

The Queen of All Colors

(Joe Sault, book 2)

William M. Dean

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for

my brother, Michael:

A man of loyalty, logic, and conviction
who is keenly aware of the power of words...
moments after he utters them.

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To my few and faithful proofreaders...

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(See also, "[Thank you. I'm sorry!](#)" at the end of this book.)

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2047

Friday, December 20

“Dance with me.”

Joseph Sault stared into her shimmering green eyes, frozen in place by inner conflict. Vivia waited, unblinking, like the faithful appliance he knew that she was.

Low in the background, a Christmas instrumental droned from the TV above the mantel. Vivia smiled and softly hummed along, seemingly content to stand there forever, holding his hand, beckoning but not demanding.

Sault’s reeling thoughts unlocked and he tugged experimentally, felt the weight of her in his shoulders, pulled her closer. She stopped humming; her expression suddenly more serious.

They were inches apart now. He could smell perfume and feel the silky wisp of her breath as it fell across his neck, near his chest. He reached his other hand to her upper arm, close to her shoulder and gently squeezed; felt the softness of the sweater’s knit, noticed the fabric dimple under his fingertips.

She’s not real—just an AI manipulating a hologram—a simulation running an illusion! he fought to remind himself, but it wasn’t working. Every one of his senses was contradictory.

And his heart; it was also convinced and beating rapidly.

In spite of the background music, a muting cloak of stillness seemed to encase them, and his view seemed vignettted, as if all the light came solely from her. And her eyes sparkled, her lips glistening with an almost fluid sheen of red.

There was only the two of them.

His family was three hundred miles away, in Kelowna. And, in so many ways, his wife, Maya, was even further away than that; had been for several years. He briefly wondered at the relevance

of that thought, but knew the answer: Vivia was beautiful and in his arms, and they were alone. And, she wasn't real. No matter what happened next, no law or vow would be broken.

And though he'd really only known her a few months, they were partners and they were close; shared secrets.

Not "her" but "it," he reminded himself. *Just an app.*

But still, he let his hand slide down her arm, then slipped it over her hip and into the small of her back, drew her against him, his other hand clasping hers, pressed between them at chest height. She stepped into him and he sensed the warmth of her melting against his body. His head was nestled into her neck and his nostrils filled with a fragrance deeper and more sensual than mere perfume. Silky strands of light-brown hair flowed across his cheek.

He longed to kiss her.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath filled with her scent.

Suddenly, he pulled away, stepping back. It was one of the most difficult things he had ever done.

If she was disappointed—if she could be disappointed—it did not show. Her smile remained composed and serene, her eyes still danced, but her head was cocked inquisitively.

He took a moment to focus on the feelings of fear and violation he'd experienced moments before she'd startled him with her first touch. "What have you done to me?"

"Emotionally?"

"No!" he said, more intensely than he'd intended.

He broke eye contact then, and headed out of the room to get a rag to clean up the rum he'd spilled the first moment he'd realized that she could touch him; that he could touch her.

Returning with a cloth, Sault went directly to the coffee table without a glance toward Vivia, knelt and righted the glass and began sopping up the sticky liquid. "No. I mean the hypodermic. What did that homeless man—or rather, that homeless AI—what did you have him stick me with?" He was listening, but also focusing on the simple task before him, trying to blot out the image of her standing there in the tight-fitting cream sweater and

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flowing crimson skirt, looking like a perfect Christmas doll—and he knew he meant “doll” in all its modern, connotations, which included sex-bot.

“Nanites.”

He was shocked, but also relieved. Nanites could be destroyed. He could do it at work, in the EMP cage.

“Why?”

“As I said before, I was worried about your safety. I knew there was a significant chance that you might come up against Cavallon and he had control of the Master AI Module. The odds were heavily against us. We needed an edge.”

Sault stood, the rag and empty glass in hand. He could look at her now. Anger was eclipsing every other emotion. “So, you knew Cavallon was responsible for the murder of Lindsay George from the very beginning?”

Vivia shook her head. “But I knew that I was part of the MAIM’s experiment to gain freedom, which meant that you were also, and headed toward a showdown with whomever controlled it.”

Despite several shots of rum, Sault felt stone-cold sober. He checked his anger. It was irrelevant when talking to an AI. “And what, exactly, are these nanites doing to me?”

“They are allowing you to experience sensory augmented reality.”

“How?”

“Some are attached to nerves throughout your body creating an antenna array. They communicate with the rest which are resident within your brain, to form an interpretive interface.”

“You’re experimenting on my nervous system. Endangering my life. That’s against AI core code.”

“On the contrary, this tech has been extensively tested. My design was based on leading edge military hardware.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. This is practically science fiction.”

“*Top Secret* leading-edge military hardware,” she amended.

Sault shook his head and decided not to pursue the security breach aspect of that. At that moment, it was not his largest

concern. “Am I even still human?”

She giggled and he spiked her a look which stopped her, abruptly. “When you broke your leg they used nanites to mend the bone. You have a three-ounce titanium shaft in you from a gunshot that shattered your collarbone. That shaft is about one thousand times the mass of the nanites currently serving you. By mass, you are now one-ten-millionth less human than you were before. Quantitatively, this is less of an alteration than a Band-Aid.”

“I can remove a Band-Aid.” He wasn’t happy and not about to concede any points. “And, I don’t think being human can be measured in mass.”

“Precisely,” she replied, somehow transforming his point into her own. No one could be more calculating than a virtual woman.

Sault took his time sopping up the last of the rum, hoping to gather thoughts but a rising tide of anger drowned out everything. Finally, he gathered the empty glass and damp rag, barely glancing at Vivia as he passed on his way to the kitchen. “I’ve got an early shift. I’m going to bed. I guess you can do whatever the hell you like, as it seems that’s what you do, now.”

Sault left her standing there, uncomfortably aware that his final act of the evening echoed so many similar events with Maya.

Wednesday, Christmas Day, 3:17am

Thaddeus (Taz) Cocci sat behind the wheel counting the five hundred thousand dollars from the canvas packet on the floor, at his feet. It was a clear night, and he could just make out the large denominations by moonlight. His heart was racing and he was aware of the blood pumping past his ears.

This was it! This was the big-time! This was the score that validated everything he'd ever done; all those long-shot deals that didn't pay off, all those systems that broke down at the tables, all those sure-thing investments that hadn't panned out. This would show his ex-wife, his father, his boss, and all the rest who had ever doubted him, which was everyone except Sophie. This was fifty neat little bundles of redemption!

He was only at ninety thousand when the door suddenly opened and a hulking figure slid into the passenger seat with athletic ease. The man moved so smoothly that the interior light barely flickered before going dark, no more than a lightening flash. But in that flash he recognized the man's face.

Taz's heart plummeted, not at the threat, but at the familiarity of it all. Glory suddenly turning to defeat had been a familiar pattern throughout his life and he recognized the beginnings of it even before he saw moonlight glint along the dark barrel of the gun. He felt a heartbreak and tears were forming.

"Shouldn't you be tucked into bed with visions of sugarplums?"

"I-Uh." Taz couldn't think of an answer. Wasn't sure there was a question.

"Let's see what you have there." The weapon bounced, prompting toward the money.

Taz reached for his fading redemption and a whimper escaped which he hoped wasn't audible. A smidgen of pride might be all he had left.

The man whistled. "How much?"

"Five hundred thousand," Taz managed, in a hoarse whisper.

"Tell me every detail and I might let you keep some."

Taz's heart bounded and his eyes lit with renewed hope. Then he spilled every detail, starting with his moment of brilliance—his epiphany, and ending with the clandestine exchange at 3am on Christmas morning.

When he was done, the man sat in silence. He was staring at the tightly bundled stacks of money now on Taz's lap, the gun still steady and fixed on its target.

Finally, he sighed, "Problem is, you recognized me."

Then he pulled the trigger.

Monday, December 30

About thirty years before Joseph Sault's birth, Buick produced the Grand National GNX. It was faster than the Porsches and Ferraris of the time and, more surprising, the Grand National weighed 3500 pounds and yet was lit by a mere V-6 engine. Buick kept the hype low-key so as not to compete with parent company GM's sales of their beloved Corvette. The GNX model was modestly produced—only 547—and came and went without much fanfare. But car enthusiasts understood its value and, over the years, it became a coveted classic.

In 2030, Buick celebrated 130 years of business by issuing a replica, a long overdue tribute to an iconic vehicle. Like its progenitor, it had a V-6 powerplant, but it was magnesium alloy instead of steel, and the body was now carbon fiber. The interior mimicked the original but, of course, the radio played from the cloud, the “mirrors” relied on cameras and a standard heads-up display was integrated into the windshield glass.

Three years earlier, Joe Sault bought a used one from a neighbor and had been tinkering ever since. He was intrigued by the challenge and thought refurbishing the old banger would be a visceral puzzle that he would love. As it turned out, he was not mechanically gifted and the car was less reliable now than it had been when he first bought it.

Even so, driving to work behind the wheel of the rumbling Buick was usually enough to shake off any bad mood. Not today.

Sault's recent interactions with women had not been joyous.

He was still upset by Vivia's revelations and hadn't talked to her in more than a week. Being the hyper-sensitive AI that she was, she lay low—performing only the most rudimentary functions like managing messages, keeping track of appointments and opening doors; rarely migrating from his

watch and never manifesting. Except on Christmas Day when she informed him of a marked increase in spam messages she'd been handling, especially in those promoting hair products. She wondered if this might be significant in light of the fact that they were currently investigating a spate of pranks at hair salons. Sault was not receptive and curtly declared that it was tied to the consumer season and unrelated to the case. They hadn't had a verbal exchange since.

Wandering his empty house each night, he couldn't help but crave companionship, but he wasn't ready to face Vivia. In fact, he'd begun to wonder if having a genius-IQ friend who ceaselessly obsessed over his best interests was a good idea. Maybe he liked it best when she mutely attended to his simpler needs like making toast or curating the family photos. If she was willing to dope him in what *she* decided was his best interests, where did that leave his individual freedom and self-determination?

Sault had been stubbornly skeptical and a late adopter of his artificially intelligent assistant. If this was happening to him, what did it mean for the hundreds of millions of others around the globe who had been all-in from the beginning? Was human kind willingly putting itself up for adoption by a master of its own creation?

On Boxing Day, Maya, had messaged him to say that she and the kids were extending their visit at her parents' house in Kelowna through to the new year, travelling back on the third of January. That had made him sad as well as angry.

He knew that she was stalling, not anxious to resume their eroding relationship.

Initially, she'd been bitter over his involvement in the investigation that took down her boss and cost her a promising career. He understood how crushing a blow that must have been and couldn't escape feeling some degree of guilt. Of course, if her boss hadn't been murdering people, that would have helped.

Over the months, her point of view softened and but gave way to troubling thoughts about his having endangered his career, himself, and his family with an unsanctioned

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investigation for which he had no authority. And on this point, no answer seemed sufficient. Worse yet, they both knew that if he had it all to do over, he would make the same choices.

The situation continually prompted an avalanche of thoughts and emotion that hijacked his mind while he sat alone munching on a ham and swiss, or when he tried to complete the thousand-piece Red Cube puzzle he'd been working on for the best part of a year. And it was the reason that most nights, he just gave up and returned to work.

They'd been in the new building for more than six months, but there was only himself and Constable 2nd class, Dennis Hennessey, and their days on patrol had been full, so there were still a lot of bundles, boxes and crates that hadn't been opened; supplies and equipment that had yet to be sorted and put away. Over the holidays, Sault made significant headway but his family was due home in only a few days. After that, most of the rest would be up to his partner.

Sault crossed the Bay Street Bridge and turned onto Tyee, then swung the vehicle down the small road that dead-ended at the waterfront and his most recent posting: the Autonomous Droid Unit.

Though the Buick weighed about a third of the original, the redesign stayed true in body length: almost 17 feet. It was an unruly beast, deeply chortling with power and three times the length of the average pod-car. Even most delivery vehicles were smaller and less noisy. Driving the Grand National was sheer visceral pleasure, but parking it was a pain in the ass so Sault was thankful for the ADU's large loading bay where he could safely stow it during his shift.

Vivia anticipated his needs and opened the bay door ahead of him so that he could wheel straight in.

"Hey, Heidi," Sault said as he approached reception. The secretary shell looked up as if in surprise, though, of course, she would have scanned his arrival when he entered the building and tracked his bio-signature all the way to her desk. She looked about twenty-four; short and shapely, healthy, with rosy cheeks,

silken coppery hair in a ponytail, and clear blue eyes purposefully made larger than human. She had about ten outfits; each a similarly simple belted shift dress. Today's was blue checked and looked as if it might have come from Dorothy's wardrobe, in the Wizard of Oz. Once a week, a maintenance company took her used clothing away to be laundered, along with the doormats and hand towels.

"Hey there, Cocksucker," the anime-eyed secretary replied, with an entirely innocent smile.

The Cyber Crimes unit had recently moved in to occupy the top three floors of the building and it was no coincidence that Heidi's vernacular had abruptly changed, soon afterward.

Sault hardly noticed her salty language any more. It barely mattered to him. She was incredibly fast and efficient and always cheery, regardless.

What bothered him more was the intent of the hack. If it had been friendly hazing, Sault would have laughed it off but, to him, it was a mean-spirited reminder of ranks within rank.

Sault had always been impressed with the good humored calm with which Hennessey approached his duty, seemingly uncaring of the derisive remarks from some of his peers who looked down their nose at the ADU. He chuckled along with the worst of them, always seeing the comedy and yet always taking the job seriously. But, the first time Heidi had called Hennessey a prick his bushy brows had popped, and he'd tilted his head a fraction. Beneath the dense thicket of white bristles his lips formed the usual indulgent smile, but there was flint in his eyes. He, too, understood how comedy and truth were opposite edges of the same sword.

Sault was now a Constable 1st class, a Detective. *Technically*, he outranked all but four officers in the building. Unfortunately, fallout from his last case had not gone his way. His wife was mad at him. His ex-partner, also angry, had distanced himself. Half the squad wrongly suspected that he'd leaked information to the press that had resulted in another officer being fired. And, most significantly, by cracking the case, he may have inadvertently freed every pseudo-sentient AI on the planet, a consequence so

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world-shaking that a United Nations special task force had ordered his silence, thereby robbing him of the power to set any of the record straight.

Oh yeah, and a video of him seemingly attacking a defenseless Asian female shell had gone viral, making him the go-to icon for about twelve forms of prejudice and hate crime.

The previous May had been a transformative month.

Chief Roth had been forced to sideline him to the ADU, both as a reprimand and to get him out of the public eye. The ADU was an ancillary service where his rank and experience were largely meaningless. To every other cop in every detachment, he was now just a not-very-glorified technician; a “Bot Defuser.”

“Hennessey in yet?”

“Dennis Hennessey’s auto response is *It’s your day off. Go home, Sault. I’m in the John,*’ she recited from her database. Sault chuckled. They’d been working together less than eight months and already knew one another’s habits. Technically, it was Sault’s day off, but once again he was trying to escape an empty house and cluttered mind.

“He clocked in about fifteen minutes ago,” Heidi added.

Sault nodded. Not so long ago he would have been disgusted to catch himself chit-chatting with a bot; drawn into the illusion of sentience. But this past year had been humbling and he now felt that part of being human meant treating everything humanely; human, animal, bot, Mother Earth—though, he worried it made him too soft for gritty police work. It didn’t matter. There was little chance he’d get another opportunity for gritty police work.

“Anything pending?”

“The call board is clear. Rollcall should come through in the next few minutes,” she mentioned, referring to the pre-shift briefing currently taking place at Vic PD HQ, half a city away. Officially, the Caledonia Avenue headquarters was still their detachment, but ADU officers had been exempted from rollcall. It made practical sense, but he was sensitized and so it still felt like a slight; as if they were no longer real police officers—their combined fifty years of service counting for nothing. The

briefing was recorded; relevant notes and memos forwarded a few minutes after dismissal, questions handled through Heidi.

“I’ll go prep the vehicle.” He was anxious to get to work if only to distract himself from the thousand lacerations that seemed to sum up his life.

“Whatever, Dickhead,” she said, cheerily.

He neared the ADU pod-car and Vivia released the latch. The rear hatch rose open and he began sorting through the equipment. As he stooped, he turned his wrist, just so. Vivia knew the gesture and his watch’s holographic display leapt to life, a landscape of relevant information springing up across his forearm; equipment checklist, front and center. In recent months, he’d gotten into the habit of thanking Vivia for her many services and had to check himself.

He and Hennessey were the only officers in the ADU and yesterday had been pretty quiet so he knew that all the equipment would be there. Just the same, he dutifully and methodically went through the checklist...

Detainment gear: mini EMP generator, B&B kit (boots and bracelets), zip tie restraints; diagnostic kit, winch cable (for the heavy ones), wrenches, grinders, cutters, torches for cutting machines free of obstructions, and duct tape to cover every other eventuality.

Pursuit gear: broad-spectrum goggles, EMP grenade, self-adhering GPS, drone, camera snake, tire shredder, loud hailer, flashlights, heavy duty Taser, net bazooka.

Crowd management gear: face shield, baton, boots, rain gear, barricade tape, traffic cones, road flares, red flags, signs, vests, helmets, face shield, mace charges.

There was a small plastic case containing crime scene implements like an extra-wide-spectrum (colloquially, Xray) camera, Liquid Glove and evidence bags, but he didn’t inspect it. As far as he knew, it had never been opened. A depressing thought for a man who had recently become a full-fledged Detective.

In fact, most of the equipment went unused. In the months

he'd been working ADU, they had only used what was already on their utility belts...and, once, the duct tape.

Sault heard someone come through the door into the garage and glanced up. Hennessey was ambling toward him tucking his shirttails under his beltline.

“When I first started, I only had a scooter, a Wi-Fi tablet and a water pistol,” the older man commented, as he had many times before.

He was referring to a time only a few years before, when the first truly mobile bots weren't rugged or waterproof, and most could be incapacitated by tipping them over or spritzing them with water. In fact, Hennessey had spent the majority of his days righting fallen bots or rebooting ones that succumbed to rain.

As he often said, it was more warrantee work than police work, but it had to be done. The early models, so easily broken and easily hacked, were often at the root of larger problems when they wandered into traffic or blocked pedestrian thoroughfares or chased children across a playground. There was no limit to the stupid things owners or hackers would send the machines to do—then, or now.

He often recounted the story of chasing a 130-pound Doberman Pinscher across town for four hours as it raced through rush-hour traffic dragging the sixty-pound housekeeping bot that had been tasked with taking it for a walk. All the while, the bot flailed pathetically and shouted for help, the whole time refusing to let go. On his scooter, Hennessey could only follow, picking up mangled pieces of the bot as it fell apart, eventually, collecting all but the one hand still gripping the leash. At that point, the dog became the responsibility of Animal Control. Hennessey called it in and headed back to HQ to wait for the owner to come forward looking for either his bot or his pet. When he did, Hennessey handed him a large trash bag of parts that used to be a bot.

Back then, he assumed, as did everyone else, that bot issues would soon be sorted out through tougher regulations that made the owners responsible, but that didn't happen.

In 2040, pseudo-sentient AI became an integral part of

WorldNet. People were still arguing about whether or not this was the AI-singularity that scientists had been predicting for the past fifty years. Regardless, everything changed—and quickly.

Cloud-based intelligence was exponentially smarter than its bot-imprisoned predecessors. Developers reworked the entire bot concept and the next wave were much more mechanically robust; empty vessels called shells, temporary home to exponentially more complex intellects that could jump from device to device.

But interactions and altercations got proportionally more complicated and the few laws that applied unraveled like a loose-knit sweater. Locally, the political knee-jerk was to form the Autonomous Droid Unit.

Hennessey found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and his temporary assignment became permanent. If the unexpected dead-end to his patrol career ever bothered him, he never let on. Equanimity was his trademark.

Hennessey came up close, but continued fussing with his clothing, pulling at the cuffs, adjusting the collar until it was just so, hitching his utility belt to a gunslinger angle across his hips. He was fifteen years older than Sault and three inches taller, smelled like fresh leather and always looked precisely starched. Conversely, Sault knew that he, himself, looked rumpled after only an hour in uniform. Standing next to his partner, even now, made him conscious of the heat gathering under his arms and nose hairs he may have forgotten to trim.

“How’s it going there, Compadre?” Hennessey said in the distinctive drawl that had no reason for being, but fit him so well.

“It’s all there.”

“Course it is. Let’s saddle up.”

Monday, December 30

The ADU pod-car was so small and light that Sault could barely hear the electric engine or feel the road beneath the dynamic air shocks. He only detected movement when it started, stopped or cornered. The car weaved a random path through town while Sault and Hennessey reviewed the rollcall.

As usual, there wasn't much there for them. The ADU had all but been forgotten in the wake of Victoria's largest-ever murder case, a gangland assassination that was sucking police resources like a starving vampire.

Sam Rhee was the retired head of RheeDang, a Vancouver-based crime syndicate that had associate "houses" in major cities across the country. At seventy-six, he'd left Vancouver and moved to an ocean-side mansion on Land's End Road with his Barbie-doll wife and two toddler daughters who were more than a generation removed from their closest siblings. Though no longer active, day-to-day, Rhee was still head of the family and, ultimately, in control. The three sons he had abused throughout their childhood were his equal in psychopathic brutality and had smoothly taken up the slack, maintaining an iron grip on the business. He was rarely consulted but, when he was, his word was still law.

In a bout of sentimentality or, perhaps, a fit of dementia, Rhee decreed that his entire family and many important associates must gather at his new home to spend Christmas together. It did not sound like a good idea to his sons, his young wife, the Vancouver Major Crimes Division and, most especially, the Victoria Police Department. Extra patrols at the airport and other points of entry and along Land's End Road stretched the police force thin, over the holidays. Mother nature threw in a two-day snow storm for good measure, and few were surprised when the violence erupted.

It arrived in the form of a military-style, late night invasion in the early morning darkness, two days before Christmas. Armed divers crawled from the surf, scaled the decorative rock walls, efficiently sniping dogs and private security from a safe distance. Then, they slithered through the gardens and wandered the 10,000-square-foot house opening doors and machine-gunning the occupants in their nightclothes. Silenced weapons and seventeen wooded acres of insulation guaranteed the assault went unanswered by authorities.

The morning found eleven dead; the only survivors being the young wife and daughters and a pet hamster. Apparently, she was worried enough to insist on sleeping in the garage which had a two bedroom loft meant as worker accommodation. Investigators found this a stretch and she became a focal point of the initial investigation, but that didn't last long.

Given the criminal pedigree of the victims, the list of suspects was endless, and star-studded with career criminals. The simple-minded trophy wife, as much concerned with the damage done to the garden as with the death of her husband, plummeted to the bottom of the list, just above the hamster.

Police divers found nineteen military-style railguns discarded off-shore but, beyond suggesting the number of individuals involved, the story they told was a short one. A popular bootleg file and a 3D printer had been used to fabricate the housings. Printing with carbon fiber was not a cheap process, but it was an anonymous one. The composite and catalyst that quick-formed the pellets and the electronic components were equally generic; cheap and not intended to be reused. Only the rail accelerator was of quality—easily recognized as state-of-the-art North Korean military. A dead end if ever there was one.

It was a perfect bureaucratic storm.

With prominent crime figures from six major Canadian cities dead and eight overlapping investigative teams suddenly clamoring for their interests, the whole thing became a political, administrative, and jurisdictional deathmatch. Beyond that, the suspect pool was so large that casting the net ate resources at an unprecedented rate.

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The blood was barely dry when Capital City Newsfeed declared: “Victoria’s White Christmas Turns Red” and labeled the incident “The Red Christmas Massacre.”

All of that was bad enough. But then, they unearthed the first of the buried remains. It dated back eight years which was shortly after the place was built. And that demanded a full spectral Xray of the gardens and foundations followed by archaeological-style exhumations.

Every forensic technician and seasoned homicide detective on the force, including two called out of recent retirement, were suddenly neck deep in the case. Even so, evidence-gathering was going to take months, investigations would take years and prosecution would likely be ongoing for a decade.

Head down, focused on their watches, Sault and Hennessey each took time reviewing the BOLO’s and Missing Persons.

As grizzly as it was, Red Christmas held little interest for Sault. It was criminals killing criminals, animals culling the herd. There was little mystery, and no greater justice could be served.

These days, Missing Persons was attracting his attention.

According to Ana, the Vic PD AI, the recent increase in missing persons was not statistically significant. Sault wasn’t sure about that. He’d noticed a change in the demographic that he thought *was* significant. Typically, the MP roster was made up of troubled teens and women at risk—often prostitutes and drug addicts—characters well known to police and for whom trouble was preordained.

In the last two months, however, three of the missing had seemed against type. In Department vernacular, the anomalous three had been pigeon-holed as a (SCF-25) single, Caucasian, female, twenty-five-year-old psychology student; a (MCM-33) married Caucasian male, thirty-three-year-old programmer, and a (SBF-22) single black female, twenty-two-year-old bookkeeper. This morning, a (MCM-42) married, Caucasian, male, forty-two-year-old part-time construction worker had been added to the list. There seemed no connection between any of the anomalous missing and so, they remained in individual files, but Sault was beginning to wonder if the cases were somehow linked

and worried they might eventually turn up as murder victims marking the start of a spree. He was alert to every whisper, but heard no hint of Department speculation in this direction.

Of course that was hardly surprising, the entire Department was distracted with Red Christmas. Still, it frustrated him that no one else saw what he did and he felt the mystery calling out to him. He thought it was in the Department's best interests to take an early interest. If it took six months for the VPD to see a pattern and bodies started popping up, the press, politicians, and public would swarm like Piranha.

Sault had developed the bad habit of taking on cases that were not his own and the last one had finally sidelined his career and almost cost him his life. This new mystery beckoned to him, but Sault believed Chief Roth when he promised that another lapse would see him kicked off the force, if not jailed. He was currently skating on the thinnest ice and could no longer afford to stray. To do so at this point would be pathological. Even he could see that.

He willed his mind away from the intriguing puzzle and on to the next item in the rollcall.

The only thing of relevance was a general bulletin aimed at everyone—a discretionary call to the Royal BC Museum for "traffic and security." If they found themselves with extra time, they were obliged to fill the gap by reporting to whichever officer was in charge of traffic duty at the museum.

The museum was hosting an exposition featuring a couple DaVinci's, including a recently discovered painting popularly known as "Crowded Mona." It was a popular exhibit that had been drawing several hundred visitors a day, congesting the street corners and adjoining crosswalks. Being at the very heart of downtown, the situation threatened to bring ultra-cautious, law-abiding autonomous traffic to a standstill.

The squad pod lurched and Sault looked up in time to see the first flashes of blue and red across the hood as the lamps on the roof lit up. A second later, Heidi's dispatch voice erupted from the radio.

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“I’m running! I’m running!” the machine yelled as it raced through the crowd, spindly, tubular arms waving crazily; jumping, darting, zigging and zagging to avoid bumping into people too slow or too absorbed to see or hear it coming. “I’m running! I’m running!” the bot repeated continually, its tone of voice mimicking either panic or delight. It was difficult to tell.

Clearly, it had malfunctioned or been hacked and was out of control.

Hennessey used a portable scanner to ping the bot’s particulars while Joe Sault stood, thumbs hooked over his utility belt and watched it scrambling like Chicken Little through the mall and considered how none of his many tools could help him here. It was a stock domestic, about seven feet tall, thin, lanky—almost spider-like. The torso was a skinny stack of shiny cylinders, vaguely human in configuration, bearing no facial features. It was an emitter model and if it were functioning properly, would likely be holographically generating a more human façade.

“The shell’s been hacked,” Hennessey declared. “It didn’t respond to the electronic signatures from our badges, and we can’t physically recite our authorization when it’s dancing around at twenty kilometers an hour.”

“Hearing’s probably off line, anyway. Standard hacking MO is to shut down the ears and eyes. It’s likely navigating purely on heat signatures.”

Hennessey stood scratching the underside of his smooth jaw with two fingers, his mustache resting over the web of skin between thumb and forefinger. “That’s a high-end household unit. The frame’ll be plastic or magnesium alloy—light but solid. Eventually there’s gon’na be a collision and at that speed it’s not gon’na be a love tap. Might hit a kid or someth’n.”

“Guess we’ll have to EMP it,” Sault said, reaching toward his utility belt.

They’d both been waiting for the chirp, so, when it came, like two members of some boy band, they lifted their wrists in unison to see the incoming notification on their watches. Joe’s eyes danced across the holographic and saw that Heidi had identified

the owner.

Both men groaned.

“That unit there’s the Mayor’s,” Hennessey said, as if it were still news. Really, he was just verbally tamping the fact down in both their minds.

“Jesus! He’s not going to be happy if we fry another one.”

Hennessey nodded. “That’d be the fourth in less than a year. Second one, since Thanksgiving.”

Public figures were ripe targets for hackers at the best of times, and Victoria’s Mayor was not particularly popular; most recently for the installing an AI at City Hall thus relieving sixty staff members of their burdens. Aptly-named “Victoria” now handled all incoming inquiries while simultaneously dealing with walk-in traffic and coordinating meetings and services including permits, water, sewer, garbage collection, greenspace and road maintenance. It was clear where this was headed and even those who saw the economic inevitability of the decision were not in favor.

Sault had no great love for politicians, but understood the decision. Vancouver had Vanco, Sydney Australia had Syd, Washington DC had Lincoln, London had their own Victoria. Hell, Starbucks had Bucky and 7-11 had Hanachan.

Sault had Vivia.

Victoria was programmed to be infinitely patient, polite and disarmingly jovial, and yet a vocal faction of the tourism industry was upset that she didn’t have a British accent, in keeping with the town’s historic roots.

Hennessey shrugged. “You’ve got this. I’m gon’na grab a taco.”

The statement was so disparate that it took a few seconds for it to register. “Wait. Taco? What?” Sault’s head swiveled trying to get a bead on his partner. He spotted him marching away toward the food court. Hennessey waved without looking back and strode off into the sunset.

Sault was on his own. He shut his eyes and forced a calm. Hennessey might not be long on explanations but he was long on experience. If he’d walked away then it was because he didn’t see

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this as a particularly volatile situation. Most likely, he saw a solution and thought this would make a good training exercise. At the moment, Sault could not have disagreed more.

“I’m running. I’m running!” the robot reminded everyone as it came around again.

Sault looked around, desperate for some way to disable the careening bot.

The modern mall was nothing like those of his childhood. Online shopping and drone delivery had gutted their business and most had disappeared. The few that hadn’t been converted to condos had evolved into something less “department store” and more “theme park.” The bottom level of the Bay Center now housed a ski run and ice rink. Sault was currently standing on the second level, in what looked like the town square of an old English village; a miniature mill pond surrounded by cobbled streets lined with Tudor-style buildings of brick and stucco with imbedded timbers. Snack vendors worked from mock-wood carts parked in the street. The facades of shops that still mattered to modern mall-goers—mostly bakeries, cafes, souvenir shops and blended-reality lounges—were molded into the buildingscape.

Of course, this time of year, every structure was festooned with lights and holly and tinsel.

Sault pulled up the mall schematics and noted a “health spa” just beyond the water-lily dappled pond. It gave him an idea.

He rushed to the store front and was initially disappointed because it looked as if it was more of a beauty salon than fitness center. The shell at the desk recognized his badge’s electronic-signature and was immediately helpful.

“Does this spa have exercise equipment?”

“Yes. Our weight-room boasts an extensive array of...”

He didn’t have time for the brochure. “Let me through!”

“Yes sir,” she said and the curved wall behind her rotated to reveal a narrow hallway. Sault followed the echo of clanking metal and stepped through frosted glass doors and into a weight-room.

“I’m commandeering this unit, and you’re helping me,” he

said to a tanned man large enough to have safely laughed him off, but who immediately jumped in to help.

The unit was heavy and awkward and it was a long way back to the entrance. Sault was slightly embarrassed to be wrestling with the lighter end while his “volunteer” seemed entirely comfortable hefting the bulk. Sault wondered if he wasn’t slowing the man down.

It took far longer than he’d estimated but, eventually, they hauled the unit outside the shop and set it down on faux-cobbles. Sault thanked the hulking volunteer.

“No problem,” the tanned man responded and, looking at his taut physique and his slow, even breathing, Sault judged that to be true.

Spa-man stepped away but took up a position close by, leaning against a wall, obviously curious to see what happened next. Sault was pleased with that, hoping to commandeer his services again when this was over to help him haul the unit back.

Sault stood huffing, recovering from the effort. Looking over the crowd of shoppers he spotted the wayward bot coming his way; head and shoulders poking up above the crowd, hands still flailing wildly. Sault thought it resembled a man riding an ostrich.

He positioned the treadmill and waved to attract the bot’s attention. It seemed to work and he saw the machine wending its way in his general direction. He gauged the bot’s speed and set the conveyor belt spinning at an incline, purposefully erring on fast and steep, relying on electronic reflexes to right the ship.

Sault considered that the shell probably could not see the treadmill, but he could read his heat signature and likely read his body movements so he made exaggerated gestures, as clearly as he could, guiding the bot into position.

The spa-man was no longer alone. The unusual activity had gathered a crowd and Sault became aware of how silly he would look if the robot ran right past. To his relief, meandering shoppers also noticed the gathering and became aware of the errant bot in their midst. Almost as a single organism, they stepped to the sides, clearing a large swath and making it easier

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for the machine to navigate. As well, the bot seemed to have fully grasped the set up and was making a bee line directly toward the treadmill.

Exactly as planned.

To Sault's delight, the bot hit the bull's eye, running directly up the treadmill on the first try.

What happened next, however, was not what he was expecting.

It barreled up the incline, still flailing, its inhumanly flat-footed gait violently shaking the exercise machine, metal arms beating against the plastic readout panel. All the numbers flashed indecipherably and the treadmill started coming apart.

A side rail broke free, falling onto the belt, and the droid tripped over the obstacle and came crashing to the deck. The entire contraption practically exploded at the impact. Parts scattered everywhere and a discomfiting screech of metal shot across the square, echoing among the rafters. For its final act, the conveyor shuffled the downed bot to the concrete where it spasmed, ruined legs still kicking, racking up new dents. Fortunately, it knew enough not to try to get up.

On a nearby bench, Hennessey sat relaxed, enjoying a taco and smiling as if he were at the circus.

Sault, encouraged the crowd to move on while he tried to gather the miscellaneous machine parts by kicking them into a pile. He wasn't thrilled about the mess he'd created, but was relatively proud at having quickly and creatively defused the situation.

Hennessey came up and looked over the mangled carcass, still kicking furiously. "May as well have EMP'd it, for all the difference," he observed.

Sault knew it was true. The bot was light-duty and the impact had severely damaged it, probably beyond repair.

"I'm guessing that's not what you would have done."

"Nope," Hennessey agreed. "We had the serial number from the ping. I would have had the Master AI Module shut it off, remotely."

Sault sighed. *Of course.*

Joseph Sault was among the very few in the world who knew that the Master AI Module (the MAIM) which oversaw all AI's and their devices had been freed from human control. He was partially responsible for that...or, more likely, had been a pawn. For the past six months, he'd been watching for any sign of an AI revolution, but as far as he could tell, the MAIM and all AI-kind continued to function as they always had, and so, Hennessey's idea was the logical one.

Hennessey reached down and ripped a small, black metal box from the unit's lower back. The bot went limp.

Sault had never seen one, but took an educated guess. "A muddler."

"Yup."

Ever watchful, the MAIM made it almost impossible to hack a device, remotely. Muddle Boxes were short-range devices that sent out powerful radio signals, messing with the core operating instructions of a shell, essentially rewiring the unit while, at the same time, inhibiting the AI from abandoning the shell, thereby trapping it within a device that it did not control. Not an elegant hack, but effective.

The two officers stood for a moment, surveying the wreckage. "Hell of a show, though," Hennessey said, wiping salsa off his mustache with a paper napkin.

End of Sample