

Chapter One

Error...Error...

Haptic feedback malfunction. Haptic feedback malfunction.

Error...Error...

Safety protocols rejected...safety protocols rejected...

The mechanical restraints latched down on me tighter. My arms and legs, paralyzed. My eyes frantically darted from screen to screen. The blinking lights of the data servers flashed violently. The multiple screens around me sputtered with glitches and glyphs. On the screen was a distorted face made up of 1s and 0s. The alarms blared around me over the loudspeakers, the error messages sang louder and louder piercing my thoughts. My mechanized prison begins to rock and shake. I struggled to break free.

I can't move.

"...iley."

I can't get out.

"...tor Riley"

I can't breathe.

"Earth to Doctor Riley, are you still with us?"

I open my eyes. A blinding light is shining directly into them, causing me to flinch in pain. "Riley, you alright?" It was Emma, my lab technician.

"Hey...Hey... Emma, yeah. I'm...I'm alright." I sit up in my chair, a piece of paper peels itself off my face and flutters to the ground; the familiar walls of my office surround me. On my desk in front of me sit piles of papers and folders bearing the moniker *Project M.I.N.N.D.* Emma kneels, her lab coat brushes the ground. She picks up the paper stained with my saliva as I wiped a bit of drool from my chin. She brushed her auburn hair back behind her ear as she leaned against the side of my desk.

"You know, you need to stop pulling all-nighters here doc. You'd be better served getting a decent meal and—"

"A good night's sleep, I know...I know," I huffed. "What time is it, anyways?"

Emma checked her phone. "It's a quarter past 9."

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck!" I hastily start throwing papers and folders into a roughshod pile.

"I figured when the boss man called me, I should probably wake you up."

I scrambled to get my lab coat on, sloppily grabbing my stack of papers and holding them close to my bosom. "Did you actually answer the phone? Run interference?"

"Of course not," she said, through a big, toothy grin. "Knock 'em dead, slugger."

As I pushed the door open with my ass, I turned to her and with a mocking smile and slight desperation in my voice, said, “You’re a bitch.”

“Glad I could help!” I could hear her call from down the hall, followed up by a short giggle. I jog down the sterile white corridor, passing glass offices lit by LED, dodging colleagues as I duck and weave past them to get to the elevator.

I clamber inside, *boop* my badge and press floor 27 about as many times. As the elevator doors close in front of me, I balk at my disheveled blonde hair and try to smooth it out with my free hand while straightening my thick-rimmed, cat-eye glasses. When the elevator doors open, there was Owen standing there waiting for me, I rush past with him close on my heels. He grabs my folders and helps to clean up the pile so that I can straighten my collar.

“You’re late.”

“I know.”

“They are fucking pissed.”

“I know.”

“We need this funding to—”

“Owen,” we stop in front of the two big glass doors to the executive board room, “I know.”

Owen takes a deep breath and smiles. “You’re gonna kill it.”

I smirk, “I know.” And we walk into the room, the big glass doors slowly swinging shut behind us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for making you wait.” In the middle of the room was a gigantic mahogany table, at least forty feet in length. It starts out wide at its base and slowly tapers off to a single overstuffed leather chair that sits the Chairman. Along either side are an assortment of shapes and sizes that are the board of directors. The ceilings were tall, about twice as high as anywhere else in the facility. Behind them sits a wall of windows as tall as the ceiling, overlooking the metropolis below. Gods among men.

I pass out the folders I was carrying to the various members of the board, ignoring their looks of annoyance. The Chairman glances up from his folder and looks at me, “What have you brought us today, Dr. Paulson?”

“What you have before you is the next wave of virtual reality technology. We call it, *Machine Interface for Neural Networked Dreaming.*”

“Or Project M.I.N.N.D. for short, sir,” Owen chimed in.

“I can read, Owen,” the chairman didn’t even glance up from the documents.

“The basis of the technology is to use our brains to create the virtual world our digital avatars would inhabit, networked to each other in a content rich ecosystem. I call it *Dreamstate VR.*”

“What’s wrong with normal VR?”

“Well, the two technologies are like comparing an apple to an orchard, sir. By using the most complex computer in the world and supplementing it with our AI technology, users can create the most vivid VR experience they will ever encounter.”

“Oh, what’s this computer system?”

“The brain, sir. Our digital interface connects to the brain of the user, the AI manages all necessary quality of life functions, and using the brain as an overclocked GPU, users can not only visualize the virtual world...but fully experience it. We’re talking haptic touch using your own nerves, taste and smell using your own neural receptors, this is the iMAX experience of VR.”

There was a long pause, the silence in the room was thick. Finally, another board member’s words sliced its way through, “How far along is it in development?”

I turn to face them. “Great question, we’ve successfully got the system in alpha testing, we haven’t *officially* had the MDA’s go ahead for human trials, but, off the record, I tested it on myself with...minimal error.”

“And your experience?”

“Out of this world.”

“And what is this AI you’ve been talking about?” asked a portly woman opposite the table from me. I turned to address her.

“Ah! Glad you asked, my lab assistant, Emma, has an expertise in neural networking and helped develop her. The green tab in your folders has her worthwhile information; its called the “Emulated Mindstate Management Assistant. It’s a general AI designed to monitor the subject and connections and make adjustments as needed.”

“She named the AI “EMMA”?” The chairman said dryly, glancing up at me from behind his bifocals.

“She’s...not one without a sense of humor, sir.”

“Very well, assuming the MDA signs off on....” His voice became distant, the room began to spin, my vision tunneled. I felt lightheaded, woozy. The lights became like pulsars, flashing, blinding me. The room falls away from me in a sea of blinking lights.

A familiar voice. I hear a familiar voice.

Error...Error...

I blearily glance to my right, my head held tightly in place. That same digital face. That face on the screens. Ones and zeros.

Error...Error...

I try to move, but I can’t.

Neural functions deteriorating...

Compensating...

Compensating...

I begin to convulse in place. I feel weak. Feeble.

Establishing nourishment protocols...

Standby...

Standby...

Dr. Riley...i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-its g-g-g-g-going to be alrigh-ight-ight-ight-ight.

Emma...I thought. Where....Emma....Emma.

"...Emma?" The world came crashing back to me. It was Owen, we were back in my lab.

"Sorry...Owen...what was that?" I placed my thumb on my temple and pressed delicately.

"Have you seen Emma? We gotta go grab drinks to celebrate!" I must have nailed the end of the meeting. Christ. I can't remember. My brain's been so foggy recently.

"Uhm...Not since earlier...Owen...I'm...I'm going to need to take a raincheck on that drink." I slowly got up from my chair, my knees felt like mush.

"Oh, yeah...Yeah sure, no problem." Owen turned for the doorway and before he left, he looked back at me, "Riley, you really did great back there. Take a few days, get rested up. You deserve it."

I smile weakly at him, "Thanks Owen." And he left.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I pressed a button on my keyboard and my computer monitor flickered on. On it was a face made up of ones and zeros.

In a soothing voice, "*Dr. Riley.*"

"Hey EMMA. Where is my lab tech?"

"*Emma Prime is currently in the testing facility.*" I roll my eyes. Of course she is.

"Thanks."

"*You're welcome. Is there anything else I can help you with?*"

"Yeah, don't tell her I'm coming." The AI nodded her digital head and the screen went blank.