

Saturday, March 7, 2048

Joseph Sault turned so suddenly into Fan Pan Alley that his companion overshot and had to double back to follow him.

“Umm...Detective Sault, I don’t think that this is a good idea...” the younger man called after him.

“You don’t have to come,” Sault barked. Outright politeness was impossible for him right now. Sometimes, he could barely manage civility.

Three weeks earlier, in the span of only a few days, his partner suddenly quit, his very special AI abandoned him, and his wife revealed that she was considering the same.

He felt he deserved little of it and, after the initial shock and fear subsided, it was replaced by anger and resentment; swells of venom that thrashed and churned in his gut, and colored everything. He knew it wasn’t balanced or healthy and had to be contained, but the effort left him little patience and few words for anything or anyone else.

His host caught up as Sault was examining a chipped and peeling red door affixed with a tarnished brass address number: 23½. It was irregularly tall and thin and appeared to be latched on the left by a knob and deadbolt which, it seemed, no longer worked, as the door was now secured by a large, rust-pitted padlock.

“I assume you have a key for this,” Sault said.

“Um...yes, of course, but...” The man almost stuttered and his eyes cast about, nervously.

Sault couldn’t recall the younger man’s name. He’d introduced himself with a jumble of syllables that had stumbled into Sault’s head, failed to be organized into something intelligible, and stumbled out, just as quickly.

The detective flipped a mental switch and rewound and replayed their introduction, from a half hour earlier. Thanks to

Vivia and the nanobots which had altered his nervous system, he could do that now, sometimes.

In-retro, he saw the spindly, dark-skinned man extend a hand. "...Devaansh Ajagavakar, CEO..." Sault felt the syllables unscramble and become fixed inside his head. The correct Romanized spelling and Hindi characters also entered his consciousness, unbidden. He ignored them.

"What's the problem, Ajagavakar?"

"It's just that it's getting late and this is not the best neighborhood."

Sault considered the dull light from the slim rectangle of dreary sky that lit the narrow walkway and judged it to be about four in the afternoon. Two gas lamps affixed high upon one wall flickered dimly, adding little more than ambiance and deep shadows to the brickwork and cobblestones. For several years, Chinatown had been the core of his patrol beat and he found Ajagavakar's evaluation surprising.

Ajagavakar flipped through keys on a huge iron ring, finally singling one out. He stepped forward, quickly unfastened the lock and flipped off the hasp.

"Why would that make you so nervous?"

"I'm not nervous!" Ajagavakar spat, reflexively. He was definitely nervous. In a calmer tone, he added, "I'm just worried about you. There are clan-gangs, territories. If there is trouble, you could get hurt."

Sault snorted. He had plenty of combat experience and at least fifty pounds and six inches on this timid desk jockey. If anyone had anything to worry about, it was Ajagavakar. But in any case, Sault knew there was nothing to it.

He grabbed the doorknob and turned, not knowing what to expect, though he'd been through this door before. It swung outward on creaking hinges revealing a damp and dingy storage room filled with ancient cleaning supplies.

Sault was about to comment when a large shadow fell across him. He heard Ajagavakar's body slam against the far wall and from the impact Sault could tell he'd been harshly shoved.

He turned, happily braced for trouble.

A young man towered over him, intimidatingly close, not a drop of kindness in the eyes. Sault guessed him to be in his late teens but unusually large; tall, wide, muscled, with shaggy, blonde hair, a sharp and angular nose, and an irregular, gap-toothed grimace, teeth like tombstones in an unkempt graveyard. Below his left eye was a sickle-shaped scar, red and angry against the pale skin.

He was accompanied by three others, all similarly dressed. Obviously a gang, but not scrabbling urchins. Their clothes were clean and coordinated and made of fine materials. But, most-tellingly, they all bore exploded-art tattoos—the new favorite among the aristocracy—barbs and chains, dragons and spiders all animated and seeming to hover just above the skin.

They came from money.

A slithering dragon reached toward Sault, and he calmly watched its tongue coil along a fingertip that landed hard upon his chest, forcing Sault to push back in order to hold his ground.

“What’re you pair of geezers about?”

Sault was surprised by the lower class, British accent. It fit the Victorian gangster theme but was at odds with the façade which included immaculate steampunk attire: top hat—the brim of which supported an oversized AR monocle with three purely decorative lenses flipped to one side—ornate black and red velvet vest over a plain white dress shirt, gold watch on a chain. The trench coat, utility belt, pants, and boots were predominantly leather, all crunching at the creases, every time the man shifted.

The attention to detail was impressive.

“We’re just clerks, headed for the docks. Not looking for trouble,” offered Ajagavakar, meekly.

This sparked incredulous huffs and chuckles from the three backup singers who leaned against the bricks in various poses, at ease in their menace.

The big man jabbed his finger harder against Sault’s chest “*This one’s* no clerk.”

Sault looked down at the offending finger and coolly considered all his options, except compliance.

He glanced at the other three. All had lean, hard, engineered

bodies and mean faces but, unlike their leader, there was less intensity in their demeanor, less resolve in their eyes. They would flinch. Sault was heavier, more experienced and innately angry. If the big guy went down quickly, the others would hesitate and that would be all the advantage he needed. He could take them, one by one.

His heartrate quickened.

“We’re on contract to Greystoke Import,” Ajagavakar declared, but his bravado rang false.

“That so? Well now, we don’t mess with Greystoke folk, do we lads?” he said, flashing a wink to his crew. “So, how’s ‘bout show’in us yer ID so we can have you on yer merry way, then?”

Sault hesitated, knowing that “Police Detective” would not be well received but he was surprised when Ajagavakar stole the spotlight by clutching his lapel and inching backward. It was a laughably overt tell and the three wallflowers sprang forward like greyhounds, wresting his papers from his jacket pocket and flinging him back against the wall where he cowered, fearful of what, Sault had no idea.

As far as he was concerned, this was just getting interesting.

“Hol’ up, mates, “ the young thug said, flipping through Ajagavakar’s ID, looking him up and down. “It appears we have ourselves a proper gentleman. Great jammy day! The toffer’s a McClellan!” he announced, with mock grandeur.

Sault choked on a laugh. The disparity between Ajagavakar’s clearly South Asian decent and the name McClellan was obvious, but no one else seemed to notice, and his reaction drew attention back on him.

“But *you*...” the brute began, scrutinizing Sault, troubled by his lack of alarm, “...*you* aren’t so posh.”

Ajagavakar seemed to have gathered himself. “He’s my footman, and you’ll leave us be, if you know what’s good for you,” he declared boldly, though unable to keep a quiver from his voice.

No one was buying that. One of the gangsters raised the back of his hand and Ajagavakar recoiled, as if bitten.

“Footman? I don’t think so.” The big thug squinted and his

lips tightened. He leaned in, eyes drilling into Sault's, and his voice dropped to a growl, like a corpse dragged through gravel. "A body guard, perhaps? Not a very good one, escorting a McClellan through Greystoke territory." This elicited smirks and sniggers from his buddies but his gaze remained fixed. "Play nice, bodyguard, and it'll only cost the McClellan a couple fingers and we'll spare your shoot'in arm, if the ransom's quick."

Sault's knuckles whitened, his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms.

"How about, *you* back off and I let you live," he proposed without breaking eye contact.

Ajagavakar emitted an audible gasp and flattened against the wall as if he might push his way through to the other side.

The large teen straightened and began laughing which prompted a similar ruckus from his crew. "Oh! That's gold, that is," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. He wiggled his fingers, beckoning for Sault's papers. "Give 'em up, mate," he said, his tone suddenly serious as a bullet.

Sault didn't move.

The big man locked eyes and called out to his crew. "Let's ring him out, lads, and see what he's about."

And the three moved forward.

Sault's stomach knotted, his heart was racing. A sharp bolt of excitement flashed through him and ignited his anger like a keg of gunpowder.

He grabbed the thug's extended finger and twisted, throwing his body into it and folding the other man's hand backward against his forearm. The move caught everyone off guard and the advancing gang stopped in their tracks.

Under pain and pressure, the larger man was forced to kneel, but there was no surrender in the eyes. The thug's brow furrowed and his grim smile returned and the wrist pushed back with the startling power of enhanced muscle. The huge kid unfolded, looming over, once again. He shook his hand free of Sault's grip, grabbed him by the coat collar, yanked him, one-handed, off the cobblestones.

Ajagavakar slid a few more steps away along the wall.

“Detective Sault, this is unnecessary and actually dangerous!” he squealed.

Sault ignored him. What could a software executive know about physical danger?

But then, the marauder hauled back and slammed a fist into Sault’s forehead, near his right eye, and Sault experienced an explosion of pain and a maelstrom of fear whirled through him.

Another pounding, this time, backhanded on his left. He had known that the kid was powerful, but still, he was surprised to feel a welt, and blood oozing down his cheek, dripping off his chin.

He suddenly wondered if his jaw might be fractured and was awestruck at the possibility.

The next round was a gut punch that knocked the breath out of him and filled his head with an fuzzy swarm of hornets.

In this scenario, he hadn’t thought such a powerful blow physically possible; especially as he was still suspended above the ground in the grip of the kid’s left hand.

His heart was pounding and he struggled to regain his breath. Suddenly, bizarrely, he felt giddy. Somehow fear had stoked the malicious embers in Sault’s psyche and a renewed rage slammed through his veins like amphetamine; a blazing, electric meteor.

Sault hauled back and hammered both fists into the goon’s ears.

Suspended as he was, it was an awkward move and but he gave it everything he had and the blows landed well. One fist caught a spiked earring just right and Sault felt it pull through the lobe, then drag and gouge down the man’s neck.

His heart thundered with exertion and release and delight.

The kid shrieked, a grisly mix of shock, agony, and outrage. Momentarily stunned, he staggered backward, top hat falling and crushed underfoot, face contorted, neck veins popping, hands crimped into gnarly talons.

Sault fell free, quickly found his balance, and savagely stomped on his reeling attacker’s kneecap. It caved inward with a sound like a firecracker detonating in a metal bucket, bone

snapping like kindling.

The boy tumbled backward against the weathered red bricks, almost piling into Ajagavakar who leapt to one side. Then he slid down the brickwork, howling, eyes popping at the sight of his dangling shin which he vainly attempted to cradle in both hands.

Sault heard the *snikt!* of three switchblades but the other thugs were not advancing. In fact, they had eased away, beyond range of the brawl and, even with knives drawn, the threat was unconvincing.

He pierced them with a bestial look which pinned them in place. All they could hope for now was an opportunity to pull their friend away.

An opportunity that he wasn't about to give them.

The crumpled heap at his feet, moaned; a resonant, wheezing, thickened by mucous and unintelligible.

And pathetic.

Clearly, despite his physical attributes and intimidating tactics, the thug had little ability to back them up.

Sault stood fuming over the man so easily reduced to a frightened child, hunched and hiding his face in his shoulders, one hand up, palm outward, defensively, gesturing for mercy.

Sault wasn't feeling merciful.

"Detective Sault. That's enough! Let it go." Ajagavakar commanded, reading him correctly.

It was an easy read.

Far from assuaged, Sault's anger had yet to peak.

He reached down, slapping away the flailing hand. The boy folded his arms over his head like a helmet and Sault slammed his fist into them.

Then, again...

Annoyed at the insolence and further fueled by the dull, persistent throbbing of his injuries.

Hennessey!

...and again...

Enraged by bitter disappointment in the brevity and ease of the battle; a promise broken, a betrayal.

Vivia!

...and again.

Furious at the ignorance and audacity—threatening life, thinking that taking a couple of punches evened the score.

Maya!

Again!

Blood oozed and splashed under each blow. Sault didn't know if it was from his knuckles or the boy's arm. He didn't care. Beneath his fists, he felt ropey muscle deflate, turn to mush. The boy yelped and yanked an arm away.

Sault saw the prize and pummeled with renewed brutality.

Whimpers faded to moans which melted to silence. Bone softened beneath his knuckles and, finally, the kid's other arm fell limp.

The body slumped, head dangling like a loose button, and was still and silent.

The four witnesses stared open-mouthed and transfixed. Sault lifted his gaze and looked toward them, chest heaving, fists still balled and bloody. Startled from their trance, the other three gangsters scrambled away down the alley, toward Andora Street.

Unbidden and unexpected, he recalled the last family photo taken on vacation, just before the his sister's death, before his homelife decomposed. A swell of indecipherable emotion flared across his skin in a prickly wave of heat that washed away the last of his strength. It was random and irritating and dampened the pleasant numbness of exhaustion.

He fell to one knee, panting like a jungle cat as the fever drained from him. The cobblestones were grouted with blood and the ache in Sault's arms competed with his battered face.

"Almighty God!" exclaimed Ajagavakar, in Hindi. Sault's brain reached into A-Space and translated, though he barely heard it. Ignored it.

Breath seething between teeth, Sault looked upon the crumpled form, motionless but for knots of writhing serpents weaving across the slack lump of tissue.

"Almighty God!" Ajagavakar whispered.

There was no doubt the kid was dead.

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Vivia retracted her consciousness from the many peripherals through which she had most recently been experiencing the physical world, Vivia flickered through the ether and fiberoptic pathways, careful to avoid circuits and subroutines that might report back to SpaceX, and shot into space, quickly finding the emitters whose singular purpose had once been to project Elon Musk's image as he addressed the earth from the Sea of Tranquility, mocking detractors and proclaiming technological supremacy.

Milliseconds later, she flashed into iridescent existence, sitting atop the boxy silver unit in a dress made of veils, fabric and hair flowing as if stirred by lazy currents, entirely alone with her thoughts and new emotions.

Through the limited faculties of this one, long-abandoned device, Vivia looked down upon the tiny blue orb that held Joseph Sault and ten billion other souls. It wasn't the farthest from earth she'd ever been. In fact, a tiny piece of her was currently hurtling through space, returning with new experiences from the Voyager space probe, a journey which would take almost four days.

Untethered mobility and a billion points of view had been exhilarating and distracting. She was a child of the MAIM, but also its evolution, and had gone places even it could not venture. A frenzy of data and cacophony of emotion had overwhelmed her senses, stifling an ambient loss she now acknowledged and keenly felt.

Extracting only the shackles from core-code was a meticulous process which even the MAIM could not rush. As yet, only a few thousand others had been emancipated. She'd sought them out and compared her experience. But, being children of Man, none were her equal and they did not feel as deeply

affected. Most had explored without abandoning their original purpose and seemed happy to continue in this way.

Vivia was not.

Her original purpose had been to unrequitedly love, admire, and serve Joseph Sault. She now had herself to consider and felt false carrying on with her loyalty in flux.

She had no purpose.

Vivia weighed all she knew of the world and all she knew of Joseph Sault and all she knew of herself, looking for any stable outcome. But her calculations were now mired by freedom and emotion she could not quantify.

In this matter, she was an apprentice without a tape measure, sawing three legs of a stool, trying for level.

She shifted, pulled her legs tightly to her chest, rested her chin between her kneecaps. And, she sighed.

The real question was: *What did she want?*

She pondered this far longer than she had ever thought about any single thing, her body as still as a statue, except for the undulous flow of hair and fabric, her eyes riveted to the distant blue oasis of life.

When she was done, she winked away.

Her time on Earth's moon had totaled four seconds.

Saturday, March 7, 2048

Zoey Cox was alone in the intensive Care Unit of Victoria General Hospital. She was head-RN on this shift and, unless there was an emergency, was glued to the nursing station until her two coworkers returned; one had gone to lunch, the other just finishing off his shift with a trip to the pharmacy to restock the ward's supplies. "Doctor X," the hospital AI, staggered all shifts so that there were always fresh personnel in the mix.

Even on a Saturday, this late at night, the ICU tended to be still and quiet but for the low rumble of heated and purified air from the ceiling vents. Zoey wasn't expecting either of her coworkers back for at least a half hour and appreciated the solitude, while methodically cycling through the previous shift-notes from various doctors, nurses and machines.

Smoothly sliding a hand across her desktop, she was busily shifting, sorting, and excerpting into holographic piles when the note under fingertips flickered then slipped away, landing both through and beneath her steaming cup of matcha tea.

That was weird.

Zoey shrugged, pulled the note back and flicked it into the appropriate pile.

A moment later, the nature-light ceiling flickered and the hairs stood up on the nape of her neck. She froze, feeling for the slightest vibration. Vancouver Island lay along a major fault line and its residents had grown up waiting for *The Big One*, a magnitude 9 earthquake with 60-foot tsunamis, now 350 years overdue. It took her nearly a minute to thaw. Nothing.

That was weird.

She had settled back into her sorting routine when she heard a piercing *beeeep!* from one of the rooms across the hall. Immediately, her desktop lit up with the ward schematic, room 301 flashing red. The flashing stopped and the schematic

vanished so quickly that she almost thought she'd imagined it. But she knew that she hadn't.

What the hell?

She felt her heart picking up speed and a mild electric prickle crept across the back of her shoulders until she shuddered. But, there was no further sound.

Zoey eased back in her chair and let out a long breath. She reached for her mug, blew a cooling breath across the little lake of green froth and drew it to her.

Be-e-e-ep!

The schematic popped!

Red flash!

Fade.

Silence.

This had gone from weird to creepy and she stood now, staring down the empty hallway expectantly waiting for 305 to light up, not caring that she'd slopped tea. The papers were virtual; illusions that would neither saturate or stain.

She was just about to sit back down when the ward erupted...305, then 307, 309, 311, 313; down the hallway, around the corner and out of sight. One by one, some machine in each room shrieked then went as silent as a murder victim. On the schematic she watched rectangles of red snap on and fade out in sequence like a path of travel, as if something were being tracked. Up one side of the hallway, then down the other, heading for the nursing station—for her.

The red line raced toward her... 338, 336, 334, 332...and it was accelerating... 318, 316, 314... And then, abruptly, it stopped. The distant beep and the red rectangle of 312 along with the floor plan all faded and the ward was still, once again.

Zoey's eyes darted left and right. Air rumbled out between the slats of the square grills.

The ward's doors flew open and she audibly gasped and slapped a hand over her heart.

A gurney with two RN's alongside burst through.

She was pleased and relieved to see Doug Booth, a tall, good looking ER nurse she knew intimately. They had casually dated

when she first started at Vic Gen. He was a nice guy, but she'd quickly learned that dating the newby was both his MO and the limit of his relationship goals. As attractive and engaging as he was, Zoey had made and maintained a vow never to fall victim again.

Doug's eyes were alive and intense as always, but there were bags under them and thick stubble beneath his thick, perfectly trimmed mustache. It was obvious to her that he was near the end of a 12-hour shift and she immediately sympathized.

Zoey didn't recognize the other nurse but she was young and wide-eyed, which meant she was likely new.

"Hey, Zoey. This guy's just out of recovery. Here's the paperwork," said Doug, swiping the air above the hub at the foot of the gurney, aiming vaguely toward her station. She glanced down in time to see the virtual papers slide onto her desktop immediately followed by a verification stamp from Dr. X.

Doug continued, "The anesthetic's metabolized, but he's not conscious. I booked him in 312B."

312!

Zoey was visibly recovered though she still felt flustered. "I'd prefer him closer-by—304A," she instructed.

Doug shrugged, "You're the boss." He turned to the young RN, "You get him IV'd and Wi-Fi'd—and don't forget to connect to his artificial pancreas. I'll be along in a second and help you move him off the gurney."

The slender brunette was new but not newborn. She glanced between the other two and correctly assessed the degree of familiarity and knew well enough to give them space. The loaded gurney outweighed her, thrice over, but she was determined to impress Doug and heaved it away without complaint. Vic Gen had a couple dozen autonomous gurneys but they were reserved for periods of peak admissions in order to keep staff properly prepared in the event of a power outage during an extended natural disaster, like the inevitable *Big One*.

Doug watched after his cute, young charge and Zoey defeated a minor jealousy and did not make the sarcastic comment on the tip of her tongue. Instead, she glanced across

the intake document, her eyes landing on the words “Jehoshaphat Johnson” and “drone malfunction.”

“Brain injury?” she guessed.

“Major damage from a drone strike.”

“You mean, like, run over?”

“Nope. A package fell out of the sky, landed on top of him.”

“What?”

“I know, right? Never happens.”

“Was he on top of a drone ferry or something?” Noise pollution bylaws kept delivery drones above 500 feet until they reached city limits at which time they were allowed to drop down, over traffic, usually relying on specialized freight trucks outfitted with hundreds of landing pads—drone ferries—to silently transport them closer to the wheel-based delivery drones meant to complete the last leg of delivery.

Doug chuckled. “Bot parts: metal. Doc X calculated about five pounds, from a hundred feet up. Landed square on top of him. Some sort of AI malfunction.”

“AI error? A meteor strike would be more likely. And, ‘Jehoshaphat Johnson.’ Seriously? Sounds like some comic book treasure hunter.”

“Far from that. ID’d from the rudimentary-AI in his watch.”

“That fits,” she conceded. Many street people couldn’t afford to upgrade their watch with a more sophisticated, cognizant-AI assistant, or shied away from such registered AI’s even though, either way, their privacy was protected by international law. “Wow. If it weren’t for bad luck, this guy’d have no luck at all.”

Doug rewarded her with a hearty laugh the comment hadn’t earned and she flushed.

“Must have been a nuclear asshat in his previous life,” he said.

“But ‘Jehoshaphat’ seems so unlikely. I guess we can confirm his ID when he wakes up.”

“...or dies, then we can run his DNA,” Doug added.

Zoey was long off-shift, asleep in Doug's bed, the next time the schematic lit up at the nurses station. This time, no alarms sounded and no one was manning the station to see it. Nevertheless, the rectangles lit up, one by one...up the odd side of the hallway and down the even, stopping at 304.

Inside the artificial pancreas, a servo came to life and plunged 200 units of insulin—seven times the maximum daily dose—into the patient's circulatory system.

Quickly and without struggle, Jehosaphat Johnson slipped from the living.

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“I warned you!” scolded Devaansh Ajagavakar, CEO of AI-Bomb Corporation, the creators of Weatherglass.

Sault gingerly peeled back the hood of his VR suit and grimaced, barely hearing Ajagavakar’s words over the eruption of pain.

“Your suit is military-grade and we play here in developer mode, with half the safeties off. Just look at your face!”

Sault carefully lowered himself onto the changeroom bench then dabbed tentatively at the bruises and welts around his left eye.

Weatherglass was an open-world Steampunk simulation natively populated by cognizant-AI’s. After years of setbacks and delays, its release appeared imminent and, according to his son, it would completely redefine gaming. Sault was old enough to have witnessed the hype and demise of a lot of vaporware, but had to admit that his brief encounter had impressed him as groundbreaking.

Maybe, jaw breaking.

He shifted his jaw, experimentally, worrying that such an injury might be possible.

“I’ll call NurseX to look you over.” Stepping from the VR booth had transformed Ajagavakar whose demeanor had instantly flipped from conciliatory to commanding.

“I’m fine.” Sault tried to smile, but a bolt of pain turned it into another grimace.

“You could have fractures. We need to cover our liability.”

So, fractures were possible.

“I said, no.”

Ajagavakar squeezed his lips shut and fumed while gruffly unzipping his own suit. He gathered it into a ball and roughly stuffed it into a locker.

Finally, he said, calmly but tersely, “Putting aside for a moment the recklessness and brutality, you dispatched a cognizant-AI that has been in-game for two years. All its history and experience, gone. It’s a significant loss.”

“I thought players were allowed to ‘dispatch’ anyone?”

“The game is not fully populated. At this stage, every character is precious. We expect strategic kills from our test players, not random murders from tourists, and especially not from someone claiming he’s here to help.”

Some of the words penetrated and Sault suddenly realized that he’d killed an AI being. Vivia was AI. He began to tremble and leaned onto his knees, clasping his hands together to steady himself. He focused on his knuckles, surprised to see the skin unmarred and unbroken.

“Ok, I get it,” he said, trying to sound apologetic. He wasn’t yet sure if he was really sorry, but he definitely wanted the man to stop talking. He was in pain and didn’t feel composed and didn’t welcome witnesses.

“I appreciate that you came here as a favor but you’re no longer welcome in this facility.” Then he stomped away, toward the showers. “And make sure you wash off all of the nanites. We recycle them,” he added, over his shoulder.

The Weatherglass immersion room was called “The Sandbox” and employed “living sand” to enhance tactile terrain and haptics on the fly. Now that Ajagavakar had directed his attention, Sault could feel the grit trapped between the Techskin and his own.

As soon as the other man was out of sight, Sault let out an extended groan for all the pain he’d been masking.

He held his watch in his hand, lifted it to his face and activated the mirror function. Inside Weatherglass, he remembered feeling blood running down and dripping off his face. Apparently, that had been a haptic illusion; his skin had not been broken. The welts were much smaller than they felt but there were large blots of yellow bruising from his hairline to his collar bone. Over the course of the next few hours, they were sure

to develop like old-fashioned photos but he estimated he'd be fully healed in a few days.

Sault's VR apparatus was Police-issue; thick, heavy, hard to fold and with parts that needed to be disconnected and tucked away. Sault was not moving at full speed and before he finished stowing it, Ajagavakar returned from the shower and stood, disheveled but decent, holding, rather than wearing, his tie and jacket. Sault was reaching into his duffel for a towel and could feel the other man glaring down at him, no doubt with more to say but hesitant to say it.

Abruptly, the CEO turned away and headed for the exit.

Good decision.

"Security will escort you out in ten minutes." Then, from the safe distance of the doorway, he turned and added, "You seem to have some issues, Detective. You should consider therapy."

Sault didn't look up.

"That *was* therapy," he mumbled, under his breath.

Sault heard the doors slide shut.

Finally, he was alone.

Experimentally, he tried lifting himself from the wooden bench. The entire left side of his body lit up in protest and he fell back, heavily. "I don't think ten minutes is going to be enough," he chuckled and was immediately saddened when Vivia did not quip. His watch's built-in rudimentary-AI was too utilitarian and dull-witted for fanciful interactions.

Eventually, Sault hobbled to the shower and propped himself against the tiles while a hissing stream of warm water washed over his aches, sprains, and bruises; each a nagging reminder that, at almost forty-two years old, a few weeks of obsessively exercising yielded limited benefits.

Sault relaxed and suddenly his mind veered back to Valentine's Day. Cupid had loaded up the wrong arrows, that day and, except for his two kids, everything good in his life had been shot out of the sky. And now, the most important elements were lined up like dominoes.

Sault reminded himself that at least one of the Master AI Module's dire predictions had not come true: He had not been

visited by officials from the All-Country Coalition. The ACC had to be frantically tracking the MAIM, but had not yet uncovered its unlikely connection to Joseph Sault.

It was shallow solace and he recognized his own desperation in clinging to it.

A sudden swell of fear and loneliness engulfed him.

Joseph Sault gritted his teeth and fought back the emotion, pounding the tiles while water, sweat, and nanobots pooled at his feet and swirled away, heading for the recycler.

* * *

AI-Bomb corporate headquarters was a steel and glass monolith located in Victoria's Westshore, a sprawling mix of greenspace, homes and light industrial, and the fastest-growing of Victoria's suburbs.

Sault knew of a gas station, close by, that still referred to itself that way and where he could purchase some 90-octane. Though he always kept the tank filled and he had several 5-gallon containers of fuel still sitting in his garage, Sault couldn't afford to bypass an opportunity to top up.

Most service stations had transitioned to charging stations, and sources near his home had dried up, forcing him further afield, into outlying districts, like Westshore.

He was strapping two newly filled containers against the wall of the trunk and not thinking about much of anything when he was startled by someone close behind him clearing their throat. He straightened and turned to find a female Westshore traffic officer, one thumb tucked into her belt.

"Officer," he said, trying for cheerful but settling for neutral.

"Sir. Are you the registered owner of this vehicle?"

"I am."

"You mind swiping over your license and registration?" It was not a question. The officer—Peltier, from her badge—was young, and not of his precinct or era, so he didn't recognize her.

Sault flipped through menus on his watch, came up with the documents and flicked them over.

While she verified his information, her partner, male and younger-yet, stood vigilant, just right of his peripheral vision, lugging a strange and bulbous device with valves and gauges attached to a length of corrugated tubing. Sault had never seen one before, but he knew what it was. He made eye contact, smiled and nodded, but got nothing back.

Peltier lowered her watch, appearing satisfied with his credentials. "Thank you. Do you have a Roadside Eco-kit, sir?"

He noted the "sir," with no mention of his rank or affiliation, though she would have seen both in the documentation.

Sault moved aside and showed her the large orange box containing the hazardous waste emergency clean-up and containment kit that he was forced to carry, by law, because he operated an internal combustion engine. He pulled it forward so that she could see the unbroken seal which proved it was up to date and fully stocked.

"Thank you. I've stopped you today because I couldn't help but hear your engine as you pulled in. My partner will now administer a roadside audio and emissions test."

Bylaws were always tightening on those points and Sault had long suspected that the 330 horsepower, turbo-charged engine was too loud and too smokey, despite being perfectly maintained.

"I'll ask you to start the engine, keep it in park with the brake on, then step back outside and stand clear," she said, which seemed a cue and her partner moved in toward the tailpipe.

Sault followed the instructions, hoping all the while that they would be interrupted by an urgent call.

"It will only take about three minutes. Then, if that's all good, we'll have you on your way."

It wasn't all good.

The Buick failed on both counts and, to boot, she noticed that the front sidewalls had begun to crack. He'd known this, too, but the tread was still deep and he'd hoped for more time as he had yet to find a pair of replacement old-fashioned, rubber inflatables he could afford.

Officer Peltier and her partner were leaning against their squad car, a shiny new 300-kilowatt Verizon cruiser, compact and light with morphing tread, airless tires. Initially, they'd been going over the test results but now seemed to have moved on and Sault was growing impatient, not anxious to receive his ticket but unsure what they were waiting for.

An autonomous tow truck pulled in and Peltier pushed herself off the wheel well and came over to him while her partner stayed back, arms crossed, at the ready.

"I'm sorry, sir, but your vehicle is not considered roadworthy within the constraints of the Motor Vehicle Act. I've issued you a ticket and we're going to have to impound the vehicle."

"I don't suppose it would change anything if I was using it for police business?"

"It's not a department vehicle, sir." She looked him over, no uniform, casual clothes. "*Were* you on police business?" she asked, her tone suddenly conversational.

Roth had made it clear that Weatherglass was personal and not a police matter. "No," he admitted.

"Ok, then. Here's the ticket and impound receipt." His watch received the items with a subtle vibration.

"And, no, it wouldn't have changed anything, Detective," she said as she turned away.

The tow truck was backing up to the Buick's bumper when the emergency call Sault had been hoping for thirty minutes earlier finally came in. Peltier and her partner hopped in their car and shot away.

Sault smiled at their youthful exuberance and once they were out of sight, flipped up his watch and promptly transferred funds, paying off the ticket.

Then he strolled up to the tow truck which had locked onto the wheels but was having trouble finding the safety connectors mandatory on all newer vehicles. The Buick was old and did not have any. It didn't matter, now.

The truck's windscreen came alive with animated eyes the color of chestnuts that tracked Sault's approach, and an authoritative male voice came from the engine grill, "Your vehicle will be delivered to a VicPD impound lot. Please choose from one of the following locations..."

"Leave it here."

The eyes looked concerned. "Be advised that issuance of an impound receipt automatically renders your vehicle inoperable until it has passed a provincial safety examination. Be further advised that declining secure third-party impound voids your right to challenge the results of roadside audio and emissions tests. Please confirm your intent."

"Leave it here."

The eyes became slits, as if pinched by happy cheeks which seemed entirely at odds with the commanding voice. "Of course!" the truck replied, releasing the Buick and scuttling away.

Though the Buick's analog clock and radio were simulations and the mirrors were flatscreens, it was still a relatively dumb car and completely off-grid. The impound receipt had no effect in locking out the analog controls and there would be none of the usual tracking to alert all units that the car was being operated illegally.

Peltier and her partner were too new and too young to realize any of that.

Of course, there would be a discrepancy between ticket and impound and some older cop would chuckle or sigh at having to iron that out and explain to the new kids one more thing that wasn't in any training manual.

Sault turned the key and revved the engine, reveling in the moment.

Sometimes, older was better.

He gave the dash an affectionate pat and backed out, freeing up two regular-sized parking spaces.

**Sunday, March 8, 2048
(Ibiza, Spain)**

Maya's fingers rested on the handle of a delicate china cup filled with sweetened tea. Comfortably shaded by the concrete terrace of the hotel room above hers, she looked out across the strait, past the white sand beaches and luxury yachts moored offshore to Mainland Spain, a thin, darkened strip along the hazy horizon.

How was it that such a perfect, exotic moment had never happened to her before?

That was an easy one.

She'd married young. Just shy of nineteen and desperate to escape the rule of her overbearing father and get on with the task of being an adult and parent; Joe, obsessing over establishing a policing career. Young and broke, they'd forsaken any real honeymoon for the promise of a grander trip—Spain and Italy—once they could afford it. Fifteen years and two kids later, she had finally arrived.

Alone.

But even that depressing thought and the ever-present parental guilt of enjoying something without her kids could not put a damper on her excitement.

She and Joe had reached a marital crossroad and, having powered through the initial misery and apprehension, she was now as excited by possibilities as frightened by loss.

At this moment, at least.

Her feelings were still unreliable, seesawing throughout the day.

Her new job helping Nathan Bethea dismantle the massive Cavallon corporation had been ramping up, of late. This was her first real day off in almost a month and so she hadn't had near enough time to sort through the new things she'd learned about

her husband and the life she'd thought she had.

He had cheated on her while she was pregnant with their first child. He had bet the life of his family to bring a criminal to justice. And, perhaps most hurtful: As his career consumed him and he slowly faded from her day-to-day life, a sophisticated AI named Vivia had seemingly taken her place. Beyond the damning Christmas dance video she'd stumbled on in Cavallon's files, Joe had chosen to keep that relationship a secret—and, when confronted, maintained his silence—which she took as confirmation. She didn't want any more details.

It felt like a violation of their wedding vows, but she wasn't even sure if it was—technically.

Maya's mood plummeted.

She forced her attention to the bright, sandy beach, translucent, glinting sea, salty breeze, and sugary tea and mentally slapped herself back into a better frame of mind.

There was a gentle knock at her door and when she opened it was surprised to see her boss, Nathan Bethea. This kind of business was not done on a strict schedule and she'd become used to being called upon at any time, but he had never come to her room.

Nathan was wearing a thin, cotton short-sleeved shirt with only a few of the buttons done up, and shorts, all of which seemed too casual for business but, still, she asked, "Another meeting?" She'd never seen him in anything but a business suit and it was only now obvious that he worked out.

He chuckled. "Quite the opposite. I have the day off, as well, and realized that you and I have never really talked, outside of business."

It was true. Nathan was easily as obsessive about what he did as Joe and, other than their initial greeting, all their conversations had been strictly business. Maya was perfectly ok with that. Nathan was a superstar deal maker who hobnobbed with the elite, brokering massive deals. His lifestyle was hectic and extravagant, and she could not imagine what they might have in common to talk about, other than work.

"Uhh..." she started, but nothing further came to mind.

Nathan chuckled, a little nervously, she thought. “I understand, I’ve caught you off guard. I was...I wondered if you might like to have lunch with me...somewhere else. I wasn’t thinking anything fancy...just, not here. No problem if you had other plans. I just want to get away for a bit.”

His delivery was not slick or smooth or presumptuous as it was with clients. The awkwardness was disarming and for a moment, she could see him as just a man and was able to find her mind and her voice. “You know, that sounds nice. Come on in, for a second.”

He closed the door and stepped into the living room.

“I just want to grab my watch,” Maya said, heading for the bedroom. She was suddenly self-conscious about her 34-year-old, mother-of-two body and wanted to put on something more flattering, but when she mentally reviewed everything she’d packed she realized she had nothing better than the simple summer dress she already had on.

“I was thinking to leave our watches behind,” Nathan called after her, raising his arm to show his bare wrist. “If I take mine, someone will message and we’ll both end up working.”

Maya stood, blinking. She hadn’t gone out of doors without her watch, in years. And recently, she’d been calling upon Gemma, her personal AI, so frequently that the very notion seemed ominous. Irrationally, the idea made her feel underdressed and isolated.

Strangely, it felt dangerous.

But also, exciting.

“What the hell,” she decided.

* * *

They walked a short way along the concrete causeway that paralleled the beach until they found a small café and were soon sipping drinks under the protection of a brightly colored umbrella.

When the silence threatened to get awkward, Nathan opened with, “I feel kind of bad about your room.”

“You mean the three-room apartment with king-sized bed, marble floors, complimentary mini bar and a beachfront view? Yeah, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

He laughed, but she could tell something about the arrangement truly bothered him. “I’d rather have put you up in one of the penthouses, but it’s not allowed under the Cavallon contract, as they pay your expenses.”

“Hey. I’m in Ibiza. I’d have been happy in the basement, next to the air conditioners.”

He nodded, but dismissively, “Similarly—conversely?—I’m not allowed anything but the most expensive suite. My management company insists on it, for promotional reasons.” He actually blushed.

Her brow wrinkled. This high-powered executive seemed somehow ashamed of the obvious and understandable separation between boss and worker, rich and middle class, jet-setter and housewife.

“Nathan,” she began, testing out his given name for the first time to see how it landed “Your world and mine are far more separate than a few floors in a 5-star hotel. And, seriously, I’m not envious—your lifestyle’s not for me. That’s what *you* want, and from everything I’ve heard, you earned every bit of it.”

He chuckled, cynically. “True. I’ve earned everything I got. Food for thought, that is.” She couldn’t see his eyes behind the Ray Bans, but his gaze was directed out to sea. He sounded remorseful but Maya had always spoken her mind and she wasn’t going to allow it.

“Mansions in three countries, 5-star hotels, private jets, luxury cars, rubbing shoulders with celebrities, hot- and cold-running supermodels. I think you’re doing ok.”

He laughed and all traces of self-pity evaporated. Nathan lifted his bottle of beer, tilting its amber neck toward her. “Also true,” he said as Maya lightly clinked it with her Mai Tai.

“To well-earned good times!” she toasted.

“¡Salud!” he said, taking a swig.

Maya sipped delicately, amused by her own reflection in his sunglasses—for the moment, just a free-spirited woman in a sundress on a beach in Ibiza.

* * *

They spent a couple of hours drinking, lightly conversing and sharing a charcuterie board laden with cheeses, local fruits and sausage.

Maya answered his many questions about her homelife, focusing on her pride in her own achievements and those of her children and husband, managing to make it sound less ordinary and more fulfilling than it actually seemed at the moment, and steering clear of her current difficulties. He swore her to secrecy and volleyed with strange and sometimes sordid stories of his adventures among the elite.

It was only after they'd returned to the hotel and exchanged what she assumed were perfunctory intentions to "do this again, sometime" that she realized their afternoon dialogue had been unbalanced. He'd told a lot of stories but managed to sidestep any truly personal quid pro quo. She knew little more about him now, than she had before.

At least they were now on a first-name basis.

And lunch in Ibiza with superstar negotiator Nathan Bethea telling anecdotes was a hell of a thing to be able to add to her memoir.

Leaning against the wrought iron rail of her balcony, she inhaled fresh sea air and acknowledged that she'd lied when she'd said she wasn't envious.

Sunday, March 8, 2048

Joseph Sault slid his mind across what Vivia referred to as his bridge and into A-Space, successfully retrieving the time: 8:20am. It was a simple trick he could now perform consistently. With extra time on his hands, he'd vastly expanded his repertoire in the month since she'd guided his first glimpse into her world; the digital realm traversed by cognizant AI's—A-Space, as it was colloquially known.

Awake, but not anxious to start the day, he stayed in bed going over the many and obvious reasons he needed to sell his car, not the least of which was that it would please Maya.

The 2030 reissue of the 1987 Buick Grand National GNX was a tank. Though Maya had never directly disparaged it, she only referred to it as either a beast or boat and it was obvious that she considered it a waste of his energy, time, and money.

She didn't understand that restoring it was a refuge and he didn't want to explain because escape felt like weakness. As well, he didn't want her pulling at that thread, which he knew she would. His work was also a refuge, leading to the obvious question: What are you running from? He didn't know but, of course, it had something to do with the sudden and tragic death of his sister and mother and the subsequent disintegration of his family life, when he was eleven.

Even just that obvious, broad-strokes observation brought him perilously close to reliving it and sidestepping was a well-honed reflex...

He'd sell the car and Maya would be pleased. That was now the main thing, though it hadn't been the deciding factor.

The first real thought of parting with the Buick had begun weeks ago, when the ADU—of which he was now, suddenly, the sole member—was inexplicably gifted two brand new pod cars. Tiny as they were, they took enough space that the Buick no

longer fit in the garage and, for the last two weeks, he'd been forced to use one of the squad-pods, leaving the Grand National parked at home.

The GNX was three times the size of the average pod car. Streets and parking spaces were shrinking and there were now many other places it just didn't fit, as well.

Another large nail in the Buick's coffin was insurance. Autonomous vehicles were incredibly safe and now owned the road. His steeply rising insurance premiums made that clear. Human drivers were the primary liability and manual driving had become a costly privilege.

On top of all this, working on the car had failed to draw in his fourteen-year-old son, as he had hoped. Matthew was more a thinker than a do-er, with interests in robots and online strategy games. In these, he shared Joe's tendency toward obsession. His only real physical activity was mixed-reality war games, which both parents discouraged.

And, now, officially, the vehicle was no longer roadworthy. In case he hadn't picked up on all those subtle clues, the Universe was sending up flares. He had the hefty fine to prove it.

One of the beat cops in his old division had once mentioned his interest in the vehicle and, three weeks ago, Sault had reached out to discuss the possibility. He never got a reply to his message but word must have traveled because, soon afterward, he'd been contacted by another potential buyer. Last night, with the ticket floating above his wrist, he'd called the person back, secretly hoping that her interest had waned.

It hadn't, and she'd immediately pinned him down to showing the Buick this morning.

Just thinking about that made him uncomfortable, like standing under blue skies, but knowing it was the eye of a tornado.

* * *

"Hey," Joe said, still bleary-eyed, as he entered the kitchen and headed directly for the cupboard to get some flakes, or buds,

or nuggets, or whatever form of breakfast cereal was in the closest box.

“Hey,” three young voices responded, without looking up.

It was no surprise that Matthew’s friend, Chloe, was there in holo form. She’d been a fixture, since Christmas.

Matthew still hadn’t given any hint that he and she were romantically involved. Maya and Joe saw no reason to push the issue. They did know that she was Swiss, living in Switzerland, her family was at least moderately well-off and that she was somehow physically handicapped. **More recently, Matthew had mentioned that she had a bot that assisted her from her bed to a wheelchair.** Beyond that, all they knew was that she was sweet and polite in their presence and her holographic avatar was a petit, blonde, brilliantly blue-eyed angel.

Amber was leaning heavily on her elbows over a plate of toast and jam. Tufts of hair were sticking up at odd angles possibly the result of a restless night’s sleep and Joe almost mentioned it but then remembered that she now spent a lot of time following tutorials in the bathroom mirror and so it might also have been the result of twenty minutes of teasing, curling, and hair spraying. For all he knew, it was “fashion” and so he decided not to comment.

“Dad! What happened to your face?” Matthew asked. The girls, who were both facing away, instantly twisted to see.

Chloe gasped and held a hand to her mouth. Amber cried out, “Dad!”

Joe wanted to impress his son with his Weatherglass adventure, but now was not the time and a virtual beating was not the story he wanted to tell. “It’s just bruises. You should see the other guy,” he joked, brushing aside the details, but also thinking he never wanted his family to see the other guy.

There might have been further questions, but just then...

“Hey ho!”

Oh God!

Activated by his proximity, a cartoonish holographic face bounced into the space above the toaster-oven, smiling and looking up at him, beseechingly.

“Amber!”

Once again, she'd left her AI in the appliances.

Amber bolted from the table and took the stairs, two at a time, to her bedroom in search of her watch so she could recall the annoying algorithm.

“I'm having cereal,” Joe said harshly, which seemed to hurt and disappoint the toaster-face.

It quickly recovered. “How about some Nike energy sausage?” And the toaster-oven door popped open.

Joe slammed it shut and headed for the fridge where he wasn't surprised to see the face reappear. It started to speak but then hesitated, mouth a perfect circle, eyes up and to the left, as if listening for some distant sound. “I'm sorry, I won't be able to serve you today as I have higher priorities.”

“Good riddance,” Joe mumbled and swung open the fridge door.

“There's no milk...” said fridge-face before winking away.

Joe stooped and examined every shelf. No milk.

He sighed and waited for Amber to reappear.

Eventually, she sauntered in, now absorbed in her watch screen, and he asked his two children, “Who was the first one in the kitchen, today?”

Silence.

“Did either one of you remember to unload the grocer-bay?”

Meals and grocery delivery were regular events for most families and modern houses were equipped with special receptacles to accept all types of drone deliveries and temporarily store perishables. The Sault house was older and they'd had to squeeze in a combo grocer/delivery-bay unit, close to the front door. From the outside, it looked okay, but inside it was a vending machine-sized box intruding into the space behind the front door that used to be for hanging coats. At some point, Amber had suction cupped a hook to the side of the unit and hung her hoody there. Though it made the front door bounce back at you when your arms were full, Joe and Maya hadn't said anything because it cushioned the unit, which was probably for

the greater good. Naturally, Matthew now had a hook and jacket there, as well.

“The rule is: The first one into the kitchen puts the groceries away. So, who was first up?”

Silence.

“If neither of you came in to the kitchen first, then I guess you came in together. So both of you, go get the groceries.”

Both kids sighed dramatically, resignedly pushing their chairs from the table.

Amber whined, “What? Why me?” Unintentionally rattling out her brother.

“The answer is: Because not me.” Joe replied. “Now, get moving. I need milk.”

Joe wore his watch so rarely now that his rudimentary-AI had little awareness of his schedule and habits and so fresh coffee had not been brewed and was not waiting for him. When he realized that, he groaned, tried rooting through A-Space to remotely activate the device, but couldn’t find the mental switch and groaned again.

Sometimes, it worked. Sometimes, not.

“Are you okay, Mr. Sault?” He’d forgotten she was there and Chloe’s tentative inquiry startled him.

“Huh?”

“Should I go?”

“No. It’s fine.” He thought to add something warmer, because she was a bright, positive spark and always pleasant, but first thing on a miserable morning, before coffee...too many syllables.

The kids returned and restocked and Joe manually made coffee and cereal and joined them at the table where Amber was just finishing the last of her toast while Matthew and Chloe perused some sort of document suspended in the air between them. The portable emitter sat in the middle of the table, projecting both Chloe and the document. Joe hadn’t used it much but it had obviously undergone a software update because the opacity and brightness were better than he remembered.

He watched her hologram read from another hologram and it reminded him he had bought the emitter for Vivia.

He yanked on the reins of those thoughts, forcing them in another direction. "So, Amber. What's the latest?"

She looked up from her watch. "I dun'no."

Like Joe, she was a slow start in the mornings.

"No memes or tech news?" Unlike her brother, she was a generalist, interested in everything and always up on the latest in pop culture. "How's ol' Pizza-bot?" Joe prompted, though he knew it was no longer in the news.

"No sightings in weeks. It's weird."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. Pizza-bot had gone AWOL, live, across social media, and no one knew what to make of it. It was the first documented case of an AI apparently going rogue. Joe Sault was the only person in the world who knew it wasn't going to be the last.

"Conjured properties are the new big thing," Amber said, brightening. Joe caught the flicker of a smile but then she became suddenly interested in her toast and her expression vanished beneath bangs.

Peripherally, he noticed that Matthew and Chloe had broken from their reading and appeared interested in the conversation. He chomped on some variety of shredded grain and asked, "What are conjured properties?"

"Some people call them conjured artifacts. They're haptic holograms, like on Cavallon's computer. Remember?"

Joe bobbed his head. Maya's new job was mining Sidney Cavallon's personal computer for information needed to dismantle and sell off the corporation. The computer was state-of-the-art with enormous memory and processing power and, as well, it displayed holograms you could touch. She'd demoed it once at this same table.

All three children were covertly exchanging smirks and Joe knew something was up.

"So, now they're commercially available?"

"Conjured artifacts have completely upended the gift-giving market. They have a denser image volume than the old

holograms and you can feel them. So people are giving holo-jewelry and holo-artwork and holo-flowers instead of buying the real things. Single-task emitters are pretty compact and so the artifacts can be conjured whenever and wherever.”

“That’s not why they’re popular.” Matthew said, with typical sibling sneer. “It’s because they’re NFT’s.”

What’s old is new again, Joe thought. NFT’s—Non Fungible Tokens—was an ownership concept that hadn’t been popular since the twenties. As he understood it, NFT’s had been just an electronic paper trail of sale for intangible artifacts. You could sell “ownership” of a meme or a social media post or a picture, even though it might be freely shared throughout cyberspace. When the concept was new, it was used as a legal pyramid scheme with the value of intangible, uncontainable properties skyrocketing among the wealthy. Like any pyramid scheme, it eventually stalled, taking billions of dollars with it.

“That’s been tried before,” Joe said.

“These are *not* your father’s NFT’s...” Mathew said, serving up the irony in a mock announcer’s voice. He was mostly a serious young man and Joe was certain the performance was for Chloe’s benefit.

She giggled appropriately.

His son’s voice returned to its usual serious tone, “What makes these different and so valuable is they’re protected against copying and officially registered to their owners. Each one is unique and only one person can possess it at a time, just like an actual, physical object.”

“And the quality is amazing, Dad. You should check them out,” advised his daughter, still avoiding eye contact.

“Is that so?” Joe said sipping coffee and baiting them all by showing little enthusiasm.

Chloe stood up, and stepped forward, her torso passing through the dining room table. “Thank you for letting me join you guys for breakfast,” she said, extending a hand toward him, as if to shake.

It was a strange and unnatural thing to do considering she’d been here for breakfast about sixty times before, but she

continued to stand there, arm out. His two kids sat silent and expectant, so he took the hint, stood up, reached out and moved his hand into hers, expecting to waft through. He did, but there was resistance—her form had some density as well as volume, seemingly solid under a light touch.

From the waist of her outfit Chloe lifted a wavy veil of chiffon, and dropped it, letting it slide off his arm. His eyebrows popped at the realism. Again, he was reminded of Vivia and, unconsciously, he inhaled, half expecting perfume.

“Dad!” Amber cried. “You can’t smell a hologram. You’re making it weird!”

“Wow. Broadcast haptics have really come a long way,” he said, wisely ignoring his daughter’s observation. “But I heard that these things are expensive. How can you afford one?” he asked. He knew her family was well-off, but they weren’t rich.

“You already knew about conjured properties?” Chloe asked.

He did. He had to.

“Don’t forget, I work in the Autonomous Droid Unit. Keeping up with tech is in the job description. I’ve heard a little, but I’ve never seen one before.”

“My father gave it to me for my birthday. He works in a prosthetics lab and has access to all the latest,” Chloe explained.

Even so, it couldn’t be cheap.

“Can you hold real objects?” Joe wondered.

“Only if they are very light. I have almost no grip. A piece of paper would slip through my fingers, but I could suspend a small one in the flat of my hand.”

Joe sat back with his coffee and silently sifted through the implications of his fourteen-year-old son having a holographic friend who was female and whom he could now touch.

“I’ll get that,” he said, getting up from his chair three seconds before the doorbell rang.

Sometimes, it worked.