



“So tell me more about this CJ fellow,” said Driver, as he drove down Grace Street. “Why is he getting under your skin?”

“You might be a little bit right. I might be a little jealous. A little bit—*maybe*. He’s getting more attention than me, but I’m the star. I can’t just sit by and let that happen. I had to claw my way into the spotlight.”

“Sounds like you’re living in a bubble, not a spotlight.”

“You have to! That’s the only way to stay on top. People don’t understand how hard it is, being famous and all.”

“Too famous to be human?”

“They don’t want human. They want arrogance. They want dirt. They want excessive, and they want disaster. But what they really want ... more than anything—is what you have. What you’ve earned.” E looked out the window. “Let them in and you lose everything.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like *that!*”

“You don’t seem too happy about what you do. Maybe you should give people some of what they want. Might make you feel better. Happier, I mean.”

“Oh, no. People have to get this on their own. You can’t help them.”

“Nobody ever helped you?”

“If I pay them. Like you. You wouldn’t be driving me around unless I was throwing money at you.”

Driver tossed one of E’s C-bills in the backseat. “We all got to make a living, but we got to be human first.” He made a left into the parking lot of Strange Matter. “This nightclub might be little more your style.” Driver pulled up to the curb and leaned his head back. “Try to have some fun.”

E slid out of the cab and slicked back his ponytail. The front door was only a few steps away, but he seemed timid. He stood by the cab, hesitant to slip on his shades.

The cab drove away and E went through the entrance.

“Live music tonight,” a girl yelled. “Ten dollar cover!”

E slapped a C-note on the podium, then tapped the bill. “Who’s playing?”

“Mink Brothers. They rock!”

This was E’s kind of crowd, people that danced where they stood, women who gazed as he walked by, men who toasted a longneck when they made eye contact. He grabbed a beer and stood by a drink rail to watch the band.

Two women approached E, gawking and whispering. They giggled as they took turns shoving each other toward E.

Another woman appeared on the other side of E, but she wasn’t drooling, or even looking at E. She, too, was watching the band.

E gave her a once over, his body grooving to the beat.

“You’ll have to help him, you know.”

E put his beer to his chest and said, “Talkin’ a me?”

“You’ll have to put aside your differences,” she said, staring at the stage.

E spun his head, still not sure it was her that spoke. “Are you a robot?” E asked her, then inspected her shoulders. “Is there a knob here somewhere?”

She faced E.

He froze, stunned by her beauty. With shoulder length dreads and beautiful dark skin, the woman was put together by the best of the best.

E bounced in his boots and said, “Dayum. You’re the finest-looking robot I’ve ever seen.”

“What you’re thinking about CJ is wrong,” she said, her eyes back on the stage.

“Were you in the cab just a minute ago?”

“He’s not your enemy.”

“Now the little shit has his own PR Agent; is that it? You get paid to follow me around, score brownie points for the fucker.” E raised his beer. “And I thought I was slick.”

“He’ll need your help.”

E faced her, his longneck bottle tilted in her direction. “Screw CJ. Let’s talk about you and me. I got a hotel suite big enough to park a blimp in.”

“A candle won’t burn without a wick.”

“God, you are giving me wood, baby doll.”

“What if no one was there to light the candle?”

“Baby, you can light my candle anytime. Hey! Whadaya know? *Now’s* a good time.”

She turned her head and gazed in his pupils.

“I’m serious,” he said. “The night is young, and so are we.”

She walked away and E watched her, fixated on her killer body and confident stride.

The game was on.

He set his beer on the drink rail and followed her to the bar, or close to the bar, or somewhere near the bar. E spun in circles, trying to find her. The bar wasn’t packed, yet he’d lost her in the small crowd.

The band finished a song and a waitress bolted to the stage. The lead singer leaned over so the barmaid could whisper in his ear. The singer grabbed the microphone and said, “I hear we have some rock royalty in the house. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s E, from Nathan Juju. Thanks for coming out tonight.”

The comment flew past E.

A babe in a skimpy cocktail dress spun toward E and said, “On the house.” She lifted a jigger from a tray and bowed, offering E a shot of peach-colored happiness.

E took the drink and nodded, his eyes wandering, searching for the woman who had just spun his socks.

The server pushed a strand of E’s hair behind his ear and winked, then she took E by the hand and led him to a table full of women.

Mission accomplished.