

COVID-84

by Adam Smith

@Game_Breaker crested the hilltop and sprayed hellfire on the players below him. There was simply no dominating him in this game. He sped past their smouldering corpses, with a blast of his jet pack shot himself into air, withdrew his giant battle sword, and sliced @TerrorProphet almost perfectly in half. So much for @TerrorProphet's prophecy of conquest, his new tech suit did not hold up to much. Now his defeat would lose him all his game points and he'd have to start from scratch. @Game_Breaker hoped he didn't spend too much on the suit.

"Goddamnit Chris, now I've gotta start collecting points all over again! Does anyone ever beat you?"

"It's right there in my name, I'm the Game Breaker," Chris replied over his comm, "you should have known better than to test me with that overpriced tech suit. Come on John, you know by now I rule H\R." Although Chris never agreed that H\R, HYPEReality, lived up to its hype. He was 3 years old when COVID-19 hit, he could still remember actual human touch, his mother holding him and stroking his head. Now everyone just plugged their brains in to H\R to interact with each other. You've got your sense of touch, hearing, and sight just fine, sometimes truly more intense than the real thing, but taste and smell didn't really come across. Forty years later he didn't care how much promoters pushed HYPEReality as better than the real thing, as a suitable replacement to actual human touch, that was just propaganda to his mind.

Chris unplugged and stared at his living unit. Although calling it "living" was a bit of a stretch. His 3m x 3m unit contained a bed little bigger than a cot, a shower stall and sink, a sterilizing room, and his H\R computer station. In H\R he was like a god: he owned a palace where he held lavish parties, he won awards for dominating every game invented, and he had virtual sex with just about any woman he wanted. But it was all so fake, designed to distract and overwhelm the senses with constant stimulation. In the end he still went to sleep and woke up in his crappy unit.

His dinner made a thump as it dropped into his delivery box. There was a pretty convenient delivery system, kind of like a high tech dumbwaiter, everything right to your unit without anybody touching it. He went to take a look, blech, another Salisbury steak and processed mashed potatoes with a sprinkle of peas. His menu options were increasingly limited these days, and there was no taste sensation in H\R to replace it. He had the credits to buy whatever virtual thing he pleased, but in the real world it was all meaningless, except for buying

recreational drugs like REVs. Even if he left his room he's still stuck in his sector. He spent his entire existence walled in a few square kilometres.

Chris felt a constant pressure from being cooped up and frustrated, and while others seemed to get relief from H\R, he was ever unfulfilled. But what else was there to do? He plugged back in and spent a couple hours in a virtual sex party, got off, and went to sleep unsatisfied. What would actual sex feel like...

Chris awoke ten minutes before his alarm and lay there staring at the wall. His alarm went off and he hit snooze, only to sit there fully awake staring. He hit snooze twice more, reluctant to participate in his civic duty. Everyone had a job: some managed people or controlled machines remotely from their H\R stations, and some like him were assigned more physical labour. He was responsible for changing filters and bins in the various grain handling machines, from harvesters to separators to storage. Despite the fact Chris could easily have qualified for a job remote-controlling machines like harvesters or plows or on some of the assembly lines, working a physical job was the only time he got away from H\R and was actually moving his body. Many people were satisfied with hooking up to their electrocisers overnight to give their muscles the stimulation needed not to atrophy from a life plugged in to H\R.

Chris pulled on his hazmat suit, checked for holes, and then stepped into the sterilizer. Every unit has a sterilizer room between the inside and outdoors. Well, calling it a "room" is probably being generous; it's little more than a closet. Just enough room for one person to stand, wait for the sterilizing to finish, and then enter or exit the unit.

After the second wave of COVID-19 self-isolation eventually became enforced isolation. New self-sustaining megacities sprung up, designed on a model divided into isolated sectors specialized in some aspect of production. A sector for resource extraction, a sector for energy generation, a sector for textiles, a sector for raising livestock, and a few different sectors for agriculture like vegetables, or Chris' sector, grains. Many jobs, like entertainment, could be done entirely in H\R.

The natural world waited outside the walls of each sector, but no one was allowed to set foot outside the mega-city. All the fields of agriculture, and forests, and mountains, and shores, could only be viewed by remote through the machines of production. Apartment complexes were built with each unit sealed off from the others and completely self-contained. People were no longer allowed physical contact with each other in the real world, and to cope with the

isolation HYPEReality was invented and given to all for free. In H\R one had the opportunity to virtually obtain anything they desire. It was an orgy of digital consumerism.

After the gases of sterilization finished washing over him, Chris stepped outside. Even though the risk of outdoor virus transmission is very low, the possibility of mosquitoes spreading the virus made wearing hazmat suits a permanent accoutrement. It looked like it might be a nice day, but it was always hard to tell through the polarized visor of his suit. He was told the polarization was simply to prevent harmful UV radiation from reaching his eyes, but it also meant that everyone else's visor was a complete reflection to him; you could not see anyone's face. This is not to say you didn't learn to recognize your coworkers in other ways: their height, gait, or mannerisms. Each sector had a hub where all its production happened, and as Chris walked to his hub, he spotted John's familiar lumber on the walkway across from him and nodded. John gave him the finger.

Their sector was pretty much just row after row of drab grey cinder block apartments, small courtyards of poured concrete slabs, escalators, and motorized walkways called autowalks. If one were so inclined you could use escalators and autowalks to barely take a step to work. Chris supposed this was public transit now. There was not a single bit of greenery anywhere. This eliminated the need for groundskeeping and ensured weather events couldn't cause flooding or other supposed adverse effects of having some bushes or trees.

Every hub connected to the inner-System, which was topped by a massive gold dome you could only just glimpse the sight of over the top of the grey, perfectly rectangular buildings. Chris didn't know anyone who had actually been in the Dome. As far as anyone knew it was all automated in there, it was the factory determining the sum total of all their needs and ensuring everything ran smoothly.

Chris clocked in and made his way to his station. Not long after he and John were both changing the filters in the grain sorter.

"Did you finish bins 5 and 6 yet?" Chris asked John.

"Go to hell, I lost everything yesterday, it took me months to save for that suit," John retorted.

"As it's all virtual anyhow, one can argue you lost virtually nothing," Chris smirked behind his visor.

John began, "Yeah, yeah, easy to say when you've got as many credits and points as..." A voice crackled into their comms, "NO personal talk during work shifts, keep your mind on your task." John made a subtle strangling motion on the handle of the filter he was changing, and Chris gently shrugged his shoulders. They went back to work.

Lunch was a depressing affair. After standing in line, in full hazmat suit, to collect their lunch tray of a processed turkey sandwich, potato chips, and small bottle of juice, they each had to de-suit in an eating booth where they could sit alone and video chat while they ate. A lousy half hour later they were back at it. This drudgery is why people simply could not wait to plug in to H\R at the end of their shift.

After work was done Chris arrived back at his unit, sterilized himself, and stared glumly at his H\R station. An alert was flashing, of course, his once a month "donation" to the gene pool. Once isolation became a permanent facet of life there came the dilemma of procreation: how do you keep the species alive when people are required to be isolated?

Well, as Aldous Huxley's tube babies hadn't been invented, the only answer was surrogate mothers and H\R nurseries to raise the babies in a virtual world. Women could volunteer to carry a baby, they would never know whose, and upon delivery they get a fat boost to their H\R credits. They don't even get to hold the baby; they just push it out and collect their bounty.

You can tell when someone has been raised in H\R because they have an aversion to the real world, preferring and fanatically promoting H\R, and are rabidly loyal to the System. Whether through actual indoctrination in their upbringing, or the influence of decades of H\R culture, or growing up without parents, or even just a natural conditioning effect of spending most of your life in a reality so much more appealing than the real thing, whatever the cause, those born into H\R simply could not get enough and saw no other way to live. It was getting harder and harder to entice people into physical labour jobs in the real world, but that was one of the reasons Chris was so wealthy in H\R: the buildup of years of extra credits from physical work.

Chris had a store of sample bottles, but he really wasn't looking forward to filling one, despite the inherent sexual release. Nothing put him in the mood these days. Alas, not fulfilling his duty would elicit an interview with a counsellor, so he turned on some porn and got it over with. He put the bottle in the depositor of his delivery box, where all his various bodily fluid samples went for testing once a month, and sat back in bed, dreading going into H\R but really unable to think of anything else to do with his time.

When he signed in, John the @TerrorProphet was practically waiting to pounce on him.

"Jesus Christ, for a supposed prophet you should know better than to surprise me like that," Chris exclaimed.

"What's taking you so long, man? It's *your* damned smash party tonight! People are already starting to line up at the mansion. Hell, your 'mansion' has got so big people are calling it 'Party Planet' now. Who's working the door?" John asked.

"I can't be bothered tonight, gonna let a bot handle it."

"Aw man, then who knows what kinda girls you're gonna get in there?!? Why not let Ignitrix or Framer77 handle it?"

"Because last time it was just the same old same ol' douchebags and sluts there, I need a new crowd. Don't worry man, I'll give you moderator status, just don't abuse it. Algorithm lets people in; you can only eject anyone being an asshole."

"Ten-four kimosabe!" John loved his obscure pre-COVID-19 references, it was one of the things that made them friends: a love for pre-COVID-19 movies and TV. Chris floated up to his balcony and entered his mansion. He'd started it over a decade ago and it was *expansive* to say the least. Adding wing after wing it really was getting the size of a small planet. He couldn't help remarking for the thousandth time how ironic it was that he had obtained so much in this reality and yet it fulfilled him not at all. He supposed that's what drove him to acquire so much, trying to fill the emptiness.

Chris was suddenly filled with a deep melancholy as he floated down the main hall of his palace, the walls and floors deconstructing and spiralling away from his approach, and then reforming upon his passing. He reached a door and it peeled back as he entered his chambers. His clothes disintegrated from his body, and he stood there for a moment, in front of a massive black mirror, and stared at the image of @Game_Breaker.

He was chiseled and sculpted to be a warrior of deadly proportions and lethal anatomy. His arms were a little bit longer, as were his elbows a little sharper. His knees were almost completely guarded by his huge knee caps, and his knuckles could grate cheese. His body and senses were upgraded in every way worth doing (suits are for suckers) and he was virtually invincible. Invincible... in a fake virtual world.

The image in the mirror shrunk until Chris stared into his own eyes, at his own body. He wasn't scrawny, but he wasn't ripped, kind of fit but soft, and his face wasn't likely to turn many heads. None the less he was somehow satisfied by what he saw. He really wished he could

walk around H\R as himself, and everyone else as themselves, like in the old movies. A bunch of people walking around in a world just like the real one, before COVID-19.

But he learned many decades ago what it was like to resist the culture of what's expected in the universe of HYPEReality. How much more lonely an existence it can be if you don't conform to certain trends and behaviours. So, in an effort to fit in and feel something, Chris excelled at everything in H\R. He rose to the top of his game and dominated everything he could. And here he was, sitting atop his palace, with a party that could possibly top 10,000 people, feeling completely alone and dejected.

As Chris floated another wall tumbled away until he was on a private terrace overlooking a spectacular ocean view with a sunset. He gazed with a tinge of nostalgia, despite never having actually witnessed the real thing, longing for the rapture he should feel at such a sight, and finding only emptiness. He was still in his natural image when a female voice startled him, "Do you ever wonder how such a perfect image can feel so wrong?"

Chris leapt into the air while transforming into his avatar, unsheathed two swords from folds of skin in his back, and brandished them with lethal intent while floating ten feet above the terrace. The woman stepped slowly out of the shadows. She was wearing a cloak with the hood pulled up, and was dressed somewhat medieval with a modern twist, the latest trend.

"How did you get in here? This is a private terrace." Chris boomed at her, his voice amplified.

"Nothing is private if you have the right keys," she replied and revealed an H\R System key. Chris drifted back to the ground. He had only seen such a thing once before, 15 yrs ago, when a former-programmer-turned-hacker was giving him an illegal upgrade. This was how you could add, or delete, the computer code of H\R. To obtain one was difficult to say the least, to use one was asking for trouble.

An unauthorized code change would likely leave a trail that would eventually be picked up by irregularity scanners, and if significant enough would trigger a code scrub. A person could lose everything virtual getting caught up in a code scrub. Chris had dabbled in coding in his early 20s, and once when he took it too far he had to watch his partner at the time get caught in a scrub. His former partner lost all status and points and credits, even his avatar was wiped to a basic System icon. Years of building up a life in H\R wiped away in a flash, and there was no backup.

Chris asked the stranger, "Ok, so who are you and why would you use a System key to see me? Are you aware they can track hacked code?"

"Let's just say I was curious to see the mighty Game Breaker up close and personal. And I'm not disappointed. It's refreshing to see someone reveal their true self." Chris was about to lay into her for catching him with his avatar off, and caught himself. She sounded... genuinely impressed. But he couldn't see her face.

"So now that you've seen my true self, will you show yours?" Chris asked.

"How's this? Go back to your true self first, and then I'll take off my cloak," she replied.

Chris' heart was racing. In this brief encounter he felt more alive and enthralled than he had been in years, decades, maybe even his whole life. Who was this woman? Why did she choose him? He transformed to his true self. Well, almost. He kept himself a little taller and broader shouldered. He was dressed in casual pre-COVID 19 clothes.

"Hmm," she mused, "you didn't look quite that proportion when I first saw you." Chris turned beet red in real life, in H\R he had blocked such emotions from registering. Then he grinned, and shrunk down to real size. What did it matter if this strange woman he'd never seen before got to see the real him? Everyone knows an avatar has no relation to the appearance of the person controlling it.

She smiled, and withdrew her hood. She had very plain features, but her eyes were bright and sharp. He had no doubt this was her real face, the subtle lack of symmetry, the imperfections in her skin. She even looked to have some blemishes. He marvelled at her honesty and forthrightness. He'd had so many conversations with so many women on so many topics and yet none of the usual banter seemed appropriate now. They stared at each other a short while, until Chris, nervous to hold her gaze, turned to the too-perfect view of the landscape.

"I think the problem is that it's flawless," Chris said, "the image is too curated, too perfect in lighting and composition, too manufactured and manipulated. All the details are accurate and believable, but they're all too ideally placed. It's like an algorithm took the collective impression of a perfect sunset and averaged it all out into this."

"You're not at all what I thought you would be like," she said, "but I had a feeling you don't get to your level of success without having something to you."

"So, the trillion credit question is: why are you here, why me?"

"Honestly I don't really know. Part of it was boredom, I've had little to occupy me as of late. Part of it was conquest, just to see if I could. Part of it was curiosity, I wanted to know what you are all about."

"Well the first is a touch insulting, the second a tad belittling, and the third downright presumptuous. But you are here, and I have yet to kick you out, and I am still talking to you. And you showed me your true self, still not sure what to make of that. Do I ever get to know your name?"

"Mary."

"Well then Mary, my name is Chris, you have my attention, what are you going to do with it?" Chris smiled at her with a twinkle in his eye.

They talked for hours, mostly about the inadequacies of H\R and the dreariness of real life. Well, it seemed Chris did most of the talking while Mary listened intently and probed him. But it felt good, finally having someone to share these kinds of thoughts with. Chris had completely forgotten he was holding a party when he got a rude awakening.

"DUUUUUUUUUUDE!" John appeared abruptly in front of him, "where the hell yoooouuuu been? Who the hell is that? And what the Christ you look like that for?" Chris snapped back into his avatar.

"What do you want, why the hell are you interrupting me?" Chris made his annoyance clear.

"You gave me moderator status, I can reach you direct for emergencies. You forget you got a party happening? Like with guests bugging me every which way about you? And we're running out of REVs!"

"Ah, I see," Chris said with a snort, "you just want more drugs." REVs were the most popular stimulant, eliciting a burst of energy, a euphoric high, and heightened senses.

"Well, you killed me and the suit I saved up for, least you can do is get me and a few hundred other people high." John knew Chris had a soft spot for getting people high. REVs and other drugs were one of the very few things where credits in H\R translated into something in the real world. This was another aspect Chris felt was by design, and did resemble 'A Brave New World', but from what he read drugs were increasingly legalized pre-COVID-19 so who knows what the present world would have been like without mass isolation. Chris brought up his

account, made the purchase, wiped John's image away, and turned back to Mary. Partygoers could help themselves to an H\R REV credit, and it would be in their delivery box usually within 10 mins.

"Do you do REVs?" Mary asked him.

"I used to do them more, like every week. It made H\R bearable, it would almost feel like reality for a short while, and then you come down. I once overdid it to win a battle that had gone on nearly 48 hrs. I was in my 20s, and I wasn't feeling well. I wasn't about to back down, so I boosted myself popping a bunch of REVs at once. It was like my nerves were electrified, my brain firing on all cylinders, and the sheer energy I felt could have cracked a mountain. When I came down I needed to be hospitalized for a couple days and the System restricted my REV supply for a few weeks to teach me a lesson. Could've been worse I suppose, but they've lost their appeal for me these days. What about you? You into any chemical distractions?"

Mary smiled, "Not really my thing, but my... friend... sure loves them, although he has to keep it under wraps because of his job."

"What's his job?" Chris asked, ignoring her brief pause on the word "friend" as Mary gazed silently at the view. She said, "Well, it's about time I got a move on."

"Oh," Chris exclaimed, surprised, "you're not going to... stay the night?" Chris could not remember the last time a woman he met did not end up having virtual sex with him. That's just how it was in H\R, as there was no consequence there was no reason not to sleep with everyone possible.

"No, I need to... get back to the real world, get some sleep."

"Well, how do I see you again? What's your personal number?" Chris asked. Mary paused, and said, "Let's meet in H\R, next Wed at Domino Joe's."

"I can't tell if you're really this mysterious or if it's all an act," Chris wondered aloud.

She grinned, "I guess you'll have to find out," and with that she turned her System key and winked out of existence.

Chris could not get Mary out of his head. The inability to contact her drove him even more nuts. With his wealth in H\R he could pretty much track down anyone he wanted, but this woman was untraceable, every search he paid for turned up empty. This of course only added to the mystique. Chris waited impatiently for Wednesday to come, and when it did you can bet

he was at Domino Joe's in a private booth nervous and excited. Domino Joe's was a popular joint to hang in H\R, a combination of a 1950s diner and a stadium, tables and booths stacked in levels that disappeared into infinity. One of the more intriguing details of H\R was that it did not have to obey the laws of physics, especially physical space. He spotted Mary in that cloak and hood getup again, as she glided over to his table.

"You really like to stay incognito," Chris smiled as she sat down.

"A girl's gotta have some secrets, your wealth can't buy you everything in here," she said playfully. Chris really didn't know what to make of her.

"Can we talk as ourselves, would you mind that terribly?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Chris set the booth to full privacy and shrunk down to his real self as Mary took off her hood. For a moment they just stared at each other with stupid grins on their faces. Then Chris leaned over the table and planted a kiss on Mary's lips. She actually blushed! Chris was blushing too, but you'd never know it in H\R.

"You show your real emotions?" Chris inquired.

"My real face, my real body, my real emotions. I always found it a bit psychopathic to want to hide your emotions," Mary replied, glancing at him sidelong with a hint of challenge in her eyes.

"Actually it's more like the *influence* of psychopaths. I'd rather be open, but I can remember as a teenager getting ridiculed for showing certain emotions in H\R. How did you come out so well-adjusted?"

Mary smiled coyly, "Let's just say I don't have the same boundaries."

"Alright, intrigued as I am, is everything going to be vague and mysterious with you?"

"I'm sorry, I just have to be careful, there are forces in H\R I need to avoid, and it's hard to know who I can trust. Meeting you was kinda like a challenge, I wanted to see if I could do it, and was honestly curious what the richest man in H\R was actually like."

"Oh I don't know if I'm the richest, who could know that for sure?" Chris chuckled. At that Mary seemed to stifle a smile and glanced away.

"So what do you do outside H\R?" Chris asked.

"I'm an H\R developer, hence my access to a System key."

"Any new features coming down the pike?"

"Well, we're still tinkering with taste and smell. Turns out the problem is a person's neural pathways for various smells and tastes are mapped completely differently from everyone else's. Unlike the vast majority of bodily functions that use relatively similar neural pathways from person to person, it's like everyone develops their own personal neural mapping of taste and smell in their brain. So lighting up the taste of steak for one person could very well make another person smell asparagus. As far as we can tell it's mainly because smell and taste become so intertwined with memory, which is of course completely subjective and varies widely from person to person."

Chris was enthralled, exclaiming, "Absolutely fascinating." They chatted for a couple hours, made out a little more, and set up another date.

"This must be what it felt like to date before COVID-19," Chris said as they embraced.

"Maybe, well, except that we're not really touching each other."

"I know, I'm obsessed with pre-COVID-19 media, and I've seen movies where a character will smell the scent of their partner on their clothes and in their bed after the person has left. They say there's pheromone exposure built in to our units, but who can know, still feels like something's missing."

"The inability to ever touch anyone, it seems so... inhumane. I feel for you."

"Well we're all in the same crappy boat," Chris said, and Mary briefly glanced away. "See you on Friday?" he asked.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Mary beamed.

All other facets of life had officially become meaningless. Chris worked his job, shot the breeze with John, wiled away the time playing games, and counted the days until Friday. He and Mary were meeting in the Fields of Eternity, a picturesque landscape where many couples went to walk "hand in hand". You could choose the open park, or be alone in one of many fantastical landscapes, some that defied the laws of physics. Mary was waiting for him by the entrance, as always with her face concealed under the hood of her cloak.

"Did you miss me?" she asked.

"Maybe a little," Chris teased, then pulled her in for a kiss. They started to walk into one of the exclusive paths where they could be alone, but soon upon entering Mary pulled out the System key again.

"Watch this," she said. With a few gestures of the key a translucent door opened. Mary walked through, Chris was sceptical.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's a door to the backend of this program. We can access some... extra features this way." Chris was wary but his curiosity got the better of him. They strolled through the virtual park, but so far there was nothing different. Mary asked him, "What's your favourite time of day in here?"

"Well, the midnight sky is beyond spectacular." Chris replied. With a twist of the key the sky darkened and the stars came out. "Amazing," Chris exclaimed with awe.

"If you're good maybe I'll show you some other tricks later," Mary said with a wink.

They walked and talked, held hands, and generally just enjoyed each other's company. Mary was only a few years younger than Chris, apparently had never offered herself for procreation, and was just as disillusioned with the System as Chris was.

"It seems so... unnecessary sometimes," Mary lamented, "all the isolation and automation. Dividing and segregating people as if none of us can be trusted with each other, as if we're all a threat. It's so depressing to watch all the forced labour, and then see people blinded by H\R, preferring life in a false reality."

Chris nodded, "I want something more out of life. It can't just be work and H\R day in day out. I want to know what the actual sun feels like on my face, not the feeling of a UV lamp blasting me with 5 mins of radiation every day. I want to know a breeze on my skin, to be fully submerged in water, to... touch someone," Chris stopped walking and turned to Mary, "I want to know what it's like to have your body wrapped around mine." He gazed into her eyes with a combination of longing and pain. She pulled his head down and kissed him, soft at first, then it got frantic and urgent.

"Ok, you wanna see what else this key can do?" Mary asked breathlessly. She tapped a couple times and a bed appeared right in front of them, in the middle of the fields. "We have full privacy, I promise," she assured Chris. They took their time, stripping each other's clothes

from their bodies slowly, taking in each other's appearance. Chris was a bit gangly, with a slightly sunken chest. Mary was plump around the hips, a bit pear shaped.

The irony for Chris was that he'd had virtual sex with every possible body type of woman in H\R: impossibly skinny with monster breasts that defied gravity, muscular and tall with almost no breasts, incredibly round and blue-skinned, translucent with four arms and four breasts, striped, furry, hairless. You name it, Chris had stuck his virtual penis in it. But none of it had him as turned on as right now.

They made passionate love in that virtual bed, they even turned off all physics enhancements so they felt the full weight of gravity and their bodies against each other. It was truly transcendent, and more importantly, it finally felt like a real connection to another human being. Mary was flushed from head to toe. Chris was laying there mouth agape, stunned at how awestruck he felt.

"Man oh man oh man, I never thought I could feel this way," he said.

"To be honest, I've never done anything like that. In fact, I've actually never been with anyone sexually," Mary confessed.

"WHAT?!?" Chris was flabbergasted, "no way, I don't believe that. You know there's a pre-COVID-19 movie called '40 Year Old Virgin', it's about a guy, but still. I can't believe you've waited this long, especially considering H\R sex is so inconsequential."

"Well maybe sex *shouldn't* be so inconsequential," Mary got self conscious for a moment, "I mean, you did like it, right?"

Chris immediately jumped up and took her face in his hands, saying, "It was the most feeling I've ever had in this world, nothing before has ever compared to it." Mary smiled.

"You know," she said, "technically you're still a virgin too."

"Oh what I would give to do that for real, to feel you, to touch you, to be inside you. I've had virtual sex more times than I could possibly count and every time all I could think of was what it would be like with a real woman. There were times I couldn't touch myself either, it was always so hollow and empty." Mary stared off deep in thought as Chris continued, "I don't even understand why we have to live isolated if we're all living in sterile conditions and have been isolated for decades. I mean we all wear bloody hazmat suits, fully contained, and have to use

our sterilizer room every time we come and go. Nothing leaks out, nothing comes in. What germs could we even give each other at this point?" Mary was quiet as Chris finished ranting.

"What if... what if we could touch?" Mary asked, "In the real world."

"As if! I can't even conceive of somewhere we could take off hazmat suits unnoticed and have time with each other uninterrupted."

"But if it were possible, would you do it?" she asked. Chris realized she was being serious, and that she just might have even more tricks up her sleeve. He looked her straight in the eyes and said, "Without hesitation or delay." Rather than push his luck with any questions he just sat there watching as her eyes darted back and forth, clearly contemplating some course of action.

"What happens if you feel unwell at work?" she asked.

"They send me home. It's only happened once, there was something off in my lunch. But I once saw a guy keel over in a coughing fit, and some inner-System guys took him away and we never saw him again."

"No that's perfect, getting ill from a bad lunch. You think you could do that again? Fake it I mean?"

"I'm sure I could, but what then?"

Mary pulled out her System key and brought up a map of his sector. "See here," she pointed at the map, "you walk around this building and you will see a door. Be there at 14:00 Monday afternoon."

"Ok, ok, just a minute here, what's behind that door and what's your plan for us? How is this all supposed to work?"

"Leave all that to me. Just do your part, make it convincing, and I'll see you at the door. You have to trust me. Do you trust me?"

"I want to," Chris said warily, "but honestly, you've been so mysterious, you dodge so many questions about yourself. I don't know what to believe."

"Well that's the best part, all will be revealed if you walk through that door, at that point whatever questions I don't answer myself will be answered simply by being there. Chris, I'm

willing to go way out on a limb here, and I believe I can make this happen, but only if you are truly all in."

Chris sat there thinking for a moment. This was all so exciting but now it was starting to feel risky. Of course, that only added to the sensation, every day with this woman brought him to new emotional heights he never thought possible.

"To hell with it," Chris said, "in for a penny, in for a pound, as they say." Mary smiled and said, "Alright then, 14:00 Monday afternoon." She planted a kiss hard on his face and disappeared into nothingness. The bed was gone too, and Chris could tell he was no longer in the backend of the park program. He exited H\R, sat on his bed, felt where she had last virtually kissed him, and imagined how she might smell. He sat there unmoving for hours until sleep took him over.

Chris sprung from his bed Monday morning. Never in his life had he felt so eager to get to work and yet so very nervous to do so. He knew he had to keep his cool, everything about him needed to seem routine. Walking to work in his hazmat suit was usually a challenging 20mins even with a climate controlled suit. He avoided the autowalks in lieu of the distraction offered by actual walking, but today his footsteps were so light he felt like he floated there on an autowalk.

He greeted John, got his gear, and went to work. At lunch he video chatted with John and a couple other co-workers, and made sure by the end to give some hints at his discomfort. He was gearing up at 13:00, preparing for his big performance. He went back on the job for about ten minutes, and then started doubling over, clutching his belly. Chris was so nervous he was actually starting to feel nauseated, and didn't think it was going to be much of a stretch convincing them he was ill. He walked back to his supervisor station.

"Ugh, that lunch did something to me, my stomach is roiling," Chris told the supervisor.

"Well go to the washroom and relieve yourself then," the super said coldly.

"I dunno, I feel like I'm gonna puke in my suit," Chris replied, stifling his urge to tell the heartless super off.

"Then go to the monitoring booth, let's see what we can see." Chris dragged his feet to the booth, his actual discomfort with the ruse only adding to the performance. No sooner did he have his helmet off than he vomited in the receptacle.

"Christ!" the supervisor exclaimed, "clean yourself up and take your temperature." Chris did as instructed. "Ok, no fever," the super proceeded to ask Chris a bunch of boilerplate health questions, after which he concluded, "I'm labelling this as food poisoning, get home and rest up." Chris nodded in mock shame and malaise, put his helmet back on, and left the building. As he left he heard over the loudspeaker, "Sterilization crew to monitoring booth 5!"

After exiting Chris started on his usual route, rested on the side of the building, and then rounded the corner as casually as he could muster. He never realized just how indoctrinated he was, as this part of the sector was just off his usual walk to work and yet he'd never been here before in his life. He followed the map in his mind and soon found the door. Ten minutes early, he didn't know what to do. The door swung open abruptly. He entered cautiously, as it was much darker inside.

It was some kind of large mechanical room, with massive machines he could only guess at the function of. But no one was around. A small blinking light near the ground caught his eye. It was some kind of communicator, and suddenly the screen turned on with a map of the room. It guided him to a heavy door, which he entered. It was a sterilization room, and it startled him as it suddenly started up. It seemed far more comprehensive and thorough compared to the relative closet of the sterilization room of his unit. Then the other door opened, and there she was.

Mary stood there, no hazmat suit, grinning from ear to ear. She motioned with her hand for him to hurry. She pulled him to a locker room, yanked his helmet off, and kissed him hard. "How's that for real touch?" she asked. Chris nearly melted. Mary prodded him, "Ok hurry, get this suit off and change into this." She had a strange outfit for him. After he finished dressing, she handed him a small card that attached to his sleeve.

"Where am I and what is this?" he asked.

"This is your ID card, it doesn't work, but everyone has one and it would be noticed if you didn't. I'll explain when we get to our destination, but mostly I need you to be quiet and pretend everything is normal. No gawking, no looking around in awe, no stopping. Stay two metres behind me and pretend you don't know me until I turn to you. Are you ready?"

Chris looked down at his outfit, it was very fancy. He'd never seen fabric like this in the real world, softer than anything he'd ever touched, more colourful too. Everything he wore under his hazmat suit was drab and utilitarian; only in H\R did people have style. "I'm ready, but I'm seriously confused, where are we?"

"Patience," Mary said, "all in good time. Just keep your head down, act like you own the place, and follow me discreetly." At that she set off, and Chris had no choice but to follow. They exited the locker room and it was all Chris could do not to let his jaw drop to the floor.

They were inside the Dome! It was massive, the entire environment self-contained under this golden shield. Buildings of the most beautiful swooping architecture stretched towards the arc of the Dome, public art displays dotted the promenades, and there was colour everywhere. Hundreds of people could be seen openly walking, no hazmat suits and no masks. There were real plants and trees lining the structures, flowers of every colour, fountains and water features, and sun blazing through the Dome with warm artificial lights filling in the gaps. People were wearing REAL clothes, fashion in the real world. Despite this wasn't H\R everyone looked so perfect, with sculpted bodies and beautiful faces. And they were interacting, touching each other, holding hands, talking face to face! Chris' eyes darted everywhere while trying to keep his head pointed straight ahead.

Mary discreetly glanced over her shoulder a couple times to ensure Chris was following closely enough. She saw someone she knew, realized she'd have no choice but to stop and chat, and hoped Chris was on the ball. As she stopped he continued walking as if he had no idea who she was. He stopped off to the side against a wall and waited, doing his best to maintain an indifferent poker face.

When Mary finished chatting and continued walking she glanced his way and he shoved off again, keeping his distance. They were approaching a fancy entrance, looked like... a hotel? As Mary approached the desk Chris lingered outside, doing his best to blend in.

The sight was marvellous. There were shops and restaurants everywhere. People sat at tables clinking glasses and enjoying foods he had only dreamed of. Shoppers were inside stores TOUCHING things and trying them on. No one seemed concerned about the lack of isolation. Clearly this was how they lived their daily lives. Chris was gawking in thinly veiled awe when Mary interrupted him and he jumped.

"Keep it together," she said in a quiet urgent voice, handing him a key card, "you're going to wait 10mins, then go to room 512. I'm in the adjoining room." Without waiting she left. Chris sat there on a bench, dutifully waiting, struggling not to show his amazement. When he got up, he realized he wasn't sure how to get to room 512. He observed the people going in and out of the hotel for a moment, spotted what must be elevators, and made his way over.

The elevators were automated, Chris asked for floor five, and the elevator responded. When he got off he strolled down the hall as casually as he could muster. He passed a couple who gave him a friendly smile as he passed. Not used to such customs he smiled nervously and tried not to shy away from them. He made it to his room, relieved. He opened the adjoining door and knocked.

Mary answered wearing a negligee. Without hesitation Chris grabbed her in his arms and planted kisses all over her. He inhaled her neck, her body, he groped her breasts and squeezed her bottom, his hands were everywhere on her. Mary moaned in pleasure and grabbed between his legs. She pulled him into her room.

Chris caressed her skin and ran his fingers down her arm, surprised and pleased at the goose bumps that appeared as Mary shivered involuntarily. She took off his clothes and they collapsed into bed and had sex as if it was their last day on earth. It was a little awkward at first, apparently H\R sort of glazed over the details a bit, but they got the hang of it quickly. Mary moaned with wild abandon and Chris grunted loudly in pleasure.

Afterwards Chris couldn't let go of Mary, while spooning her he kept nuzzling her and inhaling her scent. The smell was just incredible. The rush of pheromones was intense, being deprived of such input for so long he was sure he could actually detect their scent. Mary turned to him, "Ok, it's time to go, our window is super short."

"But, I have SO many questions! Where the hell are we and who the hell are you and all these other people?" Chris asked with wondrous consternation. Mary looked nervous and embarrassed.

"Ok, to be honest, I've been watching you for a few years now," Mary confessed, "As an H\R developer on the backend I have access to all the stats, I know for a fact you're the wealthiest person in H\R. At first it was just curiosity, there were a few people I would track over time, but you stood out for some reason. Most of your consumption seemed all about social distraction, amassing huge spaces in which to have lavish parties, exposing yourself to as many new people as possible all the time. It felt like you were searching for something. Then one day I saw you reveal your true self while alone in H\R, and I knew I had to meet you."

"That would be creepy if I weren't flattered. But I still don't know where we are."

Mary explained, "Following COVID-19 the elite decided they needed control over their exposure to the masses and started work on the Dome. After quelling some rebellions and

silencing some critics, a few years later the Dome was finished. We live in group isolation, so we can live relatively normally, while you and the other workers... do our labour for us."

Chris was appalled, "What the holy hell is that all about? Why did you show me all this? How in god's name do I go back to my sector now?"

A tear rolled down Mary's cheek, "I had to show you, it really isn't fair, and after getting to know you, and the fact you're forced to live sterile and safe but alone, I just couldn't live with myself. And, well, despite all the opportunities living here, I too was alone. I don't know if you noticed, but I don't really stack up to the women here, primarily because I'm not willing to alter my body." Mary glanced down ashamed.

"I LOVE every part of you," Chris exclaimed, "You're my angel. I can't believe you trusted me with this. I'm reeling. I really don't know what happens from here. Never mind what to do with my knowledge, how do I go back to not touching you?"

Mary touched his face, "That's a problem for another day. We need to get back before shift change." They got dressed, left the hotel, and made their way discreetly back to the locker room. Mary gave Chris one last kiss before putting his helmet on, and then showed him back out the door to the sterilizer of the machine room.

Mary returned to the safety of the Dome, firstly concerned about ensuring their tracks were covered. She was indeed a programmer, and while using some code to alter the System would have raised alarm bells, it didn't prevent her from using code to find the loopholes and cracks and exploit them. With a little help from her brother of course, who was head of security. If only they knew how hard he partied in D-H\R.

The Dome was a refuge of the rich, a literal bubble in which they could live apart from the unwashed masses. Those who felt the urge to do something with their lives mostly worked managing the labour force, many worked surveillance, and at the highest levels they were surveilling their own in the Dome. You never know when a sympathizer like Mary might come along. But the majority of them lived in the lap of luxury, with robots to fulfill almost all their serving needs. It was calculated early on that it would be more economical to have human workers do the maintenance jobs and save the robot technology and its required resources for serving the people of the Dome.

The layout of the Dome was an elegant warren of shops and services mixed with a variety of residences. Some areas were great wide plazas, dotted with kiosks and ringed by eateries,

while other sections were multileveled shopping and entertainment arcades, with walkways crisscrossing high up into the Dome. There was always a stock of residence vacancies, so people pretty much had their choice of living alone in a roomy one bedroom, sharing a two bedroom with a partner, or landing a larger home to start a family. Even though you had no need to earn money in the Dome, there was still an ongoing hierarchy that seemed grandfathered in since the construction of the Dome, and power was still wielded by an elite of the elite. Privilege seemed to come mainly in the form of timely access to services in high demand. The higher up the ladder you went the shorter a waiting list you'd be on.

Mary returned home. She wasn't exaggerating with Chris, at 38 she was still living with her parents and had never had a real boyfriend. It wasn't entirely her plain look and lack of plastic surgery; her strong personality, egalitarian outlook, and sympathy for the workers was always met with derision and disdain. She'd been kissed here and there, went on a few dates, but today she finally lost her virginity. Chris too she mused.

Mary had stumbled across Chris while examining trends in H\R, trying to determine her next project. While looking at extreme cases, Chris' profile stood out. He was an outlier, but not a trendsetter. Despite his wealth and infamy, it seemed others did not follow his patterns, no one was emulating his way of life. It also seemed he did almost no self-promotion, all his fame came from his stellar game performance and word of mouth. He never did interviews or made promo videos, and was quite a mystery in H\R. Strangely though, no one in H\R clamoured to know him. It was like everyone assumed he was just some avid gamer and nothing more, and so did not pursue him except to try and dethrone him or sleep with him. His interactions were mostly just a notch on the virtual belt. The culture of H\R seemed only to respond to whoever is being the loudest.

The elite living in the Dome were indoctrinated from an early age to see the workers as their slaves, because supposedly the elite had some inherent inborn superiority to them. It was a capital offense to reveal to any worker the truth of the Dome, however it seemed all but Mary were content with maintaining the status quo. The elite went to school and developed through life very similarly to the ultra-wealthy of the pre-COVID-19 world, with almost nothing denied them at any time and including from birth a robot servant ready to fulfill their every need. Most of their lives of luxury were little more than a psychopathic competition for who could have the newest material things first. H\R was seen as an amusing distraction; true status was measured in the real world. Those few who seemed like truly pleasant and kind people lived as

if in a constant daze, drifting through life without really questioning their place over the workers, content to exist in peace but unwilling to rock the boat of their carefree existence.

Her parents' unit was one of the more spacious and luxurious, mainly because her father was Chancellor of the Dome, which was also why she and her brother ended up with such influential jobs. Not to say she didn't earn her place as a competent chief System developer, but nepotism did tip the scales in her favour to get her foot in the door ahead of others equally qualified. As her sympathy with the workers was a count against her, she had to temper her thoughts in order not to raise suspicion of her dalliances in H\R. She always sold her improvements to H\R as a measure to further quell any potential worker unrest, as opposed to her actual goal of making life more liveable for them.

Mary was in a unique position. Being able to live a relatively normal existence the elite did not need H\R to fill a void, they could still talk and touch and interact face to face. But people needed to design and manage H\R to distract the workers, and that's where Mary came in. Now, she wasn't ever supposed to enter H\R unless it was to test some component or closely examine a glitch, but having the access she did allowed her a certain amount of freedom. She could enter H\R under the guise of work, do as she pleased with her System key, and be out with none the wiser.

Of course, the elite also had their own version of Dome H\R, so if they desired they too could enjoy the various wonders of an imaginary world that defies reality. It was completely separate and unconnected from the H\R of the workers (you can't have some rich girl high on REVs blabbing about the Dome to a worker and blowing the whole scheme). This was where Mary's brother Peter frequently partied incognito, escaping from the evils of his job by doing every debauchery in D-H\R that as head of security he could not do in reality. Just like the hotel where she and Chris met, D-H\R was set up to respect privacy, so the elite could still keep their indiscretions discreet.

Still glowing from her time with Chris, and a little sore between her legs, Mary came to dinner with her mother and father. As usual, her brother was not around, his shift work rarely coincided with a family meal. Mary had no interest in living alone, but she could never figure out why Peter stayed with their parents. Perhaps living alone with his thoughts would be too much for him, as he relied on Mary as his confidant. He also seemed cursed with the inability to find a suitable partner. There was a quota on baby-making, but most people seemed content with no more than two children. If too many couples were only having one, they

released incentives to have more, like a bigger place with a better view, or front line access to better services. All in all it was a charmed and conflict-free existence.

"So what are you smiling about?" Mary's mother asked.

"Oh nothing really, just had a good day," Mary tried to stifle smiling further.

"Well there's worker unrest in Sector 9, the combines are breaking down in Sector 3, and we still haven't fixed the H\R behaviour trackers," her father Harold reminded her. Harold was paradoxically cold and calculating yet charming and generous. Of course, it's easy to be generous when you are one of the wealthiest most powerful people in the Dome.

Mary answered, "Yes, we're working on the spyware, it's just a question of how much data to collect from the outside workers. Data capture gets spotty if there's too much unfiltered information."

"Spyware?" her father scoffed, "how many times do I have to tell you it's not spying? It's *management*. We're managing the labour force."

"Sure, without their consent or knowledge. For crying out loud, they're oblivious to our very existence!" Mary exclaimed.

Mary's mother glanced with concern at her scowling father. He regained his composure and retorted, "When COVID-19 hit we had a choice: use our resources to protect ourselves from the ignorant masses, or get dragged into anarchy with them. There are certain people born to create order, and those born to follow orders. History bears this out. Without our intervention who knows what would be left of civilization. Now everyone is provided for, there is no more crime or poverty, and all of society is a smooth running machine."

"Little different than a prison," now it was Mary's turn to scoff.

Mary's father laughed, "In what prison can you fly to the stars, party all night, or socialize with millions of people? You chose to work on H\R design to enrich the lives of the workers and ease your misplaced guilt for living in the Dome while the workers deal with the outside. They are given food, shelter, entertainment, even recreational drugs, what more could they have under the circumstances?

"We did not choose to be stricken by COVID-19, and we dealt with it as best we can. It's simply not possible for everyone to live in the Dome, the only way this works is for us to live in here and them to live out there. We manage them for their own good, if they were capable of

more there would be more unrest. As it stands, what little resistance that exists is from those few who simply crack under the strain of isolation. Seriously Mary, after all these years you yourself have helped manage them, how do you not see this truth?"

Mary had had this conversation far too many times and knew it led nowhere, so she shrugged her shoulders and turned to her meal. Rack of lamb, wild rice, and green beans. It should have tasted divine, but somehow everything paled after her taste of sex with Chris. She thought of him and stifled another smile.

Mary went to her room after dinner, planning her next foray into H\R. It was getting tough to make excuses to "work late", especially when it wasn't resulting in any new code. She sat staring at the wall, remembering the sensation of Chris' lips on her body. She had fallen asleep in her clothes when her brother suddenly burst into her room.

"Christ Mary, I need to come down in your room, I don't wanna pass by mom and dad," said Peter, clearly REVED up from some party in D-H\R.

"Jesus Peter, what's wrong with you? Why do you always take it so far?"

"Ah please don't nag me now, work was ridiculous today, I needed to blow off steam," Peter whined, his pupils as large as dinner plates.

"What happened?" Mary asked with concern. She knew her brother's job weighed on him, and occasionally he had to do some terrible things. It was learning of some of her brother's horrible deeds that grew her sympathy for the workers.

"The unrest in Sector 9, it got nasty, a couple workers had to be... dealt with. They were refusing to work unless given better rations. This is the problem when you've been growing delicate produce or managing high end livestock that you never get to eat, that you've never even seen on your plate. A person can't help but question after a while *who* is it that gets to eat that luxury food they've been growing?"

Mary knew "dealt with" was code for executed, and her heart sank. Keeping the Dome secret was difficult in the best of times, but occasionally the smarter workers started putting two and two together and began pushing back. And really, at that point what choice was there if they were to preserve the Dome? You can't explain it to the workers and then just have them go back to their meagre existence, and you can't lock them up in the hopes they'll have forgotten upon release. No, the only choice was to dispose of them and do your best to tie up loose ends. Which sometimes meant demonizing them as radicals or mentally unstable to

others in H\R before disposing of them, or inventing a work accident, or absolute worst case, disposing of those closest to them as well. It was a truly sordid affair keeping the Dome secret, which is why half the jobs in the Dome involved surveilling the workers. No wonder Peter was always depressed and looking to unwind and forget.

Mary gave Peter a hug and cradled him in her arms. He began to calm and his breathing slowed. With a father as powerful, cold, and harsh as they had, over the course of their lives they often found refuge in each other. As they fell asleep together she let out a short cough and felt a strange tickle in her throat.

Mary woke up with a headache. Unusual, she had never quite felt this way, and it was not pleasant. She coughed, also unusual, but shrugged it off and went about her day.

There were many options to get herself to work. Apart from actually using her legs to walk, and much nicer designed autowalks, there were small auto-driving vehicles, and for the truly powerful and important, flying pods. She walked down one of the many opulent halls of residences, the marble floors gleaming with the bright reflection of the Dome overhead, each windowed doorway a work of art.

Mary arrived at the central System control room, where all the orders and management originated from. She tried to focus on continuing writing the code she had started, but by lunch she was clearly unwell and went to the doctor.

Health was closely monitored in the Dome, but being in such a controlled environment and living such a relaxing care-free life few people ever really fell ill. So, most doctors spent their time studying and treating by remote the various ailments of the workers.

After taking her temperature the doctor was genuinely concerned, sent her for a battery of tests, and then straight home. Her mother came to check on her.

"I heard you weren't feeling so great?" her mother sympathized.

"Yeah, I don't know what's wrong, I felt great yesterday," Mary said, recalling the events of the day prior. "I can't imagine what happened," she said as she pictured Chris kissing her. A pang of panic went through her. Is there a connection to her feeling ill? Guilt and anxiety started to overwhelm her, but she fought it down and took some acetaminophen.

Mary slept the rest of the day, skipping dinner and feeling even worse when she awoke in the evening. Now she had a raging fever, but she was too scared to tell anyone for fear that it

was her fault and she'd have to confess to letting in Chris. She grabbed a glass of water and crept back to bed.

She awoke late the next day to pandemonium: the Dome was on lockdown. It seemed her sickness had spread, fast, and everyone was panicked and hysterical. Masks and gloves went on and doors were locked by remote, no one in or out of their apartments without security clearance. Which under normal circumstances Mary had, but when she tried to leave her room her ID card wouldn't work. She tried again, and then tried to call her mother. Just as the call was ringing, her father entered her room in full hazmat suit and mask. He was furious.

"All preliminary evidence points to YOU letting in a grunt and infecting us," he accused her. Mary gulped and looked down. "WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING???" Harold screamed.

"I... I was so lonely... and I thought... I thought what does it matter if I met with a worker? If the workers are isolated and sanitized, they should be just as virus-free as we are," she whimpered.

"Jesus Christ Almighty, we don't goddamn sanitize them, that's all for show!" he yelled, getting red in the face. "Why the hell would we waste the expense sanitizing disposable grunts? They are sprayed with water vapour, and they all share the same ventilation system. We let them share their filth so only the strongest survive!" Mary looked aghast, shocked at the revelation. Even the Dome had secrets from its residents, as if it wasn't insidious enough. She was too appalled to speak.

Harold leaned in close, his eyes burning with fury, "You have brought doom to us all. If your sickness doesn't kill you, I just might. Right after I gut that grunt you brought in and extract a cure from him." He stormed out of her room. Mary sat back in her bed, too weak to do anything, but too worked up to sleep. Eventually she fell into a fitful fever sleep.

Peter woke her, shaking her gently. "Sis, what the hell, what did you do?" Mary turned to him with tears in her eyes and croaked, "I'm so sorry, I thought it would be ok, I didn't know it was all a sham, I didn't know they fake sterilizing and isolating the workers." She burst into more tears. "He's going to kill him, daddy, he's going to kill Chris."

Peter didn't look too well either. He had slept with his sister all night during the incubation of the illness. Between the two of them going to work the next day they had managed to cause most of the spread of the illness.

"Well Christ," Peter exclaimed, exasperated, "what did you expect, what the hell were you thinking? I never would have helped you find security holes or a door outside if I knew you were going to do this. I thought you were just being curious, like when we were kids and you always wanted to explore every nook and cranny of the Dome. I'll be lucky if they don't think I was in on it."

Mary was delirious from her fever and panicked, "You have to find Chris first, you have to get him to voluntarily offer his blood to make an antibody, if daddy gets there first they'll just as likely kill him."

Peter frowned, "I honestly don't know why I should put my neck out there more than I already have. I just don't know what you were thinking!"

"Peter, I may not make it, I am patient zero. I'm begging you, for my sake, for all of us, find Chris and convince him to come back and help develop a vaccine. I don't think I could live knowing I caused all this chaos and Chris ended up dead. PLEASE, if you care, if you love me, please, I need you to do this," Mary pleaded.

Peter's brows knitted in both pity and consternation. He had seen so much death as head of security, maybe this was his chance to settle the demons in his mind and find redemption. Peter said, "Ok goddamnit, I'll do my best, it's going to take a lot of tricks." Mary told Peter Chris' sector and unit. He coughed into his sleeve, gave her a kiss on her sweaty forehead, and left in a huff.

Peter's energy was starting to fade, so he popped in his room and dropped a REV. He immediately perked up and bolted through the door. He carefully left by the same route Mary brought Chris in, finding Chris' unit easily. The workers were all on lockdown and H\R had been suspended, if you signed in it said the service was down for maintenance. Taking down H\R was a very risky move. They couldn't have the workers communicating in such a time of disarray, but the longer H\R was down the more restless people got. While people were accustomed to lockdowns, they were not accustomed to losing access to H\R. It really was a lifeline for most people.

Peter used his security clearance to override Chris' door. Chris was sitting on his bed, startled to see an inner-System security head in his unit.

"What the hell is going on here?" Chris asked.

"My name is Peter, I'm Mary's brother, and we're all in big trouble."

"Does this have to do with H\R being down?"

"That's the least of our worries, that's just to prevent information spread. You've seen the Dome so you don't have to pretend with me. I know you were there, and now everyone is sick."

"What?!? Mary is sick? How? I'm not sick, and I sterilize religiously."

"I don't have time to explain, but it's all a lie, the sterilizers aren't doing anything, it's just to keep people under control," Peter said.

Chris' jaw dropped. "What do you mean it's all a lie? What the hell are we isolated for then? The Dome was bad enough, how many more lies and secrets can there be?"

"Look," Peter struggled to stand straight, "we need your help, clearly you're immune to whatever this is, and we need your antibodies to make a vaccine. The next people that come here won't ask so nicely, so if you want to live to see Mary, come with me now." Peter decided it didn't matter if he was exposed further. He took his helmet off and dropped another REV as Chris put his hazmat suit on. For the first time ever Chris skipped sterilization and followed Peter out of the unit.

They rushed down the autowalks to the back door of the Dome. Peter swiped his ID and opened the door. Harold was standing there with a group of guards behind him. Peter looked down to the gun in Harold's hand just as Harold shot him. Peter looked shocked as he fell back against Chris, who tried to catch him.

"Take them both," Harold said, his eyes betraying no emotion other than fury. He snatched his son's ID, "Dump my son in disposal, bring the grunt to lockup, and call the virology team." Harold glared at Chris, "The only reason your blood isn't spilling on the ground too is because I need it to find a cure." He turned away as the guards grabbed Chris.

Mary awoke groggily to something dangling in her face. As she regained focus she saw it was her brother's ID. It had spots of blood on it. She looked past the ID to her father staring at her with rage.

"It wasn't bad enough you brought in a filthy grunt to infect us all," Harold fumed, "but then you rope your brother into your subterfuge? Well now he too has paid the price for your insolence." He tossed the blood spattered ID in her face with disdain. Mary tried to speak, to grab her father and plead with him, but she could barely move.

"Pathetic," Harold spat out with disgust, "I gave you everything, you had every opportunity in life, and this is how you repay me? With betrayal and lies? You deserve to die in this bed. And after we're done with taking blood from your boyfriend we'll kill him too. He's in lockup right now, your brother practically delivered him to us." As Harold backed away he suddenly coughed, spraying spittle on the inside of his mask, and then glared at Mary. She smiled weakly in defiance as he left the room glaring at her.

Mary cried out in sorrow, she was devastated. She was also too weak to move. She could barely lift her head out of bed, how was she going to do anything to save Chris? Then she realized she was holding the ID pass of the head of security. But how could she get anywhere feeling like this? Her brother's REVs!

Mary flopped out of bed and crawled to her door. It took all she had to get her arm high enough to swipe the ID. She crawled to her brother's room, dripping in sweat and panting. She almost passed out at his door, but some last reserve of adrenaline kicked in and drove her inside, where she found his stash of REVs in his drawer. She dropped one and was able to sit up. But she needed to do more than sit up. Mary dropped two more REVs and felt a surge like nothing before. She still felt sick, but somehow full of energy and a touch ecstatic. She threw on some clothes and ran out to follow her father, not bothering with any protective gear.

The Dome was a ghost town, everyone was on isolation lockdown. Mary carefully but quickly made her way to the central System control room, where lockup was. She overheard her father and ducked behind a corner. He was berating the guards, and it wasn't going well.

"What do you mean you're leaving your post?" Harold yelled at them.

"Sir, my boy is sick, his wife is sick," the guard pointed at his fellows, "and he's sick right now. The grunt is locked up and virology is on the way. We're getting back to our families to isolate before we get locked out." At that the guards left, ignoring Harold's glare burning a hole in their backs. Harold entered the control centre.

Mary was already fading, so she dropped a couple more REVs. She could feel the artificial boost, but it wasn't cutting through the sickness as well anymore. She followed her father into lockup, staying cautious and wary, her senses heightened from the REVs. She watched him at a terminal, waiting for virology to show up. She snuck by him to where the cells were. There weren't many cells considering how many people lived in the Dome. They didn't really need them as crime was non-existent in the Dome. Mostly they were used for the occasional person who got out of hand with alcohol or REVs. Mary found Chris' cell and let herself in.

"Mary!" Chris whispered excitedly as she entered, worry all over his face. She fell to the ground in front of him.

"I found you," she said almost dreamily. Her forehead felt like it was on fire.

"What the hell are you doing here? They might get you too. We have to get out of here."

"Yes, but you need this," she handed him a small flash drive, "this is the System key, you have to tell everyone in H\R, you have to free everyone," she said weakly. "Here is my brother's ID, it will get you anywhere in the Dome. Unlock the units, open the gates to the outside, and set everyone free."

"How do I do that? Oh please Mary, hold on, please hold on."

"It's easy, same as navigating H\R, and with the System key you will have full access. Find a terminal and plug in," Mary moaned and Chris held her tighter.

"I can't lose you," Chris cried, "for Christ's sake, we only just found each other! I love you Mary, you can't go."

"I love you too," she said, managing to caress his cheek. Chris bent lower and kissed her. When he pulled back, she was gone.

Chris sat there for a while with Mary's limp body in his arms and wept. Then the anger welled up. He grabbed the ID and System key and left his cell.

Chris crept up to the control room, looking around for anyone. Seeing nothing but empty chairs, he found a terminal and plugged in. It *was* just like H\R, but the backend, and there were so many more options. He soon figured out how to turn H\R back on. He inserted himself into H\R, and immediately thrust himself into John's terminal.

"John, listen to me carefully."

"Chris man, where the hell you been? H\R has been down for a half a day, everyone is freaking out. And where are you?"

"I'm in the DOME! Believe it or not we've all been played. There's a whole damn society of rich people living off our labour..." Chris was suddenly yanked back to reality as a bullet ripped through his shoulder, the force of which threw him to the ground.

Harold was standing over him with a gun, poised to shoot him. "You ruined it all you little pissant," he said, "You beguile my daughter, force me to shoot my son. Now look at you." Chris lay on the floor frozen, waiting for his end. Harold pointed the gun directly between Chris' eyes, and then coughed violently. Chris rolled away as Harold struggled to keep the gun trained on him. Harold tried to fire a few shots, but Chris managed to scramble out of the control room and into the Dome.

The inside of Harold's mask was obscured by the spit and fog from his cough, so he yanked it off. He was sweating and breathing hard, and he was starting wheeze. He pursued Chris into the Dome and down a hall of residences. Chris may have been shot in the shoulder, but his legs worked just fine, and he wasn't remotely sick. Decades of isolation had left Dome residents with little exposure to germs, bacteria, or viruses, so when it hit their sheltered immune system, it hit hard and fast.

Harold saw he was losing ground to Chris, and tried to shoot him again but could barely lift his arm. He saw people watching the scene through the windows of their doors.

"Goddamn it, he's getting away, help me!" Harold screamed at them. Then he realized they were locked down by remote, so he used his security clearance to unlock the nearest door. Except the resident held it shut. Harold was incensed, and tried the next one. They also did not open the door for him. It was obvious how sick Harold was, and no one budged.

"What is wrong with you people? I'm your Chancellor! Defend me, defend the Dome!" Harold yelled. But his pleas were to no avail, as Harold collapsed on the floor of the hall. Chris was almost at the end of the hall when he heard the collapse. He turned around.

Harold was wheezing and coughing on the floor as Chris cautiously approached him. People were staring at Chris in horror and fascination through their windows. He nodded at one little boy who looked awestruck. Still, no one moved as Chris neared Harold. Harold tried one more time to lift his gun, but he was too far gone. Chris kicked the gun away.

"Oh how the mighty have fallen," Chris quipped with scorn, "You didn't deserve your daughter or your son, they gave their lives to undo your evil work. And now you reap the seeds you have sown, as none of your people will expose themselves to save your rotten soul. Burn in hell you devil." Chris left him lying there, choking on his own phlegm.

Chris returned to the control room. He felt dizzy, not so much because of his wound, but because of what he was about to do. He plugged in to the System and went right back to interrupting John's terminal.

"John, I've been shot, I don't know how much time I have."

"Chris what the hell man, seriously I'm freaking out."

"You have to lead them John, you have to lead everyone out of their units. Our whole existence was a lie, the sterilization rooms do nothing, that was just a way to control us, keep us isolated. We've been sharing the same air, the same germs, this whole time. I met a girl in H\R, turned out she was from the Dome. I went there and accidentally infected everyone. Now they're locked down, and the girl died saving me, but I got access to their control room."

"Chris, this is crazy talk man, how can I believe that?"

"You're going to have to, "Chris doubled over with a wet cough, "you'll see when I open the doors. Don't worry about suits, they're useless too." John looked panicked and said, "No, man, no, I can't do this on my own, not without you!"

"It's ok, you can lead them John. Do it now, people will be scared and confused. Tell them they are free." Chris unlocked all units in all sectors, and then opened the gates to the outside. Blood leaked down his shirt and he felt his lids get heavy, watching on the cameras as his fellow workers stepped out into the sunshine and left the walls of their sectors, for the first time setting foot in the green fields they had only ever seen by remote.

Adam Smith, 21st Century