

# Virtual Law 1: Reunions

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First few chapters preview

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**“So how’s the** pot roast?” Jackie asked.

“Should be called ‘rot roast.’”

“Hamburgers?”

“You really want me to make a pun of that?”

Jackie exhaled, long and loud, not bothering to hide her exasperation. She then put down the menu and glanced to her right and left furtively, scanning the restaurant’s scant guest numbers, none human besides herself and Kate. “So, is there anything good, or did you just bring me here to gross me out?”

“Hey, I’m doing this for your last favor,” Kate reminded her friend. “We could always stop.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The tiny white beads at the ends of Jackie’s cornrow braids rattled as she shook her head. “It’s just that this place is on the Bridge, way out in the boonies, and you can’t even tell me what’s good?”

“Try the eggs,” Kate said.

“Eggs?” Jackie’s expression switched from incredulity to dismay. “That’s it? Just the eggs?”

“They’re good eggs.”

Jackie stared at Kate’s faint smile, grumbled something nigh inaudible, and then buried her face back into the menu.

“I guess you’ve been here before,” she said after a long moment of silence.

“Of course.”

“Why do you like it here, then? I mean, it’s on the Bridge!”

“What do you have against the Bridge?” Kate asked with a frown. “Don’t tell me you’re spooked by off-planers. That’s not a healthy mindset to have in our line of work, you know.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just…” Jackie’s voice faltered and began to trail off.

“You’d think that a person with your job would deal better with off-planers,” Kate said. “Man’s folly for screwing with the fabric of the universe. They’re not just going to go away, you know.”

“I told you, that’s not it!” Jackie snapped. Taking care not to raise her voice, her whisper became a sharp hiss.

“I’m sure,” Kate remarked blandly. “So what is it, then?”

“I’m just curious about why you like this place so much,” Jackie said. The décor, a mix of green and white striped wallpaper bordering yellowing sheetrock, all held together by thin plywood panels and plascrete sealant seemed just as cobbled together as any of the structures on the Bridge, but in a curiously well-kept way. Though the table had more than a few graffiti and carvings on its surface, the tableware was clean, the menus were pristine, and there were rows of photographs neatly lined up in wooden frames on the yellowing sheet rock walls. “I mean, it’s not much to look at, and the food sucks, so why bother?”

“History.”

Jackie gave Kate a blank stare.

“The Yellow Snowmen, D-Stroy, and Cornucopia,” Kate said, pointing towards the nearest row of photos, catty corner to their booth. “This place has been host to some of my favorite bands. I used to hang out here with Stacie and Tex before I joined the League, back when I was still working at Cybersoft. They’d have indie cover groups here every Saturday night; I loved ‘em. Too bad the new management shut it down.” She pointed towards a small stage on the restaurant’s far side, obscured in darkness that had not seen light in years. Its curtains were dingy and laced with cobwebs, and the floorboards were

buckling. “Guess he didn’t think rockers attracted the demographic he wanted. He’s suffering for it now; people sure as hell didn’t come here for the food.”

Jackie made a tiny cough. “Well, well, girlfriend, I didn’t think you were a rock chick. For some reason, you don’t strike me as that type.”

“Oh?” Kate said, raising an eyebrow. “What *did* I strike you as?”

“You looked more like a classical music girl to me,” Jackie said. “You know, Mozart and krid like that?”

“I like that as well,” Kate admitted with a nod. “I’m just not picky with music. But I guess I’m a rocker at heart. Hell, I wanted to be a singer when I was a kid.”

“A singer?” Jackie gave an amused grin. “Now *that* I can imagine.”

“Really?” Kate said.

“You got the look down pat.”

Kate laughed as she watched Jackie’s eyes scan her clothing, a blue cotton blouse over old black jeans. These looked more like thrift store duds than any of the hyper-stylish to gaudy apparel of the stars that were on the tank. Her looks were exotic, attributing to the Asian heritage on her mother’s side, but only modestly so, surely not camera material. Her nose was too close to her lips, and her eyes appeared too big for her face.

Then Jackie gestured towards a photo of a band on the opposite wall. One of the trio was a tall, muscular black man with a keyboard slung across his back; the second, the bassist, was an off-planer with gold skin and a crown of horns that grew from his scalp; the third was a woman in black denim jeans and jacket that she left unzipped to reveal a leather bustier, also black. She had a guitar proudly in her arms. Her dark hair was cropped and styled into wisps with soft purple highlights, so different from Kate’s thick, bodiless ebony mop. There was a

mischievous light in her eyes as she half-smiled.

“You look like her, as a matter of fact,” Jackie said, glancing at the picture and then back towards Kate. “Come to think of it, you look a lot like her.”

Kate twisted around to view the picture more closely. “You think so?” She said. “Well, color me flattered.”

Jackie nodded. “Um, who is she, by the way?”

“No freakin’ way!” Kate twisted back around and slammed her hands on the tabletop, startling a few of the nearby restaurant guests. “I *had* to have told you about Ambush!”

“I... gather you like ‘em?” Jackie said, taken aback by Kate’s unexpected gush.

“You better believe it. I used to come here whenever they had a concert. I’d sneak out of the house and get in on my looks ... if you know what I mean.”

Jackie licked her dry lips, her face froze into an ambivalent grimace.

“You used to whore yourself out to see a rock group?” It sounded more like a statement than a question.

“Yeah,” Kate said. “I was with the band... *all* of them.”

Kate noticed that Jackie’s normally chocolate colored skin had actually turned pale.

Kate sat silent and straight-faced for a moment more, inviting Jackie to almost buy into her statement. At last, a half-smile broke out on her face. It broadened; she squeezed her eyes shut, and shook in barely-contained laughter.

“Aw!” Jackie feigned throwing a silverware roll, and then snorted. “Well then, it looks like you saved me from giving you too much credit.”

“You mean you’re actually disappointed that I didn’t whore myself out for a concert?” Kate asked.

“Forget it,” Jackie said, waving dismissively. “But

still, you *do* look like that chick in the photo.”

“Chevrouness.”

“Who?”

“That’s her name,” Kate said, gesturing casually towards the painting. “Her stage name, at least. But you’re right; I *do* kinda look like her. I’m surprised I never noticed it before.”

“You two could be related, to tell the truth,” Jackie said, giving the picture a more studious stare. “Her hair’s shorter, not quite as thick, and her nose is longer, but out, rather than down. That’s about it.”

A strange look came over Kate’s face. It was brief and vague, almost like a grimace. It passed, but not before Jackie noticed it. “Something wrong?” She said.

“It’s nothing.” Kate shook her head. “Just a thought.”

“Penny for it,” Jackie said.

“I said it’s nothing,” Kate said, more forcefully.

“Okay, okay,” Jackie said, raising her hands in a warding gesture. “Geez, don’t bite my head off.” She checked her watch. “You know, we ought to order. You gotta be at work soon, right?”

“Not for another hour,” Kate said, removing her credplate from her wallet. She placed it into the slot on the wall beside the table and made her choice from the selections that appeared on the touch screen above it. “Besides, we’re on the Bridge.” She pointed to the windows by the restaurant’s entrance. Beyond the Bridge’s stainless steel girders, the League Pyramid loomed above the harbor and the skyline. “HQ’s just a straight shot down the highway.”

“Yeah, but it takes a good fifteen minutes for you to get your uniform on, let alone sync with all the nano-crap in it, right?” Jackie mulled over her own meal decision for a moment longer, and then sulked while she finally punched in her choice.

“Geez, what’d you order?” Kate said in a sympathetic tone. “The look on your face was like you went and asked for the chili.”

Again, Jackie blanched. “Oh, God... I *did* ask for the chili.”

“Toilet paper’s a blessing and a curse,” Kate said, pursing her lips, “and you’ll be finding that out before the day’s done.”

“That bad, huh?” Jackie said.

“Well, I did tell you to stick with the eggs,” Kate answered. “But then again, you probably don’t have that much to worry about. I mean, when they hook you up to your console, don’t you have a catch tube installed in your...?”

“It can overload if I’m sick,” Jackie said.

“I doubt you’ll get *that* sick,” Kate replied. “I’ve seen you eat stuff a vacuum cleaner won’t. Not to mention I’m one of the few people who’s actually seen you eat. Most of the folks back at HQ think you spend your life hooked up to the mainframe’s systems, with the computers just socking the food to your veins.”

“Is that a fact?” Jackie said.

“You sound surprised.”

“Well, it ain’t all that shocking, come to think of it,” Jackie mused aloud. “After all, I do run some long hours there. And I gotta admit, being on the I-Link is a helluva lot more exciting than the real world.”

“I resent that,” Kate said. “The real world’s my jurisdiction after all. Well, mostly.”

“And there are folks at HQ who think that you enforcers don’t ever take your uniforms off,” Jackie remarked with a broad grin, “but I know better.”

“Well, it’s easier to leave it on,” Kate said. When she nodded, it seemed sad, almost grave. “But I don’t. I think the others are crazy to do it.”

“Why’s that?” Jackie said. “The stuff I’ve seen you do with it over the security cams-”

“So now you’re a voyeur?” Kate said, eyeing Jackie curiously.

“Hey! That’s not what I meant,” Jackie snapped.

“I know.” Kate made a soft laugh. “You kinda left yourself wide open for that one.”

“Well, I meant it,” Jackie said. “The krid you can do with that suit sometimes makes me want to become an enforcer myself.”

“You like what you do too much,” Kate said, shaking her head. “Sides, it’s not as easy as it looks.”

“What could be so tough about it, besides the training?” Jackie asked.

Again, Kate fixed her with an odd gaze, but covered just as quickly as before.

“If you only knew,” she said.

“Knew what?”

“Training’s the easy part,” Kate replied. “But the synching ... That’s something else entirely. I’ve seen men, bigger and stronger than me, lose their minds.”

She stared at her open, empty right hand. Beads of condensation still clung to her skin from the glass of iced tea she had been nursing from when they first arrived. She flexed her fingers once, as if testing to see if they were real. “It’s like having to learn how to control new limbs, like having an infinite supply of arms and legs. They load your nervous system up with so many bionics just to make it a part of yourself, you begin to wonder if your every move will start going with a sound effect. Some people ... they didn’t take well to the synching. It unbalanced them mentally for a time; some ... they just ...”

Her voice trailed off.

Jackie was silent.

“Just be glad you didn’t have to go through that,” Kate said. “At least all your implants were voluntary. And most of the stuff you do in the I-Link is automatic.” She glanced at Jackie, again with her curious stare. “So, you still want to join the family?”

“Well... you gave me a lot to think about; that’s for sure,” Jackie said. She gave a nervous laugh.

“Getting cold feet now, Jacks?” Kate said. “That’s not like you.”

Jackie shook her head resolutely. “No, not really. It’s just a bit more than I thought, is all.”

“You know, having a suit that becomes an extension of you isn’t the only plus about being an enforcer,” Kate said.

“It isn’t?”

Discreetly, Kate’s hand went to the CANCEL icon on the ordering screen.

“Another thing is the obscene amount of tech we’re hooked up to, like detection software,” Kate said. “It’s designed to search for just about anything, you know. Hidden people, places, things, I-Link anomalies, illegal gateways...” Her metallic gray eyes locked dead onto Jackie’s large brown ones. “Brain riders ...”

Kate had barely finished the last word when Jackie sprang from her seat. But Kate reacted with near-invisible speed. In a fraction of a second, Jackie was slammed back against her seat, held securely by the neck against the wall by a pair of black tendrils. The projections grew from the sleeve of Kate’s blouse –now distended and sheathing her hand and forearm in black–, wrapped double around Jackie’s neck and impaled into the booth’s wall, at first soft and malleable as leather, and then solid as steel.

“Don’t make a scene,” Kate said. “You’ll scare the civvies, and I’ll have to inject you with some of my own nanos. You know the rest, I think: You’ll go night-night

with Jackie, stuck in that body, and then the League techies will have to pry you out. That means tracing you, and going through all the legal krid that I hate. Worst part is you'll be executed for hacking a League operative. So why don't you just come on out of there and save me a lot of boring paperwork?"

"Not if I kill her first." "Jackie" made a sneering, smart aleck grin. "I could stop her heart if I wanted."

"Don't flatter yourself," Kate said. "We both know you won't do it. And even if you did, don't think that I'd stop you. Jackie made a commitment to the League, the same as me. She knew what that would mean, just as well as I do."

"You don't have the..."

She froze in mid-sentence. Her eyes went wide, and then rolled up into her head. A small trickle of blood ran down her neck from the enfolding layers of tendrils.

"You were saying something?" Kate said. "Kinda uncomfortable for you, isn't it? I can make the arm's edge sharper if you like, but then I think you'd be suffering from a bad case of 'look, ma, no head' syndrome."

Kate waited a second more to make her point, then dulled the edges. She watched as "Jackie" relaxed with relief, and chose to speak again.

"Well, it looks like you got it all figured out, huh?" The quality of the rider's voice had changed into something completely unlike the Jackie that Kate knew. It was hollow, more direct, and mocking. There was now no question as to the type of presence that managed to subsume her friend.

"Now I know what you are," Kate said. "Scared kridless one moment, talking krid the next; you sure act like a hacker; I thought you'd be a bigger fish."

"You're perceptive. How'd you guess it so fast?"

"Like you said, I'm perceptive." Kate said with a

shrug. “Jackie knows that I don’t take the suit off until my days off. She’s not that much into small talk; she likes to keep it down to important stuff. Also, she knows more about my past than I do, and never lets me forget it. She also hates it when I call her ‘Jacks.’ Oh yeah, and when I told her about Ambush, she knows that I don’t gush like some airhead teeny-bopper.”

“Wow, man, it sure looks like I screwed up,” the hacker said, still eerily confident. “Not that it matters. I didn’t get much from you, but it was enough.”

“Data mining?” Kate said. “You could’ve just tapped the source. What happened? League mainframe was too much for you? No chance of you telling me what company you work for, I guess.”

“I’m not working for a company,” the hacker answered. “And here’s another surprise: I’m not exactly what you’d really call a ‘hacker.’”

“So what are you, then?” Kate said, feeling her patience beginning to slip. This ... whatever she was, was definitely fond of talking, but was telling her nothing. And despite being in direct contact, her own scans gave her another big goose egg, save presence of a rider.

“I alone am not your worry,” the presence said. “But my colleagues have a great interest in the League ... specifically its defenses. You were my primary target, as a matter of fact. But we underestimated the software in your suit’s man-machine interface. You’ve got some really badass krid on you. But your friend was a bit too easy to get into. So I just used her to get what I needed from you.”

“I didn’t give you anything sensitive,” Kate said. “Any monkey can get the stuff I said off the I-Link.”

“General stuff,” the presence said, “not specifics, which you *did* give me. Like just how hard it is to sync with your nanos. That ring a bell?”

“One whole thing,” Kate said dryly.

“Small steps, is what I call it,” the presence replied. There was no arrogance in the voice, no swagger, but plenty of salt. “Not to mention the fact that we *did* find a weakness in the League’s defenses. Good ol’ flawed humans. What d’you say to that?”

“Give us time,” Kate said, and smiled. “You know you can’t sting us in the same place twice.”

“Maybe we don’t want to,” the presence said. “Maybe we’ll just rest satisfied that the League isn’t perfect.”

“What’ve you got against the League anyway?” Kate said, more curious than frustrated. “They’re the reason why humans still exist on this planet anyway, and why all of creation wasn’t just turned into millions of kingdoms for God knows what. Are you even faintly aware of the dangers of screwing around with dimensions?”

The presence laughed –not mocking, only amused.

“Typical of League dogs: bred to think we’re all stupid ... that we couldn’t possibly know, that we couldn’t ever fully appreciate what it is you do. Some of us remember the war just fine. How can we not, when the League never lets us forget it? And of course, you blow things out of proportion, in your favor. If it’s one thing you do well, it’s keep the propaganda wheels turning.”

Kate was silent. Against her better judgment, she tasted the words the brain-rider and realized that in the back of her mind, even though they were the banter of a common thug, they made a sort of perverse sense. She’d seen enough of the world as a member of Cybersoft, and enough of the other worlds as an enforcer to be less than pleased with the League’s handling of the technology and planet they’d inherited after the war.

“Your eyes are opening,” the presence said. Jackie’s face made a knowing grin. Kate replied with a sour look.

“Good; you didn’t insult my intelligence by denying

it,” the presence said. “That means you’re smarter than most.”

“Am I really, now?” Kate said flatly. “Maybe I just called for backup.”

“Maybe you did, but I won’t be around for that long.”

“I firewalled Jackie’s bionics when my blades cut you,” Kate said. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Again, the presence laughed. “Ever arrogant, eh? You League types really are all cut from the same mold. We’re not without our own resources, and some of us are just damn good.” Jackie’s body sighed. “But now you’re starting to bore me. And this body’s getting a crick in its neck, so I’ll be going now.”

“Excuse me?” Kate said, half in disbelief. Was this brain-rider stupid or was he or she really that good? League firewalls were supposed to be impossible to break. “Yes, enforcer chick,” the presence said with a wink. “I am just that good... better than you, even. Oh, and just to prove it...”

A surge of electricity cut through Kate’s forearm: a spear of pure pain tearing through her fingertips, down through the knuckles, wrists and into her elbow. Her muscles hardened reflexively as she yelped and pulled it back, the force of the shock knocking her against the back of the seat. The tendrils from her uniform buckled and went limp, unfastening themselves from Jackie’s neck.

Kate watched as Jackie’s eyes un-focused, crossed, then shut. She slumped down, and fell limply into the booth.

Groaning, Kate righted herself. With residual pain shooting through her arm, she grasped her wrist and swore. Her vision refocused and she squeezed the remaining tears from her eyes. She looked across the restaurant, and was relieved to find that no one had noticed what had gone on. Jackie, however, had collapsed sideways in the booth.

Shaking off and then ignoring the lingering pain and numbness in her arm, she hopped out of her seat and went to her friend's side. Seeing the small gash in her neck, she took several napkins from the holder, and pressed them against the wound. She tried to use her suit to inject her with repair nanobots, but the shock had overloaded the man-machine interface. Her biocomp informed her that it was still trying to compensate. Even the tendrils from her suit hadn't retracted. They hung flaccidly from her fingertips, slowly sagging across the surface of the table and seat like caramelized ink.

"Jackie, speak to me!" Kate said, tapping her on the right cheek. "You still in there?"

Jackie's eyes fluttered, and then went wide as they focused on her.

"You remember who I am?" Kate said.

"Course I do," Jackie said, sounding almost offended. "You're the grand duchess of Gaia, come for tea."

Kate grimaced, but was surprised at how it seemed that nothing had happened. "It's you all right. But I think that rider made your sense of humor even lamer."

"You know, if my head didn't feel like it had a baby, I'd hit you," Jackie said.

"My point."

Jackie sat up and winced. She took the napkins from Kate and pressed them hard against her neck. "Gawd, what'd you do, girl? Try to cut my head off or something?"

"You had a brain-rider in you," Kate said. "How much do you remember?"

"Bits and pieces. I think it happened yesterday, back at work, when I was still hooked up to the mainframe. He must've been waiting for me in the system, probably trapped by the security subroutines, so he couldn't get out the same way he came in. How he hacked so deep, though, that's something I'd like to know." She glanced

around. “So we came here to eat?”

“Not anymore,” Kate said, helping Jackie to her feet. “You can walk? It’s almost time to be at work.”

“You’re kidding!” Jackie said in dismay as her stomach made an audible growl.

“Don’t get that way with me,” Kate answered as her biocomp finished rebooting, and her uniform reset itself, again becoming indistinguishable from everyday fabric. Hurriedly, she made a scan for the brain-rider, and then relaxed. Jackie was clean. “I just saved your cyberized ass... not to mention my pride. ‘Sides, you’re probably in for a little time at the infirmary, probably a CAT scan too. I’m pretty sure you’re clean, but I won’t be completely satisfied until I make sure that rider didn’t leave anything behind.”

Jackie’s stomach growled again as she righted herself. Supported by Kate on her right side, they began to make their way to the exit. “Aw, man! And I gotta eat the food at the HQ cafeteria!”

“Trust me,” Kate said. “It’s a step up from this place.”

“Then why’d you come here?” Jackie said.

“Never mind. We had this conversation before.”

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