Dear Ric,

Since we already discussed quite a few issues in the past few weeks, this assessment letter will focus mainly on those I couldn't yet bring up since I had to get to the finish line first.

One of the things that stand out is that you didn't resolve the death of Schafer's partner. It is still unclear whether he was murdered or not, whether Schafer was right in the end or not. It didn't strike me as a real problem, because it could be used as a great loose end to tie another story to. If you're not planning on doing that, you might want to resolve the man's death here. If he did get killed, Lang and Boranz could be honest about it when they have kidnapped Schafer and are planning to kill her.

Where did Sarah Dixon and Cecil Bennet go? We know Wendy has been taken care of, but these two characters disappear as well. Sure, Sarah left her house voluntarily, but we aren't told what happened to her in the end. This ties back to my comment on the camera system, which will follow shortly. I'm assuming Cecil is as dead as Wendy, but that isn't in the story as it is.

Another unresolved case is who killed Preston Hopkins. The story suggests it was Marlene, and Marlene did turn out to know J.P. Lang—they were sitting together at Priss's hearing—so that all works, but if it was Marlene, what did Lang need Wendy Denton and Cecil Bennet for? It is very clear that Lang received the necessary information from Wendy via Cecil, and that Cecil was no longer necessary, but if Marlene killed Preston, how are Wendy and Cecil working within the murder plot? Their being together is a major key to why Priss figures out the Hopkins-Lang connection, but how are they necessary pawns in Lang's revenge?

It caught my attention that you have a tendency to switch POV within chapters. It's often quite subtle, which makes it tricky to fix (or makes it something you don't have to worry about since readers most probably won't pick up on it), but there are a few instances where the switch is obvious. One example of the latter is when Boranz attacks Schafer at the end of the novel. When the bots show up, we suddenly see the world from Boranz's POV, while it's Schafer's chapter. Another example is the chapter in which Eldridge gives a speech and we actually perceive events from an entirely other character for most part of the chapter. An example of a more subtle switch is when Boranz sees the open window in the attic of the Dixon residence. The fact that he sees it has to mean that Schafer is seeing him seeing the open window, because the chapter is from her POV, so why then state that Boranz saw the open window?

As some of my early comments on the manuscript show, I first wondered whether you opted for this on purpose, but I don't think you did. Some parts are so clear, so written from a particular character, that I got the feeling these are just slip-ups that need to be fixed. For the Eldridge chapter I just mentioned, I've suggested a chapter from Brown's POV. The same for that chapter at the end of the novel, when we suddenly switch to Pittman. At other times, I will have suggested ways to describe events from that chapter's MC's POV.

Another inconsistency that got me worried is your tendency to refer to characters in multiple ways when in a particular POV. It doesn't necessarily matter how the characters are called in their own chapters or how they refer to other characters when in their POV, as long as it's done consistently. How characters refer to themselves and others does say a lot about them, so be mindful about what it does to the story when you make your decisions. For example, Nina Schafer finds it very difficult to call Mayor Jensen Mikael. Yet, she suddenly switches to Mikael in her narration of events. To me,

that seemed inconsistent with her character, with her reluctance to call him by his first name. Another one is Priss sometimes being Priss and sometimes being Priscilla. Because Priss has a replica, this becomes quite confusing. As I suggest somewhere in my comments, I'd make a decision on who Priss is and who Priscilla is and stick to that. It could bring clarity to her existential crisis as well: for her job, she had to split Priss, the proper, professional girl who keeps her emotions under control, and Priscilla, her more dirty, wicked, adventurous side. The moment she quits Virtual Escapes, she needs to find a way to bring these two back together again, a process sped up by the presence of Washington Barnes in her life.

Speaking of Priss, her internal struggle could be made more clear. For years, she couldn't act on her feelings, and now there's this guy who makes her feel like giving in. This is something she has to unlearn, and that takes time and practice.

Another thing that takes time (and probably practice) is the relationship between Priss and Washington Barnes. At the beginning, it's very clear that he unleashes something in her that she thought was lost or suppressed, or maybe she thought she never had it in the first place. At the very end, it is clear that these two people care for each other, look out for each other, and have brought something to the other's life that Priss and at least Barnes's wife are grateful for. That's all great: I think the way he's introduced, and the way their storyline ends, could work really well. However, from the moment Priss goes solo and Barnes shows up for his first appointment, both characters are starting to act out of character. It starts with Priss suddenly inviting Barnes over to watch her put on something else. If you want to keep that in, that's ok, but then you need to lead up to that. It feels very un-Priss like, even in her existential 'crisis'. Accepting the dinner invitation should already be a big thing, since she'd never do such a thing when still at V-E. I'd love for her to ponder it in her head, whether or not to do it, telling herself she's being silly for wanting to strip for him. It also doesn't tie back to her having very little sexual experience (which might be something you want to cut, I wasn't that convinced, which could be because it isn't brought up earlier in the novel). But, then the dinner happens, and she feels at ease with him, and then she's ready to cross another one of the boundaries she has set for herself. Before the dinner, she still tries to see him as her client, but after that dinner, the tables are turned. That would be a great incentive for her to go 'f*ck my rules, let's do this!'

Chapter 27 is a problematic one. I'm not sure what is happening between those two, but both Priss and Barnes seem all over the place. The her thinking he might be a cop thing makes no sense, since she doesn't share the rest of their conversation after he admits he's married. It feels too much as if you needed a reason for her to end up in the woods behind his house, while you already have a good reason: Priss not knowing why she feels the way about him is enough incentive for her to have this need to see him in his natural habitat. Or maybe she's curious after Janie and why she would let her perfectly gorgeous husband sleep not just with virtual girls but with real girls? Either way, that sense of care, of him being her friend too, needs to be in this chapter, and now it's not. In fact, at the end of the chapter, I assumed they were never going to see each other again. And then he walks into her office for an appointment and she tells him to take her now or she'll explode. You need to patch that up, and use chapter 27 as the chapter that more or less establishes their future relationship. You don't need to make it clear-cut, but allow them to not know how to work this thing out. Make their conversation, their actions, awkward, but allow for it to open up to what you have in mind for them later. What you have in mind for them could be made more clear in Priss's last chapter. There's such a gap between events that we don't know where Priss and Washington stand exactly (there's one mention of him not being angry when she calls him after it becomes public he paid a woman to sleep

with her, and she calls him the man she's fallen for), and those last chapters between them (including the one where they sleep together) are not yet pointed towards what we see in the end.

Jack Boranz is solid as a character, but it's quite confusing how long he has been Schafer's partner exactly. At first, I thought he was one of those beat cops she mentions, eager to assist. Then I realised he was her partner, but he hadn't been for long. That part worked really well, him growing on her. Then he behaves as if he has known the chief for ages, which made me wonder when exactly did he join Schafer's 'team'. At the end of the novel, we learn he *has* known the chief for ages, but him doing what he does the first time they're in the chief's office, that's not rookie behaviour. The scene is really good, though, so maybe he could apologise to Schafer more explicitly for stepping out of line? Schafer could note he's really doing his best to make up and show he's on her side. Later, we'll understand he slipped in the chief's office and had to make sure Schafer didn't smell anything fishy.

Last but not least, I have a comment on the surveillance cameras. As you can read throughout my comments in the manuscript document, I kept on wondering what the camera system can do and what it can't do. Sometimes, it seems the controller can just put in someone's name and check where and when they have been ID'd. Sometimes, I was given the feeling the system is limited and you need clearance to do such a check (it's why they go to JenCorps, right?). So, at some points in the story, it seems the cameras can be used for anything, because they record everything, and then a few people go missing and no one talks about the cameras. Sarah Dixon disappears, and obviously people assume she left Herschel because she thinks he killed her lover, but when they can't find Herschel Dixon, why doesn't anyone think of running his name through the system, and that of his wife, to see if they can find her and check whether she knows anything? That part, with the cameras surrounding Dixon's house, gives the feeling the system is actually quite limited. And when Wendy and Cecil go missing, no one mentions a run through the system with their names, to see if they show up somewhere. Wendy is practically a murder suspect, and you don't see them go through all that trouble to find her. Maybe they do, and it's just not in the story yet, but it should be added then. Unless the cameras are limited in what they show, at least unless you have access to the JenCorps data archives. Either way, do check what the system supposedly can and cannot do throughout the story to make sure it doesn't turn into a major plot hole.

About your strengths, your voice works with this type of story. You have great pace, you don't let yourself be distracted by unnecessary details (most times, but I pointed out in the manuscript where you go a bit overboard). The story stands too. I knew that quite early on and it's a major strength. The rest can be polished, but storytelling… Some people are born to do it, some learn to do it, and some won't ever be able to pull it off. I don't know which of the first two you are, but there are already so many layers to this intricate puzzle that work like a charm I have no doubt on my mind you are an absolutely great storyteller.

Your characters are great, even though some are a bit inconsistent. Schafer is perfect, Boranz is solid, Wendy is fabulously done, Marlene, Eldridge, they're all consistent, clear characters. Priss needs work, and Barnes as well, but overall you've done a great job and managed to get me attached to the story and its characters very early on. Even when characters were acting out of character, they were still real to me. Honestly, the one thing that pulled me out of the story was Priss's way of narrating sexual encounters, but I made some extensive comments about that in the manuscript itself and I'm sure it's an easy fix.

The story itself is interesting, as are the angles from which you tell it. There are only a few instances where I was concerned that those who didn't read Legacy of Ashes would be in trouble, but I think that'll be easily fixed once Lexi Shaw's story and that of Sean Stone are elaborated on slightly (really, slightly is fine). The world you built is fantastic in that it's super creepy and everyone's worst nightmare, it's Big Brother is watching you to the nth degree. It's a great theme to explore, as is the virtual reality vs. reality one, and the morals and ethics involved in both.

I'm looking forward to the next book.

All my best,

Mariëlle