

MANIC MONDAY

by Zach bertram

Aurora hated Mondays. The weekend was almost enough for her to forget those Megas that gave her trouble existed – and the tough girls on either side of her in Mrs. Hernadine's 8th grade gym class had made sure to remind her. What she hated even more than Mondays, though, was being different. She knew she wasn't the same as the other kids in school. She made the mistake of telling a (now former) friend about it, and now the Megas kept hounding her. After that she knew never to tell anyone, especially her parents, who would probably disown her, turn her in to the CDC, or both.

Her virtual-imitation Imelda Hightower shades derezzed as she walked in the conapt door. She could see the hazy blue outline around her brother Hudson that told her that he was already passively basking in the glow of the FullImpact wall unit V-receiver.

Even better, she thought, as she got far enough into the living room to see the show on screen. Hudson was watching her least favorite show of all, CDC Mutant Hunter. She saw a poor CyberEvolved being tracked down – they were even using live ammo instead of stun darts this week. At least it was almost over. "Heya, Hud. I'm going to be in my room playing Castle Imperium if you need anything."

"Actually," Hudson piped up, "I can't shake this craving for a double soy burger from McMeaty's, so I'm going to the mall. Wanna tag along?" It was a rare display of kindness. His revelry of the physical was normally in sharp contrast to her active fantasy life, but every once in a while they got along. "Let me slap on a pain derm first; I've got a killer headache," he said.

As Aurora strapped herself onto it, she was glad that her big brother had a back seat on his bike, so she didn't have to hang on and hope she didn't fall off. Hudson hooted a few times while he gunned the engine as the got up to speed on the highway. As the road signs flashed by, so did any number of virtual billboards, offering her special deals on everything from the newest shoes to a bigger wall unit to a new Crystar. *Like I can afford that on my pitiful allowance*, she thought. *I really need to get a job.*

Aurora walked through the entrance to the New Harbor Mall with Hudson right behind her. A notice that TechShak was having a sale appeared in her field of vision. About the same time, Hudson announced that there was a sale on accessories at RoadTech. "Maybe that new pair of Traveling Trodes with extra signal gain will even be cheap enough for me to get this time," he said. "I'd love to ride hands-free sometime."

They walked into the food court, where Hudson was distracted by a female member of his yogang, the Screaming Eagles. Aurora went ahead and walked up to the counter at McMeaty's, where her friend Celia was working. As she walked up, the words "Welcome to McMeaty's! Can I take your order?" rezzed and spun around Celia's head like a halo.

"Like the program? It's not quite screamin', but it works for me. Maybe someday I can get a real track," Celia said.

"That's really good shading right there. You're a real artiste. And, sure, you're not a real tracker yet,

but it pays for your Imperium subscription, doesn't it?" Aurora countered.

"That and not much else. You here alone? I didn't think you could afford wheels," Celia said.

"Nope, I'm here with that blockhead I call big brother, but he's off trying to get a piece of tail from a biker chick. Oh, here he is now," she added as he approached. "We'll take a double soyburger and a couple of carbo shakes," she said. Hudson looked at her, expecting her to pull out her cash card. "Pay the good lady," she said, glaring at him. "You were the one who just had to have a burger."

Hudson pulled out his card and swiped it through the register. "I'll give you a discount since you're with Aurora," Celia said. "That'll make it hurt a bit less, right?" she asked as she turned around to fill the two shakes.

Once it was ready, they picked up their order and found a table. "Must be brain freeze or something," Hudson said as he gulped down another slurp of his shake. "My head just won't stop hurting." He started to sweat a bit.

"Did you pack an extra pain derm?" Aurora asked. "Now might be the time to use it." Hudson shook his head and took another bite out of his burger. "Well, I'm going to wander on down to TechShak. I'll meet you in RoadTech when I'm done."

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With the new Rita Retrograde v-album, Aerodyne Orchestral, and a pack of blank v-cards in her meshpack, Aurora walked out of TechShak and got on the escalator. She saw a pack of Megas at the bottom burning red – definitely looking for a fight. She thumbed a v-card in her pocket and a cartoon face appeared in front of the person a few steps down from her. It stuck its tongue out at the Megas, who instantly grabbed the poor guy it had rezzed in front of. She hated to use that card – it usually got the Megas to pick on someone else, but she always felt sorry for the victim afterwards.

As soon as she was out of range of the Megas, she thumbed the card off and headed toward Road-Tech. The virtual neon sign of the arcade next to RoadTech was calling to her; the flashing VR5 logo was quite hypnotic. She decided to run in for a quick game of Hypernauts – her brother wouldn't know the difference. She crossed the threshold and the store said, "Welcome to the game, Aurora Ledgermain," right into her trodes.

Aurora heard a groan behind her, followed by a lot of chatter from the people around her. She turned and saw her brother ambling out of RoadTech. She rushed over to him and put an arm around him for support. He was really sweating pretty hard right now – and, somehow, it seemed to be shinier than normal. She heard one girl dialing her earphone and decided that the setting was a little too public. "Let's get you to a bathroom or something," she said, and started walking him towards one.

"I'm so dizzy," Hudson said to Aurora. "But you're not allowed to tell the other you over there." She took the bag he had in his hand and put it into her meshpack. He had finally gotten those trodes he wanted, she realized.

Oh, Aurora thought when she got to the bathroom, am I supposed to take him into the Ladies' Room?

She decided that that would have to do. She helped him into the last stall, sat him down on the toilet, and closed the door behind them. She thumbed a v-card in her pocket and an “Out of Order” sign rezzed on the stall door.

Hudson was looking pretty sick now. He was pouring sweat, and it just kept getting shinier. *It even looks almost metallic now*, Aurora thought. Then all the pieces came together in her head. She didn’t remember the change – for all she knew, she blacked out while playing a v-game and then woke up to her mother with a fuzzy outline rubbing her forehead with a damp rag. Ever since then she could always tell how people were feeling, and could even tell what they were thinking sometimes. And that’s why she was afraid of Hudson sometimes. She knew that the Mutant Hunter fan would just as much see her dead as have to see her the next day if he knew she was Evolved.

Hudson retched a couple of times, then his mouth opened and he coughed up a stream of shiny silver. Just before it hit the floor, it seemed to come to life. It reversed its direction and started streaming back into his mouth. His eyes got really wide at the sight, then rolled back in his head as he passed out.

She sat in the stall, watching the Rita Retrograde album and flipping through the pages of a virtual copy of Cyberdeck Monthly. *Maybe I can get one of these babies someday*, she thought, *It’d definitely have a lot more power than my v-term. I could crank out some really good v-code with that.* When she was about finished her Cyberdeck Monthly, Hudson stirred and finally sat up and opened his eyes.

Aurora rubbed off his forehead with a paper towel she had wet in the sink. “Thanks a lot, little sis,” Hudson said. “You’re so pink and kind right now – Pink? Did I just say pink? You are pink!” Aurora could see him go yellow with confusion. Then she felt something in her head and Hudson suddenly went red. “You’re one of them! You’re a mutant!” he yelled.

“How do you think you clued in on that one, choboy?” Aurora asked. “Last I checked, the fact that you got that out of my head means that you’re a Scanner, too.”