi smiled, and the girl blushed again. “Yes, I know.”

“Um.” The girl’s other hand finally made contact, resting upon Lexi’s shoulder. “I’ve never done this before.”

“You’ve never danced before? Then your boyfriend really was a loser.”

“No.” The girl giggled. “I mean, I’ve never danced like this with...” She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and looked away.

Lexi placed her mouth by the girl's ear. "Maybe it's a night for trying new things."

The quick breath that followed was all the confirmation Lexi needed. She caressed the girl's waist and hips, traveling a body hidden beneath tight fabric, and the girl slid her own hands to take hold of Lexi's behind. They pressed close, the girl's eyes bright beneath her lowered lashes, and followed the alluring rhythm.

As she danced, Lexi contemplated the girl's lips, which glistened with crimson lipstick. Not yet, but soon enough.



"Alexis? Alexis Vale?"

Lexi ignored the voice, too busy with the warm mouth moving against her own. She pushed the girl further into the booth, still kissing, and stroked her thigh. The girl broke the kiss, gave Lexi a look of glazed satisfaction and returned to kissing again.

"Alexis." It was a young woman's voice, steady and insistent. "Please. I need to talk to you."

Who the hell was this, and why didn't she have the sense to wait her turn? Lexi pulled away from the embrace, leaving her companion to pout in the corner of the booth. "I'm a little busy here," she said as she turned.

Her irritation immediately gave way to curiosity. The arrival wore a blue, gold-buttoned overall. Either she was a shut-in or, for whatever kinky reason, had chosen to dress like one. Her black hair had been swept into long bangs concealing the left side of her face, which was quite pretty—slender features, golden skin, mono-lidded eyes and a serious expression betrayed by the nervous twitching of her lips and the blush burning all the way to her neck.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." The shut-in studied the glossy tips of her boots. "But your life is in danger."

"Go away," said the girl huddled in the booth. "She's mine."

The shut-in took a deep breath and raised her head again. Despite her obvious anxiety, her clear green eyes were resolute. "My name is Mineko. I'm not leaving until I've spoken to you."

Lexi was having a good time, and it was well on the way to being upgraded to excellent. But a shut-in in a place like this? Too unusual to ignore.

"Give us ten minutes," said Lexi, touching her companion on the wrist.

“But Lexi...” The girl’s eyes glistened. “Are you going to run off on me?”

“Of course not.” Lexi took the girl’s hand and kissed her fingertips, prompting an anxious smile. “Ten minutes, sweetie.”

The girl gave Mineko a dirty look before sliding out of the booth, smoothing down her skirt and staggering in the direction of the bar. Lexi shifted across the couch and patted the cushion. After a second of hesitation, Mineko seated herself on the other end.

“Okay,” said Lexi. “You have my attention. But if this is just a ploy to steal me away, forget it. I make a point of not ditching my girls.”

“No. Nothing like that. I’m here about Project Sky.”

“What is that, a cocktail? You want me to buy it for you?”

Mineko frowned. Seemed she was a typical shut-in, no sense of humor. “It was a failed Codist cybernetics project. They wanted to find a way to read people’s minds.”

Ah, fuck. So that’s what this was about. Lexi took a cautious look around. Everyone nearby seemed too occupied with drinking and dancing to be prying. “No wonder it failed. I mean, mind-reading. That’s some superhero bullshit, right?”

“The prototype chip found its way into the districts.” Mineko seemed to have lost her nervousness, and she held Lexi’s gaze. “People knew it was lethal, that everyone implanted had died. But every now and then, somebody would take the risk. And they’d die too.”

That was hardly news to Lexi, and she certainly wasn’t going to grieve over it now. “Tragic. Your point is?”

“There are rumors about a working implant. Just one. A unique cyborg.”

Unease squirmed in Lexi’s stomach. She laced her fingers behind her head and feigned a smile. “Fun story.”

“Alexis, the project has been re-opened. My people know you exist, and they’re looking for you in order to understand why their first attempt failed. If I can find you, so can they.”

“First, call me Lexi. Second, how can you know any of this? You’re just a kid. How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty-two. But that’s not relevant. I know for a fact your life is in danger.” Mineko slid nearer. “Does it really work?”

As much as Lexi preferred to keep her advantage secret, it was hard to imagine a more harmless creature than this earnest, anxious shut-in kid. Besides, it seemed

she already knew more than Lexi did. “Sure, it works. But I don’t advertise it. It’d be bad for business.”

“Do you have other augmentations? Or just this one?”

The kid’s awed tone was endearing, and Lexi smiled. “Reflex and vision. One in the brain, one in the spine.”

“Can you tell me how Project Sky works? How you do it?”

“Depends on the person. I find looking somebody in the eyes is the best way to focus. Sometimes I have to get close, even touch them. Other times I can pick things up from a distance. Everyone’s different.”

“Can you tell what I’m thinking now?”

This little thing was so sincere, it was impossible not to want to play with her. “If you give me permission.”

Mineko nodded, and Lexi looked into her attractive green irises. “I don’t feel anything from you yet.”

Worry drew a crease on Mineko’s forehead. “Is that good or bad?”

“From your point of view, good. It means you’re harder to read.” Still staring into Mineko’s eyes, Lexi drifted deeper. Shadows clouded her peripheral vision as the first elusive traces of feeling appeared before her. Doubt, anxiety... The strands slipped from her grasp, and her drifting stopped.

“Damn,” she said. “You’re tough.”

Mineko gave a quick series of blinks. “Did I do something wrong?”

“It’s not your fault. Let me touch your face.” Lexi placed a fingertip on Mineko’s cool forehead and focused again on her eyes. Mineko’s thoughts hummed around her, threads of interconnected memory permeated by varying heat and uncertain motion. The inarticulate canvas of a mind.

Lexi skimmed across its volatile surface. “You’re afraid,” she said as she touched upon a cold emotion gnawing at its neighbors. Another emotion jittered by, and she latched onto it. “And excited, too. You didn’t really think this would be possible.”

A warm, vibrant emotion hid behind the others—buried purposefully, it seemed. Lexi leaned in, and the sensation burned brighter. She chuckled. “And you’re a little turned on.”

The emotion heated further. “You couldn’t be more mistaken.”

Mineko’s thoughts were becoming scattered, and Lexi frowned. “Relax. You’re throwing me off.”



Mineko took a deep breath, and her agitation settled. Lexi moved through stray ideas, idle impulses, and discarded memories while she hunted for the freshest thoughts, the ones most polished by a day's mental wandering. Impressions washed over her. Tapping through a digital tablet in search of notes, the calm voice of someone lecturing. *The first principle of Codism is...*

"You're a student at the shut-in University." Faces in motion, smiling and laughing. Cutting across a lawn to avoid a group of chattering young women. Eating alone. "You're a loner. Because..."

Lexi focused. Deferent visitors, an immense house behind gates, people staring, whispering. *That's her. That's the Tamura girl.*

"Your parents are important, powerful. That makes you different. The other students fear you—"

"That's enough, please. I believe you."

Lexi let the stolen thoughts collapse and returned to the reassuring world of a single mind. "You're going to get into trouble for this."

"Perhaps. But if you don't go into hiding, we're all in trouble."

Indignation pulsed hot in Lexi's chest. "Go into hiding? Are you serious? My life is damn good right now."

Mineko glanced over her shoulder. "For your sake and mine, you have to take me seriously. I can't sit here all night and try to convince you. It'll be noticed if I stay out any longer."

"Then get moving." Lexi reclined into the couch and yawned. Mineko's mind had been exhausting, full of tense repression. "I'll take your warning under consideration."

Mineko rose to her feet with obvious reluctance. "Please."

Lexi waved her hand dismissively. "Like I said. Under consideration."

"They know where you live. They know the clubs you frequent—that's how I found you. For all I know, there may be agents closing in."

"Consider me scared, okay?" This was getting too weird, and it was beginning to test Lexi's composure. She needed to get away from this paranoid shut-in and back to the life she understood. "Hurry home now."

Looking miserable, Mineko vanished into the crowded club. Lexi sagged on the couch and exhaled a long, tired breath. Now she was the one in need of cheering up, and no number of party hats would do the trick.



The jilted girl's name turned out to be Katrina, and after thirty minutes in Lexi's lap, the girl's bad mood had well and truly left her. As had most of her lipstick.

She chattered as they walked toward the depleted bar, and Lexi nodded despite being unable to hear a word. Kat—she had insisted on being called Kat—seemed a little quirky, but quirky was something Lexi could handle.

Kat's friends had abandoned the bar, leaving only the woman who had first approached Lexi. She sat surrounded by empty glasses while turning a blue party hat in her hands.

"Put it on," said Lexi. "It's your color."

"There you are!" The woman pointed the party hat in their direction. "You abandoned us!"

"I was being cheered up," said Kat. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, but we didn't expect you to run away and become a lesbian. How are we supposed to hang out now?"

Lexi settled on a stool and kept an arm around Kat as she perched on its neighbor. "You have something against lesbians?"

"It's not like that." Every slurred word came accompanied by a drunken, forceful hand gesture. "I love lesbians. It's just that I didn't think you'd go and turn my best friend into one."

"I'm not your best friend," said Kat sternly. "And I'm not a lesbian, either."

The woman attempted to put on the party hat but found herself unable to navigate the elastic. "I know what this is. You're experimenting on the rebound, that's what this is."

Somebody swore nearby. A familiar unattractive figure forced his way across the dance floor, pushing through the spinning, thrusting people in his path. The Cobra—no, the Viper, that was it—brushed aside a final dancer and stopped before the bar.

"What's wrong?" Lexi exaggerated a sympathetic pout. "Girlfriend ditched you?"

"The boss really wants to see you," said the Viper. "Like, tonight. Not tomorrow, not next week, but tonight."

Lexi's amusement gave way to irritation. The Zookeeper didn't get to order her around. "So he can come out here and drink with me. He's not usually a snob."

"He wants to see you in his office, Lexi. He ain't coming out."

"But she has." The blue-hatted woman indicated Kat. "She's a lesbian now."

The Viper stared at her for several bewildered seconds, shook his head, and returned his attention to Lexi. “It’s no big deal, nothing personal. He just has a headache tonight, doesn’t want the noise.”

Complying, though inconvenient, would at least be better than having this dumbass on her case all night. “Sure.” Lexi released Kat and dropped from the stool. “I have to see the Zookeeper, sweetie. I’ll be back.”

She followed the Viper to a stairwell recessed in the corner. With each step nearer the dark opening, doubt nagged at her. She was on good terms with this gang, which was one of the cleaner ones in the district, a tough operation that specialized in moving recreational drugs—no prostitution, no extortion, just happy pills and powders. She shouldn’t be worrying. Yet there was something weird about this. What if that shut-in had been right about her life being in danger?

“Hey, Viper,” said Lexi as they reached the bottom step. “You sure I can’t put this off until tomorrow? I don’t want that girl to walk out on me.”

The Viper gave an amused snort. “Sure. Like any woman ever walked out on you.” He climbed several steps, stopped, and looked back. “C’mon, don’t keep him—”

Lexi gripped him by the jaw, sinking her fingers into his flesh, and he grunted. She looked into his eyes and drove straight into his thoughts, tearing and scattering anything in her path. There it was: the boss himself, seated behind his desk, tapping his fingers in a patient rhythm. *Go fetch her.* In the corner, two shut-ins wearing black overalls. The Viper didn’t know what the fuck they were doing there. Sure as hell wasn’t going to ask. Not his problem, and besides, maybe Lexi had it coming. The queer bitch was so fucking full of herself...

She let go, and he stumbled back, rubbing his chin. “What the fuck!”

“He’s sold me out.” Lexi flexed her fingers. “You really are a snake, aren’t you?”

The Viper stared at her. “How the hell did you...?”

He was afraid, and that gave Lexi her opportunity. She lunged, caught him again, and focused. The fear expanded, a black, trembling cloud that swallowed up every other thought and feeling. The Viper moaned and sagged, held upright only by Lexi’s grip.

“Don’t move from this spot,” Lexi said. “Or you die.” She released him, and he sank to his knees. “I’m serious.”

He closed his eyes and whimpered. Gratifying, but the effect wouldn't last long. Lexi hurried back to the bar, where Kat was helping her friend straighten the blue party hat.

"You know, this place is boring me," said Lexi, smiling to conceal her anxiety. Her heart was pounding, but otherwise she was holding it together. Not even a trace of sweat. "Tell me, have you got a nice TV?"

"Sure, I have a nice TV." A bright smile animated Kat's face. "Are you saying you'd like to see it?"

"That's what I'm saying. Maybe we could watch a movie together."

"That would be cool. I have a nice couch, too." Kat gave Lexi a shy look. "You could sleep on it if you wanted to stay the night."

Despite her agitation, Lexi couldn't resist a knowing smirk. Yeah, like she was really going to end up on some couch. "Could do."

"Hey!" The friend wobbled to her feet, slipped, and landed back on the stool. "You can't ditch us. We came here to cheer you up. Lexi, tell her."

No time for being nice. "Get a fucking clue," said Lexi. "You loved that she was upset, enjoyed every heartbroken second. You weren't here to cheer her up. You were feeding off her misfortune to make yourself feel good."

The woman stared at Lexi, mute and bug-eyed.

"Come on." Lexi took Kat's hand. "Before your so-called friends make you pay for all those drinks."

They hurried to the entrance hall. "I can't believe you spoke to her like that," said Kat, disbelieving, as they walked down the poster-lined corridor. "She's always been nice to me."

"Trust me. I'm good at figuring people out."

The exit neared, and Lexi braced herself. Her escape depended on whether the bouncer had been clued in on the double-cross. It didn't look good for a gang to be caught working with the shut-ins, so it was possible not every goon had been informed.

The bouncer was lounging against a wall, arms folded across his massive chest. He gave Lexi and Kat a curt nod. Lexi relaxed—seemed she was in the clear—and took the stairs at a casual pace while Kat trudged beside her.

The street was lit from end to end by mingled, multicolored neon lights. "You live far from here?" said Lexi.

"On the east side. I'm only a few minutes away from a station."

Lexi put an arm around Kat's shoulders and steered her down the street. It couldn't have been much later than eleven, and the entertainment strip was still doing plenty of business—nightclubs concealed beneath colorful frontages, movie theaters displaying animated marquees, brothels with hazily-lit windows, small eateries exuding the aroma of deep-fried food. A fun section of the city. Too bad, really. If the reigning gang had turned on Lexi, she wouldn't be seeing it again any time soon.

"The east side, huh," said Lexi. "You must be doing something right."

"I'm a nurse at one of Contessa's drug clinics."

Not a bad gig. Foundation's crime lords poured a lot of money into private clinics for treating those enforcers who got a little too close to the product. It was expensive, but nobody wanted to rely on thugs so doped up they couldn't even fart without freaking out and shooting each other.

"They say you're the best broker in the city," said Kat. "That you have all the connections."

"I bet that's not all they say about me." A bit of deadpan comedy, wasted on this wasted girl.

Kat shot Lexi a sidelong look. "Why are you leaving with me? You could have anyone you want. I'm nothing special. Do you just feel sorry for me?"

Lexi squeezed Kat's shoulder. "That's the kind of thinking that'll end up with you depressed, lonely, and wearing a stupid hat. This is your chance to sort your life out. Don't waste it."

"Yeah, maybe." Kat stared at the pavement as she tottered across it. "You think I should try dating girls? Maybe you'd like to...I mean, if you're available..."

It was adorable when they started crushing. And it had to be shut down as soon as possible. "No, I'm not. Just enjoy this while it lasts, and it'll be the best fun you've ever had." Lexi kissed Kat on the ear. "Now hurry up. The shut-ins are hunting me for the top-secret, mind-reading cybernetic implant I have embedded deep within my brain."

Kat rested her cheek on Lexi's shoulder. "You're funny."

## CHAPTER 2

Judging by the gray glow passing through the branches of the tree outside, it was a little after dawn. Tempting though it was to fall asleep again, it was Tuesday, and Mineko's Social Ethics lecture started at seven.

She pulled back the warm sheets, stripped off her underwear, and washed under the heated spray of her little shower cubicle. As steam rose around her, the tension in her muscles eased, and memories of the past night returned. Foremost among them was Lexi Vale, the louche goddess who had lounged at the heart of that frenzied bedlam of colors and sounds.

This morning, Mineko's regulation uniform looked duller than ever: a navy-blue, one-piece overall with five golden buttons concealing a zipper. She hooked each button through its loop and smoothed down the sleeves.

Her modesty regained, she stood by the window. From here, the great walls that protected the University from the untamed city were obscured, though not concealed, by the trees in the ornamental garden below.

Several students had gathered on the benches to eat breakfast and read notes. Loneliness stirred, and Mineko looked away. They were also the children of privileged families, but she was a Tamura. No matter how modestly she might present herself in public, everyone knew the power her parents wielded. She was as far removed from the young men and women below as she was from the people living in Foundation's districts.

It was time to move, yet her body didn't want to respond—it felt too heavy with dread, sadness, and the knowledge of her own betrayal. Hard to believe that the night before, she'd dared walk the streets of Foundation, leaving for the first time the sanctioned boundaries of an enclave to enter an alien world where the Code didn't apply.

For now.



Five minutes before the start of the lecture, Mineko dashed through the theater doors and across the top tier of seats to her usual place in the corner. Most seats were filled, nobody being brave enough to risk a late arrival, and the heads below were attentively turned to the stage.

Mineko set her tablet in front of her, scrolled through last week's notes and checked the message bank. It was filled with messages from Kaori, who sent family updates daily, behaving as though her daughter were on the far side of the planet rather than a half-hour train ride away.

The ethics lecturer stalked onto the stage and took his place behind the podium. As always, he was exactly one minute early, and he spent that minute inspecting each chair while the students sat in tense anticipation.

"Nobody is late," he said. "Good."

He clipped a microphone to the collar of his blue-gray uniform and fell into his hypnotic, pacing stride. That constant motion across the stage was the only visual distraction available to a bored student. Social Ethics lectures took place without slides, video recordings or any opportunity for questions. Not that anyone would have dared pose any. This was a secular sermon to an audience who had no choice but to believe.

"Today is our second lecture on the Ethics of Social Cohesion." The lecturer waved a finger in the air. "Remember, what you learn today will be relevant in the coming exam."

The dreaded word hovered in the air, and the students seemed to shrink before its presence. *Today's material in exam*, Mineko typed.

The lecturer resumed pacing. "Remember the basics. The Third Moral Code is premised upon the total destruction of social atomization by adopting a moral form of hierarchical collectivism. Previous attempts at collectivism have foundered due to their flawed foundations—a basis in religion, for example, or nationalism, economic doctrine, and so on. The Code prospers because it collectivizes on the basis of moral human endeavor. We have learned from the basic error of libertarianism, the horrifying consequences of the free market, the facile naïvety of socialism. We have seen the destruction of our planet's environment due to industrial interests coercing states into willful ignorance. We have outlived partisan wars of ideology and religion."

Mineko straightened in her chair as she held back a yawn. Falling asleep in class was an ethical breach. Even coughing was a breach if it interrupted the lecturer during a passage he was especially proud of.

"Most human ideology is anarchy masquerading as harmony. Our founding premise is a biological model instead. In nature, every part both constitutes and organically defines the whole. We cannot function as single organisms any more

than an organ of the body can survive apart from its greater structure. Thus, moral law is the law of biological survival. Overly permissive and fatally deluded societies have ignored this law, leading to chaos. Codism is right because it exists as the antidote to these failures. It is the healing doctrine for a dying Earth.”

The lecturer rubbed his hands together, which meant he was about to delve deep into the pious, ethical drudgery he so reveled in.

“In the pursuit of social cohesion, the Code has twice been revised to account for the inability of a single person to recognize their actions have consequences for the greater body. As a rule, we hold that no body ought to destroy a part of itself when it might instead preserve it. Therefore, the solution to the destructive individual is re-education. The challenge is that not every psychology is amenable to gentle means.”

So that was today’s subject. Mineko pushed her tablet away and propped her head in her hands. It would be better to fail this question on the exam than sicken herself with the pretense of conviction.

“The Third Moral Code approved a neural procedure you will have heard referred to as ‘wiping.’ This term is pejorative, and I suggest you not use it. The entire procedure, which includes both medical and pedagogical components, is properly known as Reintegration. Refer to it otherwise, and you will jeopardize your final grade.”

The lecturer stared into the distance. Mineko took the opportunity to glare at him—only for a second, but it was liberating nonetheless.

“The ethics of this process were debated. That debate is now over, settled by the fact that what is moral serves the whole. The so-called ‘rights of the individual’ inevitably lead to the fragmentation of society. Reintegration maintains perfect cohesion by salvaging an individual who might in more brutal times have been imprisoned or even executed. No ethical objection can in the end stand against it. The alternative is to endorse a flawed society primed for self-annihilation...”



The end of the lecture brought with it a sense of relief that lasted only until Mineko stepped through the theater doors. A black-uniformed man waited in the hallway, standing against the wall to avoid the departing throng of students. He was lean, dark-skinned, and expressionless, and his features, though handsome in their chiseled symmetry, were as hard as his eyes.



As students filed into the hall, they whispered while glancing at Mineko. After all, who else would a Code Intel agent be here to see? The man beckoned, confirming the universal suspicion, and Mineko's heart jolted. She couldn't run, of course, but she certainly couldn't ignore him.

"Ms. Tamura," said the agent. "I'd like a word."

"Yes." The numb, one-word reply was all she could manage.

Mineko followed the agent down the corridor, keeping her head low so as not to meet the eyes of the students milling around her. He stopped before an unoccupied classroom and tested the handle.

"This'll do," he said, and he ushered her inside.

The agent shut the door behind them, and Mineko took a deep breath. She could always lie, force him to prove his accusations. Her father would never let her be punished without considerable evidence.

"Relax." The agent walked between a row of desks to stand before the window at the classroom's far end. It overlooked the wall of a neighboring building; not the most scenic of views. After a moment contemplating the masonry, he turned back to face her. "I'm not a Codist. I only wore this uniform so people wouldn't be suspicious of me talking to you."

The revelation did nothing for Mineko's nerves. "What are you saying? Why would you admit that to me?"

"Because I don't think you're likely to tell anyone. My name's Kade August. I'm a journalist."

"Trespassing is forbidden." Sweat clung beneath Mineko's collar, and her palms had grown damp as well. "As is wearing a uniform you're not entitled to."

Kade seated himself on the broad ledge of the window sill and gave her a thin smile. "The Code doesn't apply to non-Codists."

"Civil Obedience Law is enforced wherever and whenever the integrity of Codist territory is threatened. They'd wipe you for being here."

"I'm not inclined to care what District Affairs thinks." Kade plucked the front of his stolen uniform. "To you, this is a symbolic, near-sacred garment. To me, it's just so much ugly black cotton."

Mineko glanced through the door's single pane. The corridor remained empty. "Why would you take a risk like this? You know who my father is."

"I certainly do. Tell me, what happened last night? What business did you have with Lexi Vale?"

Panic slammed the air from Mineko's lungs. So somebody had seen her. Now what? It seemed pointless to lie. If they had evidence, Code Intel wouldn't be playing games—they didn't care about confessions. No, Mineko had to steel herself for the truth.

"I wanted to see her, that's all." Mineko squared her shoulders and looked Kade in the eye. "I'm now guilty of associating with an intruder, and I had no shortage of problems already. You owe it to me to explain yourself."

"As I said, I'm a journalist. An investigative reporter for the *Revolutionary People's Gazette*. We speak the truth of the oppressive inequality the Codists perpetuate upon Foundation."

Nothing he'd said made any sense. "But why are you here?"

"Because Codists raided Lexi's apartment last night. Don't worry, she wasn't there. Seemed to have been warned in advance."

Mineko's head swum. She leaned on a study desk for support. "So she did listen to me."

Kade nodded. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her to go into hiding, that's all. They've gathered plenty of intelligence on her, and they've just been biding their time."

Kade's grim face was impossible to read. "I assume this is related to that aug of hers, the one we call the suicide chip. I'd heard rumors your people invented it. Is that true?"

It was one thing to steal secrets and act on her own initiative. Another entirely to confide in a mysterious revolutionary. Mineko stared out the window. Dark clouds had gathered to sap the morning light. Despite the gloom, the sound of laughter and striking leather suggested that a group of students was playing football on the lawn. Football was an approved activity, but only so long as it was non-competitive.

"Well, that's not important right now." Kade's tone remained measured. "What matters is conveying to Lexi that this isn't a game. She's shrewd, but she's arrogant too. She loves to take risks."

"Can't you explain all this to her?"

"Wouldn't work. She doesn't listen to me." Kade ran his fingers through his untidy black hair. "To be honest, I'm hoping you can do it. After last night, you might have earned yourself a little respect with her, and that puts you in a rare category of people. She may take you seriously."

Surely Mineko's bedside alarm would soon go off, rescuing her from an increasingly absurd dream. "Are you asking me to leave campus today? But it's dangerous, and I have classes..."

"You don't have another lecture until four, and I'm sure you can sacrifice a little study time. Tell me, how did you get in and out last night?"

It wasn't fair he should know so much while remaining an enigma, but sulking would get Mineko no closer to an explanation. "I used a service entrance. I stole the access code from my father's computer."

"Good. So there's nothing stopping you."

This man was infuriatingly persistent. "If Lexi doesn't trust you, why should I? Surely someone who can read minds is a good judge of character."

"I said she didn't listen to me, not that she didn't trust me. If she were here, she'd vouch for my honesty."

That made little sense, but Mineko was hardly an expert on human behavior. Besides, if Kade was trying to deceive her, his agenda was entirely inscrutable—why risk his life in a stolen uniform if not in the service of the truth? And Project Sky was such a terrible truth...

"Where can I find her?"

"There's a diner on the south side of the district, The Tofu Palace. I had a friend of mine arrange a meeting under the pretext of making a drug deal. In reality, the only person showing up is you."

"How am I supposed to get there?"

"I'll show you the way, but I won't hang around. If she spots me with you, she'll suspect a set-up."

Mineko blinked. The strange man was still there, fixing her with the stern look that suited his stolen uniform so well. There was nothing to do now but relent and hope this madness would come to a gentle conclusion. "I'll do it, but I hope you understand how terrible the risks are for me."

"Oh, I understand. I'm taking those risks too, remember. But Lexi isn't going to take care of herself. Like it or not, we're going to have to do it for her."

"I have to say, she sounds like a very unreasonable woman."

Kade gave a wry smile. "She'll listen when it counts. You just have to make her realize that time is now."



It had been intimidating to walk the streets of the district by night, through colored lights and suggestive shadows, but at least the darkness had offered anonymity. By day, there was no chance of Mineko's overalls being mistaken for anything but a Codist uniform.

And strangely enough, nobody seemed to care.

"People see the uniform, they look away," Kade said. "And while that's useful right now, I wish it were otherwise."

Mineko stared around her. On either side, apartment buildings rose as high as eight stories, though most of their windows were boarded. Run-down stores squeezed between the apartments, their windows advertising everything from computer parts to freeze-dried food.

"Why aren't they resentful?" said Mineko. "Our enclaves are so rich."

"Misdirection." Now that he was outside, Kade seemed ill-at-ease in his stolen uniform, frequently tugging at the collar as if he wanted to remove it. "Despite being the real power in Foundation, the Codists let the gangs appear to rule. Thus, when things go badly, people blame the crime lords. Of course, when things go well, people simply credit themselves."

"I know the reasoning, but it's hard to believe it actually works."

"Political consciousness is a luxury most don't have. They're too busy trying to survive day-to-day. I write articles, but people have to actively choose to read me. It's not enough to start a revolution."

They neared an intersection flanked by a pair of inert traffic lights. A supermarket operated on one corner. White paint peeled from its walls and several of its windows were boarded, but the animated sign above the doors was lively enough—a many-hued jumble of letters that declared the odd site to be *The Conveni-Mart*.

A figure emerged from the supermarket trundling a trolley piled high with cardboard boxes. "What do people use for money?" said Mineko.

"Most people barter, but your currency has value on the streets. In fact, it provides the nearest thing there is to an economy. The gangs do deals with the Codists, they get paid, and the money circulates the districts. Even we revolutionaries end up using it."

Curiosity was beginning to eclipse Mineko's nerves, and she couldn't resist another question. "Are there many revolutionaries?"

"You're the daughter of Gaspar Tamura. You tell me."

Mineko bowed her head. Out here, it was all the more embarrassing to be reminded of her status. "I've overheard that our enemies number in the several

hundreds. But my father and his people don't take you seriously. They say you should all be left to District Affairs to deal with."

"So they still underestimate us. That's good to hear."

"I suspect you don't have hundreds working on your newsletter, though."

The sound of Kade's laughter was unexpected—it was a pleasant, relaxed sound, nowhere near as grim as its owner. "No, you're quite right."

They reached the traffic lights, and Mineko thumped the 'walk' button, purely for the fun of it. After waiting for a pair of bicycles to fly past, she and Kade crossed the road to resume traveling on the far side. More apartment towers loomed about them, some with railed upper balconies. A man was standing on one such balcony while flicking out a towel. He had to be seven stories up—what would the view be like from there?

"You look at everything," said Kade. "I'd forgotten how novel all this must be for you."

"There's one thing I still don't understand. Why are you trusting me? I'm a Codist, and worse, I'm one of the elite."

"Late last night, I learned that Lexi had attacked a gang member at one of her usual clubs. That seemed strange, as she and that gang, the Menagerie, are tight. So I hurried over to investigate."

"And that's how you found out about me?"

"Exactly right. I questioned people at the club, asking if they'd seen anything unusual. They remembered that a Codist had been asking for Lexi. An Asian girl, they told me, early twenties, roughly five foot four, her face partially obscured by black hair."

A nervous jitter moved in Mineko's chest. If Kade hadn't been the only one asking questions... "So how did you identify that girl as me?"

"I've seen you in photographs of your family. The description was right, and I couldn't imagine who else would have that kind of knowledge."

Ominous. "Why do you have photos of my family? Do you use them for dartboards?"

"Know thy enemy." Kade pointed. "You know what's this way? South?"

"The Rail District."

"The very same. It used to be called Bare Hill, and you'll still find a few locals ancient enough to remember the name. I grew up around there. It's not as bleak as some, but it's not pretty." Kade gestured to the decaying apartment towers. "You

probably think this looks like hell on earth. In reality, this is one of the nicest districts in town.”

Once more, Mineko stared at the street around her, taking in the broken windows, the crumbling masonry, the cracked, pockmarked pavements. It was shameful, yet inspiring too. “I don’t want to hide from the truth of what I am. What my family represents. I’d like to visit Bare Hill someday.”

“You mean the Rail District.”

“No. I mean Bare Hill.” Mineko met Kade’s eyes, which had by now lost much of their intimidating coldness, though it was still difficult to interpret what he might be thinking. “I’m sorry for being your enemy.”

Kade smiled. “Which suggests you may well be my friend.”



The diner turned out to be a cheerless, white-brick cube wedged between an accounting business and a closed-down pharmacy. The street outside was filthy, its gutters choked with bloated, putrefying garbage, and the only venue garnering any kind of attention was a rancid dive on the corner. Neon letters above the door gave its name merely as *BAR*. Perhaps it had a longer name that was only available on request.

“I’ll wait inside the bar for ten minutes or so,” said Kade. “If you don’t come looking for me, I’ll assume it’s all gone well, and I’ll head home to get out of this uniform.”

Mineko eyed the windows of the diner. Even from the street opposite, there was no mistaking the slim, white-haired figure sprawled in one of the window booths. “Is white her natural hair color?”

“What? No.” Kade chuckled. “Save the questions for her. She loves talking about herself.”

“Okay. But won’t you get into trouble in the bar, dressed like that?”

“They know me there.” Kade gave her a thumbs-up. “Try to relax. You’ll be in her good books now. She’ll treat you like a princess.”

Mineko could have done without the royal metaphor, but she nodded. She crossed the road, stepping carefully over the reeking gutters, and approached the diner with her head lowered. No, no, that was all wrong—she needed to be assertive. As she pushed open the door, setting bells tinkling above, she inhaled deep and held her head high.

The Tofu Palace couldn't have been less palatial. Its vinyl tile flooring had numerous sections peeled away, and a painted row of dancing soybeans decorated the counter. They looked like deformed green babies. Overhead, the interior lights buzzed as they saturated the room with excessive heat.

Lexi was the only customer. She sat in a booth that comprised two long seats facing one another over a thin strip of plastic. Each seat could have fit three people, but Lexi had chosen to laze on hers as if it were a couch, stretching her long legs and resting her back against the window. She lifted her hand in a nonchalant gesture of welcome.

“Good morning,” said Mineko.

“Mineko, right?” There was something about the sly angle of Lexi's smile that made it difficult to hold eye contact. “I don't always remember names, but yours stuck.”

“Yes.” Mineko forced herself not to look away. The scandalous memory of Lexi kissing a woman the night before—that was her problem. That sort of thing definitely didn't happen on Mineko's side of the wall. “I'm sorry, but the person you thought you'd meet here isn't coming.”

“That's okay. I wasn't really in the mood to take a job anyway.” Lexi nodded at the opposite chair, and Mineko took a place at the table. “Edamame?”

Mineko blinked. “I'm sorry?”

Lexi pushed a small bowl across the counter. It contained a handful of green, fuzzy soybean pods. “Go on. I've stuffed myself already.”

“I've never tried eating these before.” Mineko took a pod and frowned at it. “It seemed too messy.”

Lexi moved her fingers to her lips and mimed shelling a bean. “Like this. Pop it into your mouth and eat it. Don't toy with the poor thing.”

“Um.” Mineko fumbled with the pod, ejected a slippery occupant and crunched into its salty interior. “They don't taste how I expected.”

Lexi grinned while stretching her legs further, giving the impression of a luxuriating cat in the sun—not a domestic cat, not with that smirk and those knowing eyes, but rather an alpha predator in her hunting grounds. “There's all kinds of new tastes to discover out here, believe me.”

Had that been a veiled sexual innuendo? It seemed like there was an indecent suggestion in every movement Lexi made, each word she spoke. Mineko took a second edamame pod and gave it her full attention.

“I can tell I make you uncomfortable,” said Lexi. “Want to talk about it?”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” Mineko struggled with the stubborn pod. “I want to talk about the raid on your apartment.”

Lexi rested her cheek on her palm, squishing it. “There’s nothing much to say. You were right, and I’m sorry I blew you off. Now let’s talk about why you’re uncomfortable.”

Perhaps it would be a relief to speak about it. “It’s just... The Code is full of distortions, lies, and bigotries, but all the same, I was raised with it. I know that what I’m feeling right now isn’t fair.”

“I don’t think you have the first idea what you’re feeling.” Despite the scathing sentiment, Lexi’s tone was unexpectedly kind. “What’s your Code say, exactly?”

“The first Codists, the Codifiers, idealized reproductive family units. ‘Family is our first lesson in collectivism.’ So the Code created many prescriptions around sexual activity. A woman kissing another woman, the way you were last night, that’s something it strictly forbids.”

Lexi pursed her lips. “Sounds like fancy prejudice to me.”

“I know it’s fancy prejudice. But my parents share it, and I learned so much from them...”

It sounded so cowardly. Mineko closed her eyes for a moment in order to settle her thoughts. To hell with the Code. She was going to think for herself. “I’m ignorant, Lexi. Educated in nothing but falsehood. Please excuse me for it. I intend to learn better.”

Lexi twirled an edamame in her fingers as she gazed at Mineko. “You’ll find bigots everywhere. Not so often someone who’ll admit to being one. Who are you, exactly?”

“My father is the head of Code Security, Surveillance and Intelligence. Code Intel for short. My mother is a general in our military. I understood very early in my life that something was wrong with Codism, yet I’ve never had any way to protest, let alone fight back. But when my father began talking about Project Sky, I had no choice but to act.”

“I don’t know anything about it. Just that it’s in my head.”

“Your implant was intended as a tool for observation and punishment. The purpose of the Project was to create cyborgs who could pass through Codist society and discern who was truly loyal. But the ambition went further. Several high-ranking Codists harbored hopes that these cyborgs might also enter into



Foundation, re-educating the districts with perfect subtlety. Codism would spread like a popular movement.”

Lexi arched an eyebrow. “Huh. So why make it an implant? Don’t you guys have big nasty machines that can fuck with our brains?”

“I don’t know the details. My father and his cronies aren’t interested in the science. Just the practical applications.” Mineko tried to shape her voice into something serious, even stern. “Lexi, they see you as the key to restarting Project Sky, which in their mind is the first step toward a unified Codist society. You possess the ability to share feelings, examine thoughts and erase minds, so you must recognize better than anyone what would happen if the Codists secured it for themselves.”

“You’re too serious for someone so young.” Lexi sat upright, leaving her leisurely position by the window. “I don’t really understand why you’re here. What’s in this for you?”

“The freedom to have my own views, even if I must always keep them hidden. And my own existence. Yes, they can Reintegrate me and take my doubts away. But then I won’t be me.” Mineko spoke the words with cold conviction. She had thought too many times about what it would mean to lie on that table, her head squeezed by clamps and her hands secured to her sides.

“Reintegration. That’s where they wipe your memories, right?”

“Yes. And I’m sure there are others who secretly reject the Code. With my family connections, I may be the only one who can protect them.”

Lexi nodded. If nothing else, Mineko had wiped the smirk from her face, leaving her handsome features solemn. “What do you need me to do?”

“They’ll hunt down everyone involved in your implantation. Those people, you included, need to go into hiding.”

“The guy who installed the aug.” Lexi lowered her voice. “I guess they’ll be looking for him too?”

“If they learn his identity, they’ll be as eager to capture him as they are to capture you. We should warn him.”

Silence. Mineko waited, her tension rising, while Lexi fixed the street outside with a brooding look. Finally, she exhaled a long sigh.

“Okay. His name’s Zeke, and he’s an interesting guy. You’ll like him.” She tilted the edamame bowl forward. “One for the road?”

## CHAPTER 3

Lexi hadn't planned on seeing Zeke any time soon, not after his last stunt, but the kid was probably right. And cute, too. She stared like a bewildered tourist at the most mundane things: a dog chasing a boy on a bicycle, a woman asleep on the road, a store with a lurid window display of sex toys, two men loitering in an alley with switchblades in their hands...

"Careful." Lexi nudged her. "Not everyone likes being gawked at as much as I do."

Mineko bent her head and dropped her gaze, a chastened little pup. "Sorry. I just want see as much as I can before I go back."

"When we get to Zeke's, stare all you like. That's what they live for."

After twenty minutes of trudging through streets, fielding Mineko's countless questions—did Lexi know how to ride a bicycle? When did she learn? Were there many homeless people in the district? What was a *Hot Massage*? Did prostitutes object to being prostitutes? Why was that man vomiting?—Lexi stopped them outside an alleyway between a bar and a strip club. "Down there."

"I see." Mineko stared in the direction of Lexi's finger. "Do you know if he'll be there today?"

"He's always there. Come on."

The graffitied alley was just wide enough to allow Lexi and Mineko to walk it side-by-side. At its end, a neon-lit stairwell descended beneath a sign reading *Zeke's Lounge*.

"What sort of place is this?" said Mineko.

"You're just about to find out. Do you ever run out of questions?"

"Sorry. You must think I'm childish."

Lexi ruffled Mineko's hair. The kid didn't squirm away, but a hint of irritation broke through her grave expression. "Nah. You're fun."

"In truth, I do feel something of a child. I've been sheltered my entire life."

Lexi peeked into Mineko's eyes. Impenetrable. "You're handling this pretty well, then."

"Because of my parentage. I've been exposed to things other Codists aren't even aware of. I've seen forbidden material and I've heard restricted information. But there's still so much I don't know."

That was worth a grin. This sheltered kid was in for a shock and then some. “I can promise you’ve never seen anything like Zeke’s crowd. But don’t be intimidated. They’re all show, and besides, I’m with you. Nobody messes with my girl.”

“I’m not your girl.”

Laughing, Lexi ruffled the kid’s hair again and descended the stairs. Two parallel strips of electric red light guided them to the bottom, where a steel door was recessed into a cement wall.

Lexi pushed the buzzer, and a panel in the door shot open.

“Yeah?” said a voice like somebody gargling through a throat infection.

Lexi situated her face before the open panel. “It’s me.”

After a series of rattles, the door was pulled open by a hairy hand. One of Zeke’s bouncers, an enormous mass of hair and muscle with teeth sharpened into needles, emerged and flashed a terrifying grin.

“Lexi. Haven’t seen you for a long while.” He peered at Mineko, who had taken a step back. “And you’ve brought me a snack.”

“Keep your fangs to yourself, wolf-boy. I need to see your boss.”

“Zeke’s at work, but you can sit your butch ass in the waiting room.” The bouncer withdrew, and Lexi and Mineko followed him into the lounge.

Illuminated by purple light, their modified bodies draped over couches and reclined against gritty cement walls, the modders were a showcase of human transformation: muscle freaks with spikes jutting from their bodies, naked tattoo addicts decorated from head to toe, and cyborgs with visible augs—steel scalps, metal hands, glowing eyes—sizing each other up. There was even a man with four eyes, all of them blinking out of time.

A scale-covered woman shot out a forked tongue as Lexi sauntered by, and she made a mental note to come back later and secure what could only be the world’s freakiest oral sex. “How’s Zeke anyway?” she said to the bouncer waddling ahead of them. “Still an asshole?”

“Oh, yeah.” The bouncer gave a shark-like grin, and Mineko sidled closer to Lexi. “And he’s missing you real bad. Always saying, ‘Where’s Lex? Why don’t she do errands for me no more?’ And I say to him, ‘Zeke, honey, you’re a fucking asshole. That’s why.’”

Zeke’s waiting room was small, sterile, and furnished by a single couch upholstered in decayed synthetic leather. In concession to human boredom, a

television had been mounted on one of the walls. It played an old horror movie featuring lizard people chasing unwitting victims through caves. The lounge had been scarier.

Mineko perched on the couch while Lexi sprawled across what space was left. Even the way Mineko sat was suggestive of her personality—back rigid, knees together, hands folded. Taking up as little room as possible.

“I’m guessing you shut-ins don’t do much body modding,” said Lexi.

“Not like that.” Mineko watched the scaled monsters flitting through the underground half-light. “Individuation leads to social fragmentation.”

“Catchy. But what about your haircut? Looks pretty individual to me.”

Mineko brushed her bangs away from her face. “We’re allowed a limited degree of self-expression. Codism admits that total visual conformity is a purely superficial form of collectivism. The stress of having no identity, none whatsoever, ultimately breaks people.” She frowned as the lizardmen descended upon another helpless victim. “This is very gruesome.”

“I think it’s appropriate.”

“I suppose the monsters are computer-generated. Do people still make movies out here?”

“Sure they do.” Lexi winked. “I even acted in one once.”

“Really?” Every time Mineko became intrigued by something, she perked up like a pet promised a treat. “What was the movie?”

“*Queer Girls Pool Party*. I played Girl Performing Cunnilingus. I’d hoped for a speaking part, but hey, at least I still got to use my mouth.”

Mineko blushed and returned to staring at the lizard monsters. “Oh. Um. I see. You meant pornographic movies.”

“I needed the money. They wanted me back for the sequel, but they refused to guarantee I wouldn’t have to take it in the ass.”

“What does that mean?”

Lexi laughed until her stomach hurt. “You are so cute.”

“I’m not sure what was so funny about—”

The surgery door opened, and a man emerged with his upper arm wrapped in bandages. “You keep those on for a week or so,” said a rapid voice behind him. “And drink plenty of water just in case. Like, ten liters a day. If you aren’t pissing every five minutes, you aren’t drinking enough.”

The patient stumbled out into the lounge. A second later, Zeke walked into the waiting room, stopped short, and threw up his arms. “Holy shit, look who it is!”

Lexi slithered to her feet and stood with a hand on her hip, giving Zeke the scornful look he deserved. He didn’t have an imposing build, a little shorter than Lexi and wiry rather than muscular, but the stubby, half-inch spikes embedded on his brow and over his bald head added a misleading touch of menace. He wore a surgical gown, and his arms were bared to reveal red, skull-headed dragons tattooed on both biceps.

“Haven’t rusted yet?” said Lexi.

Zeke tapped one of the spikes over his left eye. “It’s titanium, baby. You’ll never guess what I just did to that guy.”

“Won’t I?” Lexi looked into Zeke’s cool blue eyes. Pushing aside the emotions on the surface—confusion, genuine pleasure, a touch of apprehension—she reached the freshest memories, the ones still quivering from their recent imprint. Fiddling with surgical tools, making an incision here, rearranging tissue there...a row of slashes along a muscle, their edges moving like they were alive.

“Gills. You put gills in his arm.” Lexi raised an eyebrow. “That’s weird.”

“Fuck!” Zeke covered his eyes with his hands. His long, jet-black nails seemed inappropriate for a surgeon, but then again, everything down here was a little inappropriate. “Don’t pull that shit on me.”

Did she laugh at Zeke’s chagrin or keep being pissed off at him? Easy question. “I should have pulled that shit much earlier, you lying son of a bitch.”

“It wasn’t a lie. Just an omission.” Zeke took off his gown. Underneath was a studded leather vest, which exposed the upper section of his chest and the complex tattoo adorning it. “They were painkillers, like I said.”

She’d forgotten what it was like trying to squeeze honesty out of this little bullshit man. “Which you sold to street addicts. I don’t deal hard drugs. You know that.”

“Alcohol is a hard drug, and you deal that shit. Besides, everyone involved in that deal, from junkie to flunky, was happy. Except you.” Zeke nodded at Mineko. “Who’s the shut-in? University uniform, am I right?”

“I’m Mineko.” Mineko’s tranquil voice was a welcome change from Zeke’s high-speed chatter. “You’re correct, I’m a student. I’ve come to warn you that you’re in danger. Are you aware of Project Sky?”

Zeke’s expression remained blank.

“It’s the aug,” said Lexi. “My aug.”

“Oh, the suicide chip.” Zeke shrugged. “Okay, so?”

“It was a Codist invention,” said Mineko. “But they never achieved a successful implant. Now they know about Lexi, they’ll be determined to find out how you did it.”

“This is a joke, right?” Zeke gave an uncertain chuckle. “Lex getting revenge for the painkillers?”

Lexi offered him her sweetest smile. “No joke. Time to kiss your brain goodbye, assuming you can find it.”

“Huh. Excuse me while I go shit myself.” Zeke sank into the couch and pressed his palm to his forehead. He hissed as he drew his hand away. “Ah! Fucking spikes!”

“I’m sorry,” said Mineko, staring at her feet. “I know it’s distressing.”

“It ain’t your fault, kid. But I wish I’d known earlier. I’d be hiding in a sewer pipe somewhere, drinking my own piss until this all blew over.” Zeke sighed. “Stupid thing is, I don’t even know how I did it. It just worked. I expected to have to wheel out a good-looking corpse. Instead, Lex opened her eyes, looked me in the face and said, ‘You dirty motherfucker.’”

Despite herself, Lexi laughed, and even Mineko smiled. “We need to get off the street,” Lexi said. “Just for a little. Is there anyone you trust?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Anyone’d sell me out. My own mother would sell me out. I don’t have friends. I have people who are just biding their time for a chance to kick me in the balls.”

“Sure. I feel like I’m going to get my opportunity real soon.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’ll forgive me now we’re floating down a river of shit together. I did feel bad about the deal later. Missed seeing you around, too. You gave this place some class.” Zeke glanced at the rampaging lizard people, and his frown returned. “What is this crap?”

“I think it’s interesting,” said Mineko. “We’re forbidden to watch this kind of movie.”

“No horror movies, no drugs, no sex. What do you all do for fun, sniff each other’s assholes?” Zeke made a plaintive gesture. “Lex, you’re the one with all the big friends. Pull some strings. Somebody you know must have a safe house.”

“Maybe,” said Lexi. “But it’s hard to know who to trust. The Menagerie sold me out, and I thought we were close.”

“Yeah, I heard the gossip. Bunch of try-hards anyway, all them animal names. Trying to be cool, picking all the toughest ones. The Jackal. The Tarantula.” Zeke scrunched up his face in theatrical contempt. “Me, if I had to choose, I’d be the Alpaca. I saw a picture of one once. Woolly as all fuck.”

“Zeke.” Lexi raised her hand, and Zeke subsided. “Focus.”

“Sure, sure.” Zeke tapped along the spikes fixed to his brows, his usual thinking habit. “Hey, did you warn Callie?”

Shit. She’d forgotten about Callie. “Not yet.”

“Who’s Callie?” said Mineko, turning away from the movie.

“She’s the one who sold me the thing,” said Zeke. “Clever kid. Smuggler, mechanic, driver, a real all-rounder.”

“How did she get hold of Project Sky?”

“She don’t talk specifics. But over the years, she’s supplied me with some serious black market shit. I didn’t even ask for this, uh, Project Sky thing. She just rocks up with it in her hand, says ‘Zeke, how rich are you today?’ Turned out I was rich enough. And stupid enough.”

“What did you do with my money, anyway?” said Lexi.

“Your cash picked up your bad habits. I blew it myself a few months later.” Zeke took an electronic cigarette from his vest and touched it to his lips. The end of the cylinder glowed a pale blue. “Fucking shut-ins. I might as well douse my cock with kerosene and light a fucking match.”

“You do that, and we’ll go warn Callie. She still out west?”

“Oh, yeah. Same shitty little place. She’s still pissed off at you, by the way.” Zeke grinned at Mineko. “If you’re gonna hang around Lex, you need to know she’s like a roller coaster.” With one hand, he mimed a roller coaster motion. “There’s ups, there’s downs, there’s loop-the-loops. A real thrill ride. Some walk away grinning. Some walk away ready to puke.”

“I don’t know what a roller coaster is.” Mineko didn’t look at him as she spoke, captivated as she was by the movie. A lizardman pounced out of the shadows, fangs dripping, and she started. “Oh!”

“Quit watching that.” Lexi prodded Mineko’s shoulder. “It’s bad for you.”

“You guys go tell Callie the bad news, and I’ll wait here,” said Zeke. “In this nice safe bunker of freaks. Don’t forget about me, okay?”

“We’ll see.” Lexi prodded Mineko a second time, and she finally followed, still casting backward looks at the television as they made their way into the lounge.

During their absence, the light had shifted to a vivid green. A few curious eyes turned Lexi's way, but most of the inhabitants ignored the arrivals in favor of admiring their own reflections in the lounge's many full-length mirrors. Lexi could relate.

Halfway across the room, Lexi paused. "Just a sec."

Ignoring Mineko's sound of alarm, she walked to where the scaled woman was reclining against a cement support. The woman looked up, and her lizard-like eyes narrowed.

"Hey, snake-girl," said Lexi.

"Hi, normal." The snake woman wore a white blouse and slacks, not exactly serpent attire, and it was hard to know how much of her body those scales really covered. Lexi hated to be left wondering. "You like my look?"

"Oh, I do." Lexi produced her seductive smile, the one that never failed, and the snake woman's expression became coy. "You know, I could heat that cold blood of yours."

The woman gave a nervous laugh, reddening beneath her scales. "I wouldn't think a vanilla like you would be into someone like me."

"I like my girls dangerous. Hiss your number for me, beautiful."

After a nervous glance left and right, the woman recited her number. Lexi took out her phone and added the digits to her enormous contact list of willing women. *Snake Girl*, she typed before saving the number. Hard to forget that.

"I have to slither along now," said Lexi. "But I'll be handling you soon enough. I'm impatient to feel those fangs."

She turned before the flustered woman could reply and rejoined the unhappy Mineko. "All done."

"What did you need from her?"

Lexi smirked. "I'll tell you when you're older."



Callie lived on the industrial fringe, far west of the University, and that meant a trip on the subway. The nearest station was only two streets away, and Mineko spent the short walk asking enthusiastic questions about body modding.

"Are tattoos permanent?"

"Yep. I have one myself."

Ahead, a ramp led into the underground station. The signpost above it read *METR*, the *O* long having parted ways.



“Really?” Mineko said. “Where is it?”

“That’s a secret. If you want to see it, you’ll have to get me naked first.”

“Or find a copy of *Queer Girls Pool Party*.”

It was a deadpan worthy of Lexi herself, and she laughed. “You’re okay.”

They descended into a fluorescent-lit, garbage-filled tunnel. Every surface had been tagged by gangs or decorated by graffiti artists, and as Mineko trudged along, she admired a vivid artwork on the ceiling. If she weren’t more careful, the kid was bound to face-plant in something nasty.

“Never been in a subway, huh,” said Lexi.

“We have a transit system of our own. It connects all the enclaves.” Mineko marveled at her spray-painted surroundings. “But nobody’s allowed to draw on the walls.”

They arrived at the first subway platform. Wind hissed through the open tunnel, and droplets plinked from the ceiling onto the rails. A few people were waiting for the train, among them a leather clad trio—a lanky guy, a tall girl covered in scars, and a haggard, wild-haired woman. They loitered with the self-satisfied swagger of gangsters.

“Stay near me,” said Lexi, and Mineko shuffled closer to her side.

The sound of her voice must have carried, as the haggard woman looked their way. “Hey!” she said. “Check out the queer!” She strutted toward them, and her companions trailed with less enthusiasm.

It took much more than this to intimidate Lexi. “Hi,” she said. “Go ahead and admire me, but no touching.”

“That’s an ugly fucking haircut.” The gangster’s own straggly hair looked as if animals had died in it, but it probably wasn’t wise to say so. “I don’t even know what I’m looking at here. You a dyke or a faggot?”

“Are those my only choices?”

“Don’t be a fucking smartass. You got a dick down there or not?”

Lexi summoned her most sultry smirk. “Treat me to dinner and maybe you’ll find out.”

“I told you not to be a smartass.” The gangster sneered at Mineko. “And what about the shut-in? You this queer’s little sex toy?”

Well, that escalated things. Lexi moved in front of Mineko. “Leave her out of this.”

“The shut-in bitch should know better than to come outside. I suppose she wants to fuck you so bad, she can’t help herself.”

“C’mon, drop it,” said the lanky gangster. “I just wanna go home.”

“We’re waiting for the train, aren’t we? Plenty of time to mess with this...this whatever-the-fuck-it-is.”

Lexi stared into the woman’s glassy eyes. The contents of her mind poured over Lexi like oil, slippery and tacky. Emotions flaring and fading in seconds, thoughts arguing, a cracked temper reigning supreme. Lexi grasped a memory: waking in the dark, head throbbing, a moment of clarity. *I need to stop doing this shit.* Groping in the dark, wanting water. Touching a rat. Feeling its hair and gristly tail. Screaming. Rats. She hated rats.

Time to fuck this woman up. “You don’t want to catch this train,” Lexi said.

The gangster sneered, exposing damaged teeth, but confusion rose to join her anger. “What are you talking about?”

“Let me tell you about the last time I caught this train.” As Lexi spoke, she kept a grip on that fragmented mind. “I sat at the back next to this real quiet guy. Halfway through the trip, I heard this sound like meat ripping. I looked across, and his chest was moving. All these lumps, pushing up his skin, moving in different directions.”

She magnified the images that had emerged into the bitch’s brain: naked tails, glittering eyes, the fear of being bitten, rabies, fat bodies swarming over her as she slept. “Then his chest burst open. He was dead, he’d been dead all that time, full of rats. They ran all over the train car, they ran all over everyone...”

“Bullshit,” said the scarred member of the trio. Lexi’s target, however, had taken a trembling step back.

“This whole subway is filled with the fuckers. You can’t turn and not catch one watching you, can’t put your hand out without something hissing and taking a bite.” Lexi gave a final push, intensifying the woman’s panic and disgust. “Someday you’ll be waiting for a train, and the tunnel will flood with rats. They’ll wash over you screeching and tearing—”

“We gotta get out of here! We gotta fucking go!” The gangster was hyperventilating, her rapid breaths accompanied by a wild twitching in her face. “We gotta go, we gotta go!”

With another shriek, she hurtled toward the entrance, followed by her shouting friends. None of the other waiting passengers had even looked up—why get involved, just another druggie, right?

Lexi gave Mineko an apologetic smile. The kid was still staring in the direction the gangsters had fled.

“You used Project Sky on her,” Mineko said. “Why rats?”

“She had a fear of them, so I took it and made it worse. A lot worse.”

A distant hum gained volume as a pair of lights illuminated the tunnel. The train hissed to a halt beside the platform, and Lexi and Mineko boarded the first car.

Most of the seats were rotted down to their frames, and the intact ones were covered in a mysterious residue. Fortunately, there were handles on the ceiling, only a few of which were repulsively sticky. The train accelerated, and Mineko shifted to avoid a rolling beer can.

“I guess your trains are nicer than this,” said Lexi, swaying as the train took a rapid corner.

“Considerably.” The windows rattled. “Does anyone maintain these?”

“Best not to wonder.” The train gained speed, setting its windows shuddering even more violently. “If you’re scared, you can hold my hand.”

Mineko watched the white panels flickering hypnotically on the tunnel walls. “Thank you for offering.”

Lexi smiled. What a funny kid.



Narrow chimneys topped by black plumes of smoke filled the skyline. Mineko wrinkled her nose. “Those can’t be healthy.”

“You think?” Lexi kicked a cardboard box rude enough to be in her path, and it landed in the middle of the street. The road markings had faded, making the potholed lanes indistinct, but it hardly mattered: the only vehicles that made any use of the western highway were the shut-in trucks sent to collect the bounty of the factories.

“Zeke said that Callie is angry with you. Do you mind if I ask why?”

Lexi sent a second piece of debris flying. It landed in a pothole. Let the kid think she’d done that on purpose. “Callie’s just riled up over nothing.”

“How long has she been riled for?”

“Uh...three years, I guess.” Lexi shoved her hands into her pockets and picked up her pace. Easier not to think about that incident, at least not until she had no other choice. “She’s a loner. A little strange.”

They passed a construction yard busy with activity. In the shadow of an immense shed, sparks flashed from welding torches while workers carried steel beams toward a scaffold, constructing the skeleton of something as yet undeterminable. A

group of people were sharing their lunch behind the fence. Several gaunt children sat with them, squabbling over scraps. Mineko gawked at them with obvious dismay.

Bad as it all looked, it smelled worse, and Lexi tried to breathe as little as she could. The shut-ins sometimes distributed medicines to the factory workers, but most of the drugs ended up on the black market. When that happened, gangs sold them right back to the sick workers who needed them. One of those social ironies and not a very funny one.

Callie's place was at the end of a ribbon of pavement that snaked around the edge of an abandoned factory lot. A junkyard behind a mesh fence neighbored the garage that doubled as Callie's home and workshop. Lexi strode across the cracked pavement—straggly weeds had pushed their way through it, not realizing the air up here was even worse—and toward the open garage door. Mineko trotted in expectant pursuit.

Inside, the garage was a mess of benches, tools, and scrap. The scent of rust and oil lingered in the air. Callie's van was parked amid the disarray, its white surface streaked with grime. Callie herself stood at a workbench, a tool in hand. She set it down and gave Lexi a mistrustful look.

In the intervening years, it seemed she had gained a little weight, but not enough to lose her athletic appearance. She had full hips and a curvy ass—captivating under a tiny pair of khaki shorts—but her waist was trim, and her arms and legs toned. Her black tank offered little coverage, and her tanned skin was streaked with grease. Another oily dab marked one of her round cheeks. Typical Callie.

"Lexi?" Callie brushed aside her auburn hair, which provided an untidy frame for her heart-shaped face. One look into her expressive eyes—her prettiest feature: lustrous brown irises accentuated by dark lashes—made clear nothing had been forgotten. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry." Lexi resisted the urge to slink away. "I know you're probably not thrilled to see me."

"Understatement." Callie's attention shifted to a point behind Lexi's shoulder, and her lips parted in a shy smile. "Hey."

"Hello," said Mineko. "I'm sorry we interrupted your work."

"It's okay. I can work and talk at the same time." Callie took a wedge-shaped tool and set to prying at some stupid gadget. "Come in."

Lexi slouched into the garage—the last thing she needed right now was a guilt trip. Mineko strode past, staring at everything around her.

“What are you working on?” she said.

“An auto part I scrounged up. It’s broken, but I’m hoping I can fix it.”

“May I watch? I’ve never seen anyone fix an auto part.”

Callie’s smile widened, bringing out the dimples on her cheeks. “Sure.” She levered the top of the gadget away, lifting a trailing set of wires with it. “It’s a converter. It makes energy use more efficient.”

“Does your van run on electricity, then?”

“Yup. I used to have a gas-powered one, but there’s nothing left to fuel those but vapor.” Callie pointed into the device. “You see this?”

Mineko leaned forward, fascinated. “Oh, it’s melted.”

“Right. Acid damage, maybe. I was hoping it’d just be a loose wire.”

“Can you fix it? Or is it too melted?”

Callie laughed—not a sound Lexi had expected to hear today—and shook her head. “Any melted is too melted.”

After several more seconds of close inspection, Mineko looked up, her face bright. “I’ve never seen anything like it. You must be very clever to work with this old technology.”

An attractive shade of pink suffused Callie’s face, and Lexi grinned. A few more appreciative remarks like that, and Mineko would have a friend for life. An insecure, clingy friend who played with scrap metal and never seemed to wash her hands.

“It’s not so hard.” Callie glanced at Mineko’s uniform. “Are you a student?”

“Yes. My name’s Mineko.”

“I’m Callie, though I guess you already knew that.” Callie gave Lexi an uncertain look. “I’m not going to lie, I’m kinda confused.”

“The Codists are tracking down people connected to Lexi’s implant. I’m afraid you may be in danger.”

Callie put a hand on her hip, a cocky little adventuress. “That’s okay. I’m used to danger.”

“Not danger like this. Trust me. My father is the head of Code Intel.”

Callie stared open-mouthed at Lexi, who nodded. “They raided my apartment last night,” Lexi said. “It’s serious.”

“May I ask where you found it?” said Mineko. “The implant?”

“The shut-ins keep vaults in the desert,” said Callie. “Whenever I stumble onto one, I break the electronic locks and take a look. A few years ago, I found a few chips in a box marked *Project Sky*. I’d heard old smugglers talking about it, so I knew what they were. Suicide chips.”

“Do you know their purpose?”

“The story is they’ll make you live forever if you can survive the implant. Which is probably bullshit, but people chance it. The thought of selling them made me sick to my guts. I considered leaving them there, but I needed the cash, so I took one, just one, and sold it to Zeke. I guess I should have left that one too.”

“Focus on the present,” said Lexi. “You’re always stealing from the shut-ins. You must have experience getting them off your back.”

Callie frowned at her grease-stained palms. “You and me need to sort something out first. Can we go outside?”

Lexi laughed. “Are you challenging me to a fight?”

“I’m serious. Mineko, we won’t be long. You can look around if you like, but be careful. Some of this stuff is sharp.”

Lexi followed Callie out of the garage and over a stretch of dry, hard dirt. Behind the junkyard fence, ungainly piles of scrap glittered under the midday light. Callie linked her fingers through the mesh and stared into the distance.

“So, did you bring me out here to show me your junk?” said Lexi.

“You know what this is about. You fucked up my life.”

Lexi scoured her soul. Nope. Sympathy not found. “Yeah, well, fucking is what I’m best at.”

Callie slumped against the fence. “You aren’t even a bit sorry, are you?”

“I don’t give a shit. I tried, okay? I looked deep within my soul for shits, but there were none. No shits to give.” Lexi sighed. “You take everything too personally. It wasn’t as if I went after her. She came to me.”

“Don’t remind me.”

God, this melodramatic fucking kid. “You’re the one who seems to want to talk about it.”

Clouds drifted above, slow and tinged with pollution. In the distance, a dog bayed. Lexi waited. They’d never really been good friends, and while that was mostly Lexi’s fault—Callie was the emotional type, and Lexi kept those at a distance—it made her easier to shut out now.

Callie gazed at the sky. “Mineko seems really nice.”

“Sure. She’s a good kid.”

“Don’t call her a kid. It’s patronizing. If she’s at the University, it means she’s at least nineteen.”

“Right. A kid. Like you.” Lexi laughed as Callie grew even more sullen. Still too easy to tease. “Don’t take it personally. I was a kid once too.”

“You’re only thirty, for fuck’s sake.” Callie gnawed at her thumbnail while frowning at the clouds. “I guess we could drive to one of the old bunkers out west. Take a bit of tinned food, stay under for a little while. You and Zeke will be bouncing off the walls after an hour, but it beats getting wiped, doesn’t it?”

Buried underground with two ex-friends, eating century-old food from a tin and creeping out into the desert to take a piss? Why, it sounded like paradise. “Let’s call that Plan B and keep thinking up a Plan A.”

“If you say so. Do you think Mineko’s going to get into trouble for this?”

Lexi shrugged. “She doesn’t seem to care much about that. It’s been fun dragging her around. She looks at everything like it’s just fallen from the sky.”

“You have any idea why she’s helping us?”

“Says she doesn’t believe their bullshit anymore. Thinks she’s fucked if they get this chip working and they use it on her.”

“Makes sense.” Callie pushed back from the fence. “Let’s go. I don’t want her to step on something and get tetanus.”

They found Mineko contemplating a rack of tools. “What’s caught your eye?” said Callie. Too cool to care, Lexi lounged against a workbench.

“This old baton.” Mineko tapped a long steel stick. “Is it for self-defense?”

“I use it to break windows, that’s all. I pack something a little more serious for protection.” Callie retrieved an ugly single-barreled shotgun from under a workbench. “And there’s a pistol in the glovebox.”

“Oh.” Mineko took a nervous step back.

Lexi snickered—the kid looked like a frightened animal—but Callie gave a sympathetic smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t point it anywhere near you.” She returned the shotgun to its hiding place. “Would you like a drink? You must have walked a while to get here.”

“Sure,” said Lexi. “I’ll have a rum and—”

“Not you.” Callie opened a bar fridge and searched through its glowing interior. “What do you like, Mineko? Carbonated juice? This one says raspberry, so it’s probably water, red dye, and a bunch of chemicals.” She showed the bottle to Mineko. “You might recognize the brand. I nabbed a crate from a shut-in truck.”

“Yes! I love this!” Mineko popped the lid. “Would you like the first taste?”

“Sure.” Callie sipped the drink before handing it back to Mineko. “Fizzy.”

Mineko beamed. It was surprisingly touching to see that serious face so transformed. “And you have a whole crate of these?”

“Sure do. Drink until you pop.”

Mineko took a sip while Callie watched her with a thoughtful smile. “May I ask how long you’ve been a smuggler?” Mineko said.

“Since I was thirteen. Eleven years. How long you been a student?”

“Three years. I’m twenty-two.” Mineko passed the bottle to Callie, who swigged from it. “Do you really not want to give Lexi a drink?”

“Don’t worry about me,” said Lexi. “I came out here specifically to die of thirst.”

Incredibly, Callie laughed. “Okay. If she helps me pack the van, I’ll let her have a drink.”

Mineko nodded. “I’m glad. By the way, what’s this here?” She indicated a jumble of little widgets scattered on a bench. “I couldn’t figure it out.”

“Oh, that’s an old pocket watch. I took it apart to see how it worked.”

“Will it tell time again if you put it back together?”

Enthusiasm lit Callie’s round face. “If I do it right. Want to see? It should only take a few minutes.”

“Uh,” said Lexi. “Do we really have time for this? No pun intended.”

Mineko shot her a reproachful look. “She did say it would only take a few minutes. I’d like to see the watch.”

“And you will!” Callie took a pair of tweezers from the workbench. “Now, this bit here is the main plate...”

As the kids huddled together, Lexi stared out at the wasteland of cement, steel, and stacks. It was no surprise Callie was weird: living out here with nobody for company but hungry dogs, sleeping to the distant rumble of machinery, waking to an oppressive horizon always vomiting smoke.

Three years. It was a long time to hold a grudge, maybe, but Lexi was in no position to talk. She watched the chimneys, her gaze unfocusing, until she could scarcely distinguish between the smog and the sky.



TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# REINTEGRATION

BY EDEN S. FRENCH

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)