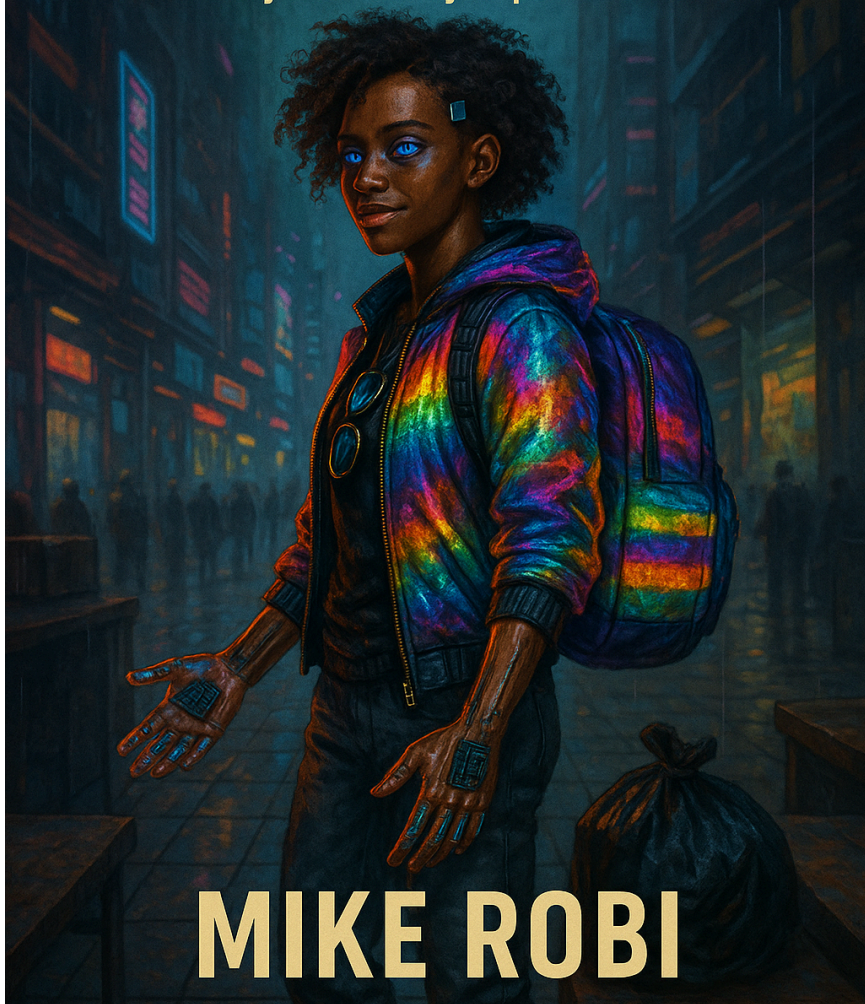


RAVE MAD

A short story from the Cyberpunk GUS universe



MIKE ROBI

Five desks. That's all the class had.

Near the top of the TeliCo headquarters, this district's glimmering tower of rot, the room was sterile, cold, and quiet. This wasn't just any class. This was for exceptional teens, handpicked for their rare aptitude in empathy, code, and psychological manipulation. A perfect cocktail of exploitable traits.

Makena entered first, walking in a straight line. Four classmates followed. An armed guard brought up the rear. Even in the safest corner of a corpo multibox, these kids were too valuable to risk.

The holoscreen at the front of the room flickered to life. A man appeared, bowing low. "Welcome, class. I am Takumi Shinji, your instructor for Advanced Interpersonal Exploitative Psychology. Please take your seats and activate your holopads."

The students obeyed without a word, slipping into their seats and powering on the holopads laid out before them.

Posters in Japanese adorned the wall behind Mr. Shinji. When it came to grooming spies, the corporations didn't skimp, global recruitment for the sharpest minds money could lease. He began the lesson: the art of gaining trust just long enough to deceive, but not long enough to be remembered. Temporary ghosts.

Makena followed the lecture, her fingers hovering over the holopad, absorbing the lesson just enough to pass whatever test came next. But her skull throbbed. Hard to concentrate when every breath pulsed behind your eyes.

All five students were still reeling from their latest augmentations.

The night before, they'd been fitted with new ports, small chrome sockets just beneath their hairlines. Universal interface jacks. One cable to plug their thoughts into any machine. Whether they wanted it or not, it was installed.

Each student bore the full suite:

- Universal Port Connections threaded through their palms, hardwired into their nerves.
- A cognitive node pressed into their right temples, ramping up info-processing speed.
- OcuLens Mk9.1 eyes, cutting-edge optics with a fully customizable HUD.
- And perhaps the most dehumanizing: subdermal keyboards embedded into the skin of their hands, for discreet input.

No anesthesia. No choice. Just policy.

All five had splitting headaches. But none of them said a word. That, too, was policy. These weren't ordinary teens. These were corporate ghosts in training.

Spycraft in this era wasn't something you picked up in adulthood. It was something you were sculpted into from birth. Most were taken before the age of five, snatched from families in the dead of night and erased from every registry. No press. No protests. Just quiet disappearance.

TeliCo was late to the game. Their empire was built on vice, booze, cigarettes, and the synthetic indulgence of the masses. Their crown jewel was morachol, a cheap chocolate substitute with a not-so-secret ingredient: methamphetamine. The addicts didn't care. Morachol was cheap, legal, and available in every vending unit on every corner of The Stack.

Now TeliCo wanted more. Power. Influence. Teeth.

Makena's class was their first attempt at a spy network. A trial run.

Mr. Shinji finished after an hour, bowing once more. "I will see you in two days. Mata ne."

The screen faded to black. The door slid open with a hiss. The guard stood tall.

Without needing a single word, the children lined up and marched out, silent, mechanical, practiced. They weren't led to recess. They didn't have lunch breaks.

They were marched to their rooms for a few hours of scheduled "self-reflection".

Makena stood in front of her door as it hissed open.

She stepped inside, and the panel slid shut behind her, sealed tight for the next hour.

The room wasn't a room. It was a box. A cell dressed up in sleek corporate steel. A single bed welded into the wall. A desk and chair bolted to the floor, a holopad already waiting. A toilet-shower combo in the corner, zero privacy. Just a camera in the upper corner, cold and unblinking, aimed dead center.

Makena sat down at the desk just as a small hatch slid open with a mechanical *whirr*. A bowl of soup clunked forward into the tray.

Soup day. Her favorite. Not because the soup was good, hell no. It likely tasted the same going in as coming out.

She reached down, pulling the Universal Port Connection wire from the top of her hand and plugging it into the holopad. A flicker on her HUD.

Connection confirmed. Her fingers moved across the invisible keys in her palms, the muscle memory seamless now. She didn't even look down.

The holopad blinked, linked wirelessly. She slipped past the access gates, rode the sideband frequencies into the local security node. Found her own feed. And replaced it.

Her HUD now looped an old clip of her eating soup from last week. Same bowl. Same face. Same motions. The illusion was perfect, because they'd taught her how to make it perfect.

They couldn't be mad she used the tools they gave her... right? She sighed, whispering, "Finally..."

The fake feed ran on autopilot. She slid it to a background layer and opened her favorite part of the net, the noise. The chaos. The life she wasn't allowed to live.

She scrolled through radio-video streams. Raves. Street festivals. Pirate club feeds from the undernet.

The bass hit first, deep, primal. Then came the flash. Strobes. Lasers. Bodies pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, writhing like circuitry on fire. She watched the crowd pulse, sweat glinting under neon rain. A hundred strangers grinding together, lungs full of smoke and lungs full of life.

She closed her eyes and bobbed her head, syncing with the rhythm. She could see herself there. Feel it.

Her body wedged between strangers. Lost in the sound. Not a spy. Not a project. Just another kid wrapped in heat and noise. The bass shaking her bones like a tuning fork. The lights like neon fairies, spiraling over ceilings, crawling across faces and skin. The grime covered walls, dirty floors and sweat covered bodies a stark contrast to the serialization she currently lived in.

A world where no one watched. A world where she could be. Just for a few stolen minutes.

Makena's HUD beeped with a timer, soup day is over. Another week until she can escape again for just under an hour.

She stood up, picked up her soup bowl, and dumped it straight into the toilet. One flush, no hesitation. She set the empty bowl back on the table.

Her fingers danced back over her palms, switching the holopad's output to the security feed again. The live camera flickered into place. Two minutes later, the small panel above the desk hissed open again. She slid the bowl inside. It clunked shut.

Then the chime.

That familiar, soft *ding* echoed through the walls, followed by a saccharine, soothing female voice, designed to comfort. "Bedtime, class. Please lay in bed. Your lights will be reduced in five minutes." *Ding*.

Makena stayed seated, staring forward. Her thoughts wandered, untethered. No real plan, just instinct.

She slipped the holopad into the bottom hem of her shirt and walked to the bed. She pulled the blanket over her, not for warmth, but to hide the glow that might slip out when she powered it back on.

She closed her eyes. Her HUD flicked online. As the room dimmed into its near-dark hush, she hoped whoever was watching tonight wouldn't notice the missing pad from her desk.

She moved slow. Silent. UPC wire slid free again. Click.

Plugged back into the holopad. Her fingers moved blind. She didn't need eyes to navigate the system anymore. Her HUD painted the security layout across her mind like instinct.

A few flicks of her fingers and she was inside, starting a fresh recording loop. A new recording of her sleeping form. Every shift, every breath, every turn timed to mimic exhaustion. It had to be perfect. Sloppy loops got noticed. Perfect ones slipped through.

She waited. Still. Barely breathing. Forty-five minutes. That should be enough.

She cut the loop, powered everything down, and actually let herself fall asleep.

Makena woke to the familiar *ding*.

“Good morning, children. Please prepare for your day.”

She sat up, slow and quiet. Pulled the holopad from under her shirt and padded over to the table. The wall slot hissed open and a fresh uniform slid out. She dressed quickly, folding the used set and slipping it back into the return.

The door opened. Another day. She joined the line.

They moved in silence, five shadows in a system built to erase humanity. They weren't friends. They weren't even supposed to know each other's names. If one of them got captured, the rest couldn't afford to be compromised. That was the rule.

Makena had spoken to people before, *in training*. Mock exercises where emotions were mimicked, not felt. Affection was a tool. Empathy a blade. They were taught how to connect, just enough to manipulate.

But at night, when the guards weren't watching, she'd seen more than what they taught. The videos. The music. The raves. The sweat-slicked joy of strangers pressed together, vibrating to a rhythm that wasn't cold protocol or silence.

And that was when she'd decided. The night she looped her sleeping feed, Makena knew. She was getting out.

She wanted the sardine-packed chaos of the dancefloor. The noise. The mess. The color. The life.

Days passed. She did nothing to raise suspicion. She trained. She recited. She fought. She obeyed. Until soup day.

When the bowl slid through the wall slot, Makena didn't hesitate.

She plugged in. Security feed loop engaged.

But this time, she didn't scroll through rave videos or dream in color. This time, it was data.

She tunneled deeper into the network, pulling up personnel files. Her plan needed a face. Someone who could pass as her father. Dark skin, similar features. Time ticking fast.

Then she found him. *Jarold Hargrave*.

Middle management. Clean record. Just close enough to the public-facing sector to make her story believable. She repeated his name a few times in her head like a prayer.

Next, geography. Nearest c-school? *C-School 051*.

Then came her false identity. *Makena Hargrave. 17 years old. Chronic stomach pain due to IBS. Registered student at TeliCo C-School 051.*

She pulled up a corporate email client, hands flying across the keyboard embedded in her palms. She crafted a short, official-looking message from an internal account, embedding a redirect link disguised as a school funding report.

Behind that link: a custom keylogger, masked to look like an error page, that would then redirect for real to the TeliCo Klik Storage login.

If he clicked it, she'd have his credentials. She hit send. Two minutes left.

The soup sits still on the table. She forced it down in fast, painful gulps, each swallow making her gag. She needed to simulate the stomach cramps for what came next.

Feed reset. Holopad shut down. The chime. "Bedtime, class. Please lay in bed. Your lights will be reduced in five minutes."

She crawled under the blanket, her gut already rebelling. A dull, acidic throb started behind her ribs. Perfect.

Her skin was clammy. Her heart hammered. She knew her training would carry her through. But this wasn't a simulation. This was real. And real meant she couldn't afford to mess up.

Makena waited until her stomach began to truly revolt. It churned and gurgled with violent protests, angry sounds bubbling from deep inside her gut.

She closed her eyes tight, drew in a deep breath, and bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. Then she screamed.

It was raw, sharp, and ragged. Her hands clutched her stomach, her legs kicked out wildly beneath the blanket. The camera light in the corner blinked from orange to red. Seconds later, the door hissed open and one of the facility guards stormed in.

"What is it, Makena?" he barked.

She gritted her teeth through the fake tears. "It hurts! My stomach...feels like it's gonna explode!"

The guard leaned in. The rumbles were real enough, soup boiling like a hellbroth inside her. He cursed under his breath. “Shit...”

He didn’t hesitate. Scooping her into his arms, he turned and bolted. “You’re going to sickbay.”

The hallway lights strobed overhead as he moved fast, turning corners like a man with something to prove. They reached a locked steel door, and he rang the alert. A moment later, a tired doctor stepped into view, rubbing his temples. “Yes?”

“She’s got abdominal pain. Name’s Makela.” The guard avoided eye contact, careful not to give too much away.

The doctor nodded, motioning him inside. “Exam Room One. Lay her down.”

The guard did as instructed, then left to take post at the clinic’s entrance.

Makena stayed still on the table, hands still clenching her stomach. The doctor entered a moment later, giving her a tired smile. “Night school, huh? Brutal hours.”

She nodded weakly. “Please... it hurts so bad.”

He flipped open his holopad, scrolling. “Name?”

“Hargrave. Makena Hargrave.” she groaned out.

He tapped it in. Her falsified profile loaded, complete with fabricated medical history. “Ah, there you are, daughter of Harold Hargrave. IBS, huh? No problem, I’ll get you something to settle it. Just sit tight.”

The doctor left the room. As soon as the door clicked shut, Makena bolted upright.

The holoscreen on the wall played an endless loop of pharmaceutical ads, erection enhancers, blood stabilizers, emopacks, but she wasn't watching them. She was watching *behind* them.

She reached up and pulled the screen slightly aside.

There it was the multi-colored networking cable. '*Jackpot*' she thought with a grin..

She pulled the UPC wire from her hand and jammed it into the open slot. Her HUD lit up with connection prompts. She didn't blink. Her fingers typed across the keys in her palms like they were on fire.

Within seconds, she was inside.

She grinned as five camera feeds dropped to black. Across the facility, a bored guard hunched over a console snapped upright.

"Shit, feeds down." He grabbed his radio. "All units, cameras offline. Report to Hallway A2 and check your stations."

The guard posted outside the clinic heard the call. He hesitated. Makena had been writhing in pain minutes ago. She wasn't going anywhere. And protocol meant helping check the other stations. He left to perform his duties.

Makena crouched low and crept to the door. She opened it an inch, just enough to peer through the hallway. Clear.

She slipped through, moved fast but low, silent as shadow. She reached the entryway. Peered through the half-window.

The guard was just turning the corner back toward the main hall. She allowed herself a breath.

A grin. "Hell yeah," she whispered as she cracked the door open and slipped out.

She didn't run. Not yet. She remembered the floor plan, every corridor, every turn, burned into her brain from sleepless nights and training drills. She made a sharp cut toward the elevator bank, her heart jackhammering against her ribs. Her hand tapped nervously against her thigh as she waited, eyes flicking toward the corner cams she knew were dead.

Still clear. The elevator *dinged*. The doors slid open.

Three strangers stood inside, one in a grease-stained coverall, another in a faded hoodie, the third asleep on his feet.

Makena stepped in like she belonged. No hesitation, no eye contact. Just calm.

She hit the button for Floor 20. Five stops later, the doors opened to a different world.

The air changed here, less recycled, more... *alive*. Noise filtered in from a nearby vendor alcove. She stepped out into it, trying to blend with the scattered crowd wandering between stalls. The scent of fried starch and cheap synth-meat clashed with burnt wiring and boiled meds. Vendors barked at passersby, selling bootleg drugs, knockoff clothes, hacked aug mods, anything that could numb the grind or help someone climb one floor higher.

Makena's eyes scanned the row. There, public holopad chargers.

She walked over casually and connected to the dustiest, oldest model in the dock, probably hadn't had a security patch since the last decade. She turned her back to the station as she extended her UPC cable and jacked in. Her HUD lit up instantly.

She was in. The pad barely even resisted. She pulled up her corporate mail. And there it was.

Username: j.hargrave

Password: password99

She giggled; she knew she was lucky that he used a password that wouldn't have been secure sixty years ago, much less today. Her palm flared with data as she rehashed her Klik chip's ID, overlaying it with the Hargrave account credentials. She was now, for the next few minutes, *Jarold Hargrave*.

Now she needed a Klik retrieval terminal.

She spotted one across the corridor, a plain white box bolted into the wall, a glowing blue slot meant for hand verification.

Makena crossed quickly, eyes scanning for patrols or watchers. She slid her hand into the slot, holding her breath as the chip synced.

Account: Jarold Hargrave Balance: 108,285.93 Clicks

She exhaled slowly. She could've taken it all. She *wanted* to. But that wasn't the game.

She transferred an even two thousand Clicks, small enough to look like a late-night binge or a forgotten subscript. At the moment of the transaction, she rewrote the chip again, cutting the ID, pocketing the funds, severing the trail. Clean.

Her mind raced thinking she needed a quick change of wardrobe. Spotting a long trench coat hanging over a chair as its owner stands and walks towards a noodle stand.

She turned, heading back to the holopad station, eyes on the mid-tier cubbies. She slid one open, yanked a decent holopad out, hopefully before the owner could notice.

Time to move. She rushed over, grabbed the trench coat and slid the holopad into one of the deep pockets.

She walked fast, straight to the elevators again, riding them all the way down. *Ground floor.*

The doors opened. She walked toward the lobby exit, her pulse in her ears, the city beyond those glass doors so close she could taste it. Her boots stepped into the grime-caked floor tiles and her breath hitched.

She made it. They'd come looking for her soon. She knew that. But not yet.

She closed her eyes for just a few steps, long enough to picture it:

Neon stripes across her skin.

Tanko colors bleeding like fire and joy.

Bass that shook the bones of gods.

Crowds that didn't care who she used to be.

She was at the door, the pane of glass and metal that held her back from the wide, wide world. She looked up to see a camera, the red light turning orange. Her eyes glued to it, she could feel the eyes on her. She pressed her hand to the door access, '*DENIED*' her heart dropped. She closes her eyes, she didn't have much time before the eyes she felt were hands against her shoulders.

Makena turns around, looking frantically. Trying to think of a way out. She sees her way out, walking right towards her. An overweight man in his mid twenties walking past the door, just close enough to be within her grasp. She surprised the unsuspecting man, by grabbing his hand and yanking with all her strength. Being caught unaware he was easily thrown off balance and stumbled towards her. She jams his hand against the access lock, '*ACCESS GRANTED*'. She lets go of his hand and rushes to the now open doors.

She stepped into the open street. The multibox tower behind her loomed like a prison with invisible chains. The sky was choked, the air metallic, the street cracked and coated in layers of sludge. But it was hers now.

She checked her HUD. West. She turned left.

She didn't know where it led, but it was away. Far enough to vanish, to start over. The further she went, the harder she'd be to trace.

Makena smiled as she jogged. It wasn't clean. It wasn't safe. But it was free.