

STEPHEN NEAL

# Deception

Jak lay next to me snorin' louder than I ever heard in my life. He knows it bothers me and I think that's why he won't get it looked at. Out of all my contracts, I hate him the most. But when he keeps me up with his noise I have time to think about things like the lives of the people at the top of the building. They don't have to get contracted out like me. Jak comes to bed every night and is allowed to do as he pleases with my body because of a damn contract. I am worthless and used, like the garbage that clutters the contaminated streets below. He beats me all the time, but that ain't in my contract. I'm not one to be loud and complain though since that would just make it worse.

While I'm dreamin', I hear a little whistle noise outside my home door. It must be nothin', nobody ever is out at these hours since the men are sleepin'. But the noise came back louder and sounded more whispery than whistly. I don't see no harm in checkin' the eye hole since Jak is asleep and it's probably nothin'. It don't matter how much noise I make

gettin' out of bed since Jak can't hear shit over his snores, but steppin' over his damn work clothes might get tricky. I put on my padded slippers so that my feet don't make so much noise and I creep to the locked door and prepare to look through the eye hole. Before I can get there, I heard the noise again, and it said my name. What kind of noise sounds remotely like "Jezz?" I best be careful 'bout this. I slide my eye over the eye hole and look out to see none other than Gildina. What does the bitch want at this hour?

I crack the door to ask what she want at this kind of hour.

"What d'ya want? It's nearly eight at night and you come callin'!" I whisper, exhaling.

"Jezz, we have a problem. It can't wait no more and I know you is the smartest on the floor'." Gildina pants. "I have somethin' I need to show you."

"Can it wait? I ain't tryin' to wake Jak up and get a whippin'," I yawn. I'm tired, but Gildina has my attention.

"No, it can't fuckin' wait, Jezz! All this shit is a lie! I don't think outside is how we were told," she exclaims under her breath.

"You talking crazy, Gildina. We all know this is how it is and how toxic it is outside." I explain, anxious from the ridiculousness of her ideas. Maybe she took too many of them drugs in her room.

"Just shush and follow me and you'll see. Put a cloth in the door to open to be quiet when you come back. Don't wanna wake up that shitty contract man you have," Gildina warns.

“Fine, but I’m sure this ain’t shit.”

As I follow Gildina to her door I see for the first time how ridiculous her body appears. Her behind is almost animated like a toon on one of the HG’s. She focuses on those augments offered so much. I guess it got her a better contract, since her dude don’t beat her. Jak smacks me silly half the time. I ain’t about to go under the needle myself just to get an easier contract, though. When we get to the door she put her finger to her lip to make sure I am quiet and I nod. She opens the door quickly and shoves me in while she follows immediately after. She walks to the far side of the room and looks at me with a sense of calm I hadn’t seen all night.

“Okay. Don’t worry, we can talk how we want for now. I put him on too many drugs so he ain’t wakin’ up for hours,” she motions to the bed.

“Cool. But why am I here?” I ask, confused.

Gildina exhales, preparin’ to give me the rundown. “This side wall of my room faces the outside of the buildin’. Nothing is out there ‘cept the air and supposedly filth, right?”

I nod in agreement, more intrigued than I had been back in my room.

“Well, when they put in these screens to display these pretty pictures we want, they take out the original walls. Look at this view of outside and tell me what is wrong ‘bout it,” she explains.

Gildina clicks a button on the remote on the nightstand next to the bed and the nasty outdoors appeared. There is trash everywhere and people crawlin’ ‘bout trying to survive in the toxic air. Everything looks standard, hell it even looks

like the view from my room. “It’s the same, Gildina. Nothin’s wrong. What are you gettin’ at?”

“Don’t focus on the details, focus on the colors and the whole thing, not just pieces. Step back, Jezz.”

I step back, almost stepping on a button for the dispenser in the wall. I look at the view less harsh and more blurred. I can’t find anyth—there is somethin’ wrong. There’s a bright blue and light piece in the picture where it shouldn’t be. I walk to it and reach to touch it.

“Good, you found it. I knew you would, you are the smartest,” chirps Gildina.

“What is it?” I ask as I rub it with my finger. It is dented, almost like a crack in the wall.

“I think it’s a crack I made earlier from tossin’ a remote this direction when I got scared.” Gildina explains. “I had a visitor from the past, Jezz.”

“Girl you are trippin’ on some dips or some shit. The people from the past are all dead, like those people trying to survive down there,” I scoff as I point to a man breakin’ into an abandoned vehic door on the ground.

Gildina explains to me the visit of the woman from the past called Connie. This sounds like some far-fetched drug junk, ‘cept I’m still interested in that crack in the wall. Maybe the visit was real, but I don’t know what she wants me for exactly. “Gildina, say I believe your drug junk, what am I for? What does this crack have anything to do with me?”

“Jezz, it’s a crack! But, try lookin’ through it like you do your eye hole and you’ll see!”

I roll my eyes as I shuffle over to the wall with the crack. I lean over to look into it, makin' sure to cover my ass. Just cuz the rest of the girls show their ass don't mean I will, even if her man Cash is knocked out. As my eye focuses on this bright lil' crack, I see what Gildina was clammerin' about. Somethin' isn't right. There's a blue sky I can see. Green trees, blue water and people strollin' about. This shit can't be real, it's toxic out there. Maybe I'm sleepy. It's already ten at night. But wait, there is light outside. It can't be night. "This ain't makin' sense."

"I know! That Connie told me about a different place she went in the future where everythin' is natural and pretty. Where people live freely and happy. What if it is real, and it is out there right now?"

My head started spinning. Our lives in this buildin' could be a damn lie. What if this isn't the only life?

"I need to sit down." I mumble as I step back from the crack in the wall. Gildina sits me in a chair.

"It's freaky, ain't it? I mean maybe we could get out of here and see what's really goin' on out there," Gildina blabbers in excitement at the thought of more people seeing her round ass.

I sit in silence on the chair. I can't think straight. But maybe I am thinkin' the right way. The only thing I can even focus on is the idea of getting' out there. But we are monitored in the buildin'. We can't get down to the lowest floors without work passes. Wait, I have an idea.

"You wanna go out there, Gildina? We should go to see what it is like, even if we just peek our heads out the door," I say in a reassuring, calm tone.

“I dunno, Jezz. I mean we ain’t even been let off this floor before. What we goin’ do if they catch us sneakin’ round?” Gildina mutters.

I have to plot how to get us down there. Only the men on this floor have work passes, though. On top of all that, Gildina ain’t buying going down there. She was all damn excited to show me this shit, but she don’t wanna do nothing about it. I’m sure there is somethin’ to convince her, I just don’t have no clue what it’d be. Maybe I’ll persuade her with somethin’ with the cosmetics. All she care ‘bout anyway is her chest and ass.

“Hun, lemme ask you somethin’. You already used your cosmet ticket this year?” I ask sweetly to get her interest.

“Yeah! I did! I got my lips puffed and it’s great!” She chirps. “Don’t they look great?”

“Yeah they do, hun! But you know, I think they’d look even better with purple eyes.” I suggest slyly. “They look great now, but the eyes would really make ‘em hot.” I know I have her. I’ll just give her my ticket but she’d have to come with me.

“You think so? Shame, I already used my cosmet ticket this year. Maybe I should have gone for the eye dye.” she sighs. “You used yours yet?”

Success. “Nah I ain’t used mine. Tell you what, I’ll give you mine but you gotta come with me.” Hopefully she’ll take the bait. I don’t care, she can have the ticket for since I don’t even use ‘em. But gettin’ her to come with me is just a cool trade to me.

“You mean you’d let me have it? All I have to do is

go peek outside with you?” Gildina asks, perking up and immediately more interested in goin’ out there.

“Yup, that’s all. And I even have a plan how we goin’ to get there.” I say firmly.

I explain to her how we will get outside. Her contract man, Cash, is knocked out cold, and mine is asleep. We’ll steal their work passes to get to the transfer chute. After we get on the transfer chute, we have to go to the stop for my man’s work since he is the only one we know who works above ground. I explain to her the risk involved, but she don’t even seem to mind since I mentioned that damn cosmet ticket. She is ready to follow me anywhere now, so I just decide to lead her rather than even bother tellin’ her much more. We are goin’ outside, and that’s all she needs to know.

“Okay, get your man’s ID and I’ll get mine. If I ain’t back here in five minutes, come get me.” I tell her.

“Mmkay fine, works for me.” She mumbles back as she opens up the eye dye catalog and peruses the different colors.

I leave and tip-toe back to my room. It feels like the hairs on my forearms are raisin’ from the anxiety I feel. In my room, I can’t find where Jak put his damn pass. He never puts the damn thing in the same place twice. Tryin’ not to knock anythin’ over or make too much noise, I check every corner and every surface. Surely he didn’t lose it. I walk toward the bed to see if he had it on him, but as I step closer I almost trip on his pile of clothes. Damn worthless man, never cleans up after his own self. It ain’t in my contract to do it. But, just for peace of mind I’ll put ’em away. As I am movin’ ’em, his pass falls out of his pants. What a place to keep it. Good thing I ain’t so lazy otherwise I’d never have found the pass. I’m goin’ to head back to Gildina.

“Girl, we need to go. We ain’t got all day.” I scold Gildina for being so distracted by the cosmet catalog. “If you don’t hurry, I may have to take back my offer.”

“No! No, it’s okay I’m ready to go,” she says as she jumps up. She walks across the room to get her man’s pass. “Got the pass ready and everythin’ just like you said.”

“Then let’s do this.” I say firm as I can manage.

We are creepin’ out the door towards the chute at the end of the hall. It is an oddly shiny silver and well-maintained compared to the rest of the floor. I guess the people at the top don’t want no excuses for not goin’ to work. As we get to the chute, we have to present the stolen work passes. I am terrified but I can’t let Gildina see. If I freak, she will ruin the whole plan for us. I quickly insert Jak’s pass into the slot, and it opens for us to enter. Inside, the silver is even shinier, almost like the silver is puttin’ off some sort of light. After we step inside, the doors shut and lock behind us. I expect there to be a button to push with a clear marking, but instead a row of three buttons light up. Each one is a different color: blue, red, and green. Nothin’ tells us about these at all. My nerves are startin’ to peak and I don’t know what to do. I look down at Jak’s pass to see if it tells us anythin’ and Gildina starts getting impatient. I tell her to relax and let me think. His pass is green, so maybe that’s the answer. I push the green button and the chute feels like it fell from under us.

“Wow, I bet that take off would be real fun on some drugs.” Gildina pipes up.

I ignore her silly comments mostly because I don’t agree, and I ain’t lookin’ to argue. The chute has been goin’ for ‘bout five minutes when we start to feel bumpiness and slowin’ down. Suddenly, the walls of the chute change and show us



the outdoors. Or at least what we've always been shown. The view is of plains that are bare dirt and bodies scattered about from the people who die where they sleep. Well shit, maybe this really is the outside we're seein'.

"This is scary, Jezz. I don't like the looks of that if we goin' out there." Gildina whimpers to me as the image disappears.

"It'll be okay. Remember, that ain't how it really is." I warmly reassure her as I grip her hand.

The chute is slowing down fast and I can't hold on. Gildina and I fly to the other side of the moving compartment and slam into the wall. The chute stops, and the doors open. I help Gildina up and we peek out the door. The chute dings and we hurry out. The doors slam shut behind us just as we step out. We're in a long hall, but it's bigger than any hall I ever imagined. At the end of the hall there is a large green sign that says "Entrance," and I nudge Gildina to follow me to it. Maybe "Entrance" stands for somethin' else. As we are walkin' we hear a whirrin' like somethin's gettin' cleaned. To our right, there is another hall, and I peek my head around. At the end of the second hall, I see a maintenance droid cleanin' the floor.

"Gildina, don't make no noise. We can't get seen or heard by that droid down there or we'll get caught." I whisper.

Gildina nods, and we dash across the intersection of the halls out of sight of the cleaning droid. We're almost at the door when Gildina pokes me.

"The cleaner stopped." She whispers. "But did you hear that noise?"

"No, what noise?" I frantically ask her. If we are found,

we'll be executed on sight at this point.

Gildina points at the door marked "Not an Exit" and below it "Alarm will Sound". She is motioning with her hand that we should go see. I follow her and grab her hand as she went to open it.

"Wait, let's listen first before we go openin' doors. Might not be safe, plus there is an alarm," I cautioned.

She nods in agreement and puts her ear to the door. Her eyes widen and look perplexed. I put my ear to the door and hear somethin' that can't be. Through the door, we hear the sound of the Bobwhite Quail, the last bird to go extinct. As kids, we heard it when we were learnin' 'bout how toxic it was outside. Somethin' is wrong. I think this is our best chance at openin' the outdoors, though.

"Do you trust me, Gildina?"

"Yeah, Jezz. Of course, I mean you never done me wrong or nothin' before."

"Okay, good. Take these and go back the way we came." I hand her Jak's work pass and the cosmet ticket I promised. "I wanna see what is behind this door, but I don't think you should have to get caught with me."

"You sure, Jezz? I mean I already came this far." She asks politely, not wantin' to stay anyway.

"Yeah, it'll be okay. Go home."

Gildina looks me in the eye and seems to understand the urgency. She takes the pass and ticket and thanks me, and almost runs back to the chute. Before she gets there, I see a

metal arm grab her and she wails in fright.

“Jezz!!! Help me!” she screams louder than anyone I ever heard.

The cleaning droid is holding her and signaling an alert. The alarm in the buildin’ starts blarin’. This is the last chance. I step back and run at the door for momentum. My shoulder swings it wide open and I am stopped in my tracks. Blue and green everywhere. There is grass and birds flyin’ round and white clouds floatin’ in the sky. Behind me I hear metallic steps of more droids runnin’. I can’t control myself and I fall to my knees to weep in the green grass in front of me. I hear gunshots in the hall. The Assassins had just executed Gildina. She doesn’t deserve this, but I can’t think more ‘bout her dyin’.

“It was all a lie. Connie’s other world is this world.”

As I raise my head I look at the beauty in front of me through my tears. I feel the cold metal of a barrel pressed against the back of my head. I accept it. But now I know. Now I have seen it.