

# WHITE CELLS



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Colin Ryan

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Cover design by Colin Ryan

First draft, August 2016.

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*“Do not live half a life and do not die a half death.”*

*Khalil Gibran*

## Chapter 1

*Chicago, 2087*

Donovan knew it wasn't real, but, god damn, when she ran her finger softly up the middle of his exposed thigh it still sent a euphoric tingle rippling through him. It was the way she slid over his hip bone. The slight pauses she took, then the even slighter press of pressure she applied as it came to rest against his skin. Deep down, he knew it was only a digital rendering of her finger running over a digital rendering of his thigh, but it felt real. Donovan released a long, controlled exhale and gently coerced his closed eyes to slit themselves open. There she was. He was on his back; she was propped up on one elbow over him, her fiery curled red hair draped wildly over her naked shoulders

and, like a curtain, obscured the glimpse of her breasts he searched for instinctively. Her emerald eyes traced the track of her finger as it continued to wander over Donovan's body. With her knees bent, he could see her feet lingering in the air behind her head, tapping to some inaudible beat. As a matter of fact, there was no sound here. As a matter of fact, there was no anything here. With the notable exception of their two naked, post-coitus bodies piled atop each other, the environment was blank. Truly blank. A softly lit, off white expanse as far as the eye can render in all directions. Donovan could feel the ground beneath him, pressing up into him with all the equal force that her body was pressing down, but for the life of him, he could not find the point on the horizon where the ground stopped, and the overhead began.

“Hey, Poe...” Donovan said, still searching for a non-existent horizon. Her eyes flicked up coyly to meet his.

Poe. When he met her two years ago, her profile moniker tagged her as Juxxtipoe\_14. In the time since then, they'd bonded over a shared affection for mid-21st-century combat simulations. She was good, maybe better than him. She was a better shot for sure,

but he knew all the scenario maps, callouts, movements, and strategies. They made a good pair. Along with the rest of their team, they'd earned a respectable slot in the competitive top 100 cog-wide ladder rankings. To everyone else, she was simply JP or Jux. He was the only one who got to call her Poe.

“Yeah?” She prodded into the long silence between his thoughts.

“What’s up with always loading us into unprogrammed spaces?” He asked, lifting his head slightly off the ground to be able to see her out of more than just the very bottoms of his eyes.

She peered around as though just now realizing that they were indeed in unprogrammed space.

“What? Am I not giving you enough to look at?” She said and pushed herself back onto her knees, sweeping her hair back over her shoulders, putting all of herself on full, glorious display. Donovan’s eyes darted back to her. An exaggerated puff of air blew out his cheeks.

“I’m just sayin, maybe a little scenery would be nice.” The tips of his fingers reached out to graze her flat stomach.

“Never bothered you before.” She said.

“I didn’t say it was bothering me. I’m just asking. Seriously, we’ve been doing this for over a year, and I don’t know what any of your environments look like. Isn’t that a little weird?” He said.

She gave him a puzzled look. An inquisitive sorts, one laced with the slightest hint of defensive posturing. A moment passed between them, Donovan finding the silence to be more awkward than he thought his question warranted. Then, without a word, she was moving. Three short, isolated, controlled movements, each equally as smooth. First, her finger retreated from its aimless wanderings, leaving a quickly fading white dot in the spot where it last pressed into his skin. Then rolling back onto her knees. Then up to her feet. She settled, allowing her weight to drift back onto her heels, her hands falling onto her hips. She blew a tendril of fiery hair out of her face. He watched her, managing to only prop himself up clumsily on his elbows. Now far beneath, his cock hanging loose, body still beaded with



sweat, he stared up at her proportionally perfect rendered body towering over him and felt suddenly very vulnerable. She snapped, and a red silk kimono popped into existence around her shoulders, falling in neat waves down over her breasts, hips, and knees, its hemmed edge hovering just above her toes.

“Well. It’s my server, I make the rules, and I can render whatever I want, and I like it like this.” She said. Donovan sat up, torqued with her sudden sharpness.

“Poe, you can’t tell me that this is your default environment. That’s bullshit, and you know it.” His voice rang with that certain high whiney pitch it gets when he senses he isn’t going to get his way. The rush of the familiar feeling of his heart beating faster, the blood coursing, that warming feeling that pulses through his entire body when he sensed someone challenging him. His teeth ground together inside his clenched jaw. But, this was Poe, he told himself. He cared about her, he reminded himself. He took a couple of short, quick breaths and finished with one long exhale out his nose. The anger was still there, lingering under the surface. Its volatility bubbled behind his eyes, but he had himself under control. For now.

“What do you want from me, Donovan?” She used his real name. His full name. Not the affectionate Donnie he’d come accustomed to. She had had enough. This wasn’t one of his simulations where he could pick up, pivot around the edge of the fight, and re-engage from a more advantageous position. That was something he understood. This was entirely different. Entirely novel. They’d never had a fight before. This was a fight, wasn’t it? He wasn’t entirely sure. It’d never happened.

“I don’t know. I just thought it might be nice to know something about you. Like something real. Like. I’ve told you so much about me, and I don’t even know your real fucking name.” The red-hot pulses behind his eyes had almost immediately become a sharp stinging, turning them bloodshot and teasing his tear ducts into action. Another single exacerbated breath relegated the tears to thin watery lines forming along the rim of his eyelid but managed to prevent any actual drops.

“I never asked for you to tell me all that stuff.”

“I wanted to.” He said.

“Look. We have a good thing going, don’t mess with it. I mean, who fucking cares if we’re nining in empty space or on top of a skyscraper or in the desert. It’s all fake anyway. What’s the difference?”

Donovan rose himself to his feet. Now he looked down toward her. His rendered body stood a head above hers. He, for the most part, looked like his real-world self, barring a few exceptions. He was a bit taller. Shoulders a bit broader. Chest a bit more defined. Abs a bit more chiseled. Of course, his skin was buttery smooth. He added a significant amount of bulk that his real-world body lacked and gave himself what he considered a ‘quality of life’ extension where it mattered. His hazel brown eyes and dark, short-cropped hair were accurate, though. So a near-exact replication as far as he was concerned.

“The difference is this place is the kind of environment you’d get from a cheap erotic simulation or where some eGirl turns her tricks. It feels... cheap.” Donovan said.

“Well, if it’ll make you feel better, I can start charging you for our little sessions.” Poe retorted, her

head tilting down so she could glare at him from the tops of her eyes.

“That’s not funny.” It wasn’t. It hurt him. Every relationship in Donovan’s life was anchored in the transactional, mostly what could be gotten from him. Money, status, access. But not Poe. Not her. This was the one place where she was here because she wanted nothing more than his company. Right? Right. Obviously, she’s lashing out... right?

Poe’s freckled nose wrinkled, and she shrugged the comment away.

“I’m not laughing. I don’t usually make light of boys calling me a whore.” She snapped through clenched teeth. Her arms crossed in front of her.

Only lashing out. Right?

“That’s not what I meant!” But he knew it’s what he’d said. It wasn’t a secret to either of them who was advantaged should a contest of wits occur. He was already staggered. His voice was slightly raised but not yelling. He could feel his shoulders roll themselves forward, his jaw clench, and his brow furrow. He

couldn't stop them. Across from him, she was calm, grounded, and pissed. He'd wished she was yelling.

“No, of course not, but it's what you implied. What you really think of me. I mean, god damn, Donovan, ever heard of subtext.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Admit to me right now that you think I'm 'cheap.' You've always thought it. Admit it now, or I'll never believe another word you say.”

A long pause hung in the air between them.

“Is it...” He started. Picking the exact words not to upset her further. “Is it that you just can't afford anything or... cause, like, I could lend you...”

She cut him off. The rendering of her cheeks turning cherry red with anger.

“Fuck. You.” She said with slicing contempt.

That. Donovan thought. That was not the right choice of words.

Donovan could feel himself losing her. She was slipping away the way he seemed to push everyone away eventually. He'd managed to keep her around longer than most. In cognitive reality, it was a bit easier to make yourself more tolerable. He was plenty aware that it was most likely the Adonis body that gave him just a bit of a buffer before his personality could destroy everything it touched. He knew it and could start to feel nervous desperation replace what was left of his anger. Poe wasn't moving, but she was growing distant.

Damn it.

His thoughts spiraled. Why'd he have to open his fucking mouth?

Damn it.

Damn it.

Damn it.

He fumbled around, awkwardly biding time to recompose himself. His brain desperately racked itself for a pivot, a flip, a spin, some way out. When he was a

younger, less disappointing version of himself, his father would often speak with him about the nuance of power. The art of control. Back in the days when Donovan was still a prospect for greatness. Back before he dropped from school and left a lucrative internship to ride his trust fund deep into an endless tunnel of depravity. Still, some things you can't just drink away, and at that moment, the raspy words of a distant man unearthed themselves from deep in his memory, and a much-needed epiphany leaked through his stalled mental block.

*'Don't control the person in front of you. Control the room. Set the rules for the world they have to live in. Never let anyone become comfortable. If they do, take quick action to set them off balance. Changing the venue is quick and effective. Just make sure you change to a location where you can set the rules.'*

Donovan couldn't count how many times in his youth he'd heard, "Let's move this conversation into my office." The dominating, oversized double door swinging shut as his father would glide into his plush, studded chair, lean back, and steeple his fingers confidently. There was no place Donovan hated more than to be than on the wrong side of his father's desk

because, in that room, you were powerless. Here in cog-real, Donovan didn't have an office. What he did have, though, was a retainer on a server that he paid a hefty premium to keep private and unlisted. What was better than the perception of control? Administrative privileges.

As Poe had made a point to note, this was her server. A public one, but she had this small corner of it carved out for herself. She knew what she was doing and had set up decent security. It was as close to a private server as one could get without significant funding. With the snap of a finger, she could boot and ban him from here forever. Donovan had seen it done enough times too eager pricks around the cog-real trying too hard to score points with her. He didn't think she would. He sure hoped she wouldn't. He was pretty sure she wouldn't, but Poe was not known for her surplus of patience. Still, public is public, and no matter how good her code, she had limits on her privileges. Donovan called up his heads-up display with a sharp hand gesture and began ripping through the files. Poe couldn't see his display, just a blurry window floating between them. She was well versed enough with the system to understand that he was browsing files, looking for something. Donovan's eyes darted back and forth, his



right hand down to his side moved in small, sharp, controlled motions to navigate the menus. He quickly found the file he'd been looking for and collapsed the window. Hanging in the air in front of Donovan's face was a small glowing orb swirling teals and purples like a tiny cosmic snowglobe, no larger than a marble. Donovan plucked it out of the air, refocused his attention on Poe, and did his best to drag an apologetic smile across his face.

“Okay, look, I'm sorry. That was an asshole thing for me to say. I know that. So let me make it up to you. How about tomorrow you come to my server, and we can hang out there? I can show you some of my environments. I've had this restaurant sim for months that I've been meaning to check out. We could do that. It's an old Parisian reconstruction from before the Glassing. Right on the river, you can see the Eiffel Tower and everything. It's supposed to be really well done, super high fidelity; the file alone is massive. I just haven't had anyone to try it with yet.” He dawdled the orb between his fingers nervously.

“Ughhh.” Poe snorted. “I hate eating in cog-real. It's always so fucking annoying when you log out and realize you're still *actually* hungry.”

“Okay, okay. Doesn’t have to be that. You know, I have all kinds of sims. Some that aren’t even on the market yet. Just promise you’ll log in, and we can figure something out.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea.” She said, her eyes shifting to the side.

“Come on. You owe me.” He said instinctively. That worked in the real world more often than not. Though, the only people who ever actually owed Donovan anything were the junkie TurnCoat addicts who he should not have been slinging to in the first place. In reality, all the special treatment Donovan constantly received was solely reliant on his last name. Littrock.

A long silence hung in the air. Donovan watched Poe’s fingers, waiting to see if this was the straw to get him banned. He sunk his weight into his feet as though that would hold him here if she booted him. He knew it wouldn’t. She reeled through her memory, likely trying to figure out what she could possibly owe him. Finally, she let out a sigh and stepped forward, closer to him.

“Fine.” She conceded.

Surprised that his gambit worked, he held out the small orb toward her. “Oh. Okay. Um. Well. Great. So, uh, here’s my server’s address and authentication for access. I’ll log in about, say, 7ish my time?”

She reached out to grab the orb but stopped suddenly, looking at him suspiciously. “Do I need to run this through validators? Not trying to slip me dirty code, are you?”

He looked at her with the practiced face of injured innocence. “What? No. Of course not. How long have we known each other? You think I’d orb-jack you?”

“Just address and authentication?” She pressed.

“Just address and authentication.” He confirmed.

Another moment hung in the air. Another long one. Finally, she snatched the orb out of his hand and peered at it up close, like examining some precious gemstone.

“Come on. Now you don’t trust me?”

Donovan’s whined.

She hesitated, then stood up straight and crushed the orb between her fingers. It shattered like glass but with no shards. The teal-purple streams of raw data absorbed through her fingers.

“Happy?” She asked rhetorically, then continued. “Either way, it’s getting late.” She forced a fake yawn. “I think I’m gonna log off and go to bed.”

“Oh yeah. Me too, well, not to bed, the boys are waiting for me to meet up with them.” Donovan offered, the words tumbling clumsily out of his mouth. They garnered no reaction from Poe, which he figured was ultimately to his benefit.

“Ok. Well, I’m out.” She flicked her hand and popped open her own heads-up display.

“So, see you tomorrow?” He asked her as she absently navigated her private menus.

She blew a puff of air out of her cheeks, “Yeah, we’ll see.”

Poe finished in her menus, and her rendered body began to float backward, free from weight and gravity into a reclined position hanging in the air. It was the position her real body was currently in, leaned back, legs up, head cradled in its cog-couch somewhere out there in the world. It was a standard script that automatically placed her cog-real rendering into a matching position of her physical body to prevent any motor function conflict upon logging off. There are few worse feelings than coming to in a cog couch and having your body convinced it's standing, jumping, running, or being anywhere else than it actually is. The perceived snap back to its reclined position can be disastrous. Early generations of cog-real would send people into seizures or break bones as they flailed around trying to resolve the disparity between the mind and body.

Donovan found it strangely intimate. That short moment when she reached the fully reclined position, her eyes gently closed. It was like a glimpse of the actual person on the other side. Knowing that was the physical shape she was in, somewhere out there in the world gave him a voyeuristic rush of excitement. But then, an instant later, like a sandcastle against a wave, she dissolved away. More silence. He stood listening to

himself inhale and exhale, feeling the beating of his pulsing heart begin to slow itself down. With an audible sigh of relief, he began looking around for the exit door. He found it quickly, rendered a few paces directly behind him. It wasn't there before, but Poe's server was shutting down, and the coding provided him a door to return to the Terminal. Always the same. White frame, red wooden door, worn brass knob. There was a spot where the knocker should be, he could see the outline of where one once was, faded in the red paint, but it was missing. He'd always found that a curious detail. He told himself he'd ask Poe about it next time he saw her, the same way he had done the dozens of times before, but he never seemed to remember to actually ask until he was standing right here staring at it, and it was too late. Next time, he told himself.

Donovan opened the door to the Terminal and stepped through; the Terminal's decency filter instantly applied the generic black cargo pants and matching tank top to his render. Poe's server collapsed behind him, leaving him standing in the expansive server browsing terminal. Designed as a homage to 20th-century airports, the Terminal opened into a wide atrium lined with shops selling everything from full simulation packages to cosmetics skin renders and every virtual

trade-wear one could desire. The middle of the Terminal was filled with benches, couches, and tables around a central koi pond densely populated by glowing fish whose ability to leap from the water and float around in the air defied most physics engines. There was an ever-present rendering of an android wearing a tuxedo playing a grand piano on a tiny isolated platform in the pond. The entire atrium was covered in a high glass dome, the outside of which rendered an awe-inspiring array of cosmic phenomena garnished with the occasional starship darting across, leaving a fading streak of white. The Terminal was always full of people, passing from one server to another, doing some shopping, or simply meeting up to socialize. Behind him was the door-wall. Each of the servers Donovan had access to were displayed on the wall as their own unique doors. They came and went as servers came on and offline.

Donovan hurried over to one of the empty tables near the middle of the atrium and tapped on the tabletop, which instantly rendered a full-sized desktop computer. He could have used his heads-up display, but he always preferred a desktop when possible. He opened a coding terminal and began poking away at his keyboard.

Around him, the hustle and bustle of the terminal faded away; he focused. The sound of the piano was nice but distracting. He peered up from his keyboard, made a gesture toward the piano player, and muted the smooth jazzy melody. Donovan pulled open the data-orb file he'd given to Poe and executed a small section of jack-code slipped in with the authentication encryption that had taken him months to figure out how to conceal convincingly. His desktop buzzed and whirled as the code expanded itself, running a sequence to query/reply and finally producing a long readout filled with siphoned personal profile data. Poe's data.

“Okay, okay, okay. Let's see what we have here.” He said, rubbing his hands together.

He parsed through the readout, filled with a growing list of personal information.

“Samantha.” He finally sighed, allowing himself to steeple his fingers beneath his chin dramatically. “It's so nice to finally know your name.”

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