

CHIPZ

Ryan Matejka

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Mira waited until the concrete pillar she had her back against stopped shuddering with the impact of incoming automatic gunfire, and then she got her shit together and ran in the opposite direction. By her previous count, she had less than three or four seconds to find something else solid to put between herself and the gunman before his next magazine was ready to punch some holes in her comparatively delicate organic body. Considering she hadn't yet been able to scrounge up the credits to augment her legs with high-velocity synthetic musculature, this was a very, very small window of time in which to run for her life. With two seconds to spare, she dug her boot into the sludge that covered the ground and slid herself around to the protection of the next pillar.

"Come back here you thieving bitch!" her sole pursuer shouted through an artificial voice box that had the same effect of a megaphone. As convincing of an argument as his demand was, Mira decided she'd have a better chance of seeing what counted as daylight again if she instead stayed put.

"Come and get me you ass-faced junkyard!" Mira shouted back with notably less volume. To be fair, this itself wasn't the smartest thing to say either considering Mira didn't have a weapon or the physical ability to subdue a gun-toting heavily-augmented opponent who looked twice her size and like he'd killed three people over breakfast, but the mixture of adrenaline and black market uppers known as CHPZ in her veins was getting the best of her. Nonetheless, the man likewise chose an alternative to her suggestion, and instead opened fire on the concrete pillar she hid behind while letting out a roar that was loud enough to compete with the blasts of gunfire in giving Mira a bad case of tinnitus. She quickly made a note in her internal scrapbook application to consider augmented eardrums as another requirement of her new line of work.

A chunk of pillar exploded next to her forearm, tearing her shirt and nearly taking off several layers of flesh with it. She added "new shirt" to the same list.

This was all just on-the-job training. Nobody was going to sit her down and teach her what exactly to prepare for when stealing from an off-the-books pet cloner, let her watch them demonstrate it themselves a couple times, and then stand next to her and guide her through her first few attempts. How was she to know that such a profession would have need for an impressively deadly and determined security guard? She figured stealing from a pet cloner would be an easy first gig—a stepping stone that would get her feet wet before taking on the really dangerous and profitable gigs.

While her protective pillar was still under a constant explosion of gunfire, Mira took a look around to assess her options. There was only one more pillar in front of her in this ancient building before she got to the windows, but seeing as she was at least ten stories up and had totally organic legs, she wasn't feeling very confident about a jump. To her left was a room with a shut door, behind which might have been another, safer way out, but she had no way of knowing this given her completely organic eyes couldn't scan the layout, and it was too far of a run through sludge without cover to get there in one piece anyway. To her right was a gigantic hole in the building out of which she could see the black smoggy night and nothing else—while there was a chance she could use this hole to get to the lower floor, she'd have to get closer to find out if that was even possible, at which point she would be totally exposed and unable to turn back in time if it was a dead end.

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She didn't much like any of those odds. She needed a sure thing. She needed to stay alive so that she could get blissed out on more CHPZ while she was still young and the Earth was still somewhat habitable.

With nowhere to go, Mira took a quick stock of what tools she had at her disposal while gunfire continued to chip away at the pillar. There was her body, which was pretty useless; her clothes, which were plain, dirty, and now ripped; her bag, in which was what the ass-faced junkyard was after; and her only current augment—the computer in her brain that let her connect to the internet, store memories and other data in perfect condition, and access applications. With these her only tools, Mira decided she was fucked and waited for the hail of bullets to stop.

The room went silent.

"Mind if I ask you a question before you start shooting again?" Mira shouted.

"Who says I'm going to start shooting again?" the man replied. "Maybe I'm going to come up next to you and rip your head off of your spine."

"We both know you're going to start shooting again because you have no idea what I'm capable of so you'd rather keep your distance. Also I've always been pretty good at pattern recognition."

With the sound of gunfire nothing more than a distant echo and the immediate threat to her life momentarily reduced, Mira temporarily and unintentionally lost herself in the overwhelming sensation of being under the influence of both adrenaline and CHPZ.

On its own, CHPZ was a very pleasurable drug that made its user feel euphoric, aroused, and for brief periods of time able to sense things that were impossible to a sober brain, such as being able to see and smell audio. Mixed with the adrenaline that came from being in a constant near-death experience, however, all three of these effects were greatly enhanced. Mira was now feeling better, hornier, and more in tune to the world around her than she'd been in her entire life, which should have been confusing given her predicament but was only made more enjoyable by the drug.

Mira bit her lip and squirmed with delight and anticipation while her senses seemed to be in coitus with each other. For a moment she forgot where she was entirely and resolved to lay down and do absolutely nothing, but then one of her mixed senses picked up on something interesting that snapped her back to the present time and place. She decided she wasn't totally fucked after all.

"Whatever, so what's your question then?" the man asked, unaware of Mira's half second of vulnerable bliss.

"What if I just give it back to you? Will you let me go?" Mira asked, her mind fighting hard against the drug despite its obvious allure.

The man took a few seconds to think about this, during which time Mira temporarily succumbed to the chemical cocktail again, albeit to a less extreme degree now that the drug had apparently hit its apex early—likely thanks to the adrenaline—and was currently wearing out.

"I don't see why not," the man said.

"You're not lying?" Mira asked.

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"Just toss it over here, I'll take it and leave you alone. I promise."

Mira slid her bag off of her shoulder, picked up a big glob of sludge from the floor, and slopped it into the bag. She did this four more times until the bag was completely full of foul-smelling gunk, then peeked around the pillar and tossed the bag over to the man. It slid through the sludge past the previous pillar and came to a stop at his feet. He opened up the bag, looked inside, and put his entirely exposed mechanical hand into the sludge to look for the item Mira stole. However, without the sense of touch, he appeared to be unable to feel around for it. As if it would make a difference, he pulled that hand out, held the bag with it, and dug around inside with his other mechanical hand, trying to sort through the sludge to find the item.

"Are you sure it's in here?" he asked.

"Keep digging, I promise it's there!" Mira replied.

She then stepped completely out from behind the pillar and began to walk toward the man, who was too busy looking down to notice her at first. He heard her footsteps in the sludge just as she passed the first pillar, however, and looked up in alarm.

"Don't come any closer! Stay there!" he shouted through that stupid mechanical voice box.

"My mistake, I thought you told me to 'come back here you bitch' and I wanted to comply," Mira said, and continued her slow walk toward the man.

He reached around for his gun at his hip, but failed to get his hand around its grip. He looked down at the gun and then his hand, the latter of which was covered in sludge, and grunted as he tried to close his fingers around the gun. The exposed gears and pistons shrieked in agony.

"Have you ever tried CHPZ? It's really quite the drug," Mira said. "It not only makes you feel good, but under the right circumstances it can let you see and understand things clearer than you could with a sober mind."

"Shut up you bitch!" the man grunted.

"For instance, I was able to smell the chemical compounds of this sludge as well as feel the makeup of your entire body, especially your exposed mechanical arms. Here, let me help you with that."

While the man was distracted by his inability to use his hands, Mira pulled the gun out of his holster and held the barrel against his head. She then reached into the bag, pulled out what he'd been looking for, and showed it to him.

"I didn't lie, it was here. I just didn't mention how stupid it would be to gum up your hands by looking for it yourself. Now, I held up my end of the deal and gave this back to you, so now you're going to hold up your end and let me go and never come looking for this, or else I'm going to put a bullet in your head."

Mira had never really hurt anyone before, much less killed anyone, and she didn't actually intend to start today, but the CHPZ was still raging through her body enough that she figured it would be a much easier life-altering decision to make and live with.

Putting the small item she'd stolen in her pocket and keeping the gun aimed at the man, who was still capable of giving her a good beating if he decided to risk it, Mira stepped around him and backed away toward the exit.

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Riding the receding wave of the CHPZ, she bolted down the stairs, across town, and back to the home of her contractor without stopping. As instructed earlier, she knocked four times on the unassuming apartment door. The old woman answered, looking like a tired, older version of Mira herself.

Mira dug the item out of her pocket, carefully wiped the remaining sludge off of it onto her shirt, and handed it to the woman. "Just like new," she said.

"Oh thank you! Thank you, thank you!" The old woman said, holding it between her index and thumb and admiring it. "Did I tell you? It's been in my family for generations. He may have taken many things from me in the divorce all those years ago, but I couldn't bear the thought of him keeping it. Oh, if only I had a daughter to pass it down to." She then slipped it over her ring finger, where it fit perfectly. She smiled at Mira, then her eyes fixed on Mira's forearm where the concrete had ripped a hole in her shirt. "He didn't give you too much trouble, did he?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Mira said.

"Good. I had faith in you. Now give me your arm," the old woman said, holding out her right hand. Mira took hold of her forearm, and the woman likewise took hold of Mira's. Behind her eyes, Mira pulled up a window on her internal computer to view the website where she'd created an account to hold the payment credits from her illicit endeavors. In a matter of seconds, while holding onto each other, Mira watched her number of credits grow from zero to three figures.

"Pleasure doing business with you, ma'am. Be sure to tell your friends they can count on me if they need anything of the sort done for them," Mira said as they released their hold of each other.

"Same to you, and I'm sure some of them will be contacting you shortly. It's such a relief to deal with such a polite young woman for such ... *upsetting* matters."

It was cute, really, the way she couldn't even bring herself to say the word. Mira wondered if she might ever grow to be like the old woman someday.

The two said goodbye to each other and the old woman retreated into her home, shutting the door behind her.

It was official, Mira was now a thief for hire with a 100% success rate. The victory felt better than she'd expected, thanks in large part to how close she'd come to failure and how much the job had meant to her client.

Still, it paled in comparison to the feeling of being on CHPZ, especially in a life-or-death situation. She looked at her account balance yet again. It was just enough to get a small augmentation like shatter-proof knees or a single eye with multivision modes, both of which could have helped immensely in what she'd just been through. It could also buy her some new clothes and nicer furnishings for her home.

But most importantly, it could buy her enough CHPZ to spend an entire three days living in a beautiful dream.

She called her dealer, set a place to meet, and made her way off into the smoggy night.