

CITIZEN ZERO

Mark Cantrell



CHAPTER 1:

Beggars Can't Be Choosers

THERE were eyes, of one kind or another, everywhere. The one across the road turned to glare at him as soon as he arrived at the bus stop. The knowledge that it recognised his face bit worse than the scrutiny.

Mills sighed and tried not to think about the insistent surveillance. Today, of all days, he felt especially self-conscious. He wanted to go back to bed and shut out the world. But he couldn't ignore the Summons; it wasn't worth the hassle.

The bus arrived, grumbling to a halt, thankfully blocking the eye's mindless stare. He might have felt relieved, but he knew he didn't need to be seen for his movements to be tracked. The doors slid open with a hiss of hydraulics and he clambered aboard. It was an old vehicle, retrofitted for autopilot because the company was too tight to invest in new ones. Human drivers were little more than an old man's reminiscence.

"They've been faffing around with driverless motors since I was a lad, Davey. It never really took off, bloody gimmick, but this is different." The memory of his dad waggled his phone,

scowling at the news item he'd just read. "Easy to take someone's job these days; you be careful with that tech stuff you're learning, lad, it's liable to bite you on the arse some day."

Mills had laughed. He'd been at technical college then, sure of himself and of a future emblazoned with his name. The old man wasn't supposed to be right.

The other passengers glared impatiently while he fumbled for his card. Mills pulled himself out of the past and swiped through the transaction.

"Customers, please be advised," the on-board computer said, "the current boarder is a class 'D' security risk. Please take care of all personal belongings. CCTV monitoring is in operation for your protection."

The passengers shifted in their seats. Some held tight onto handbags and briefcases. Nobody looked directly at him.

The bus lurched forward and Mills, suddenly unbalanced, slumped heavily onto a vacant seat beside an old man in a black overcoat. The man stiffened, suddenly very interested in the view through the window.

"It's disgraceful. Folk like that shouldn't be allowed to travel with decent people."

For a surreptitious whisper, it carried. So did the collective murmur of agreement. Such jibes should have lost their power to hurt long ago. Mills turned anyway and stared at the two old ladies with distinguished citizen badges pinned prominently to their lapels. Once he had their full attention he treated them to a lazy grin. The women looked away and his face slumped back to its usual dour expression. The spiteful 'eye' in his pocket chose that moment to beep: a reminder he was going to be late for his Summons. He removed it and turned the credit card-shaped

device over and over between his fingers. “Nexus 40”, the legend read. Beneath, printed on the scratched surface:

UK Benefits & Welfare Plc
– A Ministry for Human Resources Company –
working for you, so you can too

It really was a hateful piece of plastic. Everywhere he went it signalled his location to the JobMart’s city computer. Called out his presence and left a digital scent for the authorities to follow. He pressed the display micro-switch. Text scrolled across the strip and he read it for the umpteenth time. Could they really be serious?

“Artificial reality job-hunting,” Mills muttered aloud. “Hey, maybe I’ll get an artificial job!”

The man next to him shifted in his seat and gave him a sidelong glance. *Sod you.*

“+++ MILLS D + S + PLEASD TO INFORM THAT YOU
ARE SELECTED FOR NEW IMPROVED JOBNET SCHEME
+ INTENDED FOR RELENTLESSLY UNEMPLOYED +
UTILISES LATEST IN ARTIFICIAL REALITY
TECHNOLOGY TO HELP YOU BACK TO WORK +
ATTEND 0915 HOURS THURSDAY 10 APRIL 2070 +
ENDS +++”

Terse and to the point, like all of their messages. We command. You obey. And these schemes became stranger with each passing year. How many had there been so far? But perhaps this one would be different. Perhaps *this* one would result in that ever-elusive beast: a job.

“There’s always hope.” Mills allowed himself a cynical smile and signalled the autopilot for his stop.

THE JobMart’s tinted windows seemed to frown at him. Even on a bright day like this the building appeared overcast; so shabby and dreary it gave him the urge to shiver. Desperate as he was to find meaningful employment, he pitied those who worked within.

Mills felt his muscles tense as he passed through the doors. The weight of the place pressed down on his shoulders, its mood a viscous mud that dragged at his feet. People jostled him. A long counter, separating the employed from the jobless, divided two worlds, where ragged queues of blank faces waited to sign their names for another infusion of grinding poverty. Behind the wall, like workers on a human production line, JobMart employees churned out ready-made rejects.

Joining the queue, Mills found himself surrounded by the dead-eyed faces of the hopeless and the broken. The usual numbness took hold as he settled into line.

SLOWLY, the queue wormed its way up to the main desk. People in headphones sat at a bank of machines nearby: the blind and the illiterate, force-fed ‘opportunities’ by soothing machine voices. On the far wall, in large print, a poster declared:

BEGGARS CANNOT BE CHOOSERS

In rows of seats at the rear wall, vacant faces watched the information videos endlessly playing on the monitors suspended from the ceiling. On one of the screens, another well-dressed politician spitefully slandered the poor.

MILLS' mind was taken back to the steel works, where he'd had his first and only job. Life was hard, but at least Mills had felt useful. And in those days, he'd had friends. He'd been worth knowing. Pete, Jeff and Rob – his shift-mates. Where were they now?

They'd been keen. They were young. So of course they swallowed all that candy-coated spin about the new wave of skilled technical workers, melding modern technology to traditional industry. The four of them were at the forefront of Britain's revival as a new economic powerhouse. And, boy, did they let the pride swell their heads.

Somewhere, he still had the picture frame loaded with a piece the local news site ran about them; the four friends from tech college who'd landed a place at New Ebbsfleet's pride facility. The animated image accompanying the story showed them grinning like idiots. Some day he'd get some fresh batteries for the frame, if only to delete the memory.

From the air-conditioned box of a control room, they had smelted and poured millions of tonnes of metal. Long ago in the old steel cities, thousands of workers had done the job by hand, but they had long been thrown aside by the time the fully automated facility he'd operated had come along. And then he, too, was thrown away. In some distant office his job had been deleted by some *corporatchik*, doubtless in connivance with some government functionary.

The worst of it all, they'd been required to help the crew from the external contractor upgrade the facilities so one of those first-wave AIs could operate the plant remotely. Grim times; ordered around by hard-faced men who otherwise kept to themselves. Frequently, they would be observed mumbling their

side of secretive conversations into unbranded mobile phones. Mysterious to the bitter end.

So much for the optimism of a New Industrial Revolution. When it turned out the AI wasn't up to the job, somebody decided to cut their losses, or maybe save face. The plant was closed down, with barely a tweet out of the local news. Funny, that.

“**YES?**” The woman at the reception desk didn't bother to look at him. There were bags under her eyes and her mouth drooped; how many people had she already processed, at not yet ten in the morning?

Mills didn't feel much like talking. What was there to say? He produced the Nexus and handed it over. The woman slotted the card into her terminal and tapped a few keys. “Name?”

He rolled his eyes at the ritual. “Mills,” he said.

“Initials?”

“Dee. Ess.”

“Date of Birth?”

“23-5-38.”

“Social Security Tag?”

“DF874920S.”

Satisfied, the woman tapped at the screen. The display flashed as it brought up his file; he strained to catch a glimpse of readable text but the monitor was at the wrong angle. The woman blew a stray lock of hair away from her face as she entered some more details, then closed his file and returned his card. She still didn't look at him.

“Wait at reception point B, over that way.” The woman pointed the direction. “Somebody will be out to see you shortly.”

Mills looked over to where she had indicated. Over the heads of the queues he saw a sign for the reception area suspended from the ceiling. With a sigh, he stepped away. Behind him, another body shuffled into place and he heard the ritual begin all over again.

“Yes?”

A mumbled response.

“Name?”

Mills put it out of mind. He pushed his way through the crowd, uttering indifferent apologies and pointedly failing to make eye contact with any of his fellow inmates. It didn't take long before he was clear of jostling bodies. Reception B was devoid of souls; whether that was a good thing or not was another matter, but it was good to regain a sense of personal space.

The carpet looked less worn in this corner of the main hall. A row of private interview rooms had been retrofitted along the side wall. Light from the JobMart's external windows streamed in through the narrow strips of glass in each of the doors. As far as Mills could tell, none of the rooms were currently occupied.

He looked around, saw another – windowless – door in the wall that ran along behind the main reception desks. He stepped closer and read the sign adorning it: “JobNet”. For some reason he felt his skin prickle. Nerves, that's all; silly. Whatever waited for him on the other side couldn't be any worse than the previous schemes the JobMart had volunteered him for. Suck it up and see it through, same as always.

Mills kicked his heels for a couple of minutes, then lowered himself into one of the shabby seats and settled down to wait. As

his eyes drifted down to gaze at the carpet, he felt his mind wander again.

THREE years after it closed, he had gone back to the steel works for a nostalgia trip with Rob and Pete. Somebody had beaten them to it. The foundries were still there, much to their surprise, but now they formed an attraction in an industrial theme park: ‘The Workshop of the World’.

Some multinational had bought the place. The site was dressed up to represent part of Britain’s industrial heritage, which in a way he supposed it was, but it was still strange; the real heritage was long gone, buried beneath the foundations of shopping malls, luxury apartment blocks, and monuments to commerce.

In that theme park, his foundries glowed again. But they glowed with the cold, tinted light of electric lamps, and the metal they poured was nothing more than back-lit paste.

The ‘workers’ were the best. Big, muscular men with oiled and bronzed skin, who toiled away at the foundries. He’d found it funny: they were never designed for manual operation, except in an emergency. But how many of the paying public would know that?

The fall of the Industrialists’ Empire. The Workshop of the World, just a play-park for kids. The irony wasn’t lost on him. Here, in the country that had coined the phrase, actors performed ancient work for a paying crowd.

“**MR** Mills?” A pleasant voice shattered the images of the past. “Would you like to come this way?”

Startled, he looked up to find a woman smiling brightly at him. Such an amiable approach came as something of a surprise. The badge on her chest identified her: Jane. No surname. She indicated the door marked JobNet and walked towards it. Mills rose to follow her. Beyond the door, a window flooded the room with daylight. He glimpsed the trappings of an office: a workstation monitor on a cheap desk, which also held a phone and an assortment of pens. A filing cabinet lurked in one corner; a fan situated on its top gently stirred the air. All very ordinary. With a resigned sigh, he stepped over the threshold.

CHAPTER 2:

The Whole World's an Oyster

INSIDE, the air possessed that faint polymer smell of sun-warmed plastic; an uncomfortable odour he always associated with school and low-level authority.

“Take a seat, Mr Mills.”

Gingerly he sat down in the cheap chair. Trying not to dwell on the uncomfortable, sweaty plastic, he regarded the woman. *A face with a name. Unusual, that.* It made her seem almost human.

Jane smoothed her skirt and sat down on the opposite side of the workstation, briefly treating him to a warm smile. He did not return it. His apprehension outweighed her friendly manner.

“I see you’ve been unemployed now for... ten years, David,” she said, casually scrolling through his computer records. “You must be feeling that things are pretty hopeless by now.”

“Well... yes. You get sick of hearing the reasons they come up with to fob you off. I’ve heard it all. And then there’s these AIs. I lost my job to an AI and the bloody thing couldn’t hack it, so they pulled the plug – they shut down the entire plant, can you

believe that? Now it's AI here and AI there; they're bloody everywhere –”

“That's what we're here for, David,” she said, flashing another smile. This time he noticed how her eyes lit up – so different to the faded officials he usually met – but if she was trying to lift his spirits it wasn't working.

“We've helped a lot of people like you, David. So, don't give up hope. I know things look grim at the moment, but there *are* jobs out there. We're pretty proud of our track record so far –”

“Yeah, well, I've been on schemes before and they all sang their own praises. Not one of them has done me any bloody good though.”

Steepling her fingers, Jane sat up straight and looked him squarely in the eyes. “David, there's a world of opportunity out there, just waiting to be seized by those with the motivation and self-confidence. Why confine yourself to this town? To this country even, when the whole world literally rests at your feet?”

“This is what JobNet offers. You can travel the world. All the limitations that have held you back will evaporate. There are no obstacles any more. Do you see what that means?”

“Doesn't sound all that different to the internet, if you ask me.”

“That old thing?” Jane shook her head. “There's really no comparison, David. Words and video on a screen divorces you from what's real. We're offering a *lived* experience. What's more, we've got international trade deals in place that *guarantee* residency rights to over 54 countries – and growing – if you land a suitable position through JobNet.”

“I'm not too good with languages...”

“Don’t worry, David. All the English-speaking economies are signed up, and you’d be surprised how many other nations have welcomed diasporas of native English speakers. It pays to think globally, now, David. You can start a whole new life. The internet gives you a window to the world; we can give you the real thing.”

The world is my oyster, he thought. To his surprise, Mills couldn’t hold back his intrigue. The woman had come alive, her expression animated. Did she really feel for the unemployed, or was it just another sales pitch?

“Okay,” he shrugged, “so what’s JobNet?”

The smile warmed him again. Jane sat back in her chair and regarded him for a few moments. She really was quite pretty. In any other situation, he could see himself wanting to know her better, but the desk between them was a wall; a division between society and the dispossessed. Yet there she was, offering him a way to clamber back to the world – *her* world.

“Read this, David.” Jane passed him a sheet of paper. “It’ll tell you what you need to know.”

Official documents. Doubtless, there would be reams of forms to fill in. As usual. He let out a faint sigh and began to read.

WHAT JOBNET CAN DO FOR YOU

DON’T let life kick you in the teeth. You may have been unemployed for what seems like forever, but there is a way out of the rut – if you let the JobNet Agency help you.

What is JobNet? Simply an AI 2.0 network running a world-simulation program that places you, the client,

into a virtual environment of such a high resolution that it feels like the real thing.

Our experts have discovered that a pleasant environment helps to relieve stress, and what is more stressful than the search for work?

You will be placed in a garden paradise that provides a friendly surrounding while you seek that perfect job. You will also be able to relax and enjoy the benefits that a virtual world can provide. This combination of work and play is designed for the total comfort and improvement of our clients.

With the emphasis on a stress-free experience, you will move alongside representatives of thousands of potential employers worldwide. What better way to find work than by building rapport in an enjoyable social scene?

To this end, JobNet has also dispensed with the tired, formal approach to job applications. The result is a face-to-face interaction that means a more productive relationship is established between employer and client. You may not get the job, but you could find a friend and ally on your way back to the world of work.

With JobNet, you can't fail.

“**TEA** or coffee, David?” Jane suddenly asked.

“What?” He looked up from the document.

“Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?”

“Oh, er, I'll have coffee. Milk. One sugar. Thanks.”

Jane poured some liquid from a percolator placed on the windowsill into two mugs, one of them inscribed ‘Jane’.

“Sorry about the chipped rim,” she said, placing the other steaming cup on the desk. “I hope it’s not too sweet?”
“It’s fine. Thanks.”

HOW DOES IT WORK?

SO, how can *you* enter the perfect job-hunting environment? First of all, this opportunity is not available to just anyone.

To become eligible for JobNet’s assistance, the client must have been unemployed for a considerable period of time. Here at JobNet we understand the feeling of hopelessness that turns job-hunting into an uphill struggle.

You may already be familiar with AI-IT. Since the emergence of the first AI mainframes in 2049, the technology has gone on to revolutionise industry and commerce. With the advent of AI 2.0 smartware seven years ago, the pace of change has dramatically increased, leaving almost no aspect of business and society untouched.

AI has ushered in a smarter way of working. We’re determined that nobody gets left behind as a result of feeling bewildered by change – and that means revolutionising the way we work, too. That’s why we’re utilising the power of AI 2.0 to help people like you get on in life.

JOBNET is truly international. As a result, the jobseeker can literally travel the world in search of training or employment. Thousands of options are available through the JobNet scheme. It enjoys the prestige of

finding work for millions every year, and is regarded by top recruiters as *the* international employment initiative.

To find out more about how to get yourself wired up to the future, contact your nearest JobMart and speak to our team of helpful advisers – it’s the smart thing to do.

The JobNet Agency
A UK Benefits & Welfare Company

WITH a grunt, Mills finished reading and placed the sheet of paper back on Jane’s desk. He watched as she sorted through his computer records. At last, she sensed he had finished and looked up.

“So, what do you think?” she asked, flashing that electrifying smile.

“Sounds great!” Despite his cynicism, curiosity had gained the upper hand. “So what happens next?”

“You sign this, David.”

Jane handed him a small tablet. The screen displayed his name, address and a few other details. He pressed his thumb against the biometric scanner without really bothering to skim through. The device beeped. An image of his thumbprint, together with a file copy of his signature, appeared on screen. Mills handed the device back to Jane.

“There,” she said. “That’s all the paperwork out of the way, you’ll be pleased to hear.”

“No forms?” *Surprising.*

“Nope. We just needed your signature to say you’ve agreed to the scheme. There is one more thing, though.”

Jane reached down to open a drawer. She removed a small cardboard carton and deftly opened it, tipping something further

sealed in shrink-wrapped plastic onto the palm of her left hand. Mills eyed it curiously as she handed it over.

“What’s this,” he said, “a nasal inhaler? I’m not bunged up with a cold, you know.”

Amusement flitted through the twitch of her lips. “Exactly right, David, except for the bit about the cold. This contains the nanocules that help the system deep-map your brain and allow your projection into artificial reality.”

“Through my nose?” He frowned, sceptical.

“Pretty much,” she said. “Beats needles. A lot of people don’t like being jabbed.”

“No, well, I can see how this is better.”

“You don’t sound convinced, David. Don’t worry, it’s no different from medical nano-tech—”

“Been a long time since I could afford medical bills. Charity clinics don’t do nano.”

Jane’s smile wavered; Mills sensed he was starting to push his luck.

“Okay,” he added hastily, “what do I do?”

“First, check the wrapping. I need you to confirm that it’s unbroken and there’s no sign of tampering. The wrapping will discolour if that’s the case. So...”

He examined the package. “It looks fine, yeah.”

“Okay, well if you’re satisfied, you can open it and, well, I’m sure you know what to do.”

Even so, she mimed pushing the inhaler into her left nostril and closing the right one with a finger before taking a deep breath. Mills shrugged and ripped the packaging open. He went through the motions. It was like sucking up fine dust; his nose tingled and he sneezed.

“Shit! Oh, sorry...”

“Don’t worry, David.” She laughed softly, genuinely. “A lot of people have the same reaction. It won’t make any difference to the quality of your uplink.”

Jane stood and gestured towards the door at the rear of the office.

“Now, if you’d like to follow me, David, my colleague and I will get you set up while those nanos are settling in.”

He followed her into the next room, hands curled into fists inside his pockets. The blinds were shut; the only light came from a desk lamp in one corner and the soft, gloomy glow of a monitor currently being studied by a man in grey trousers and a white shirt. Despite the warmth of the room, he had his tie knotted all the way up. A row of medical couches lined one wall; a neatly folded suit jacket draped across one of them.

“That’s it?” he asked, pointing at the computer.

Jane smiled, but it was the man who replied. “No, Mr Mills, this is the network controller and bio-monitor we’ll be using to calibrate and establish your remote link. The mainframe that’s hooked up to the AIs all over the world is housed in our main office in London. I’m Stuart Sutcliffe. I’ll be overseeing your AR-time while you’re with us.”

“While I’m with you?”

“At some time today you’ll be moved to a residential facility on the outskirts of town, where you’ll be more comfortable. After all, you’ll be in AR for a couple of weeks, longer if you so choose. Obviously, we couldn’t keep you here that long.”

“You’d make the place seem terribly untidy,” Jane added with a smile. “Now, please, if you’ll sit yourself on the couch

here, we have to ask you some standard questions before we begin.”

Mills nodded as he shuffled onto the couch Jane indicated. Stuart took up a smartpad and walked over. His manner reminded Mills of a doctor he'd once known – mechanical and indifferent.

“Okay. Are you currently on any prescribed medication?”

“No.”

Stuart tapped the smartpad's screen.

“Are you a registered drug addict?”

“No. Are you?”

Another tap.

“Have you consumed alcohol or marijuana in the last 72 hours?”

“Are you joking? On the money I get?” He wiped his brow, wishing the room weren't so stuffy.

“Please, Mr Mills, answer the questions. I'll take that as a no, shall I? Do you suffer from a heart condition?”

“No.”

“Do you suffer from epilepsy?”

“No,” he replied, monotone.

“Is there any history of mental illness in your family?”

“My Granddad used to think he was Napoleon and Caesar in the same past life – got him very confused. Does that count?”

“Mr Mills, please. We have to ask these questions for your own good, so try to be serious.”

“Sorry.”

“Have you ever undergone nanoneural interfacing before?”

He deliberately gave Stuart a blank look. “A what?”

A hint of confusion crossed Stuart's face. Mills felt a certain satisfaction at that; he'd caught the man out in the middle of his bullshit. But Stuart soon recovered. "Sorry, Mr Mills, I mean have you ever been hooked up to an AR system before?"

"Oh, all the bloody time! No."

"You are familiar with artificial reality, though?"

"I've read about it, so yeah. Rich man's plaything; virtual reality with bells on, right?"

No reaction from Stuart, just a tap of a finger as he ticked off the appropriate answer, but Jane placed her hand over her mouth to hide a smile with a sudden humanity that made him feel a little light-headed.

"Not quite, David," she said. "It's actually quite a mature technology; you really won't be able to tell the difference from physical reality. The gaming industry was an early pioneer, of course. The costs were prohibitive for the mass market – that's where your rich man's toy came from – but it's been used for industrial and certain specialist applications for a good few years now. China's Space Agency is using it to train their taikonauts for the Mars mission, for instance. But here at JobNet, we're really rather proud that our parent company has been a pioneer in bringing the technology down to Earth."

"That's right, Mr Mills," Stuart added, "it provides an ideal teleworking environment, bringing staff together, and it offers a perfect medium for engaging with AIs. The costs have plummeted, to the extent that for the last five years we've been able to put the technology to use helping people like you."

Mills wiped his brow, overloaded; did everyone get this hard sell or was it just his lucky day? When his hand cleared from his

vision he saw Stuart turning back from the desk, the smartpad set aside.

Dizziness grew and Mills rubbed his eyes with the pads of his fingers; they felt heavy and he struggled to remain alert.

“Okay, Mr Mills. We’re nearly ready to hook you into the system. This is your first time, so you’ll be kept in a holding phase while it calibrates with your neural emission pattern. You’ll find it a rather euphoric experience, like lucid dreaming, just go with the flow and enjoy the experience.”

Through his hazy vision he watched Stuart reach past his shoulder, where a headset rested on the back of the couch. The room went black as the helmet was slipped onto his head, but the sudden darkness did nothing to stop the spinning sensation.

“The helmet is basically a transceiver designed to shut out unnecessary external stimuli,” Stuart’s muffled voice informed him. “The nano components we fed into your system will help relay and receive information directly to and from your brain.”

With the helmet in place and his vision blacked out, shifting blobs of colour meandered across his mind’s eye. As the dizziness worsened, they fused into shapes, battering him with a dizzying light show. His arms fell, limp and heavy, to his sides. His head sagged forward, a dead weight. Muffled voices signalled alarm beyond the woozy confines of the darkness. Hands on his shoulders, failing to arrest the sense of falling. A thud followed. Not a physical impact but a memory, the idea of impact.

Outside of the darkness, he could just about feel his body lying on the cheap carpet of the JobMart. A voice called. A woman’s. Maybe saying his name. He tried to move, but his extremities felt far away; he tried to speak, but his tongue was a

foreign object. Muffled voices faded into the void as he felt his sense of self become detached from his physical presence.

An effulgent light, streaming from what he perceived to be *up*, bathed his consciousness. For a fleeting moment, he was aware of himself in two places at once, and then he shifted... *elsewhere*.