



MY REALITY APP

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STORY BOOK EDITOR
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CHAPTER 9: OBSERVED



****Chapter 9: Observed****

"Damn it!" Luca slammed his fist on the desk, the cluttered array of screens around him flickering under the motion. He had made a mistake—a serious one. He'd left a door open. And now, someone had found it.

For days, Luca had noticed an unusual figure appearing in the video feeds he had hacked to follow Sofia. At first, he dismissed the man as a neighbor—just someone who happened to cross paths with Sofia near her apartment. But when he spotted the same man in the bustling crowd of the college cafeteria, his instincts flared.

The man was too deliberate.

At a glance, he moved like everyone else—casual, unremarkable. But Luca had spent years mastering the art of blending in, learning to move unnoticed through the crowd. This man's subtle awareness of his surroundings, his calculated gait, and the way his eyes scanned without appearing to look—it all screamed one thing: professional.

Worse, the kind of professional who operated outside the underground.

The only people who could pull off that level of blending were the security forces. And if someone like that was sniffing around Sofia, it wasn't by accident.



Luca couldn't risk hacking directly into the man's system—not without risking detection. Instead, he played it safe, piecing together what he could by hopping between lower-level profiles, slowly building a composite of the man's face. Once he had enough data, he ran it against the My Reality database, hoping—praying—that man wasn't who was suspecting to be.

The result hit him like a punch to the gut.

William Davis.

The name was as chilling as the man's reputation. William wasn't just any officer—he was the head of criminal investigations. His clearance level was sky-high, and the microchip embedded in his body made hacking into him impossible. This wasn't just bad. This was catastrophic.

Luca's mind raced as he tried to make sense of it. How had William found Sofia? Was it random, or had something he done tipped him off? Luca doubted William knew about him directly; if he did, Luca would already be sitting in a cold, dark cell. No, William was still in the dark about Luca—but he was far too close.

Luca needed answers. Fast.



He delved into the police records, accessing what he could without triggering alarms. There was no way to see the exact details of William's investigation, but perhaps something in the public reports would provide a clue. Over the last five months, thousands of reports had been filed. Somewhere in that sea of data, there had to be a trace of his mistake.

Methodically, Luca cross-referenced the logs of everyone he had hacked to follow Sofia. Each name was checked against the records of reported anomalies. Two matches appeared.

Two people had reported interruptions in their advertisement feeds.

Luca stared at the screen, disbelief washing over him. How had he missed this? He had spent years perfecting his scripts, polishing the code to anticipate and mask every conceivable side effect of his intrusions. Yet here it was—an oversight as glaring as it was dangerous.

He thought back to the endless hours he'd spent testing, tweaking, and retesting his systems. But no simulation could truly replicate the chaos of the real world. There was always something. Some hidden factor that revealed itself only under real-world conditions. And this time, he'd been lucky—incredibly lucky.



Considering the thousands of feeds he'd hacked during the Sofia operation, the fact that only two people had reported anything was a testament to how much people hated the relentless flood of ads. Most likely, they hadn't even realized something was wrong—they'd simply welcomed the break in the constant spam.

Still, luck could only take him so far.

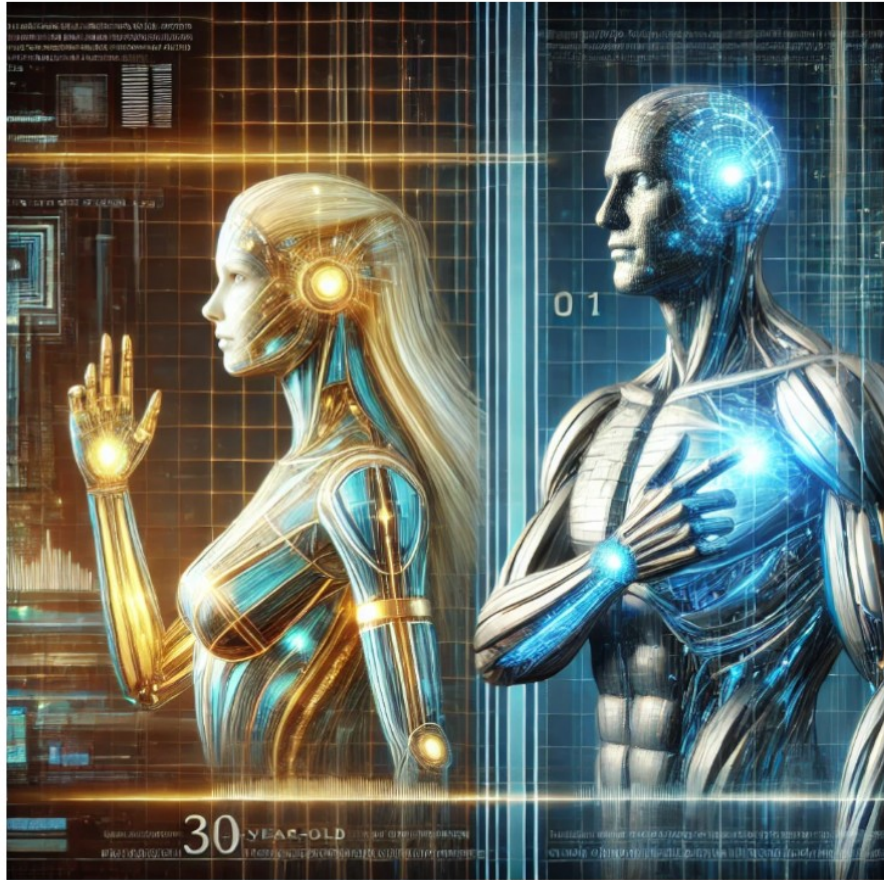
Luca worked quickly to patch the flaw. The issue with stopping the ad feeds was relatively easy to fix. He rewrote the offending lines of code, ensuring that future hacks would go unnoticed, even by those few who missed their ads.

But the damage was done. William Davis wouldn't forget those reports. He was already on the trail, piecing together the anomaly with the precision of a bloodhound. Luca had eliminated one vulnerability, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the net was tightening around him.

His jaw clenched as he stared at the screen, Sofia's profile still open in front of him. The stakes had never been higher. Every step he took now had to be perfect. One more mistake, and it was over.

William was too close.

Luca leaned back in his chair, his mind racing. He'd started this journey to bring down the beast, but now, the beast was staring right back at him.



Now that Luca had patched the issue with the ads, he could safely return to hacking the video feed system. But the problem hadn't gotten any simpler. If anything, his situation had become even more precarious. Contacting Sofia had gone from exceptionally difficult to nearly impossible.

Both Sofia and William carried the impenetrable security microchip, rendering direct hacking out of the question. Luca briefly entertained the idea of hacking into William to force him to abandon his surveillance of Sofia, but the risks were staggering. His scripts were carefully designed as passive listeners, tapping into streams of data without triggering system alerts. Active hacks—altering the system rather than merely observing it—were a far riskier endeavor. The moment he took an active step, he'd be lighting a beacon for every security algorithm in existence.

No, that wasn't an option. Luca needed an indirect approach, one clever enough to draw William's attention elsewhere without exposing himself.



He needed help.

And for that, he needed Henry and the underground.

Luca shut down the hacking session on his computer, his fingers lingering over the keyboard as the familiar hum of his system faded. He terminated the video loop in his contact lenses, the camouflage that allowed him to work undetected. Instantly, the full weight of My Reality's surveillance returned. He was back in the system.

For now, he had to act like a good, law-abiding citizen.

Contacting the underground required physical proximity to one of their hidden access points. Activating his camouflage while moving through the city streets would be suicide. The system constantly cross-referenced location data, and a mismatch between his real-world position and the system's tracking would trigger alarms instantly.

One method to reach the underground discreetly was through a cyber-café—a common and, ironically, ideal cover. These establishments catered to some of society's more private indulgences: augmented reality sex experiences. They allowed users to pair their My Reality feeds with mechanical dolls or even real human sex workers for tailored encounters. The most luxurious dolls, equipped with high-end customization, were priced far beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, making cyber-café a thriving business for offering such services at affordable rates.



Luca entered the cyber-café, the dim neon glow of its signage reflecting off his lenses. The attendant at the front desk barely looked up as he requested a private cabinet. The café was sprawling, a dark, labyrinthine maze housing over a hundred cabinets. Each was soundproofed and unmonitored—extra cameras weren't necessary when everyone's eyes already served as surveillance devices.

Luca was directed to a cabinet near the exit door, his payment already processed through the automated system. Inside, the room was spartan, lit by soft, artificial light. A mechanical doll stood motionless in the corner, its neutral face and generic features designed for anonymity.

He set the doll to its standard five-minute loop, a seamless cycle that would fool My Reality into thinking he was engaged for the full hour he had rented. The system would see nothing out of the ordinary: just another citizen indulging in an everyday fantasy.

After a few minutes, Luca activated his camouflage loop. The system would now replay the fabricated footage of his actions in the cabinet while he moved freely beyond its watchful eyes.

Luca slipped out through the café's backdoor into a dimly lit alley. The air was damp, the faint smell of garbage mingling with the metallic tang of city grime. He glanced around, ensuring he was alone before moving quickly toward the nearby sewer entrance. This alley was rarely traveled, and tonight, it was mercifully empty.



At the sewer grate, Luca crouched low, his movements deliberate as he pulled the cover aside. He dropped into the darkness below, his footsteps echoing faintly as he made his way through the narrow tunnels. Shadows clung to the walls, and the occasional drip of water was the only sound accompanying him.

After a few minutes, he reached a rusted maintenance door, its edges worn with age. From his pocket, Luca retrieved a key—a relic of the old city, long forgotten by the corporate overlords who now ruled the surface. He unlocked the door, revealing a small, hidden chamber.

Inside, he found a concealed panel cleverly disguised as part of the wall. With a practiced motion, he slid it aside, revealing a narrow passage that led into the remnants of the old subway system. The underground's outpost was just beyond.

The outpost hadn't changed much in the nearly three decades since Luca first stepped into its shadowy embrace. The same precarious huts, cobbled together from scavenged metal and wooden panels, lined the narrow paths. The faint hum of stolen electricity powered the community, providing just enough for basic heating and simple stoves to boil water and prepare meager meals. Life here was harsh and unforgiving—but it was free.



Luca wound his way through the settlement, his gaze taking in the familiar sights of resilience and determination. Near the edge of the village, he spotted Henry crouched low, hammering nails into the frame of a new hut. A family was building a larger space in preparation for a newborn on the way—a treasure among the underground people. Children represented hope, the pillars on which the dream of a free world rested.

Henry, once a towering figure of unyielding strength, now moved with the careful precision of someone nearing eighty. Time had weathered him, but it hadn't dulled his spirit. When he caught sight of Luca, he pushed himself to his feet with a small grunt, a warm smile spreading across his lined face.

"So," Henry called out, his tone teasing, "looking for another beating at chess?"

Luca smirked, slipping into their familiar banter. "You bet, old man. You just got lucky last time."

They embraced briefly, the kind of hug shared by two men who had been through more than words could ever convey. As they stepped back, Henry's sharp eyes caught the seriousness in Luca's expression. Without a word, he understood the unspoken weight.



Turning to the family building the hut, Henry waved them off with a kind smile. "I'm taking a little break. Don't worry, I'll be back to help finish up."

The two walked through the winding streets of the underground village, weaving between huts as the community settled into its evening rhythm. The scent of simple meals filled the air, and children lingered in the dim light, kicking an improvised soccer ball despite their parents calling them to supper. It was a fragile peace, a testament to the resilience of those who had chosen freedom over the comforts of the surface world.

After a short walk, they reached Henry's cabin. Like the others, it was modest, its walls patched together with care rather than luxury. Henry had always insisted on living no differently from anyone else. To him, leadership wasn't about privilege—it was about service.

Inside, Henry flicked on the heater, and they sat at the small table in the center of the room. Luca wasted no time, recounting the events of the past few days: his discovery of William Davis, the flaw in his code, and how William had come dangerously close to uncovering him. Henry listened in thoughtful silence, nodding occasionally but never interrupting.



When Luca finished, he leaned back, the weight of the situation clear in his voice. "I need to distract William—get him to turn his attention away from Sofia. But I can't do it through hacking. It's too risky."

Henry rubbed his chin, considering the options. "If we're going to pull him off her trail, we need to give him something he can't ignore. What do you know about the cases he usually takes?"

Luca thought for a moment. "As head of criminal investigations, he has a lot of freedom. He's usually involved in high-profile cases—gruesome murders, major crimes. But lately, he's delegated everything to his team. It's like he's obsessed with Sofia."

Henry's brow furrowed. "Then he knows she's connected to something big. But he's the only one watching her, right? Nobody else in his department?"

"That's right. As far as I can tell, the rest of the department doesn't even know what he's investigating."

Henry nodded slowly. "That means whatever he has isn't strong enough to share with anyone else. He's not ready to go public. If we're going to pull him off, it has to be something substantial. Something he can't ignore."



Luca reached into his bag and pulled out a small folder. "I thought of that. I've been compiling a list of high-profile events—political rallies, corporate galas, anything where our people could stage a distraction."

Henry took the folder, flipping through the pages. As he read, a sly smile crept across his face.

"I think I know just the way to make that inspector run like a rocket."