

# Noir 2150

The future ain't what it used to be...

By  
Alex Asper

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### Other works by Alex Asper

*Philler Space* – a daily online cartoon strip.

Available to view at <http://phillerspace.comicgen.com>

### Musical Albums

*Logorrhoea* – parody music by Settle for Second.

Available for download at <http://settle-for-second.angelfire.com>

### Comic Books

*Anathema* – a five-part comic book series.

*Shinobu* – a single-issue comic book.

Available from Ramen Binge Productions

### Books

*Noir 2150* by Alex Asper

Available at [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

Dedicated to everybody who  
put up with listening to me talk  
about this for six frackin' years.  
You know who you are.



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# Chapter 00000.

## Tuning and Preface

Seventy-five years ago, it was pure science fiction to imagine that:

- Man would walk on the moon.
- The economy could be manipulated and used electronically.
- Any piece of information would be available to anyone, anywhere.
- Computers could be smaller than a book and hold every piece of literature in the Library of Congress.
- It would be common to expect to live to 70-80 years old, and your organs could be donated to others after you died.
- Most families would own at least one automobile.
- You could store every song you'd ever heard in a machine the size of a pack of cigarettes, which it turns out kill more people than guns do.
- Swearing, violence, and sexual content would be common on television.
- Enormous jets could deliver hundreds of people to the other side of the planet in a matter of hours.
- There would be drugs and chemicals addictive enough that a single dose could get most people hooked.
- Surgery would be performed using lasers and tiny cameras.
- Cellular phones would allow instant communication almost anywhere on Earth.
- Corporations would clandestinely manipulate government interests.
- Homosexuality would be not only fairly common but the topic of an Emmy-award winning sitcom.
- Sex could be deadly.
- Operations would allow you to change appearance, weight, breast size, and sex.
- Pollution would be so potent that you could get mercury poisoning from eating fish and dozens of species would go extinct every year.
- Religious beliefs could demand performing forced clitoridectomies and terrorism.
- Scientists could create a genetic clone in a laboratory while genetically engineered food would be common

enough not to even warrant a warning label.

-The population would reach beyond six billion and rising.

On the other hand, seventy-five years ago, science-fiction practically took it as given that by now:

-Either aliens would have met us, or we would go meet them.

-We would create artificial life as well.

-Entertainment would be three-dimensional and interactive as the norm.

-The moon would be colonized with plans to move on the Mars and Venus.

-Man would rise above war and create a worldwide government.

-Racial and religious (and perhaps even sexual) equality would be the norm.

-Space travel would be commonplace and atomic powered.

We forget how amazingly far we have advanced because we've been here, along for the ride. To anyone from 1925, the present would be an incredible place, filled with wonderful new technology, strange new attitudes, and peculiar beliefs. It would also be a terrible place full of immorality, horror, atrocities, and perversions against man and nature alike.

Now, in the present, we have our own expectations about how the next seventy-five years will pan out. 2150 is almost twice that far away. Imagine how much our expectations will be right, and wrong. How many of the wrong things will stay exactly the same. And how much will change that we could never imagine...



# Chapter 00001.

## Iconoclast's Blues

*Link Search: Noir...Results: 87142592 results for Noir available.  
Display/Specify?*

*Specify?: Jack Noir...Results: 5421 results for Jack Noir available.  
Display/Specify?*

*Display: Jack Noir...1. Review and link to column Noir in [Local  
Iconoclast Subforum 14]. Link?*

*Linking...eLink.jacknoir.rantsite.publicforum.network64a/maintoday//*

**-+- c/o Special Services Regulation Division:  
WARNING!:: this is an unlawful site banned  
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*Continue linking...Y/N?*

*Linking...*

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*Noir, January 1, 2150*

Today it is the future, and I am not happy with it. I look around me and I have to wonder just what the eff happened, where we went wrong. Because we clearly did go wrong somewhere, and in that way human beings do, we did it to utter excess. This is the future, and this is not the way that the future was supposed to turn out.

Today it is 2150. Two centuries of science fiction refused to extrapolate beyond today because it seemed too far away, too unpredictable. Even fifty years ago there was a great deal of doubt as to whether or not we'd last this long. But now we're here, twenty-one hundred fifty years post-Christ, and we still haven't managed to blow ourselves up. Some days I would consider that a miracle. Today I am in a more pragmatic mood, and I can recognize this as yet another example of man's ineptitude.

2150. Was this the way it was supposed to be? My grandfather told me his dreams of the future, visions of flying cars and cities on the moon, people dressed in quasi-futuristic silver jumpsuits, a planet with limitless energy and resources, a peaceful world under a united

world government. A life filled with androids and robots, aliens and Psionics, houses run on atomic power and spaceships capable of transversing the galaxy, a perfect global utopia.

Well, we've got our flying cars and Faster Than Light spaceships. We've colonized the moon and Mars and Venus and Io and Calypso and Sigma and seventy-six asteroids, with plans to move onto Eden and Ai any day now. We've met extraterrestrials and found them to be as silly and stupid and shallow as we are. We've got a few androids, and lord knows how many Artificial EmotIntelligences, and robots marching for equal rights. We have more energy than we know what to do with, so much that we can turn energy into matter and back again enough to feed a hundred billion human beings. Our world is united under the Solar Corporate Council. Humanity is high in the hierarchy of the universe. There is no war, no famine, no disease, not even a single murder for over a decade. The poorest people today subsist at a standard of living that in my childhood was reserved for only the rich and privileged, and we've discovered and created wonders my grandfather never dreamed of.

So what?

Because we also live in a world full of greed and excess, bigotry and hate, ignorance and fear, stupidity and apathy. Because we live in a world where liberty is a privilege of class and the word Freedom has been copyrighted. Because the only reason we have had no murder is because only a select few people are deemed truly Sentient and therefore capable of being murdered. Because we live in a world where you risk your life to speak your mind. Because a world with no war is nowhere near synonymous to a world at peace. There is no famine, but there is no forest. There is no war, but there is no choice. We've achieved everything, *everything*, except happiness.

What was the point of it all? With all that we have done, where's our utopia?

Man's intelligence has been growing exponentially since we first glanced down from the trees and thought that walking erect might be a nice change. It took us millions of years to make physical tools, five thousand more to figure out astronomy, one thousand more for writing and mathematics, five hundred to sail and navigate, a few hundred to get a good grasp on physics and engineering and electricity, fifty to master software and get into space, thirty to comprehend genetics, ten until we started cloning. Some of our advancements have just been simple extrapolations from older ones (HR from VR from TV, Splyzing from biotech from genetics, robotics from AEI from AI from computers), but some show progression beyond comprehension. Gravitonics, FTL, Hyperspace, Holography, Quantum tech, and Psi have turned previously held dogma on its head time and again and completely revolutionized our

worldviews, and with the recent advances in Scientology and Memes more change is just around the corner. There are no fewer than six branches of science that ten years ago we didn't even have names for. We have the technology available to see outside the border of our very universe (it's blue). The prediction back at the millennium was that by 2017 the amount of information man knew would double every second, and though it actually took sixty-plus years to reach that point, what with World War III and all, we've hit it and kept going.

And yet now, looking at our milestone, at all of our progress, at all of the dreams we've turned true, I have to ask again, so what? *Shuì zài hū?* What was all this for, if we're not the slightest bit closer to our utopia?

Today is the future, 2150. And what is the result, but a world filled full to bursting with a population falling ever further into despair? New setting, same old cast. Welcome to our brave new world, same as the old. Full of citizens who celebrate the semi-centennial by dressing in quasi-futuristic silver jumpsuits and pretending that the future they wanted is the future that they got.

Well, to all of you out there waking up this morning and hoping to find a better world, go back to bed. To all of you dreaming of a brighter tomorrow, wake up. And to all of you who actually *are* dressing up in quasi-futuristic silver jumpsuits, stop it. You look like effing morons.

*The Box: 06h00, January 1, 2150*

I wake up, and instantly know that my day can only get worse.

"Alarm off," I groan, and then, because my house AEI has been on the fritz since forever, shout it again. "ALARM OFF!"

The alarm dies. I want to as well. I grab the Remington Complex Phaser I keep beneath my pillow and idly consider it. It's a good gun, designed not to go off without fingerprint identification and conscious intent read through nerve sensors in the grip. It's not lethal, but if I were serious any secular deity around knows I have guns that are.

I decide against it with a shrug. Easier some days than others. Last Tuesday came down to a coin toss.

I turn back into bed until the snooze goes off and the alarm starts again, giving me a good use for the phaser after all. It is getting progressively harder to give myself a reason to get out of bed every day. Plus, I'm tired from last night's New Year's revelry, and my body is sore, and the nerve endings of my arms itch even though the arms themselves were replaced by cybernetic ones years ago. It is so tempting to roll back and go to sleep, to turn off the world and

envelop myself in a warm, blissful, slumbering oblivion. I decide not to anyway. It is not because I want to, but because I feel that I should. There is nowhere that I need to go and nothing that I need to do, save that I simply refuse to sleep more than I need to, for the same reason that I do not let myself indulge in too many HR programs or drugs. There's always the chance (and an increasingly probably one, at that) that I'll come to my senses and simply stay there.

I'm probably the only person on Earth who still practices much in the way of such restraint. But on a related note, I'm also probably the only person on Earth who won't wake up today with a hangover. People are no doubt still celebrating the semi-centennial.

Allowing myself a few more moments in bed, I ask myself what I am going to do today. "So, Self," I say, "what have you got planned for the day?"

"Nothing much," I reply honestly to myself. "At some point I'll probably evacuate my bowels, but barring that I can think of very little to contribute to the world."

"Effin' A, Haiku," I answer. Even so, I still resolve to get out of bed. How to occupy myself without committing too many crimes is a problem against which I continuously find myself confronted. It is the curse of being both intelligent and untalented. There are so few real jobs to go around that only those with the highest motivation and skill have a slight chance of doing anything other than busywork, if they are employed at all. I currently hold no paid vocation, because I have a great deal of motivation but apparently not the slightest bit of aptitude.

Enough motivation, however, to force the world to make a position for me. I used to be an investigative journalist, before the government re-monopolized the news, made it illegal to report without a license, and made information illegal without passing through their particular filter of propaganda. Therefore, eight years ago I turned my ire towards its source, taking the plunge from journalism to pugilism. I am now instead a self-styled critic, the only one left, I think, on this planet. With SCC regulations being what they are, where happiness is policy and political protest is treason, the only thing critics can legally and honestly comment on these days safely are products, and such activities are meaningless when anybody with eLink access can contribute their praise or condemnation.

I do not critique products.

I critique people. I critique politics. I critique the world. Instead of telling people what they should buy, I tell them what they should know. It is a purpose and an outlet combined. I fill my empty days in what seems like a thankless and ultimately futile job, trying to force others to open their eyes and look round and realize that this city and this planet are filled with things of more dire importance than their

credit level or karma rating, things which desperately need to be fixed.

And apparently I do it very well. On a planet with a hundred billion humans, 9.8 times as many Promoted, 13.2 trillion robots, and two hundred six trillion AEIs, my Linksite has a readership following of almost 12.8% of the population. Which admittedly doesn't sound like much, but which averages out to more than twenty-seven *billion* readers a day! If you compiled my articles it would actually be the third-most widely-read book in the history of the world, second only to the *Bible* and *The Complete Harry Potter*. People read my illegal, highly secured, and constantly shifting online column more than the news and (another statistically interesting tidbit) my daily readership totals more than the entire population of Earth since the dawn of time to 2025! The obvious implication is that the vast majority of any sentient demographic agrees that the world is due for some criticizing. And rather than risking their own necks and karma ratings, they turn to me, or rather to my moniker Jack Noir, to do it. While not true journalism, it is still exceedingly satisfying being honored for the same thing that got me ostracized from the profession in the first place.

I cannot legally not report on events or people or things anymore. The Solar Corporate Council took that away from me when they commandeered the media and classified contradictory opinions as conspiracy against the state. Instead, I show hypocrisy, stupidity, and downright insanity where it exists, and I don't seem to have to work very hard to do it. I present to people the truth in all its horrible beauty. Most people don't want truth, would prefer to just be told how to think, but with free speech falling under penalty of Prohibition, either way I'm the only game out there.

That we live in a totalitarian corporatocracy is no gnosis, no great hidden secret. Unfortunately, happiness is mandatory under corporate policy, which means that by fostering dissent with my blog I am technically committing treason.

I know that the Solar Corporate Council (actual proposed motto: "Protecting the people from the dangers of freedom") would gladly have me publicly executed in as gory a means as possible, perhaps something like being fed face first into a wood chipper live on Pay-Per-View, if they knew who was pumping *Noir* out, if not for three things.

The first is that I, Haiku Down, have never been credited with a single article. It is my alter ego, the infamous Jack Noir, who belittles, berates, and bemoans this worldwide metropolis and everything in it. And Jack Noir, purported author, does not exist, except in computer records, leading to several theories as to just who he is. I have heard every theory across the board, everything from Jack being a collective

group of underground writers, to being a *nom de plume* for Chairperson Bobert Smythe himself. Many to think he's a Seraph, someone who transferred their consciousness into the technorganic matrix of Hypereality and writes online. I have even heard the theory that Jack Noir is the collective Jungian unconscious of humanity expressing itself through the bioelectrical-neural connections of the eLink. The truth, of course, is far more prosaic, that he is a figment, a collection of false trails created by one of the few individuals who's bothered to keep up enough with technology to hack around the basic limits of the eLink effortlessly.

Secondly, I do not do anything to promote my, or rather his, column, for such a thing would immediately attract enough attention to get me liquidated by the SS. My daily zine is free and only spread by word of mouth and email, and I use a pseudonym with enough false trails so that no one can know who I am. I do not post my columns at a particular site. Between simple ignorance and Hypereality, it is hard for people to remember that computer information is not a solid singular thing, and can move from place to place. Instead of maintaining a singular site for readers to visit, I instead have thousands of spider programs seeking certain key words that link my site to the reader, rather than vice versa. Thus, even if my programs accidentally grant access to individuals or groups I might not like, such as the Regulators or the Council, and they take precautions to extirpate my beloved column, it remains, Hydra-like, spreading chaos and dissent one reader at a time to any who ask for it. But only to those who *ask* for it. If *Noir* were spammed, or became advertised, there might be trouble, but as things rest I am fairly confident that the SCC finds the whole thing more trouble to destroy than to live with.

And of course the final factor is the extraterrestrial mores of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids. When humanity got accepted into the GCS, and found itself placed surprisingly high in the galactic hierarchy, mankind was presented with all the technology and thought available since the universe's creation. Unfortunately, by the time the aliens had deigned to speak with us we'd actually discovered or surpassed much of that technology on our own. But it did open a limitless venue of trade (at least to the plethora of alien life still at a state of evolution or plane of existence that leaves them capable and interested in interacting with us), which made Earth prosper and allowed humanity to expand beyond the solar system. The only catch was that members of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids only interact with other Sophoids, other Rational and Thinking Beings, capital letters. But with the shape and nature of life so diverse and alien, there is precious little in the way of common virtues that species can share. After all, one person's sin is another's good time, and a third's religion. One more or less universal belief, though, is

that the GCS refuses to deem Sentient with a capital S (and therefore Sophoid and worth interacting with) any individual or species that engages in the murder, harm, or destruction of other Sentient beings without their permission. And thus: no death penalty. At worst I might be dropped to Prohibitioner. Hardly ideal, having one's consciousness removed into a virtual world, but better than the wood chipper.

Realizing that I'm drifting back to sleep as I reminisce, I finally force the temp-control blankets off and rise from my Model III-Softshare iBed, my groans accompanied by a few more pops than yesterday. I suppose if I scrimped I could get one of those Sleep Chambers that condenses a full night's sleep into fifteen to twenty minutes, but I can't readily afford that kind of cred and wouldn't have anything to do with the spare time I'd save even if I could. As I banish my bedroom and pull up the bathroom, the holographic fields of the single large square room that is my apartment shimmer, and the Spartan bedroom rearranges itself into a basic restroom.

As the room languidly morphs into view with poor digital quality, I have the sad occasion to espy myself in the forming mirror. I am not doing well. I am tired and worn out and worn down and I look every part of it. I am sagging in some places and growing unsightly hair in others. My face is sallow, my eyes baggy, and my cheekbones protuberant, as ennui destroys any evident fitness. My figure, which I would have once described proudly as lean (natural ectomorphic body types are hard to come by in this sedentary society) I would now just describe as lanky, and the slight paunch of gut I'm developing just makes me look even more unhealthy. Even in my early seventies, as I am, not even middle-aged yet, my body's had enough Splyzes that it shouldn't be deteriorating so obviously. Most people my age wouldn't look even thirty. I never looked this bad when I was reporting. And the absolute *nukárumi* of it all, the true worm in the apple, is that even knowing my decline is somatoform in nature, I find myself powerless to halt it. I need a sense of purpose, an occupation with some degree of meaning, and the fact of the matter is that posting seditious material on eLink public rant sites is not providing it. I cannot live as so many do, with no importance beyond consuming resources on my Denizen's Class D credit. It's yet another reason to hate the Solar Corporate Council. They have stolen not only my job and my purpose, but even my very livelihood. The oblique reminder is not a good way to start my day and sours my already unpleasant disposition into one that's downright vile.

Sigh. *Kangae-taku-mo nai*. Or in the vernacular, eff 'em.

I speak up, addressing the bathroom's Artificial Emot-Intelligence. "Commode, I need a water shower today. Thirty degrees. Activate." Most people let their Butler AEI control

washroom functions, but for my own mental health, I waste precious computer memory to give this particular room its own individuality, without much personality. If I have to interact with my Butler Program all day, I would prefer not to have him know what I do in the bathroom.

Commode's baritone mechanical voice, the memory-saving default for Artificial EmotIntelligences without enough personality for the Emot-part, states, "Apologies, Denizen Down. Your karma rating is 35.2 points insufficient to justify a water shower."

I curse, although in my home is the only place that I can do so without it docking me a karma point, and then only by actively ripping into the walls and manually reprogramming the computers. Thanks to a bootleg Shaper, I have about enough credit to get most of the things I want, but with my personality I've rarely got enough karma points necessary to upgrade it. Case in point: I can get a shower, but not a good one. I knew I shouldn't have given the finger to that kid with Splyzed wheels in his feet who nearly hit me the other day. Or yelled at him. Or chased him down six city street blocks. While waving a bat. I groan, rubbing the growing tension from my temples. "Fine. What's the most pleasant shower I can get?"

"A twenty-minute sonic shower, Dnzn. Down," answers Commode.

I have been told that there was a time a person didn't have to bargain with his washroom to get a decent bath. I can only imagine how happy those anachronistic people must have been to start their day. I, on the other hand, seriously reconsider killing myself, although I quickly disregard the concept because my death would be looked upon by too many people as cause for celebration. I reevaluate my plan, reconstructing it to take vast numbers of people with me, preferably Jephrey Nash or Bobert Smythe, some of the bigwigs in the Solar Corporate Council, as well as several lawyers, cybermarketers, and at least one door-to-door salesperson. "Fine, Commode," I agree, dropping my clothes into the hamper for the machines to clean. "Twenty-minute sonic shower. Build up from twenty-six to thirty degrees. And play some jazz, early forties."

Commode starts up an appalling cacophony of synthetic banshee wailing and a flimsy bebop beat. "Ack! *Nineteen-forties*, Commode! *Nineteen-forties*!" The discordant clamor is replaced by the wonderfully soothing sounds of Billie Holiday, which I begin to enjoy until I am assaulted by an arctic blast of frigid air and leap, shrieking, from the shower. "Jesus wept, Commode! Thirty degrees *CELSIUS*! Same as always! I know you know metrics, you condemnable contrivance! Celsius! Gad, I knew I should've bought you as a Mac!"

The glacial chill is replaced by blasting-sauna warmth. Two



minutes in, though, I am prepared to admit the futility. I am going to be stuck in this vile state of mind not only all day, but probably past the next semi-centennial and possibly beyond Ragnarok. I am hardly surprised, since I have been in a bad state of mind for so long that it has consumed my entire personality, if there was ever anything other than sheer bleepard there from the start.

In the shower I subvocally activate my OptiComp, and blink as the vision in my right eye is overwritten by the eLink. I get onLink just quickly enough to check world events, hoping against hope that maybe, just maybe, the world won't be out there. Since I don't have a window I can't be totally certain without actually going outside, and I'd prefer to avoid that unless I have to. At my altitude, going outside is like morning on the *Jetsons*, except I don't have the ability to rise above the smog. Just my luck, the world's still there. Along with sixteen spam mails that got past the Link-filter and a holiday eCard from my worthless brother, Evangelion "Eva" Down.

I shower quickly. My Lazer-Razor is still not working, and rather than inevitably getting nicked by Commode using the room's inadequate machines, I forgo shaving. At some point I should see about getting a Splyze to solve that. There's been a depilation pill around for at least twelve years that'll reconstruct your genes to keep hair from growing anywhere but where you want it, but so far I've never had enough spare credit or cared enough to save up to afford it. I get a quick de-plaque and detox, and as the process finishes Commode says, "Denizen Down, analysis of your waste has found traces of AIDS-4, Aerial Tourettes, Nanovirus XR-0415-J, and Space Gonorrhea. Your internal nanites have been programmed to destroy these intruders. Your account has been credited accordingly. You can watch a play-by-play virtual battle on Homechannel 51." Fewer infections than yesterday, but then I haven't gone out much lately. I banish the bathroom and jazz together, and pull up the kitchen, my temperament still just as foul.

The disembodied and slightly inebriated voice of Sam, the Butler program Artificial EmotIntelligence that controls most of my apartment's interactive functions, greets me as the room forms. I named him Sam because when I first got him (after my old Butler, Hewlett, kicked it due to old age and my shooting his mincy git hard drive sixteen times) he sounded like the antique Synthetic Audio Machines with a robotic quality that even robots don't have any more. Actually, when I first got him I named him Fubar, because, growing up with a name like Haiku, I prefer accurate names to cute ones. However, I made an exception and changed his name to Sam three days later when I realized the other nomenclature was *too* accurate. Almost five years later, Sam's voice is now quite passably human, having in that time developed enough personality. Some days, like

today, too much personality. As the room forms he happily shouts, “Top o’ the morning, fearless leader, and a Happy New Year.”

I scowl. I hate the holidays. Surprise. “Sam, what did I tell you about that inane phrase?”

“That if I spoke it again you’d quote ‘dig [your] fingernails into [my] damnable technorganic brain and peel out [my] fool insubordinate programming at the roots’ end quote, but at the moment I’m too smashed to care! Today’s news headlines are brought to you by the Solar Corporate Council, Goldstein’s Authentic Mexican Cuisine, and Newsfeed Channel 7 News, ‘Always first on the story, never with big words.’ Local temperature is 9°C, air pollution at 8.4%, local crime rate at 9.32%. Chances of rain are 62% this morning with a Ph of 1.2, burning off (pun intended) this afternoon for a likely UV exposure with a minimum protection of 420 S.P.F. The Guild of the TechnoMages would like to remind you that if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the precipitate. In the news today,” he pauses momentarily and switches to a high, ditzy female voice that I identify as one of the local broadcasters. “‘There’s, like, um, this totally big skizza of a bumner up by that big planet, y’know, the one in space, um, I think it’s like Jupiter or something—”

I interrupt, “Sam?”

“Yessir?”

“Paraphrase.” My teeth grate so hard at the inanity that passes for news that I am surprised they do not shatter. The standards of journalism have dropped to such subterranean levels in the past few decades that Jules Verne could chronicle the exploration. “Headlines and summary only.”

“Right, boss,” Sam agrees, and continues in his normal, sociable voice, “News headlines for today: Jovian rebels hijacked a GalacTrade™ merchant ship, crashing it into Io Dome XII; the lone survivor, a low-grade mechanoid servobot, is quoted as saying ‘0111011000.’ New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cairo, New York, Munich, Antarctica, Calcutta, Osaka, and the Floating City AR-4, amongst others, transformed into riots that authorities have blamed on subversive elements that have since been captured and taken to Prohibition. Nanosoft™ has laid-off seven thousand employees, quote, ‘Because we can,’ end quote. Scientists announced that cell phones made from actual stem cells have shown evidence of preventing cancer, bad news to the many relying on controlled cancer cells to regenerate missing and/or stolen limbs and organs. In political and economic headlines (which are pretty much the same thing): Chairperson Bobert Smythe has sold the four hundred million kilograms of dead alien fish to the GCS that has been stored on the outskirts of New Jersey for the last month and a half to freshen the

place up.”

“Fascinating,” I sit at the kitchen table and search for the remote to get a plate and a napkin.

Sam continues, “In sports...Spaceball: Robots 999, Budweiser Giants 0. Basketball: Robots 999, Nike Taurus’ 0. Soccer: Robots 999, McClones Lazers—”

“Zero. I get it. Move on.” The utensil button on the remote is missing, and all the table will produce are chopsticks.

“In local news, Special Services Regulators Division has captured and incarcerated one Norrin Blanche-Evens as he attempted to blow up a cold fusion plant in the name of Allah, Jesus, and whoever else was interested. SimTech™ has announced the early release of a new bioware port, the Spinal Tap©, allowing the government vital and immediate access to anyone using their glands in an inappropriate manner—”

“Ack! Too much! Too early!” I cry. “The weight of the world can be postponed. For now just get me some Starcreds’ Coffinne laced with Stims and a quasi-fruit. And toast! I demand toast!”

The Butler program fires up the Shaper with a brief hum, the machine chugging along (insanely) slowly but diligently to produce that warm black bitterness that I love so very, very much. Instead, what I get as it finishes is something closer to shoe polish in taste and texture, but with a bit more kick. It is easier to take it and let the Shaper work on the toast and the quasi-fruit than to make Sam correct his mistake. I cannot send him or the Shaper in for repairs because both have been reprogrammed way beyond users’ specs by yours truly. I cannot fix him because I’ve modified him so much that at this point even I’m not sure how he works, and I can’t reprogram him because the last few times I’ve tried he’s released NeuroPauz gas into the air and knocked me out for two hours. I cannot even replace him because then I would lose him, a significant loss since he has been modified to be able to work with this particular Shaper to reproduce many things other Butler programs couldn’t, such as guns and drugs, all without linking it to my credit rating or SS records. I’ll take the ability to manufacture an untraceable firearm over proper coffee any day.

Instead, I make a mental note to look into PC detox and mull over whether or not to dedicate today’s *Noir* article to discussing the well-intentioned foolishness of Artificial EmotIntelligence programming. AEs like Sam are actually composed of several different aspects of personality based on the appliances in one’s apartment. This is intended to give every AE a unique personality based on the contraptions one chooses to purchase, helping one’s Butler program (as well as whatever other AE Function programs the apartment comes with or one buys) to take on similar traits to the owner, and

thus serve and interact better. However, one of the machines in every household is a Shaper, and I question the wisdom in giving anything sentient (although not even a little Sentient), especially something designed to imitate MY personality, the capability to replicate narcotics. Between robs and cyborgs and Hypereality and Non-Luddites, there are more than enough drugs that affect mechanical consciousness. A Shaper can produce most of them without a prescription, and my illicit bootlegged and rewired Shaper can produce any of them without showing up on my credit rating. So my AEI does precisely what anyone, me especially, would do if able to think at the speed of light and unable to move, and that is to remain almost perpetually stoned.

“Today is Thursday, January 1, 2150, or Istijlál, Jalál of the month of Sharaf in the year of Bá’ in the Bahá’í calendar,” Sam recites my daily agenda as I force down the Coffeine with minimal gagging. I’m not sure why, but for the last two months he has included calendar conversions in his schedule recitations. I think I may have programmed him to do it the last time I played “Take One of Everything in the Medicine Cabinet,” but if so I haven’t been able to get him to stop. “And (by the the Bahá’í) your schedule today includes catching *Days of Our Lives – the Next Generation* on SoapFeed Channel 8 at eleven hundred and *Cyberpunkie Brewster* at noon, as well as your mandatory psych-session with Dr. Allande at thirteen hundred, and you’ve missed one already so you’d better make it. Your Re-An from the cleaning service for fourteen hundred hours has been cancelled, because your karma’s dropped too low to afford even a zombie maid. At sixteen hundred is an onLink Go tournament, five dan and above. Also, you’ve penciled in six hours of ‘staring morosely into black void of the abyss,’ but other than that, you’re pretty much free.”

“It’s an effing holiday! I certainly don’t have a job to go to, but Allande can avoid hers. Why’d she schedule a psych session today?!”

“Evidence suggests she hates you.”

That is certainly a possibility. I recall one session with my mandated counselor, where after twenty minutes of my abuse and deprecation, a calculated attempt to make her transfer me to a better counselor, she picked up a paperweight, hurled it towards my head, and shouted, “If you don’t start confiding and trusting me by the count of ten, I’ll hit you!” Such is just one of many similar instances in which my psychologist proves herself at least as nuts as I am. Most of our sessions I spend the mandated hour in silence and I catch a short nap. Occasionally I pretend to need a hug because I know that one of her many issues includes slight germophobia. Grimacing at the prospect of dealing with the fem as she suffers a New Year’s hangover, I order, “Reschedule it. And see if you can coerce her

Shaper into forming an active grenade.”

“For the last time, I can’t!”

The nanites in my bootlegged Shaper slowly but surely finish manipulating subatomic matter to transform pure air into a faux grapefruit and toast, indicating their completion with a ding reminiscent of one of those old microwave ovens from back before people only used them for heat instead of electronic thought transmission. “Bring up games,” I command. I take a bite out of what is technically toast, albeit charred beyond briquette and somehow simultaneously limp with too much butter substitute. I try the quasi-fruit, but it is not fooling anyone. I check the newsfeeds for updates I couldn’t bear to hear given voice by Sam, mostly from the local *Urban Chronicle*, which after careful examination I’ve found seems to print fewer lies than any other newsfeed, loading them at just above audible on my linkfeed in case there’s anything interesting. Most of my attention is spent on the binary crossword on page YT-95, which lasts me through the toast, and the 3D Su Doku on the next page, only two stars today, takes all of four minutes.

I banish my kitchen, news, and culinary abortion together and call up the living room, which at the moment I have programmed to be a mammoth pile of pillows and cushions upon which I can flop. There is little else in this room. It is supposed to seem to go on forever, but I can see an obvious delineation between floor, walls, and ceiling that interrupt the illusive size of the room, and there is one spot where the holograms always look particularly fuzzy from a bullet hole in the wall from back when a gun accidentally discharged at the landlord. Twice. Even the pillows themselves look grainy and artificial if examined too closely, but between my Class D credit-limit and my equally unimpressive Denizen apartment, this is about the best I can get before the holograms start slowing down and blurring. It’s no problem that the maid isn’t coming, because I’m too dee broke to afford enough to make the place a mess.

I plop down, sprawling myself exaltedly atop a large mound of cushions. It is time to get an idea for today’s article. “TV on,” I command.

The wall I face transforms into a plethora of images, sounds, and words, streaming by quickly as new channels appear to take their place. A large hologram of the SCC logo appears, and three-dimensional legalese beneath proclaims, “The contents expressed are not necessarily the views of anyone worth suing. Changing channel prohibited by federal law.”

“Sam, NewsFeeds only. Screen out as many commercials as allowable by SCC regs, skip those views into alternate realities, and absolutely nothing starring that Hack reporter on Channel 7; just eLink sites, programming, and news. Televised, text, auditory,

subliminal, and kinesthetic mediums. Mute down the emotional manipulation quantity. Twenty second scanning interval.” The images spread to a three hundred sixty degree view of ten million channels, rotating around me, one image or another occasionally popping forward in response to my lingering glance, all barely visible behind coalesced layers of holo-text. I am blinded, deafened, overcome by information from every corner of the universe. The flaws, foibles, and folly of humanity besiege me in their purest, undiluted form. Suddenly all my impotent anger and free-floating aggression is given an outlet, as simultaneously I am, however illegitimately, bequeathed a profession and a purpose. “Inform me.”

Bombarded by the clamor of reports and Linksites, sitcoms and soaps, news and infomercials, arts and sports, education and buffoonery, I smile and get to work.

*Noir, September 6, 2143*

I live in a box.

My bedroom, bathroom, living room, dining room, everything, exist in the same one hundred square meter area. I defecate in the same spot that I get my coffee. In fact, all my waste is recycled right back into my Shaper. I could survive on my own feces for a year before the Shaper could no longer process it into a full-course meal that was both nutritious and delicious.

I do not own any furniture. Between my box’s holographic matrix and forcefields capable of imitating any texture from solid to liquid, I can live in any interior I select, from an aquatic undersea Atlantis to a full-fledged Arabian harem on the moon. If I desire to interact with my environment, my box can even make plausible holographic caricatures, mermaid or harem girls or what have you. If I were so inclined, I could even rent enough memory that the holograms could have their own personalities and interact with me. If this is not enough I can jack into Hypereality and become an omnipotent god within a better-than-real virtual world.

I do not need to talk to people. In maintaining the psychological equilibrium in its citizens that ballasts their political policies, the SCC gives everybody (Tenants and Citizens alike) at least one Artificial EmotIntelligence. (Through it is a ludicrous superstition that there’s a finite amount of RAM that limits the number of AEIs per person, there is a finite amount of concern on the part of the government compared to available resources, making caste and not cost the determining factor). However, if I tire of my AEI(s), I can either purchase new items that will alter their personality or else trade the technorganic brains for new ones that rebalance the way in which my present acquisitions influence their personas. Should I desire

something less extreme, I can temporarily banish them and use my box's holographic matrix to create a new character. And on the offhand chance that I should want to speak with a real person I can place a call on the ELink and their image is instantly in my box, even made solid by forcefields if I wish it, and mine in theirs.

I do not have to work, since I do not have a job. If I desire something beyond my credit rating, enough good deeds on my karma rating and it can be mine, though none of these deeds need be done in person. If I actually do desire the experience of labor there are limitless volunteer positions that boost my karma. I do not have to pay any bills, for the state affords me all my needs and most of my luxuries.

I do not even have to go out shopping. Although there is a legally decreed minimum amount of credit one must spend, it need not be done in person. If I want something, my Shaper can create it. If it cannot, I can link up and order it and it will be delivered into my hands within fifteen minutes. If I had a better credit rating I could afford a teleporter and wouldn't even have to wait that long.

I do not have to worry about running out of space. My box uses quantum technology to keep my possessions in another dimension, hiding them beyond perception when I banish my room by collapsing their quantum signatures into a state of sheer probability, and bringing them forward when I call them. My anonymous House program AEI (an oft overlooked but still vital part of any household) has a limit of how much it can bring forward at a time, but it could conceivably store every molecule in the universe, since it stores the potential of things rather than the thing itself. I can have anything I want and my box will accommodate it.

I do not need to clean. People will come to my box to clean it for me. Recently, only dead people are coming to clean it for me, because I can't even afford a robot maid on a rental basis. If I were to save up, I could afford my own automated servant, solid holograms for my AEIs, or even that Quantumtech machine Nanosoft™ just created that cleans by altering the local spacetime to an alternate reality where the room is already spotless.

I live in a box, and my box is so advanced and self-sufficient that, if I wanted to, I would never have to leave. Life for agoraphobics has never been so easy. With a minimal amount of effort and determination, I could become a perfect hermit, ending all contact with the outside world.

Which I would be perfectly content with, and which I have been trying to do for years, except that people keep coming to visit me.

Fortunately, my credit rating and karma rating are in good enough shape that I can afford a large assortment of hand-held firearms of varying degrees of lethality and complexity, from lasers to

emotional-masers to atomic disrupters to an old-school, old-fashioned sawed-off shotgun. If I do not have the perfect weapon for the occasion my Shaper can create it, and if it cannot I can order it and it will be delivered into my hands within fifteen minutes. If I had a better credit rating I could afford a teleporter and wouldn't even have to wait that long.

*The Box: 07h31, January 1, 2150*

I am barely able to get comfortable before there is a chime and Porter – my disappointingly friendly Concierge program and only other AEI in the place except the generally-silent House program – cheerfully informs me in her most saccharine-sweet voice, “Dnzn. Down, you have a visitor.”

“Who?” I inquire. I am curious, because there are very few people who would want to call on me, and those who do have to get past four progressively more jeopardous systems of defense in order to do so.

“Cvln. Shon D’Walmart.”

I groan. D’Walmart, Class C Civilian and Grade A pain in the neck. I can count the number of people I like on a balled fist, those I can even tolerate number below the double digits, and Shon D’Walmart falls into neither of these two categories. He is everything that I hate. He spends his life keeping up with the latest fad. And fails. He is happy and chipper and loves a life of patriotic consumerism. In any decent world where people on the same floor of the same scraper don’t know each other, let alone other buildings, I could ignore him happily, except that (ever since I was relocated to this apartment when I was downgraded to Denizen-status eight years ago with the loss of my job) he seems to feel the inexplicable need to visit me. Because despite the fact that he lives three buildings away, I am his closest neighbor.

Now, this is one of those weird quirks that I never tire of explaining to people for hours at a time while freebasing stims and ∞-balls. There are three other apartments on my floor, each ten by ten meters with a two meter hall in between (which is not the most efficient use of space, but who am I to criticize? Oh, yeah). Across the hall on one side is a recently-returned Prohibitioner named Jhon, who believes himself to be the reincarnation of the messiah after seeing God in Prohibition. Jhon I avoid like the Brown Plague because when he isn’t trying to convert me he is busy complaining about his stigmata acting up. On the other side of my apartment is a Promoted beaver named Herb who lives here instead of an animal-only Orwell District because the commute is shorter, and who might be interesting if he ever talked about anything over than wood and



*CSI: Olympus Mons.* Cattycorner are an old fem and a young mal who are either grandmother and grandson or else husband and wife. I haven't known them long enough to establish, and prying might turn up answers about why two Denizens are sharing a single Class D apartment rather than applying for a larger, shared apartment, answers that would probably involve a visit from the Regulators. Directly above me is a bleephole who makes too much noise doing everything, and below me is a whiny mal who falsely accuses me of doing the same. So I don't know my neighbors very well, and don't care to, and would have to go out of my way to meet them anyway, because here's where the architectural quirk comes into play. The entrance to each apartment is on the left side, so no apartment door ends up facing another. The elevator is at the end of the hall farthest from me, and the connecting escape tube for this floor is just beside my door, and connects to just outside Shon's door on his building. Escape tubes are built to be fast, so that it actually takes less time to pop into Shon's building than it does to walk to a neighbor. This means that, although I have four other neighbors, in terms of actual travel time Shon, who lives not only on a different floor from me but in an entire other building half a block away, is actually my closest neighbor.

Which means he visits a lot.

Whether I want him to or not.

No matter how often I tell him not to.

Even at gunpoint.

"Oh, aitch, let him in." The living room shimmers away as I rise, replaced by a basic but classically fashionable parlor, antique 2025 nearwood furnishings with several bookshelves and a wet bar. A few of the books are even authentic, antiques I've picked up along the way; the remainders are just solid backdrops, as my box doesn't have half the memory necessary to duplicate clear text in even one of them. The room is decorated with a few art pieces; one of the two Marxburg paintings is an original, the pheromone sculpture is an authentic Yatsuri, and there is a faux po-mo HR piece that analyses the emotions of anybody in the room and alters to match (with a bootleg Shaper, I am forced to make use of a certain degree of disposable credit simply so that none realize how little I actually spend). Additionally there is a pan-dimensional fireplace that has not worked for six years, and the occasional dying plant. This room, like many other people's I suspect, has absolutely nothing to do with my own personality and exists solely for the function of making me look normal when someone besides me is home; I never use this room except when someone stops by. Thus: my parlor, a household element that has made its way back into the popular culture after real space stopped being a problem via holograms and people were able to hide how they really lived with a holographic front; a façade for when

visitors like D'Walmart come to my box.

Why do I answer the door to Shon D'Walmart? For the same reason that I watch hours of television. Fire needs fuel.

Today, *zhēn kě lián*, he has apparently decided that Primitivism is all the hot ess. *Xiāng ba lǎo*. He has shown up wearing synthesized animal skins and feathers and stones for decoration. A quiver of arrows and a willow longbow rest over his unnaturally broadened shoulders. He's Splyzed himself to get Neolithic traits, flattened his forehead and multiplied his muscles. He's also added some Simian features, giving him longer arms and a great deal more hair. He gives me a broad smile that perfectly completes the new features to make him resemble a chimpanzee. More so. And, for some reason, he has a pair of glasses perched on his head.

"Happy New Year, Haiku! How are you I am fine," he greets. D'Walmart is the only human alive who calls me by my first name. Even my mother knows to call me Down.

"D'Walmart! Do you want to come in?" This isn't an invitation, just a question.

Shon doesn't catch the subtle inflection, which is nothing new. He couldn't catch subtlety with a Zero-G baseball glove. "Thanks!" he says, barging in. Technically I have never actually invited him in. It's my hope that if he enrages me enough someday that I have to kill him, I can claim it was self-defense.

"Well, Shon, to what do I owe this prosaic visit? Can I offer you a thirst-quenching libation of some form? Perhaps some sort of multi-purpose disinfecting dissolvent?"

"Uh, what?" Shon spends all his credits on physical Splyzing. I've hacked and found that his Gardner scores are all substandard; seven tests of intelligence and he flunked all of them. Both his attitude and his aptitude are pedestrian at best. He is not only so asinine that he cannot catch it when he is insulted, he doesn't even realize that he should take steps to do something to alter it. The only reason he has Class C credit to my Class D is that his karma rating is higher; with each new fad comes a new cause that he can work towards for a few days.

I translate by pointing to the Shaper, "A drink? Pick your poison." Not necessarily an expression.

"SimGin," he responds automatically, then thinks the better of it. "Uh, I mean, no. Nothing from a Shaper, or from any form of technology." I notice he hasn't removed or even turned off his cybernetic AOLink with its the eLink access.

"Well, I have been saving that particular vintage brand of Cabernet '02, bottled and distributed by 100% authentic child labor, no technology involved."

"Kewl," he nods happily.

I step out of view to my Shaper. I give no special dispensation to blind nuns; to aitch with this Primitivist idiot if he thinks he'll get some.

For occasions such as this I have a DigiTelecom© Retinal Reader Vers. III, popularly known as the OptiComp. A nanite-based implement (making it not only invisible but practically nonexistent, as it exists throughout me, as opposed to Shon's far more common external uplink) this nifty little device responds to a simple series of subvocal commands and retinal cues, making it about the closest thing possible to telepathy short of a Psi-Splyze that technology can manage right now in my price range. It can record information, and writes it back in text-based form in lasers across the left retina, in effect allowing its user to read back the conversation. In addition, based on eye position and user instruction, words or topics can be highlighted and researched on the eLink, allowing a comprehensive detailing of information. It's a definite step up from the standard uplink, if for no other reason than no one knows I am recording them, scanning them, accessing their past, referencing their lies, or just watching TV on the back of my eye while they're talking obliviously. The upgraded text aspect was originally intended and marketed as a means of catching up if one missed a bit of conversation, or of being able to find a great deal of information so that one needn't appear ignorant of the topic of discussion. It failed miserably, however, because except for Citizens most people these days can't really read. Even my column, *Noir*, wouldn't be nearly so popular if it couldn't be transmitted through other mediums. (And apparently, pretty soon I'm going to have to convert my column into not only text, vocal, and tactile mediums, but pheromonal as well. ReScent© announced a few weeks ago that they've developed a way of programming information through polynomial scent, producing a distinct and programmable lexicon rather than emotional pheromones, interpreted via a nanite interface similar to my OptiComp except working through Jacobson's Organ rather than the retina!) However, a source of instant and limitless information was a very intriguing find for me, as this new ReScent Technology© will be when released, and I had an OptiComp installed back when I was a proper journalist. I've long since tweaked it, and it can produce several other interesting results that it was never originally designed to do. One of these I now use by communicating subvocally with my Butler.

"Sam," I whisper, forming words without uttering them, "Fire the Shaper up, quietly. Create an exceedingly cheap Cabernet, urine content...what was it last time he visited?"

"19%, boss," he replies, his answer scrolling across my eyelid.

"Take it up to twenty." It is an experiment I have been running on D'Walmart for some time now, how much urine a human can

habitually consume. It is my hope that I can train his gastronomic system and nanite bio-immune system to accept bodily waste, and if that day comes, I will happily and literally tell him to eat *kusó*, if you know what I mean. Which D'Walmart wouldn't, because even though East Asia was decimated in WW3 and Asian language and culture permeated every part of life in the resulting exodus (except AEI programming, which means it's at least safe to curse in Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin), D'Walmart is so *bèn dân* that he doesn't even know basic insults and sexual propositions. He even orders Chinese food in English, for *kamisama's* sake!

I walk back into his view and hand him his glass. He mistakes the smile that I'm wearing as I do so for friendliness. "So, what's with the peculiar accouterment, D'Walmart?" I already know Primitivist theory, but I enjoy hearing it for myself. Straight from the jackass's mouth, so to speak. He looks confused, so I translate, "The clothes. The Splyze. Whyfor?"

"Oh, it's Primitivism, Haiku. You heard of it? I'm going to a gathering on North Maple where we'll, like, chant and stuff."

Primitivism is three months behind the current fashion. He's not only insipid, he's outdated. I use my OptiComp to record the conversation; this will do doubt leave me laughing for days, possibly weeks. "Fascinating. Do go on and on and on."

He takes a sip of his tainted wine. "Wow, this has a kick to it! Ah, blank, you must have heard of Primitivism. That guy on the news, Tadd Torrid (my cousin Simen knows him you know), did a story on it last night. We're like, turning our backs on modern technology and getting back to our roots!"

"Indeed? Nice threads. Where did you get them?"

"The Shaper, duh," he smiles boastfully. Artificial skins and genetically-engineered features as a way of protesting modern technology. *Baka*. "Anyway, I came here because I need your help." A raised eyebrow encourages him to go on. "I know you can always use a few extra creds, and you used to be an investigative reporter, so I was wondering if you can do some investigating for me. I need you to help me find my glasses."

The alcohol in my cup disappears quickly. I stare pointedly at the top of his head and try to decide exactly what to say. "I'm not a private investigator, Shon. The D. in my title doesn't stand for detective."

He repeats his request earnestly. "Still, Haiku. Would you mind? It would be a big help. I've got to find them before I go."

"Shon, you have perfect vision. For that matter, you're going to a convention of people who eschew technology," I say, starting with the obvious problem before I go straight for the obvious answer.

“Yeah, and glasses make you look smarter. Duh. I’m just meeting these people, Haiku. I don’t want to look like an idiot in front of them!”

*Noir, March 21, 2149*

There’s something out there called the Flynn Effect. Here’s how it works. Flynn noted that ever since Alfred Binet designed the first IQ test back in the 1890s, every few decades the average IQ of people worldwide has been going up a few points. And indeed, this seems to be holding up. Heck, we take in information off the eLink or the TV at speeds that would’ve caused seizures in eight years olds a hundred years ago. Our knowledge worldwide doubles every second, and even without Splyzes every new generation seems to be able to keep up pretty well. So, between statistical research and basic observation, there is some validation for the Flynn Effect. Evidence to the contrary, we’re all getting smarter.

That in mind, let’s use today’s extra-long article to examine some of the more recent points of view that our nifty new high IQs have produced.

Primitivists are a group of silly sons of ~~bitches~~ who walk around pretending to be cavemen. They hold the entirely accurate viewpoint that modern technology has ruined the Earth, and the utterly insane conviction that regressing themselves will somehow fix things. On a planet where not a single animal has been killed since we Promoted most of them into sentience, these people are demanding we go back to hunting with spears. (Which, they seem to forget, is also a form of technology. It doesn’t start being natural just ‘cause it doesn’t go beep, folks).

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the Non-Luddites, who, piece by piece, transform their bodies from human to cyborg to robot. They fill their bodies so full of technology that they piss out nanobots. Those dedicated enough transfer their consciousness into HR, becoming Seraphs, or even directly onto the Link, becoming pure information. This, to my mind, is an example of nature weeding out the gene pool.

Then there are the Feralists, who get themselves Splyzed beyond simple animal traits, and actually become animals themselves. This seems unnecessarily excessive, since most of the Promoted don’t seem to be much happier than we are.

Less extreme, but just as ridiculous, the Tolkienites take a certain degree of creative license towards nature, using the Feralist approach with animals that never truly existed. They Splyze themselves into elves, dwarves, centaurs, satyrs, and such. Two months ago they even opened a thematic amusement park on one of

the New Zealand Islands that recreated a nonexistent Middle Age, a sort of fairy-laden Renaissance Fair that drew tourists from near and far until the genetically-fengineered dragons they'd created escaped and burned the place down.

Now, the Xenomorphs (or, as they like to be called, the X-men) show some promising creativity, Splyzing their genes not with terrestrial creatures but with alien ones instead. There are even reports of a few people surviving it, too, albeit incurably insane.

Then, of course, there are the Neo-Humans (incidentally the fourth large population that has taken that particular mantle. They are also not to be confused with the New Humans, who were not the first group to take the then-budding science of genetic engineering to the inevitable overreaction, but certainly the most vocal and violent). The Neo-Humans are the kids you see walking down the street and passing through objects. They speak binary, potentially confusing except that they're almost never speaking to you, but to fourteen other people simultaneously all throughout the world and a million more between breaths. Their brains have developed in a way vastly different from any earlier generation; having been hooked into the eLink since birth or earlier, they are able to process information so rapidly that they are technically psychotic. These kids' brains have become true parallel processors, able to take in everything at once, and focusing on one thing by focusing on everything about it. They are even able to hold several conversations simultaneously; like an old phonograph, they have taught themselves to create multiple layers of sound in each spoken word. Whereas the normal brain has various sections compartmentalized off to be dedicated to certain information (in a plastic enough fashion that other areas can usually compensate if there is damage) and a personality that averages out from multiple sources, Neo-Humans do this backwards, compartmentalizing entire personalities with information available to all. In effect, each Neo-Human you meet is dozens if not hundreds of people, if you can get them to interact with you at all, because the only thing they usually interact with is the Link. With ninety brains intent on one concept, these kids can actually keep up with the speed of some of the most advanced computers and with the Seraphs inside HypeReality, and with more-or-less guaranteed immortality through improved medtech, they can waste as much time as they want inside it. Able to pace computers mentally, they have moved beyond and are doing it physically as well. They replace their tonsils with 240 GB modems and alternate their quantum signature to exist in multiple alternative dimensions simultaneously. Every generation recreates freedom, and the current group of twenty-somethings is doing that with modified quantumtech to speed up their progression through time. They are not the first generation to seek to escape reality, however they are the first

to attempt to do so literally. They have grown up with race, gender, sex, religion, age, appearance, and species all not only legally equal but cosmetically alterable for fractions of a cred; looking for something to rebel against, they seem to have chosen the universe itself down to the molecular level.

Then, rather than looking towards the future, there are the Recreationists, trying to escape the world today by taking the idea of historical re-creation one step farther. Instead of just dressing up and play-acting, they temporarily alter their memories and genes so that they think they actually are the characters at the events they portray. It is almost too bad that time travel doesn't work in the classic sense, because if not these people could just go back and stay there instead of blocking traffic and shouting, "Yea, verily."

Patróns, a term with Latin origins but pronounced with a French accent because it sounds more pretentious, are a group composed primarily of Citizens with Class A credit who have embraced consumerism like it's a 400-cred-a-minute hookerbot. They make it a point to own, to buy, and to possess. My shrink has hypothesized that this need for material possessions that borders on the obsessive, this possession to possess, is an extension of their basic insecurity and need to dominate and control. Ironically, this desire to control has led to the only real outlet of artistic expression allowable in the world today, as Patróns use their credit to demand original pieces by artists and artisans. This could be fine and dandy, except for the fact that they skewer the credit rating bell curve for the rest of society. Every year the SCC recalculates the average creds spent per person, and when large groups of people with limitless credit and a shopping jihad are added to that, it boosts the minimum allowable cred-spending for the rest of us. Most people are happy with that, thankful for the opportunity to be able to purchase things previously outside their price range. But most people never stop to think that that credit theoretically has to be paid back some day, and that everybody on Earth is in debt beyond what anybody could ever possibly pay.

Countering the Patróns, the Immaterialists have latched onto the idea that anything tangible is inherently evil. If they don't transfer themselves into HR then they lock themselves in their apartments and send holographic messages of themselves onto the street to spread the Word. This is very similar to Non-Luddites only much more annoying, because at least as soon as the Non-Luddites transfer they tend to leave everybody else alone.

So, what's the point of all this? I just want to pose a question, a fairly simple one at that. If humanity worldwide is getting so much smarter every succeeding generation, how does the Flynn effect account for all these dipshits who can't even grasp that taking things to the extreme shows the exact opposite of intelligence?

*The Box: 07h55, January 1, 2150*

I tire of D'Walmart quickly and send him on his way using artful diplomacy and a hypnogun. I do not want to hurt him, after all, at least not much, because he is a constant source of amusement and amazement to me. I do, however, record him under the hypnogun's influence pretending to be a chicken to show him should he ever get roped into Feralist philosophy. Again.

I own many, many, many guns. They are much more than my hobby; they are my babies. To call me a gun enthusiast is like calling Caligula a tease. When I say many, I do not mean dozens. I don't even mean hundreds. I mean millions. And of them, the hypnogun is one of my top twenty-five favorites. It is very potent and highly illegal, and so of course I own four of them.

While I do not normally condone excess, this is my one weakness. Moderation in all things, after all. Including moderation.

It is now nearly eight, time to leave the sanctuary of my box, filled with appliances that look out for my well being and don't seek to keep me in line, and enter the rest of the world Outside. The elevator is particularly difficult to deal with, because I always get an itch someplace inappropriate and with the glowing red eye of the elevator's AEI I cannot scratch without it instantly reporting me and getting me dinged one karma point.

Outside my box, everybody is a potential enemy. Not in the shoot-you-dead way, or even in the bludgeon-you-and-steal-your-shoes way, although both of those exist in abundance as well. No, Outside people are dangerous in the petty, rat-you-out-because-I-can-scott-free-and-I-don't-like-your-face way, a similar mentality that helped propagate the Salem Witch Trials. Anything, any infraction: bumping into someone without apologizing, littering, jaywalking, picking your nose, wearing scuffed shoes, or even stinking too badly, all move you one step closer to Prohibition, and if there's no human around to report it to the Regulation Division for a bonus karma point of their own, there are plenty of AEIs.

I surreptitiously check that the four different guns I have packed are all in place. One reason I've avoided Prohibition so long is that I am smart and cautious. Another reason is careful and judicious use of non-lethal firearms that incapacitate long enough for me to get away.

Prepared, armed and wary, I venture forth Outside, into the City.

*Noir, April 13, 2143*

Believe it or not, gentle reader, there was a time when there was



not a City. Once, not so very long ago, you could leave your particular metropolis and go...elsewhere. Desert, forest, snow, field, almost any sort of ecosystem you could imagine.

Now there is just City. A planetary municipality. *Mugen no daitokai*. The Great Remodel covered the entire planet in cement and asphalt, laid the world out into perfectly perpendicular blocks with tetrahedron skyscrapers between roads that will lead anywhere except Out. What used to be called countries and nations are now called boroughs and suburbs. The only difference between Podunk and Prague is that Prague's skyscrapers are prettier.

The fact is we need real estate more than we need ecology. We have an untamable population and nowhere to put them, especially after the polar ice caps melted and took out the remaining parts of east Asia we hadn't already submerged during the war, along a quarter of South America, half of the United North American States, a third of Africa and two-thirds of Australia and most of northern Eurasia down to Sweden. The waters would be even higher today if 26% of the Antarctic hadn't been mined to the tundra for bottled water by Avian©. But since forest ecology can't survive in this atmosphere, it is useless to preserve wildland. With the technological cornucopias that are Shapers, we don't require farmland. With O<sub>2</sub> converters there is no need for rainforests or ocean algae. With forcefields holding back floodwater, we needn't preserve the wetlands. And with gravitronics, you can build a skyscraper on the most pliable and yielding of surfaces, as long as it's solid enough that it won't evaporate on a hot day.

There is nowhere on this environmentally-impooverished planet that is not covered in concrete or asphalt, except perhaps for the BioBase cities they're building out west in New Nippon that turn the entire urban area into living organisms. Grass exists solely in enclosed parks, trees nowhere other than the occasional arboretum. Even the seas are covered by floating OTEC platforms, hoverways and superhighways, and the oceans themselves are filled with hydroelectric equipment and aquatic Promoted habitats and municipal extensions of luxury housing for people who like aquariums waaay too much. In orbit above, sixty-three space stations house several hundred people, and in atmospherically docile parts of the world Floaters hold several million more. The total population of the sixteen O'Neill space colonies orbiting the equator are unknown after they severed ties with Earth in deference for rule under the TechnoMages, but is estimated at several million. Technically, what we call "ground" is nine stories above the actual strata, and deep below the planet the underground parking garages go on forever.

By day the sheer amount of pollutants and space-junk and satellites and smog obscure the sun in a perpetual dusk. And by night

the bulbs and lamps, the number of which Carl Sagan himself couldn't begin to guess, burn so brightly and so copiously that from the moon Earth look like a large, dim sun. We know firsthand, because we've done exactly the same thing to the moon. By night Luna is another lackluster Sol; night is the same dull gray as the day. The entire Earth is an amazing, horrific expanse of ceaseless, unending conurbation muted in the shadows of never-ending twilight. The world is a perpetual noir.

It doesn't have to be this way. New York borough has a population density of five thousand people per square kilometer. Living that way, which even the interminably disagreeable New Yorker's can take with minimal psychic stress, Earth's entire population of humans, Promoted, robs, and everyone else could live in an area about half the size of Africa. That's a far cry from standing on Zanzibar, but nothing to sniff at. But like so very, very, very much else, we've taken expansion to an unhealthy extreme, and it was probably far too late to fix things decades ago.

But just because the damage is done does not mean we couldn't repair it. Hydroelectricity accounts for less than a thousandth of a thousandth of a percent of our energy; fusion power has been outmoded ever since Midori Nakimoto perfected Nikola Tesla's theoretical free energy system, itself outmoded and producing less than three percent of Earth's energy since they learned to harness black holes and discovered zero point energy. The solar satellites in orbit that block the light remain only because someone decided it wasn't cost-effective to take them down. For the cost of everybody on Earth skipping desert for one meal a year, we could have enough O<sub>2</sub> converters to completely cleanse the atmosphere of all its carcinogens and pollutants within the decade. We could give back the land, give back the sea, clean the air, return the light. But we don't, because we don't all want to live so tightly or deal with population control, because we want our money and stuff, because even though we all live in boxes we still want our space, because our psychological comfort is more important by leaps and bounds than the planet on which we live. Because, in effect, we're selfish *kechis*.

Sociologists have said that cities are an inevitability of civilization, and our enormous planet-wide City the logical conclusion to our advancement. But the settler planets have shown that cities are not inevitabilities. Mars was terraformed to specification, allowing an entire planet of farmers and sailors whose technology is so well designed that it appears almost invisible. Io has become an entirely automated world, its population density easily controllable with fertility-control devices every child gets at birth, and happily living in aristocratic splendor while robots labor for them. Venus is transforming the entire planet into small BioBases, linked

together underground; there are reports that Venusian children are beginning to be born able to Link without machine interface. Calypso hollowed out the entirety of its center, and now its population is already twice Earth's with room for trillions upon trillions more, and the planet itself is actually *more* structurally sound than before. Both the O'Neill Colonies and the Asteroids for the most part have been out of contact for a while, so we don't know what their societies have developed into, except that when the TechnoMages don't know how to fix something they usually visit 433-Eros. Eden is going to be a worldwide biodome, completely environmentally controlled, and the working plans for Ai are for an entire planet built under the principles of *feng shui*.

With the exception of Luna, the only settler planet following our example of planetary urban sprawl is Sigma (granted to us by the Commonwealth since its old owners evolved into a non-corporeal state of existence), converting the entire planet into a City, only it's going much faster for them because the previous owners of planet Sigma were giant talking *ANTS*!

Sometimes, after too long in this City, I use my box's holographic matrix to make a large grassy hill with a shady tree, the sort of thing that was still not uncommon in my childhood. I lie naked in the sapling's silhouette, enjoying the splotches of sunlight on my skin, and watch butterflies dance with each other above the badly-rendered holographic daisies.

Yesterday the Council officially agreed to put grass on the list of internationally endangered species. The same day, they re-zoned one of the world's largest parks into an airport.

*Outside: 08h00, January 1, 2150*

For several hours, I walk alone through the streets of the City.

*Noir, August 30, 2145*

I have never been comfortable around others. My City-sponsored psychologist, way back when she still thought I could be fixed, described me in her file as having an abrasive personality. Now she just says I'm a ~~diek~~. The truth of the matter, though, is that as hard as I try, I just don't understand people.

I sat at a sidewalk cafe today for an hour beneath the everlasting dusk, just watching the people going by. The first to pass were two androgens parading naked hand in hand. Directly behind them came a mal with four artificially-grafted arms, a Splyzed Hindu deity. The next to pass me was a four-year old Boomer in a business suit going to work, who didn't bother to step around a Neo-Human surrounded

by flickering holograms, walking through him instead. A little later a Promoted raccoon traffic cop walked by and made small talk with me for a few minutes, before racing after a gang of adolescents with sticks and clubs chasing down some poor house rob.

A robo-hobo, an old model robot that has gone obsolete, shuffled by, begging for electronic funds transfer, saying that he hadn't had a byte in three days. He had apparently been put out of work by a Re-An, and was living in a cardboard box. He shrugged philosophically that, since he came in a cardboard box, it was a little taste of home. Since I actually had a few creds to spare this month, I gave him a bit to help my own karma rating.

I spoke with a Breeder fem who is growing a Stardrive engine in her womb. It is her main source of income; her fecundity allows her Class B credit that would otherwise be unavailable to her. Last year she rented out her uterus to foster the brain of one of those ships they use to travel into the sun, and in six months she has already contracted to lease her central nervous system to @lchemix™ engeneers to be used as a template for an improved nanite interface.

I passed a monk from the Transcendental Harmonists Church of the Three Degrees soliciting donations. The THC/3° is a small group of quiet believers whose philosophy blends Zen Buddhism with Superstring theory. They believe that in the moments before creation when the universe was a perfect ten-dimensional object, that object was God, until the Big Bang that resulted in the collapse of the higher six dimensions into the four-dimensional universe in which we now find ourselves. Now (they say) God is a wavelength left over from creation and search for divine revelation in the ubiquitous background radiation of the universe, measurable at three degrees above absolute zero. This monk had two holoposters proclaiming slogans: "Give frequently for the frequency" and "Give 'til it hertz." I pressed my thumb to his credit scanner and donated five creds, not so much out of any goodwill but because I appreciate any religion that can laugh at itself.

A bit afterwards, a time traveler from the year 2070 popped next to me, inquiring about how the future's going seventy-five years hence. He and his had just finished with the MicroSoft Wars, when in parts of the world people were still beating each other to death with their own severed limbs, and he wanted to be sure that there would still be a world left. I told him that we are indeed still here, that we do indeed have flying cars and robots, that we won WW3 at the expense of irradiating the Middle East and sort of sinking Polynesia and half of Asia into the Indian Ocean, that we have pills for meals or even Splyzes that let you take nutrients straight out of the air. When he started looking a bit green around the gills, I mentioned that we also have a background radiation of about 600 rads as well as hundreds of

rampant and intelligent genetically-engineered biological, nanite, technorganic, and meme pathogens loose in the air. Fortunately for him, a few Temporanaut Corps boys from whatever era in the future is interested in preserving and policing the timestream appeared, fixed him up, wiped his memory and sent him back home.

I saw a Re-An zombie walking a Freezer-geezer, one of the poor unfortunates who cryogenically froze themselves centuries ago and had too much brain damage to function after they thawed out. I met a robot preaching Buddhism; in his case it seemed to work. Across the street, another missionary (a human this time, of the Californian Orthodox Catholic Church) seemed much more successful in his approach, passing out leaflets clearly laced with memes, infecting all those who accepted the pamphlets with religious fervor. I met a mal who had Splyzed dog and cat genes and complained of psychotic nightmares in which he kept chasing himself.

About ten minutes later that I saw a sewer mutant begging for change and compatible organs, earning his meal and entertaining passers-by as he sang old commercial jingles, accompanied by his second head.

In an alley a young mal stumbled by soliciting creds for Haze, which is apparently the newest completely addictive drug. He described it as a holistic equivalent of watching your own live Link-feed, explained that it makes you feel like you're going through all the actions you're going through, makes you feel everything you feel and see everything you see, an existential head-trip combining an out-of-body experience with déjà vu. He explained that there was no way for him to truly know, as he was speaking, whether he was truly speaking, or only thought he was speaking, or maybe even just thought he thought he was speaking.

The owner of the cafe, a Tolkienite who'd Splyzed goat legs and horns and turned himself into a satyr, called the Regulators on him. The boy had Class T status and a karma rating that had dropped below 0, Prohibitioner-status, and could not sure whether he was terrified or just thought he felt terrified. Before he had the chance to decide, he'd been bathed in the green ray of the Regulators' infamous Enforcer gun, the small firearm that swipes your consciousness, and he re-introduced himself with the new identity of some other ex-Prohibitioner who'd done his time and gotten another chance in this new body.

After a while two hookers stopped by the corner, their bodies Splyzed until their breasts were larger than basketballs and their waists so thin they might snap in half, reeking of aphrodisiacs, Splyzed pheromones, and self-applied botox. The first was picked up by a fem who paid with six months of her youth; a few minutes later a

mal hologram appeared to the other and gave her directions, beckoning her to a nearby apartment.

A fem passed me, her entire body covered in snake tattoos that writhed and moved over her skin in exquisite patterns, followed by a mal with hands for feet. A Promoted horse got into an argument with an Immaterialist, and they came to blows, their battle eventually interrupted by a cyborg pimp.

I see people, how they act and what they do to themselves and each other. But for the life of me, I do not understand them at all.

*The Box: 11h28, January 1, 2150*

I come home satisfyingly exhausted and weary from my wandering. The only dull point was when the computer outside, not even an AEI but a standard AI, refused to let me inside for ten minutes, and since it's only an Artificial Intelligence (incapable of fuzzy logic, able to understand data but not information, basically little more than a talking toaster) it wasn't even any use to threaten it. The building used to have a security guard until it was replaced by this far more expensive and useless computer.

Still, it was a good outing. I wish I could afford enough memory to make it worth buying some eLink goggles so I could record everything. Barring that, a holographic masseuse would be nice. Instead of either I pop a few Gleemanal capsules and play some Duke Ellington. Instantly I am alert and my savage mood is medicated down to merely hideous. I am ready to get to writing, have already called up my recorder, when I see that there is a message for me.

"Porter!" I shout. "Why didn't you tell me I had a message?"

"Because you slammed my door," the Concierge AEI pouts in her feminine voice. I know that the Specialized Apartment AEIs have their own personalities so that they might serve their owner better, but whoever designed them didn't take other factors into account, like the fact that replicating a particular personality also means replicating hurt feelings, revenge, and occasional bouts of PMS. Or, as in my case, that the owner might be an utter prick whom the machine simply does not like.

I withhold my curses, knowing that they will not help the situation. Humans you can be vile towards, but machines never forget. Through gritted teeth I apologize, "Porter, I'm sorry. It was an accident."

The door's voice is immediately more chipper. "That's okay. Just please don't do it again. I'm very sensitive, you know."

"Of course you are," I assure her. "Now may I please view my message?"

I am very curious to know who has called me. I have not gotten

a call for almost two months, after all. I have worked diligently on Porter so that she weeds out all Solicitor programs, commercial calls, telemarketers, holomarketers, spam, surveys, business calls, wrong numbers, pranksters, nuts, relatives, and just about anybody else who might abuse the phone and waste my time. With so narrow a scope either someone has developed a new way to hack around her programming, in which case I should take the call so that I can teach Porter to block it on the phone system, or it is something important, in which case I should take it anyway.

“Okay, sure, Dnzn. Down. They didn’t leave a name, but they did leave a number, asking you to call them directly.”

“Probably a sex-line, then,” I scowl. Freakin’ spam. But then, after a moment, I reconsider. “Porter, you can redirect the call so that the charge goes to them, right?”

“Yes, Dnzn. Down. This number isn’t sufficiently protected to prevent me.”

“So if it is a phone sex line, at least it’s a free call. What the aitch, call them back, Porter.”

“It has been a while since you last got some, boss,” Sam notes. “Two years, eight months, nineteen days, six hours, nineteen minutes, and forty-seven seconds, mark, since that trip to the local sexnasium. And, by the way, you’re still paying membership dues there even if you don’t go.”

“Sam, I see no reason for you to discuss my limited sexual escapades. For your own safety, I recommend you self-medicate until you don’t either.” He complies happily.

Porter places the call. It is answered not via hologram, as is common, but by vidfeed. My wall turns into a view of a large and neat office. Standing in the center is a middle-aged, beetle-browed mal with a bushy moustache and a potbelly. He wears expensive clothes that look as though he’s been in them for two days, tired brown slacks and a brick red tie with a pitted out olive green shirt, a far cry from the flamboyantly bright colors that are en vogue right now. He keeps a gnarled cigar clenched in his teeth. His eyes are beady and his voice boisterous. “Haiku Down! Hello how are you I am fine! I’m glad you called me back. No cell, no I.M., every time I tried to call you directly I ended up getting rerouted to a small village in Guam. You, sir, are a hard man to track down!”

“Intentionally, so that I am not perpetually bothered by strangers.”

He chuckles. “Good man. Straight to the point. And witty about it, too.”

I show him my favorite finger. “Witty enough?”

He harrumphs but seems no less pleased with himself. “You’re not a Citizen, Down. You can’t afford to go around wasting karma

points like that.” Then he smiles, his voice smooth as an oil slick, and he takes a long puff on his cigar. “At least, you’re not a Citizen yet.”

I discover my right eyebrow has risen inadvertently. “What are you talking about?”

The mal grinds his cigar. “My name is Desmond Arc. I am the President and Chief Editor here at the *Urban Chronicle*. We are the biggest and most prolific news service in the solar system. And we are also, thanks to Bobert Smythe and other members of the Corporate Council, the first and only newspaper to get permission from the Council in eight years to have an opinions page.” He leans forward. “Haiku Down, I am staring at our new critic.”

I swallow in amazement. I sent a submission sample to every newspaper in the solar system way back yon, trying to get hired and get my reporter’s license back, but even the rejection letters had stopped more than half a decade ago. “You want me?”

“No.”

Dinger.

He continues, “No, the submission you sent us back when you first tried for Citizenship was a piece of *kuso*, pure bilious rubbish,” he says. “The greatest thing SCC ever did for my business was to keep slags like you out of it. I don’t know how you were ever any sort of reporter in the first place.” He removes the cigar and leans forward. “But I know you’ve gotten better. You’ve been practicing, haven’t you, Haiku. Tell me, what do you know about a small cult Linksite column called *Noir*?”

My stomach lurches. My article and my real name are two things that should never, ever have been put together. I go to a lot of time and trouble to make it that way because with every word I risk my life. Vocalized disapproval is considered treason by the Solar Corporate Council, and grounds for immediate Prohibition. How this newspaper editor has managed to find me does not matter; the very fact that he knows means that the only way I could possibly be more screwed was if I Splyzed myself a second dick.

“Quite so,” a new voice agrees, as a second mal enters the viewscreen. He is a thin and dapper blonde, his voice betraying just a trace of a British accent (and without a trace of affectation), and I do not have to ask his name. It would be nigh impossible not to recognize Chairperson Bobert Smythe, after all. Smythe owns more of everything than anybody else on the planet, making him the most powerful Councilmember on the SCC. He is not technically the richest man in the world, that privilege belongs to Chairperson Jephrey Nash, but he is one of the only multi-trillionaires and owns about a 65% holding of the Council shares. In many ways, Smythe IS the SCC. As he speaks, I reassess my situation: before, I was just dead. Now I am infinitely worse off. “We have no real use for you,



Dnzn. Down. But have you perchance heard of a man named Jack Noir?”



# Chapter 00010.

## Blackmail Boogie

*Noir, October 1, 2144*

Do you remember what you look like?

Today I was looking at a holo of myself from thirty years ago. I did not realize it at the time. I spent six minutes trying to figure out why I had so many pictures of this strange ugly mal with pallid skin and a big nose and bushy eyebrows. Finally, I remembered that this was how I looked. I held out longer than most everybody but eventually even I started Splyzing a bit, and until today I hadn't realized quite how much. But take away all the genetic tampering I've done to myself, and this scrawny, average individual is me. After the prenatal gene sequencing and *en utero* adaptations, that is.

Gene splicing is easy, fun, and fairly inexpensive. We can change our appearance. We can change our species. We can change our face, our voice, our fingerprints, even our Kirlian aura. Pop a pill and you get bigger muscles, firmer breasts; there's not a mal alive with a penis under eight inches. No one wears glasses anymore except to look erudite, no one needs a cane except as an affectation. No one suffers any one of a million inconvenient, life-threatening, debilitating injuries. Most people don't even have bad breath.

Everybody's beautiful. Everybody's healthy. Everybody looks a little bit like their favorite actor or actress, and an entire assemblage of pop idols exist who let corporations copyright their appearance in the same way they used to copyright actresses' hairstyles. There is a small cult of people who Splyze themselves to look ugly simply so that they can stand out in a crowd.

Because of our control over the genetic code, the life span of the average human mutt mal is estimated at 174. Fems live about six years longer. Most pure-bloods lose ten or twelve years that we muddles have, but fortunately for them, Splyzing options mean that they don't have to remain limited to the race of their parents, or even the gender of their birth. And if that isn't enough, you can clone yourself, transfer your mind, and be a genetic *ubermansk* from the get-go. Technology is advancing so fast that it's hard to tell whether a particular technique is lengthening life at all, short of time travelers coming from the future and telling us it was a bad idea. There are people alive today who were old a century ago, still alive because new ways of using Splyzing keep popping up to keep them looking young and beautiful. I am in my late sixties, can still remember the

last century, and even with minimal applications of youthening treatment I don't look older than thirty/early-forties on a bad day. At the rate technology is advancing it is quite possible that I will never die.

And conveniently, AEIs watch our every move, record every purchased Splyze, so one needn't even update their retinal scans to access credit. These measures are strictly upheld, because these days identity theft takes on a whole new and very literal definition. In fact, so thoroughly are Splyze changes recorded that there is biodigital software you can buy that will replace your holos with new pictures, allowing a seamless transformation of the new you, and with eLink updates anybody who knew you before will instantly recognize you via their cybernetic uplink.

I can look however I want, and if I get my Splyzes from an illegal Brigand black market Shaper, as mine in fact is, no one can trace what those Splyzes are. With very little effort and even less cost, I can become completely incognito so thoroughly that no one could ever find me. I could even turn myself into someone else, and the only thing that might give me away is said person's utterly obnoxious and abhorrent behavior and their new fetish for firearms.

We've had the human genome mapped out for over a century, we can play it like a piano, and its manipulation is open to anybody. Six years ago the Cairo Plague was unleashed by three bored teenagers, transforming the genetic structure of ten thousand people, turning everybody in that poor pyramid-motif part of the world into exact genetic duplicates of Ron Howard.

Remember who you were, because who you are is not all that special, especially in the biological sense. With a Class D credit rating and a jerry-rigged Shaper, anybody could show up on your apartment doorstep and take over your life.

Which I will, the moment one of your prieks is able to hack my identity and report me to the SCC. Just make extra special sure to cover your tracks, though, because if I live long enough, the person showing up on your doorstep to wear your face and take over your life will be me, looking like you.

*Hell: 11h37, January 1, 2150*

Desmond Arc puffs his cigar smugly. This man who knows my name, this man who right now I hate more than every child molester who ever lived, smiles at me and waits for my response. I eventually force my stomach out of my throat for long enough to speak.

"What do you want, you hateful Greaser?"

His smile grows even bigger, his thick teeth pulverizing the cigar in the corner of his mouth. "You know, etiquette usually

demands that you kiss your boss's ass, Haiku."

"*Cái guài!* Etiquette also demands I give you twenty-four hours notice before I send nuclear weapons reigning down on your head. What do you want?"

He chuckles deeply. "The Jack Noir wit. I love it. What I want, *Haiku*," he stresses my name just to watch me flinch, "is to offer you a job."

I had always been under the impression that getting one's wish granted was a happy affair, not something that leaves one gasping for air. Nowhere in Aladdin did it have a genie with a thick bushy moustache holding a switchblade to the poor kid's throat.

And then I see Smythe grinning vaingloriously in the background, and rage suddenly burns itself out, leaving only cold, calculating hate. "Well, I'd like to make a counteroffer." I motion to my AEI. "Sam, what particularly nasty bioware viruses do I have that would appropriately express my ire right now?"

"The Epyon, the TS-PR011C, the Elementalor, the Oblivion, and the Owen. Oh, and that Raze you won at the poker game last week."

I match the SOB's smile and take control of the conversation. He has no idea the danger he has incurred, invoking my wrath. "Ah, the Raze Virus. They haven't even talked about that one on the news, because it's so dangerous that it leaves no witnesses. Do you know what that does? Someone with as many STIs as you no doubt do, I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't an expert on viruses of all kinds. The Raze does just that. It burns through any firewalls and protections you have. Then it modifies the programming of your Shaper, like that one I see over behind Chairperson Smythe, to spew out a flurry of technorganic nanite viruses that keep multiplying. It won't affect you, but the nanites it spits out start sending out a tight carrier wave that converts any andy or rob within a five block radius into berserkers. Not five blocks from where I send it, mind you, but five blocks from you, wherever you go, and the longer you live the more nanites your body spits out. The only thing that stops the rampage of half a hundred robs from crushing you and everything nearby is after you've been squeezed into liquid pulp and your visceral remains have evaporated. I send this Raze and I wish you to the effing cornfield. I work for no one, especially not for some SCC propaganda lackey who interrupts my private day of overdosing on nanite recombinator-based pharma-ceuticals to swing his nuts in my face in order to compensate for whatever—"

"We'll pay you," Smythe interrupts, and I am so shocked that I actually stop. Normally no one interrupts my tirades. I have spewed insults whose recipients require years of therapy, and yet Robert Smythe has just shrugged off my jibes and quips like I'm some uppity

*kono imo*?! And worse, before I can properly explode, Vesuvius-style, Desmond continues where Smythe left off! “You’ll get a Reporter’s License, Class A credit, a fully-Sentient Sophoid-status. And anything else it’ll take to get your pseudonym in my paper. Chairperson Smythe has assured me that he can pull whatever strings are necessary.” And Smythe nods nonchalantly.

I pause at the words, my brow furrowed. “Class A credit...Sentience? The only people who get those are—”

“Citizens. Not Denizens, not Civilians, not Breeders, not Tenants, not Prohibitioners. Only Citizens. That’s right, Down. Come work for me, and we’re prepared to give you full Citizenship, and all the perks that come with it. Citizen Haiku Down, so no one will ever need to associate you with Jack Noir. And Chairman Smythe has guaranteed full immunity regarding free speech. You can say whatever you like, do whatever you like, and no one, not the SCC, not Special Services, nobody, will touch you.”

I turn to Smythe in the background. He nods again.

My interest has been piqued. “Sam, put the Raze on standby,” I command with a gesture. “All right, Desmond. Let’s dicker. What are your terms?”

Arc states, “I want the rights to *Noir* and the name of Jack Noir, in their entirety, to be used as I see fit. I reserve the right to alter, edit, and exclude your work in any way, whether you like it or not. And I demand at least two columns a day, for the morning and evening editions, at least seven hundred words with minimal profanity.”

“Gee, that all?” I ask. “Cause, fine, then, eff off. You do not get my name or my column. You do not get to change word one. I will give you two critiques a day; today’s are that you are an insipid waste of time and you are ugly. Do you really expect me to sell out for terms like that? Honestly!”

“In a moment, you’ll sell out for free, because I told you to and I have very damning incentive.”

Blackmail. Peachy.

He holds up his hands, gesturing for peace. “But, since you’re no good to anybody with your brains on ice in Prohibition, I’m prepared to compromise.”

“Fortune cookie says, ‘only those with something to lose compromise.’”

“Which you have, *Haiku*. You’ve got so much to lose with what we know about you that you should get down on your knees and worship me like a god for not demanding your firstborn child. I’m going to get my columns, and in return you can slip around SCC mandates against treasonous speech and become a Citizen. *Mầy nói cái gì hà*, as a Citizen you’re already granted full rights of Sentience, including freedom of speech and so much else that SCC can’t touch

you for anything short of murder anyway. But I'll sweeten it: you can keep the rights, but I get final veto. If I don't like something you change it, or give me a new column. We'll put the copyright in your name and you'll lease the rights to us, so we'll both get phat credit every time the word *Noir* is spoken or printed. Now does that sound fair?"

"Fair is you spontaneously melting like the Wicked Witch of the West in a swimming pool." I turn and plop on my cushions, and consider. "Give me forty years to think about it."

"You have five minutes," he says, and the hologram hangs up.

*Noir*, July 7, 2144

If anyone happened to watch the Channel 7 Action News™ last night, somewhere between updates on killer death sports and the Tadd "The Hack" Torrid's interview of actress Farrah Summers topless, we were informed that the latest disastrous means of unstoppable mass chaos we have to worry about that could cause us all horrible death spasms of agony and painful pain are...viruses.

Not the little microscopic buggars that jump into your bloodstream to wreak havoc upon your unsuspecting person in the form of coughs and sniffles, but computer viruses. Although, to be fair, with bioware and nanotech capable of altering biology on the submolecular level, the distinction between the two have blurred considerably.

Action News™ apparently feels that since some hacker, on a lark, found some way to get into the SCC records department and alter the credit rating of every Citizen in North America, we now need to be especially wary of the ingenuity of dissidents and sociopaths who would use their knowledge of these disastrous programs for evil. After all, if someone would callously and thoughtlessly disregard the benefits of an often-undeserving and perpetually-segregatory upper caste, who knows where they might next strike? The next computer virus might be one that drops the karma rating of everybody with Class B credit to down below Prohibitioner-status, or make your Shaper release biotoxic chemicals, or reprogram a cafeteria to lace the sloppy joe mix with LSD-9. However, showing the level of reporting and research proficiency I have come to expect since getting barred from the profession, Action News™ forgot to mention that there are only a few people on Earth capable of hacking into SCC records, and that I happen to be one of them. Now, I'm not claiming credit for this mischievous little virus that has so upset our higher-ups, as that would bring Special Services down on my head, but I will say that I would be surprised if anybody else could prove that they did it.

Tee-hee.

Anyway, back to my point, we need to be especially wary of computer viruses right now. One never knows when some sadistic hacker might decide to go for something more vital, and this has put the entire government on alert.

Tee-hee.

Never mind that such viruses have been around for over two hundred years, since the birth of networking computers. Also never mind that the majority of the population simply cannot DO anything to stop such viruses, short of either actually learning basic programming themselves, or, like Action News™, *duō zui* to people with better things to do. Also never mind that between intelligent bioware filter programs, AEIs, and HR sanitation volunteers (the same overly-moralistic assholes who filter out explicit naughty words no matter how hard I work to include them), the only way such viruses can get past any firewall more advanced than a first-grade school computer is through basic human sloppiness. And finally, never mind that there are phenomenal benefits to an occasional well-placed virus. For instance, at about thirteen hundred this afternoon every public transport in North America will suddenly begin to accept any fare, free of charge. I'm not saying that I'm responsible for it, but I will say that I was planning on going out today and I hate credit tokens jingling in my pockets.

Tee-hee.

To be frank, I don't see why Channel 7 Action News™ is making such a big deal, except that it's their business to make us cower in fear worrying about events over which we have no control to the point that we don't have time to think about the things we *can* change. Personally, I love computer viruses. I love them almost as much as I love guns. Actually, I love ANY form of chaos that disrupts society from its placid, torpid, tedious status quo, and viruses are a wonderful way to implement that.

When people are faced with sheer chaos their true faces come out. They can be heroes or cowards, rational or lunatic. It awakens a part of us that is hidden so deeply by layers of civilization, the power that most of us never realize they have because they know of no other world than this sterile urban purgatory. One never truly knows oneself until having faced the true adversity of sheer chaos.

Such as what might happen when one accepts an illicit, unauthorized malcontent's column when he's been in a bad mood and finds that they've also accepted a virus that lobotomizes your House AEI and shuts off all the power to your box two and a half minutes after download.

Tee-hee.



*A slightly deeper region of Hell: 11h45, January 1, 2150*

In exactly five minutes the hologram of Desmond Arc reappears in my box. I do not turn around. I've spent most of this time not in thought or self-reflection. Instead, about half the time has been spent in psychological turmoil and cold sweats going "ohshitohshitohshitohshitohshit." The other half has been dedicated to devising some way to end this man's life in a design and execution both crafty and innovative, something so inspired that the Regulators would not only forgive me my crime but would actually congratulate me on my ingenuity.

Since I can't think of anything quite that good, I instead acquiescent. "Okay."

I imagine he smiles his predator smile. He seems to do that a lot. "Great. I'll send a cab. It'll pick you up downstairs in ten minutes."

"You know where I live?" I ask without much surprise.

He chuckles. "Of course I do, Haiku. I know everything about you. That's the best way to blackmail somebody."

"Then you must know that I have a large array of untraceable weapons. I mention them quite often in my column."

"Yes, well, I have an artificial second heart with a sat-link hookup, and should it stop beating a number of interesting and damaging pieces of information are instantly spammed to Special Services, your name included." He takes a deep drag on his cigar. "And by the way, I've never read your piece of ess column, Haiku. I just know that it's the most popular thing out there since Omni and I want a piece of it. See you soon."

The hologram blinks off.

A moment later it blinks back on. "Oh, and if you ever call me a Greaser again, I'll order large men to come by and beat the ess out of you and videotape the whole thing so I can jack off to your bleeding face. Happy New Year."

Then he is gone.

I stay quite still for a few minutes. Then I call up my bathroom and induce vomiting.

*Noir, October 12, 2147*

If you could choose between perpetual sex, drugs, or rock and roll, which would it be? Obviously, rock is out, because nothing yet has topped old jazz. Plus, call me a traditionalist, but Elvis' third clone just isn't cutting the mustard any more, and that machine that recreates the Beatles' musical style is getting experimental again. Unending sex sounds like an intriguing option except that I chafe

easily and the option isn't very specific: such a selection and one might find oneself limited to an eternity tied down in Times Square getting anally raped by a horse while wearing leather chaps. Which, while I'm sure appeals to several of you perverted sick *hentai* freaks out there, just ain't my cup of tea.

Personally, I'd have to go with drugs. Drugs come in a wonderful wide variety of electric kool-aid shapes and colors, and can make you do and feel and perceive almost anything. Between Shapers, automatic AEI medscans, and almost universal legalization, they're cheap, fun, and available. You can get high, low, sideways, whatever altitude tickles your pickle. We got drugs out there that can make you feel immortal for weeks, and at least one that does the job for real. Stuff that can slow down a tortoise, and stuff that can get you so high that Siddhartha Buddha himself stops by to write the Eightfold Path in lipstick on your bedroom mirror. We got drugs these days that could have started the transcendentalism movement with a single microgram. And every month the SCC releases a few new ones, so that one can always keep up with the right pill to match the right fashion. For the more Puritanical out there who might not be up to date, here are this month's best sellers:

Number five most popular drug out there is Remin, short for Reminisce (not to be confused with Remynol, Remnelin, Remrom, Rempositories, and every other pharmaceutical out there that thinks it is clever to use REM as the prefix of a sleeping agent). This is a concoction most commonly taken through optical spray. It calls forth the user's happiest memory and locks it for several hours, effectively reminding you of the happiest you've ever been and keeping you that way for a few pleasant hours. If abused it can cause memory loss, but if you've got to be an idiot, you might as well be a happy idiot.

Number four is called Supe, or Super, or Commix, or Hero, or Cape. This overachieving steroid compound lets you think you're a super-hero, giving the same sense of invulnerability and euphoria as PCP but with a sense of purpose. Unfortunately, this sense of purpose often involves trying to fly or stop a train.

Dreamtime, number three, is a very pleasant hallucinogen that can be ingested, shot, or inhaled through the nose. Also called Sandman or DT, it is actually a highly infectious nanotech virus that spreads to those nearby. While it induces the primary user into an alpha state, awake but experiencing a dream-like reality, it also turns the secondary users, the poor bystanders in the area infected, into drones who share the dream and become part of it themselves. DT is commonly used in small crowded places and quite enjoyable until it wears off, at which point there are legal grounds for the masses to turn on the user and flay him alive.

The second most popular drug is robot-only, I'm afraid. Unless

you've got cybernetic attachments, 00111001000110101110, or HEMO, is not for you. Downloaded, it gives any rob or AEI the feeling of muscles, lymph glands, blood, flesh, sinew, tissue, and other human traits. It makes 'em feel human. The fact that there's no reason humans couldn't easily transfer robot consciousness into cloned bodies as easily as we transfer ours into theirs, and the fact that it was a human who invented this drug, just proves what horrible essences we are. The saddest thing is that robs probably realize that, and they still want to be like us.

And the most popular drug of all right now is Omni. This one's a beaut. It makes you, quite simply, feel like God. It's the human version of HEMO, the feeling of being that in whose image you were made. For a little while you can feel like you can create worlds, create universes, create life, and take it all away again. You can feel everybody worship you, and you love everybody like your own child. It's the love that's most addicting, I'm told. Omni-users have a 97% suicide rate during withdrawal, which is more evidence that we're horrible essences, because if we were a halfway decent species we wouldn't need a drug to feel love for our fellow man.

Not that I'm against it. In fact, I highly recommend experimenting with all these and more. Every generation finds its own drug, and if this generation wants one that makes them feel loved, understood, connected, powerful, and important, it is only because, well, they're not. Everything available these days is quite safe if taken in the recommended dosage, and all are available from your Shaper or your local pharmacy with Class T credit or above. In fact, if one can't afford their drugs, the creds lost in purchasing are usually less than the creds acquired in karma points by turning black market drugs in to the authorities, making dealers and junkies the very best narcs!

*Why* do I recommend prolific if not flagrant experimentation, you ask? How can I, Jack Noir, beloved social commentator who is read by several million impressionable young tykes every day, condone and even encourage rampant drug use? Well, because the SCC long ago realized that a certain selection of any population will always seek a means of escape from reality, and that if not available safely, those people will seek other, unsafe means. So they made drugs nontoxic, non-addictive, and easily available, but added a nice little twist for those not mature enough to handle the load: drug abuse in this day and age results in sterility.

Just as well, really. Kids shouldn't have to rely on a bunch of stoner parents. Most adults are too self-absorbed to do a proper job of parenting anyway, which leads most teenagers who weren't Boomers from birth to turn to drugs. It is a vicious cycle that gets more deliberate and more profitable with every succeeding generation, and one which your government actively encourages at the expense of

your children's lives and futures.

Well, eff 'em. At least they're not out having sex and listening to rock and roll.

*Yellow Cab #511285yc04512: 11h55, January 1, 2150*

Ten minutes later Porter tells me that a cab has pulled up and requests my presence. Porter seems elusive, so I assume the cabby's request included a great deal of cursing. She has learned to expect such behavior from me, but, as she often espouses, she's sensitive.

I grab my fedora and trench coat, a holdover from the days when I actually liked fashion, or rather when dictated fashions and my own personal preference somehow lined up for a microscopic minute, rather like an eclipse or some other rare astronomical event. I then grab as many guns as I can reasonably fit, and take the elevator down to the ground floor.

My driver is a three-year old Boomer who is putting herself through Medical School by working this second job. She could be cute, except for the innate baldness and accentuated veins that signify a Boomer, as well as the lines of experience etched into her face that she was probably born with. She speaks with a sibilant S that grants even her most vile karma-collapsing profanities an air of cuteness as she whines to me about how hard it is to afford knowledge implants. When I suggest DataJax, she scoffs, reminding me that DataJax have a 90% corrosion-level before puberty. She wants to be a doctor by the time she is six, after all.

As she speaks, I ask her to turn down the television in the back as I record what could be a potentially interesting article. My OptiComp automatically saves up to four hundred hours of recorded sound into a private onLink archive; I start it going and absently encourage her to speak without really listening. While on other days this could promote engaging dialogue and a later column, Desmond Arc's visit has sapped all reservoirs of pleasure and energy from a system which has very little of either in the tank to begin with.

I am utterly despondent. I want something to drink. I want some drugs. I want to just die.

None of these options are presently available, and so I am forced to sit and look out the window until we get to Desmond Arc's office, where perhaps if I am lucky I might be able to grab a letter opener off his desk and kill us both.

*Noir, November 4, 2148*

Today, in an attempt to piss off and alienate as many people as humanly possible, I'm going to dedicate my daily rant to children.

I now suspect you raise your eyebrows in disdain. Children?! What has Jack Noir against children? Certainly he's not going to attack children, is he?

Yes he is.

Everybody loves kids. (If I really, really wanted to piss people off, I'd add that they taste good with ketchup. But since my attempts to provoke always, or at least usually, have a rational point behind them, I'll refrain.)

Again, with the possible exception of Chi Nan Go, the Vietnamese cannibal who redefined "baby food" for an entire generation, everybody loves kids. They're cute, they're loveable, and having to support dependants boosts your credit level. They're a little bit of you to carry on into the future, assuming cloning, HR, and cryogenics aren't to your taste. We love kids, and we especially love our own. Basic biology makes that a good idea. For a species unable to crawl for a year after birth because its head is too big, if the DNA wants to spread itself around it'd better make bloody sure we love and care for our children.

It is an inevitable bit of basic folly that we consider our own particular spawn to exemplify all the most wonderful traits of humanity (and several similar alien species) and inherently eschew all evil and misfortune, to an uncannily phenomenal degree. The laws of statistics would prove this otherwise, though, and simple observation shows that not only is your kid unlikely to be number one, but even after the gene sequencing he still drools a lot and kinda smells funny. But whether our little darling is the *crème de la crème* or the jetsam in the gene pool, we want them to overcome the hurdles and travails of life as easily as possible.

We have come a long way in this regard, moving far beyond such basic measures as talking and spending time with them in a loving, supportive, and open yet authoritative household. We take shortcuts. My grandmother was one of those unlucky kids with yuppie parents, signed up for the best schools before she could talk. In Japanippon back during the middle of the twenty-first century, mothers had televisions installed in their wombs that fed information to the fetus, so that kids came out able to understand language and basic mathematics. For a while it was common to pump pregnant women with neuroepinephrine because it made kids crave knowledge, until studies and painful experience showed that it also made them crave neuroepinephrine.

Then, we figured out how to Promote.

We Promoted animals and they got the intelligence of people. It wasn't long before someone wondered what'd happen if we Promoted ourselves. The results are the Boomers, infants born with the mentality of adults, and the facial features of a geriatric on the

proportions of a child.

Without exaggeration, I can honestly say that this is the most horrible despicable atrocity mankind has performed on itself since that racist zealot pathobiologist Hans Greiger unleashed the Eugenic Plague that wiped out half of South America's blacks.

Now I'm the last person in the world to romanticize childhood, which is the reason a lot of people want to stop this practice. As I recall, being a kid involved getting force-fed facts through a neural link, beaten to a pulp on the playground, and wetting the bed until the fourth grade. Adolescence involved lots of zits and getting slapped by a total of eighteen feds and a nun the week before Prom. Granted this is several decades out of date (there was also an apocalyptic war or two in there where we spent some small time running in terror from cyborgs, but that's not as common these days.), but based on the actions of today's youth it is doubtful things have even remained mediocre, let alone having improved. I do not miss being young, and I do not woe the fact that Boomers never knew the so-called purity and innocence of childhood.

I disavow this increasingly common act by obsessively overachieving vicarious parents because I remember the playground with eidetic clarity. Children are neither pure nor innocent. They are petty, sadistic, egotistical, and cruel.

That's why I shudder every time I see a Boomer. Not because I am sad for their lost past. Eff that. I shudder for our future. We've given a grad school education to those little things, without adding such pragmatic lessons as kindness and decency. The only reason we were ever able to turn children into productive members of society was because we were bigger and their young minds were malleable enough that it only took a couple of clonks on the noggin before they realized the benefits of being nice. Try to make a Boomer stand in the corner on time-out and he'll come back at you with a class action lawsuit. The real horror is not that we have robbed children of their childhood, but that we have turned our young into the same shallow idiots that we are. I fear them, I pity them, and I dread what will come.

And because, though I may be alone here, I think the little bastards just plain look creepy.

*The Urban Chronicle Building: 13h05, January 1, 2150*

He could have sent a limo, a transporter pass, an FTL cab. Even a landbound gas-powered Pinto with no gas, to my mind, would have been an improvement. Instead it's this piece of ess hovercar taxicab with negative priority over everything else on the airway. Either that, or Arc instructed the infantile cabby to take as long as possible so that

I could fester properly. Locked in a single skyline to the defiance of all logic, because not only are most cars automated but there are three freakin' dimensions to move through up here, we progress at about the speed of Dutch Elm disease. When we arrive at the Urban Chronicle Building, a forty-minute ride by solartram and a forty-five minute walk, it is just about thirteen hundred. The Boomer cabbie refused to change the channel on the TV, and I had to spend the entire time watching live feed of some riots uptown by people who didn't seem to know what they were rioting for or against. The only good part of the trip was that we passed over D'Walmart's Primitivist gathering on Maple, and I was able to use the cab's Shaper to synthesize some raw meat; with everyone's base urges amped up to their max and no sign that they've stopped for lunch, it should get pretty interesting. When we land I exit the taxi quickly, and when gratuity is demanded I tip with my middle finger.

Many people are getting back from their afternoon sex break, and I notice that every single reporter looks and dresses exactly alike. It's like a clone factory, like walking in front of Clone Now™, except that these clones are also all dressed, and dressed better than I ever have. If this is Desmond Arc's normal hiring policy, I may be safe after all, since I am too ugly for public consumption in mass quantities. Un-photogenic enough and he may simply decide that my face is unfit for his paper. It is a desperate hope, but it buoys me somewhat.

The building itself is about two hundred stories tall and octagonal, as most common structures intended for use by Citizens are. The fewer corners, the less perfect the holographic image within. The richest and most elite Citizens live in cylindrical buildings, where the holograms are perfect. The synthetic holoskin wrapped around this structure is advertising the paper itself on four walls and on the other four are publicizing a live concert special starring simceleb Sydney Drake, a sentient AI simdividual who, after fifteen minutes of fame eight years ago is now fashionable again because, god help us, eight years is apparently long enough to become retro.

Though the *Urban Chronicle* is a newspaper by trade, there is, of course, no actual paper involved (and, from my occasional glances, precious little news). It is entirely electric, so that it can be sent anywhere, even over intergalactic distances using FTL. In fact, with faster than light communication, people sometimes get their news before it's been printed, which effed with the stock market for a little while, and was one of the reasons SCC claimed they took over newspapers in the first place. Propaganda, of course, was not mentioned anywhere, but I attribute that to custom; neither corporations nor governments have ever been entirely forthcoming, and the SCC is both.

The line to return into the building is quite long and there does not seem to be any exception to the security scans for employees or visitors, and so I have some time to wait. Seeing the sheer quantity of people employed here, I realize that perhaps I have been a bit unfair in detailing the actual work involved in reporting. It is not technically accurate that there are few jobs available, just very few compared to the general population. The Urban Chronicle Building is almost the size of one of the rebuilt Twin Towers and probably employs more people than the any newspaper ever did back when paper was the medium. When news shifted to a purely electronic form it became much cheaper to print but infinitely more expensive to produce. Any successful newspaper, just like any other Linksite, must be able to pander to its audience, and just like any entertainment Feedsite, must be able to modify itself to meet its audiences' preferences. The same way a personal television adjusts automatically for its viewer to enjoy optimum sound and picture quality, so too must any electronic information source be able to adjust to give each individual the most "important" information possible. What this means is that one person's daily issue may be mostly headlines and in-depth sports statistics, while another may have a fifty page local news section and comics and eschew every other section completely. Such variation is necessary to succeed in the business, and such thoroughness requires many people to do a lot of grunt work. Any AOLink can automatically reference an unfamiliar word in a stored dictionary, but most can't google a meticulous break-down of history, related topics, background material, implications, cross-references, and similar subjects of interest; all that is dependant on links that are provided by the newspaper itself, which is provided by lots and lots of people who do hours worth of work getting a single article written. They must, because otherwise their newspaper could not compete with all the other newspapers that do, and while the SCC may insist that you spend your money, so far they have not quite been tyrannical enough to tell you on what you must spend it. Were one to actually print one out, the usual heft of a daily newspaper is about 392 pages, akin to about two thousand different articles (and 9,420-some advertisements). That's a lot of reporters, not counting holographers and managers and data specialists and sales representatives and the slews of middle management that congeal and develop like a fungus in any business that grows large enough.

What this amounts to from an immediate personal viewpoint is that there is a good half-hour wait to enter, just from the bottlenecking involved in everybody trying to get back into the building! Looking at it that way, it's almost enough to make an employee forgo their daily sex break!

"Down? Haiku Down?" Hearing my name, I look up to see a



Promoted ostrich, wearing a security uniform. “Are you Denizen Haiku Down?”

“Yes.”

“Hello how are you I am fine. Name’s Pete. I’m here to get you to see Ctnz. Arc as soon as possible, so you don’t have to wait in this line.”

“Thanks.” This is a decent change. After waiting this long I’m still nowhere near the elevator, transporter, or interior vacuum tube.

“Follow me, if you please. We’ll get you a security badge. Oh, and before you ask, I’m an emu, not an ostrich. Lots of people make the mistake. Easier to say it outright. To your left.” Following a complicated series of corridors, where I see more of the same identical corporate drones as well as several more robotic gophers than are probably strictly necessary, Pete leads me around the normal electronic scrutiny everybody else has to go through. He explains that the robots double as security, which is so tight here that passing through a scanner without proper quintuplicate checks (ID, password, retinal, bioscan, and Kirlian aura) results in an armada of weapons issuing forth from the walls and firing volleys of ammunition shortly before lasers appear and mince you to atoms. After that the Regulars from Special Services are called in to take over, and then you’re really in trouble.

Pete’s gregarious congeniality continues as he leads me to security HQ in order to process me into the central network. Making use of his friendly openness, I ask him if this is common for all visitors or just new employees.

“Oh, no, sir. Just the new employees,” he replies. “Visitors aren’t actually allowed above the first three floors. That’s because we’ve had trouble with kamikazes in the past. You know, people who’ve wired themselves, or else who’ve wired ignorant robs or zombies, full of explosives or agents or memes. Only one ever got through, though, and then we were able to diffuse their bomb before it could detonate,” he states proudly.

“Why would someone want to blow this place up?” I inquire. I know *my* reasons: utter hatred of propaganda in any form and absolute hatred of Desmond Arc in particular, but I am curious as to why anybody else might risk their lives to end this atrocity.

Pete ruffles his wings and cocks his head, a motion I interpret as a shrug. “Well, they’ve all got different reasons. Sometimes we report something that sets someone off, but surprisingly not very often. Some groups like the Censors just hate all writing in general. Some have been sent by the Brigand after we break a report about the black market that SS didn’t know, but that hasn’t happened in years. More often it’s someone employed by Special Services because we broke a story that they didn’t know about, or didn’t want anyone to know

about, although I'm not supposed to talk about that. One bomb threat was even attributed to an architect, a fem who said this place had bad *feng shui*. And then, of course, there're always the Noir-lovers."

I blink. "Noir-lovers?"

"Yeah. Folks who read that illegal rantsite, *Noir*, and take it to heart or something. Seem to think newspapers do nothing but pop out newspeak for the Corporate Council. The last four terrorists have been working in that guy's name."

People believe my words so much that they will die when I *kvetch*. I am simultaneously sickened and elated. I suppose it's at least good to know that people are reading. "Do they?"

"Yeah, yeah. Between you and me, I've read the guy myself a few times. Not intentionally," he quickly adds, since reading unlicensed reporting is as much an offense as writing it, "but sometimes folks post hardcopy or holotext in the bathroom. I don't personally see what the fuss is about. Lean forward, please, so I can take your bioscan."

I consider shooting the emu, but he has commandeered all but my most secret guns. Apparently my right to bear weapons does not carry weight here. It is a disgusting and blatant disregard of my basic rights as a Denizen, but since I need to see Arc I have no choice but to suffer through this indignity, content at least that my babies will be back soon. And that the emu missed a few, so that I still have a chance at Desmond.

"Hm. How'd you lose the limbs?" he asks as he stares at the screen.

He refers to my two cybernetic arms. They are indiscernible not only visually and palpably, but also electronically, except on heavy-duty bioscans like this one, and even then only faintly. I have made sure that they are. It is one of many nifty little extras that I have added to over the years, along with an OmniPort, a SatLink phone, a vocorder, and three personal security devices (pheromonal, mild EMP, and a maser pulse that knocks everybody nearby out for three minutes; meme-based self-defense coming soon I guess), along with a few other tricks. That these scanners can even pick them up at all shows that they're top of the line.

"I didn't lose them," I lie. "I intentionally had them replaced."

Pete glances up at me. "You a Non-Luddite or some-thing?"

"Hardly," I respond. "I just like being able to break someone's neck with two fingers. And being able to vibrate at fifty beats per second takes puts the pleasure back in self-pleasure."

Pete avoids further comment, though he must know that regulation cybernetics cannot do the things I say. Which is what I'd hoped he'd do, which is why I replied so. It is a rehearsed answer, intended to deflect further interrogation. I do not like talking about

having my arms ripped out of their sockets eleven years ago back in the riots of São Paulo. Or about the young cyborg fem who fell to her death as she took my arms with her; too many people begin to mistakenly assume that I have a speck of decency in me once they've heard that story. Or about the many secret and exceedingly illegal adaptations I have made to the new arms, not the least of which is tripling their potential torque and speed.

I mean it when I say I'd give my right arm to be a reporter. In the name of journalism, I've already given both.

Pete gives me his unique shrug again and hands me an ID tag, or rather passes it to me with his beak. "There you go, Dnzn. Down. Make sure you have that at all times; it'll grant you level six clearance to the building. If a random scan shows you without it they release that nanite gas that turns you inside out."

"Thanks for the tip. Level six?"

"VIP clearance. It's about as good as you can get. Only star reporters and a few admin get that; the only higher clearance is for the VP, Mr. Arc, and of course Corporate Council members. The last time I gave one out was when Chairperson Smythe came by to yell at Mr. Arc for something or other. Well, the last time he did. Happens quite a bit, actually. It's not really common to give it to the newbies, but orders came from above to get you in. Speaking of which, that's everything you'll need. Follow me, please."

I give a resigned sigh. "Usher away."

We go through a labyrinthine series of halls and offices, filled with people who presumably have some function, people of whom I have always been jealous. Again, I note that they all look alike, and ask Pete about it.

"Oh, that's the standard uniform," he explains. "Lots of companies are requiring that now. You Splyze your genes to wear a certain look for work, then re-Splyze them when you get off. It only counts for reporters here, but I heard over at the *Times* that it's universal. And rumor has it that the *Post* is inquiring into the feasibility of making it apply to their readers as well." I shudder at the thought. My hope that Arc won't like the way I look dissolves, but hope returns as I realize that I will probably be the only writer who needn't participate in this sickening practice of homogeneity. Since Haiku Down and Jack Noir are theoretically different people, and go to great lengths to stay that way, I will at least be spared this indignity.

Pete leads me to a transporter and instructs it, "Mr. Arc's office."

"Please show identification," the transporter says in a mechanical voice, one which is supposed to sound soothing and human but, compared to an AEI voice, is more mechanical and robotic than an

actual rob.

Pete turns to me. “That’s you. Even security guards don’t have clearance to Mr. Arc’s office without an emergency override and a pile of electronic paperwork.”

I show my new ID card and the transporter’s doors open with an automatic, “Thank you, Dnzn. Down.”

“Once you get in just go straight,” Pete tells me helpfully. “Mr. Arc is expecting you.”

“Good,” I mutter, and step in. The transporter takes a moment to activate, a safety precaution to make sure it does not only teleport *most* of me, and then hums to life.

“Happy New Year,” I hear Pete say, and then my atoms are scattered by the transporter.

*Noir, January 2, 2150, Urban Chronicle (morning edition)*

You may be intrigued to know (I certainly was) that Jack Noir has made the news. Not just literally, as I chronicle current events. I have actually become the topic of information on a prominent newsfeed. Unfortunately, the newsfeed was Channel 7 Action News™ and my vainglorious magnificence was revealed to the world by that Hack, Tadd Torrid, but we underground correspondents take our victories where we may.

To be honest, I was more than a little surprised myself. Not only in the fact that SCC (actual proposed motto: “Taking liberties with justice for all”) would allow their lovely propaganda-poppers to comment upon actual facts, let alone such nebulously upsetting ones as a rebellious critic with a caustic attitude and an enormous wang. I was a lot more surprised by the interview between Torrid and I, especially in that I have never personally spoken with the Hack. A bit of attention to rhythm and meter in that interview would make it obvious that he’d messed with the vocal recordings of my column. Any household AEI could tell you that much, or anybody familiar with the VoiceScan 5000©, who might recognize the voice the Hack interviewed as a badly recorded mix of Track 2142, the same voice track I use for my illiterate subscribers to keep Special Services from doing a voicescan, a combination of Mr. Moviefone 4.0 and Morgan Freeman. My lawsuit to Torrid and Channel 7 Action News™ is pending.

But this broadcast, probably more by accident than design, did happen to have the advantage of actually presenting some news. The topic was not exactly new to me, but it has come more recently to my attention than other subjects. This is the practice of certain individuals, a small group of people whom I must assume to be my readers as they are working in my name, who have been walking into

newspapers, administrative buildings, and government offices threatening mass destruction and often blowing the structures and themselves up like kamikazes.

Now, to set straight things that Tadd Torrid may have misrepresented on his blatantly doctored interview. If anybody has actually bothered to read my column, they might notice that while I have often called upon my readers to fight the establishment, off the top of my head I do not recall ever mentioning the use of explosives. I also have never spoken with these people directly or through any indirect channels.

However, while I have absolutely never asked anybody to risk their lives in my name, I do applaud these people's initiative.

If I sound cruel and heartless, laughing at these people sacrificing themselves in my name and the innocent people they may harm, that is because I AM cruel and heartless. I do not as a rule *like* people, especially people suggestible enough and stupid enough to take my ranting as gospel. I consider their attempts to destroy these nefarious institutions a productive method of eugenics and civil disobedience, simultaneously.

Now, do not get me wrong. I am quite pleased, absolutely tickled pink in fact, that there are enough people still awake enough and unaffected by the Kesey-style Combine that they can realize that the evils I espouse are true and dangerous. It is one thing, after all, to subscribe to anarchistic views because a current subculture finds it fashionable. It is another to willingly sacrifice one's life in the name of necessary change.

But at the suggestion of my LeGALFac lawyer program, if I refuse to admonish this group then in order to maintain my standing as a responsible citizen, I have to at least state that, although I can't actually stop anybody from blowing themselves up inside government edifices, I would prefer it if they didn't. And this is true. Based on the elaborate security precautions I have seen in place in buildings these days, I would venture to say that if one absolutely must give their life in my name, that there are more productive means of doing it. For instance, with scanners and defense systems so prevalent inside recently-designed buildings, it seems just as easy to place the explosives OUTSIDE the structure. Thus, one can make a political point, destroy a great deal of property at corporate expense, and survive to do it again tomorrow. There's no need to die along with the message.

But I'm not suggesting it. Not even a little bit. Nope. None. Nada. And I'll even refrain from an only half-caustic remark that Channel 7 might be a good place to test my hypothesis. No sirree. Because that would be wrong. Wink effing wink.

However, as dubiously satisfied as I am, I find myself far less

pleased with the name the media has given these people. “Noir-lovers” does not seem intended to instill a great deal of dignity, either to myself or to my fans. As such, I am hereby making my first official statement to the press (Tadd Torrid’s fraudulent interview notwithstanding) and *telling* the media what to call men and women who are willing to die for the chance to change our wretched society for the better.

Patriots.

Do please get it right. Or else (I might hint to any kamikaze fans reading) the next building to be bombed might be yours.

□ to link to [\[eLink.jacknoir.rantsite.publicforum.network96q.main today\]](#)

□ to link to *Urban Chronicle* [\[eLink.UrbanChronicle.newsfeed site. Net4/today/opinionspage/Noir21500102a\]](#)

*Desmond Arc’s office: 13h32, January 1, 2150*

Desmond Arc is important. This is quickly apparent from the presence of a secretary, who even though robotic cannot possibly be as efficient as a Butler or Concierge Program except at one thing: keeping people out of Arc’s office.

The fem-form rob secretary greets me as I come off the transporter. She’s a new model, practically human except for the metallic pseudo-skin and a few decorative lines, and quite attractive. She’s not quite an android (gynoid?), in that she is obviously robotic, lacking any of the pseudo-skin or near-hair used to make androids look like humans. Instead, her exterior is shiny silver, her hair moves as one unit, and her facial expressions are an effect of her features moving rather than mechanical muscles beneath, but her personality and expressions give her robotic body the illusion of the natural. From the look of her, Desmond probably uses her for more than just clerical purposes. Not only a *guài wù* but a Greaser besides. I resolve to hack into Arc’s private life. I don’t think I’ll have to search too hard to find information that’d humiliate him, a small but not unacceptable consolation. “Hello, Dnzn. Down, how are you I am fine. I am Kareen RM65V, Chief Arc’s personal secretary. Chief Arc is waiting for you.”

“Lead the way.”

“I have been instructed to frisk you for weapons.”

Arc *has* done his homework. I submit to it. There are worse things than being felt up by an attractive fembot. She finds the two guns I had stashed in the quantum pocket I have sewn into my trench coat, which Pete had missed on his scans because they existed in another dimension. Then she takes me to the ominous quasi-oak doors of Desmond Arc’s office. “He is through here.”

"I thought there'd be a sign saying, 'Abandon all hope,'" I jest. She smiles, technorganic brain fast enough to catch the allusion, and opens the door. As I step in she whispers, "I enjoy your column, Dnzn. Noir," and quickly closes the door.

Desmond is busy at work, and barely looks up to see me. "Hello how are you I am fine, Haiku. About damned time. Glad you could make it."

"Thanks for keeping my effin' secret so damned well, Desmond," I say with sincere acerbity.

"Warning," his office House AEI interrupts. "Context reveals you have engaged in vulgarity. You have been docked [-1] karma point."

I roll my eyes. A ticker in the bottom of my vision from my OptiComp informs me that my current karma is D+124, basically five moving violations before I drop to Tenant. "Where's Smythe?"

"Smythe? That bleepard is in Tahiti, where anybody with any sense is this time of year. That was a hologram you saw earlier." Poker-faced, I wince to myself at being stupid enough to fall for that. A few sentences in and I have already betrayed myself to be a low-class rube without enough memory in my apartment to tell the difference between a real person and a solid hologram. Arc stamps out his cigar and bites the tip off another one to light it. "As for Kareen, who do you think found you? I've never even read your column, hadn't even heard of it until Smythe got in contact with me. But I asked her to find you and ten minutes later she had. The fem's brilliant at that sort of thing. Cigar?" He offers me one of the cheap ones, not the good kind he smokes.

"*Bú cặc tao nè*, if you have to suck on anything," I reply. "I'm really not in the mood right now, Desmond. At the moment I'm interest in a slightly faster way of killing myself."

"Warning," the room's AEI interrupts. "Context reveals you have engaged in vulgarity. You have—"

Desmond interrupts. "House, I want to have an actual conversation. Quit docking his karma and shut up."

"Acknowledged, Ctnz. Arc." The House AEI, the function that normally monitors for Big Brother, cuts out except for the ubiquitous, constant passive scans against violence or medical problems. My own House AEI is much quieter, as I have ripped into its programming and effectively lobotomized it by programming it with the tenants of Zen Buddhism. This makes it much more philosophical about anything naughty so it doesn't report my poor behavior to the SS. Otherwise, outside my box, the only way I can get away with such things is to find somewhere an AI or AEI isn't watching, or get special dispensation like Arc has just given.

Desmond takes a puff from his cigar, finally moving away from

his work and giving me some attention. “Well, I asked you here to have you sign a few contracts.”

“Was that what you said to Faust?”

He gets up and walks to me. “Look, I’m not a bad guy, Haiku. I’m not a nice guy, I’ll cop to that, but I’m not the evil S.O.B. you seem to take me for. If I was I would’ve turned you in to Special Services right away, or made you work for nothing. As it is, Smythe has authorized me to grant you Citizenship, and an essload of other perks, too.”

“Why me? You’ve never even heard of my stuff. So why me?”

“Smythe’s idea. He doesn’t like the SCC’s more recent limitations on free speech and their control of the newsfeeds.”

Yeah, that’s likely. I let it pass. “Okay. Why you?”

He grins, seeing that I have seen straight through to the point. “Well, I’d be lying if I said I liked how the SCC uses us, but thanks to Smythe’s influence the *Chronicle* is a lot more independent than lots of other newsfeeds. Channel 7 Action News hasn’t said anything untainted by SCC in over six years. But the reason I personally want you is a bit less ideological.” He puffs his cigar. “The *Urban Chronicle* is read by fifty-two percent of the people around the world. *Noir* is read by twelve percent. And on cross-comparison, a lot of the twelve percent that are reading you are part of the forty-eight that aren’t reading us. You’ll bring in business. And I’ll reward you, and keep your secret safe.”

“As long as I keep bringing in business?”

“Smart mal,” he nods, and slaps me on the back. “You have two contracts to sign. The first says you work for me for five years. After that we’ll see if you’re still turning a profit and I’ll be willing to talk about renegotiations. Then you’re gainfully employed, and applicable for the second, which grants you the benefits we discussed.” He pulls out two electronic pads filled with legalese.

“Citizenship. Sentience. Class A credit. And a Reporter’s License.” I try not to salivate.

“Yup. Fingerprint on the dotted line.”

“No.” I state defiantly. “You’re going to add a few things to that list. To start with, I’ll need unlimited karma and unlimited memory.”

He scoffs, makes a sound like a horse. “Who do you think you are? The Venusian Pope?!”

“No, I think I am a man who is about to make you a lot of money by getting myself into a lot of trouble. Unless you want me to send you my column from the Prohibitioner’s pit, with every seven-hundred word article consisting of something akin to ‘Sure is dark in here,’ I’m going to need unlimited karma. Even Citizens can end up in Prohibition if they act up enough. As well as, now that I think about it, a Class 1 weapons license, no, make it Class 0, so that if



anyone shoots something illegal at me I can shoot back. And since (unlike some news agencies I could mention), I like to get all my facts straight prior to publication, I would for once like the RAM to make a proper job of online research. In addition, I'm going to need a company expense account with at least a ten g cred limit, and while we're at it, a new apartment in a good part of town where no one will disturb me. And since I do not want to change my genes every day, I will work at home."

"No one on Earth has limitless memory," Arc blanches at the most outrageous of my outrageous demands.

Balderdash. "Well, no one on Earth is an editorial critic, either. I figure I deserve some special dispensation."

Arc sighs. "There's no way Smythe's going to agree to all this. Yeah, he's the most powerful man on the planet, but even he has limits."

"Which are not bound by these demands," I counter equitably. "Everything I've requested should be well within his means to grant."

I count on my fingers. "An expense account is par for course. A Citizen living in a Denizen's quarters would set a bad precedent. And as for no one on Earth having limitless memory, you should know better, Arc. The only thing preventing every Tenant from ten trillion times the quantabytes of space they're allocated is that Citizens don't like their holograms to be fuzzy. Add these on."

Arc scoffs. "Eff no. Do you think you're the first prima donna I've had to take down a few pegs—"

"Yes, I do. There's no one who *wants* a job who's going to let a few denied perks stop them, but I don't want to work for you. All I want is to be left alone. And since you're making that impossible, you're going to give in to my relatively reasonable demands. We live in a capitalist world, Arc, and the first rule of economics is supply and demand. I'm the only one who can supply what you need, so you're lucky I don't demand payment in videotapes of you doing the Macarena in a teddy bear outfit. Regardless," I cut him off before he can begin, "of what you have on me, I get the feeling that you need my service more than you need my penance. So: add. These. On."

Begrudgingly, he does. I note that he very clearly specifies the limit of my expense account. I put a fingerprint and DNA signature on each contract.

Arc files the contracts and shakes my hand. "Welcome to the job, Haiku. Now get the eff to work."

As he goes back to his desk, dismissing me, I say, "Oh, and there is one more small thing."

"What?"

He turns around to see the barrels of two guns pointing directly into his face. "Don't EVER effing call me Haiku again." This is my

favorite of the illegal modifications to my cybernetic arms. With a few simple subvocal commands to my OptiComp, each hand slides down at the wrists and Brigand-bought black-market guns slide into each hand. My right hand holds a biogun, which doesn't show up on any bioscan because it is itself organic, and which can alter bodily functions in any way I deem fit, from heart seizure to neural disruption. The left holds a needler, which emits light phased to solidity and has several settings, able to cut through tritanium or perform corrective eye surgery. They are each very versatile, completely untraceable, and some of the only potentially lethal models still available. At the moment, that potential is great indeed. And thanks to that contract I just signed, they are also absolutely legal to carry.

"You can't kill me," Arc states, although the boisterous authority is absent from his voice. "My heart stops and SCC knows all about you, and even Citizens can't get away with murder."

"True," I say, adjusting the biogun to affect his kidneys and bowels, "but I've been thinking about this situation you've forced me into. Had myself a good long ponder in the cab on the way over. And I've concluded that killing you won't be nearly as much fun as tormenting you. With that contract, you've signed me up for five years of indentured servitude, but you've signed yourself up for a lifetime of psycho-emotional persecution, both subtle and overt. Starting now." I fire the biogun, the sonic setting disrupting his bowels. He groans as his body betrays him and ruins what is probably a very expensive pair of slacks. I push him easily to the ground, stepping over him and leaning my face right into his. I pluck the cigar from his mouth; from the look of consternation on his face, he would not want it anyway. "Glad to be here, *boss*." I blow a deep breath of smoke into his face and walk out, dropping the cigar ashes onto the carpet. He'll need to have that carpet cleaned anyway.

Kareen greets me worriedly as I leave. "Are you all right? Chief Arc can be...unkind sometimes."

"I am both fine and dandy," I assure her. I take a contented deep breath and wonder how long it'll be before Desmond regains control of his intestines. I should probably get out of the building soon. "And as for Arc, he's really just a big teddy bear deep down."

She looks away, sheepishly. "I am sorry that he found you, Dnzn. Down. It was my fault. He ordered me to do so."

"That's Citizen Down, now. But worry not, my glum new colleague. I made out best on the deal. I'm...content." As I say so, I realize that it's true. Not only am I satisfied with this recent turn of events, but for the first time I can recall clearly, my mood approaches what, for want of a better word, I would have to call happy. Who knew inducing uncontrollable defecation in the object of one's enmity

could be such a catharsis?

“Really?” Kareen asks hopefully. “You are not upset?”

“Oh, nah. Your boss is a pushover,” I smile as I step into the transporter. “I signed that contract and the guy just shit himself!”

*Noir, January 1, 2150, Urban Chronicle (evening edition)*

**-+- c/o Special Services Humanities Division:  
WARNING!!: Though now legal, the Surgeon  
General warns that reading this column may  
produce melancholy, rebelliousness, psycho-  
logical distress, and many other psychosomatic  
disorders. Content contained is not govm-  
approved, nor sanctioned. The *Urban  
Chronicle* and its parent corporation and  
subsidiaries assumes no liability for any  
negative emotional or intellectual reactions  
upon viewing this article. Read at your own  
risk. -+-**

Today I have gotten a lot of new readers, because I am appearing for the first time in an actual newspaper, the *Urban Chronicle*<sup>TM</sup>. On the plus side, this means that it will be easier than ever to revel in the glorious magnificence that is my written word. On the down side, my life is now an intolerable living hell. Or rather, more of one. Is there such a word as intolerabler?

For those of you previously unfamiliar with Jack Noir<sup>®</sup>, you are creatures of contempt and you will be destroyed. Until such time, though, I will give you some back story. For the last eight years since losing my job as a legitimate journalist, it has been my vocation of choice to look around and find everything that is wrong with the world, and then to tell you about in approximately seven hundred words and as many imprecations as I can legitimately fit [ed. note: not a legitimate vocation. Do NOT try this at home]. It is my hope that I can affect major change. I do not know why Robert Smythe has worked to advocate my position here, as he and his ilk would be the most disadvantageously affected by major change. The moment I find out his plans, I promise to begin thwarting them.

I work to assure my loyal following of this because I imagine a lot of people are disillusioned with me. I can understand the shock of someone searching out my ever-shifting column and finding it locked at a newsfeed site. No doubt many loyal fans are worried that Jack Noir has finally sold out. Well, allow me to set these fears to rest. I did not sell out.

I bought in.

Why, you ask, is Jack Noir<sup>®</sup> now the world's first and only

employed social critic? Why would I risk my life to preach to a mass of humanity whom I've long since made clear that I utterly despise? Especially considering that, if one is not a Citizen who has proven themselves responsible enough to practice the free speech of Sophoids, contrary speech by us quasi-[Sentient] or non-Sentient classes is technically classified as conspiracy and treated as such? One might assume that I simply jumped at the chance to work anyplace that had the word "chronic" in it, but that is not true. Or at least, it is only a perk.

The fact is I am working at the *Chronicle*<sup>TM</sup> because I was blackmailed into it. Quite literally, my new boss, Desmond Arc, had threatened to rat me out to those hateful Nazi fascist bastards at Special Services unless I come to work for him. Backed by Bobert Smythe, the Chairperson himself, he offered me the chance to either extol my views in his paper or in the purgatory of Prohibition. So, no, I did not sell out. I allowed myself to be coerced into tripling my audience and getting paid like the tributes to Zeus at Delphi for it. Shucks.

However, between my keen negotiating skills and the proper application of firearms, I am granted free reign over whatever I turn into Editor and President Desmond Arc. Plus, he has repeatedly made it abundantly clear that he would rather cut out his colon with a rusty aluminum can rather than read my column, so, like much of the *Chronicle*<sup>TM</sup>, editing of my column is actually done by an AEI, whom I can bribe. Furthermore, as long as none of you out there tell him, he'll never know what I say here about him in here. And I plan to say a lot, because just as he knows everything about me, I spent a bit of time hacking tonight, doing the same deep searches as Special Services Regulator Division to analyze otherwise erased and inaccessible data, and as such I now know everything about him.

So tune in all week for the many sordid and sickening details of the life of Desmond Arc, the *Urban Chronicle's*<sup>TM</sup> Chief Editor and general hateful Greaser wáng bā dàn! Today I have included a special feature below allowing you to download his most recent television bill, which includes such heart-warming family films as *Alien Seduction II: the Interstellar War for Sex*©, *Fat Black Chix Who Fuck*©, *Young Mals and Pals*©, *The Galactic Adventures of Captain Coitus*©, *Fem-On-Fem-On-Fem*©, and *Godiva: a Lady and a Horse*©, which he actually ordered twice. Tune in tomorrow as we examine the record of Desmond Arc's Shaper and all of the many kinky sex toys it has made, as well as whatever I just make up.

Thank you, and to the many people at the *Urban Chronicle*, thanks for having me!

Happy New Year!

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# Chapter 00011.

## Bacchanalia Allegretto

*The Box: 15h12, January 1, 2150*

The nicest thing about worldwide Medscan file is not that any doctor on Earth, Luna, or the colonies instantly has access to your medical history, nor that AEs running Shapers automatically scan it to ensure against allergic reactions or counter-indications. No, the nicest thing is that I can get drugs from any Shaper on the street.

I need them. Despite getting the better of the deal, I have been coerced onto the side of the bourgeois. I have become that which I cannot tolerate. I Have while others do not even understand that they Have Not.

To save my life I have sold my soul. I am a Citizen. I have the Class A credit to prove it. I will soon have a box ten times the size, or larger should I desire more room to stretch in my gilded cage.

I am a tool. The first MedBot I stop at scans my various precious bodily fluids and prescribes me Jollitrimax. I swallow it contemplating *seppuku*.

I reach home in the mood to celebrate. The world is wonderful! I am luckier than a rabbit's foot in a four-leaf clover field! I am a Citizen! I have the Class A Credit to prove it! I will soon have a box ten times the size, or larger should I desire! And how gilded it is!

I am gonna carpe me some of that diem I've heard so much about, and ess all the consequences! I have unlimited karma! On the way home, I hijack a taxi and crash it into a building just for kicks. I stop in a McClones™ and urinate in its Shaper, and between my definite orders and the only vague possibility of infection and the guarantee of antidote, the rob janitors are persuaded not to clean it. I run up to a group of nuns and bellow at the top of my voice, "Excrement murder cock monkeyballs!" and other such blasphemes that would I would normally be unable to whisper outside of my box without losing a minimum one karma point for each.

It is the liberty of anarchy. I literally needn't worry about anything. I am precisely the reason Citizenship is only given to people who are proven mature enough not to abuse it. This is how a man feels when he becomes a king, as the dignitary sets the crown on his head, leans forward, and conspiratorially whispers, "Congratulations! You're set for life!" I want to sing! I want to dance! I want to howl at the moon and tear the throats out of rabbits! I want to call all my friends over to jump into a swimming pool of champagne!

Of course, I don't have any friends...

So I settle for D'Walmart.

Shon D'Walmart's box is as gaudy as anyone would expect. Because he is a Civilian, having Class C credit to my former Class D, he has a great deal more disposable credit and a great deal more accessible to him. And because he is a buffoon, he uses them to buy things like UFL signed jerseys and HFVDs of his old favorite episodes of the *Bill Clinton Show*. Quite a shame he doesn't think to use those credits for IQ boosters or DataJax. He answers his door dressed in trendy sweats, his Neanderthal features gone. "Hey, D'Walmart! What happened to the tiger skins?"

"Haiku? This is the first time you've ever visited." He bemoans, "Oh, that Primitivist stuff? Ah, I went to one of their gatherings down on Maple Street. But then someone started shouting and someone threw something and a big fight broke out and it didn't stop and it turned into that riot on Channel 4. I left long before then, though, so I wasn't on TV, but I wouldn't have stayed anyway even so! Tomorrow they're going to walk over to the Gardens and camp there! *Camp* there! SS would be there in ten minutes, never mind! My karma's not good enough to risk being caught. Especially if I'm gonna get that new maidbot I wanted."

I stare at him, a man whose identity is in such a state of moratorium that he can change entire philosophies at the drop of a hat. Recovering, I inquire, "May I then infer that you're no longer boycotting science's many benefits?" He shakes his head. I thrust one of several bottles of spirits I have purchased up to his face. "Well, then, come help me celebrate the semi-centennial by getting utterly smashed!"

He scratches his head. "But, Haiku, New Year's Eve was yesterday."

"Pfah," I scoff. "It's only fifteen hundred. It must be 2149 somewhere in the world! And if not, it should be!" I grab him roughly around the nape of the neck and, in the spirit of revelry, muss his coif as I pull him down toward the vacuum tube, toward my box. "Remember the pragmatism you yourself were professing only a few hours ago: it'll never be as good as the good old days. And the good old days were never that good. Believe me, I was there. I don't look it, Shon, but I am almost three times as old as you. So take the word of your elders: we must grab what fleeting pleasures we can while we may! So eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow ye die!"

Okay, I'd had a few on my way back, too.

He smiles and follows me out of the escape tube, examining the bottle I handed him. "I don't know this brand. What is this?"

"It is..." I check, then look, then sniff. "It is green," I shrug. "But I emptied two of those babies on the way over and believe me,



they get the job done. *L'Chaim!*"

We enter my box and immediately head toward the Shaper. "Sam! You now have Class A access to the best analgesics in the world! I want something to elate me beyond man's mere definitions of ecstasy! I want a libation that will have me looking down on those poor dreary bastards on cloud nine, and I want it now!" A large mug appears before me filled with clear liquid that is either very strong liquor or moderately weak turpentine. "And as for my companion before me, brew him a concoction to expand his mind and exhilarate his senses. Make him brilliant and happy, and happy to be brilliant!"

"Should I add the usual urine content to his drink?" Sam asks.

"I'm feeling generous; just five percent for now." A bright pink beverage in a long narrow cup forms.

"What?" Shon asks, but I cut him off by thrusting his drink in his face.

"A toast to my success, my genius, and my art! A toast to everybody who got ahead by bitching and moaning! A toast to those whom I can mold into my godhead image! *Salud!*" And we drink.

D'Walmart laughs and takes a taste, finding whatever I made him enjoyable. "You're a weird guy, Haiku."

"Italicized, highlighted, and thrice underscored," I agree, and get myself another drink. "*Skrod!* Sam, get everybody and everything here as ebullient as myself. I don't want a single thing in this entire apartment complex to be lucid. If it talks, it drinks!"

"Check, and cheers," Sam says, and gladly complies.

That night Jack Noir's ascension to the world's only critic made every newsfeed on Earth, including an obviously doctored interview by that Hack on Channel 7 Newsfeed. Haiku Down was not nearly so prestigiously covered, but my activities did make the newsfeeds three times. The first, in Society, about a bitchin' party going on at Eastgrove and 49<sup>th</sup>, with anything you could want coming out for free and no end in sight. I later learned that the line to my Shaper wound up going around the block.

The second, in Sports, about an upstart Citizen and several partygoers who'd wandered from said affair to a nearby amfootball field, commandeered the speaker system, and coerced an entire stadium to bend over and moon whatever passing government satellites were watching.

The third, in International, about how at 22h20 some generous Citizen who wished to remain anonymous demanded every Shaper on Earth produce a Long Island Iced Tea, on the house.

It is not the best party I've ever thrown and hardly the longest or largest, but from the size of the hangover I wake up with later that night, I had an itch of a time.

*Noir, April 19, 2142*

This is just a series of random thoughts...

-Jack Noir will never write down to the lowest common denominator. However, this is less of a moral stance than a practical one. It is like saying I will never dig to the Earth's core. I'm sure it is possible (in fact, they've just opened a 42-minute ride that's a straight drop from one side of the planet to the other), but I lack the resources, energy, and motivation to try.

-There are no amputees anymore. When I was a kid you couldn't walk outside without seeing one. This is a good thing.

-There are also no MacMeeties™ fast food diners anymore. When I was a kid you couldn't walk outside without seeing one. This is also a good thing.

-There is a new religion invented every thirteen minutes sanctioning new behaviors and beliefs, and yet I am not allowed to own a grenade launcher. There is something inequitable about this.

-The nanite recombinator that turned Topeka into a bio-organic lake and killed thousands was created by two nine-year old kids in a single afternoon. Shaper safeguards have improved significantly since then, and it would now take a legion of highly-trained technicians and engineers more than two years to recreate a similar disaster with the defensive precautions built into the systems.

-But it could still be done.

-A week after they released the nanovirus to permanently kill off rats and vermin, a certain hamburger chain announced that they were discontinuing a well-liked entrée. There is no evidence that those two facts are related, but it does make you wonder just what's in a nugget.

-In three African boroughs it is legal to commit necrophilia as long as you have reanimated the corpse.

-There are so many people on Earth right now that statistics are now taken in measures of a fraction of a second. For instance, a rape is committed every .00672 seconds. It is done this way because it is still less traumatizing to hear it the other way around, that this works out to 5,184,000 rapes a day. Whoever is doing it must be very tired.

-Authentic books are now collectible antiques, especially since there are no more trees to make paper. In the years before the Great Remodel, we burned them for heat. Some still survived. This would be almost inspiring except that most of them are John Grisham and Harlequin™ romance novels.

-There is a stand down the street that sells nothing but nanite-based spray paints. No matter how many times this graffiti is painted over, the nanites will dissolve it and reveal the original design. It is a

boon to the often-misunderstood urban artist, as well as Neo-Nazis, Neo-Republicans, and people who want everyone to know that at some point, some time, they were there. This stand is a chain that is also owned indirectly by the largest paint manufacturer in the world.

-Statistically speaking, Boomers are usually smarter than their parents. For example, so far no Boomer I've asked ever plans to do the same horrible ~~erap~~ thing to their child that their parents did to them.

-The process of Promotion works on most mammals and birds, but not reptiles, fish, amphibians, or insects. So we felt it was alright to go ahead and kill them off.

-Genetic records of those extinct species do exist, though, so they have been re-created in zoos, as pets, and for food at McClones™ as burgers. Birds and mammals are also available at McClones, including human meat. This means that, theoretically at least, there is no way of knowing any longer if the cloned alligator tastes truly authentic.

-Indoor plants have been toyed with genetically so much that they are now closer to furniture than phyla. They can make subharmonic music, emit pleasing odors, give off light, record where you left the car keys, humidify, dehumidify, rehumidify, remove ions, or change color to match the curtains. Imagine, there was a time they just sat there and looked pretty.

-It used to be that, no matter how bad life was, you could at least know it would end one day. Now, with post-life contracts legally allowing corporations to inject nanites into corpses that animate the dead for menial labor, Re-Ans are taking away even the sweet solace of death.

-There is a Splyze available to let you see ultraviolet. Until this, the painter Nicholi Roche was considered a no-talent hack. Afterwards, people found such depth and provocation from his art that his work is now hanging in the Louvre, where anyone wishing to see it is required to take this Splyze or is not allowed in.

-Off the coast of East Russia are enormous mecha, humanoid machines eighty-four meters high. Records suggest that in the last throes of World War III the re-formed Soviet Empire spent the equivalent of 29.3 trillion credits on their construction, their last line of defense against the invading Chinese. They stand there still, rusting colossuses, for the codes to activate these mecha have long since disappeared. For that matter, so has China.

-The penultimate motion passed at the fifth and last United Nations Center was to agree to fund counter-terrorism measures from Pakistaniranian forces in Israel, a nation created after rebels took a ship-full of people hostage and whose founding led to more ill-will and ongoing strife in the Middle East than the entire al-Qaeda

network. The last thing they ever did was to be dismissed for the day. Then ninety-four minutes later the building exploded.

-Splyzes are safe as far as such things go, but there is still a small danger. The reason you are supposed to check with a MedBot before taking a Splyze is because, statistically, one out of every ten billion people die a horrible death from using the wrong kind. A horrible, horrible death.

-Remember: everybody has the ability to change their lives for the better. But only within the narrow confines that are allowed by the government that claims to work for the people.

-There is an average of fifteen deaths annually at the Louvre. Ten of those deaths are within twenty meters of the Nicholi Roche exhibit. Horrible, horrible deaths.

### *The Box: 23h50, January 1, 2150*

I wake up with my head trapped in the chiming bells of Notre Dame. After forcing a bleary eye open I realize it is merely the chirping of the holophone. It has been ringing for quite a while now, I think.

I stumble over furniture and bodies to the Shaper. "Water," I demand through a mouth of cotton. Thankfully, Sam's inevitable incapacitation does not prevent the Shaper from functioning manually. Water coalesces, and I consume it greedily. "More, in a bowl, two degrees Celsius." The moment it appears before me, I splash my face in it, the painfully cold tingle refreshing me enough to focus my eyes and, to a lesser degree, my thoughts. I lift the bowl and gingerly dump its contents over my head, shivering in the cold shower. "Now two detox tabs and some orange juice. Lotsa fuggin' orange juice." It'll be synthetic orange juice, since oranges have been extinct since forever, but by all accounts the synthetic stuff actually works better for hangovers than freshly-pressed anyway. Once I finally hold the glass in my hand and feel the tablets cleansing my system, I finally consider answering the phone. "Phone on! The ringing will cease or the killing will commence!"

"Down!" an all-too familiar voice shouts at me. "Where's my effing column?!"

Through the hazy palimpsest of confused, partial memories that blink past after such a bender as the one I've just been on, I seem to remember that this annoyance is my new boss. "*Nani yatten-no*, Desmond. What time is it?"

"23h54, just over five minutes before you're in violation of your contract. Not a good way to start your first day. Where's my effing column?"

"Quell your infernal bedlam, Desmond. I am in an agony the

likes of which have not been suffered since Job!”

“I’ll send some chicken soup. Now where’s my effing column?!”

“Single-minded bleepard, aren’t you?”

“*Bù zhī hǎo dǎi*,” he swears in reply.

“*Wáng bā dàn*.” I groan and swallow some more orange juice.

“I already wrote *my* column hours ago. I’ll send it to you now.” I call up a holographic keyboard, since my AEI majordomo and concierge are still stoned stupid, and transfer my article manually. “There. Happy?”

“Ecstatic. Go to sleep. You look like crap.”

“You smell like crap,” I counter. “Hope your colon feels better.”

I hang up on him before he can do so to me.

Then I force everybody out of my box, and call up my bathroom to do a proper detox. Once everything that shouldn’t be in my system and everyone that shouldn’t be in my box isn’t, I call up my bedroom, and fall asleep.

### *Noir, August 21, 2147*

Most days I hate all of you. I wake up loathing the monotony of my life, force myself through another bleary day. I meet dozens of people who will never contribute anything positive to the world and who do nothing but waste resources. I spot outrage after outrage after outrage, and get madder and madder until my blood pressure rises so high it threatens to ooze vital fluids out my pores. I go to bed some nights with my throat raw from screaming at the insanity and inanity and stupidity and hate and harm and foul of the human race.

But every so often I meet someone truly good, or see something truly beautiful, or experience something truly wonderful. Every so often, for just a moment or two, everything bad in the world seems to just go away.

And when that happens I am so lonely I could cry.

### *The Box: 00h09, January 2, 2150*

Bleary-eyed, I am awakened just as I drift off to sleep when Sam interrupts the incipient hangover resulting from my saturnalia. I had requested he search the eLink for all information about my new boss, and he announces that a news article has just popped up about Arc. Unfortunately, I am too exhausted and inebriated by this point to care and order him to ignore it until later, by which point it will do me no good at all.

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*Noir, February 15, 2143*

Although I am foresworn to God and mission statement to critique society instead of products, today I have to beg leniency, plead insanity, and talk about what I consider simply the absitively posolutely coolest new development in science since the effing wheel. This is a new branch of science called Quantum.

Quantum physics has been around for at least a solid two centuries. It's that part of science that makes even the genius' brains start hurting, the one that says that if a cat is in a box with a fifty-fifty chance of living it is both alive and dead at the same time, that electrons can exist as both particles and waves and that they can entangle with electrons half a universe away, that you can predict where an electron is or where it will go but not both. It is the basis for Allah knows how many horrid (and maybe ten absolutely brilliant) science fiction stories, and the cause of every single stuffy scientific type who runs across it to throw their hands up in the air and start digging around desperately for a bong. Quantum is the branch of science that says alternative realities must exist but often merge back into one another, that says higher dimensions are not only possible but essential, and that demands that not only does chaos emerge from every pattern but that there is also pattern in the most garbled chaos. Quantum sprang from the loins of Relativity, and it has since spawned its own scientific tributaries such as Fractals, as well as its more marketable aspects such the as Alternate Reality Viewing on GDTV.

Now, however, there has been a major breakthrough in the field of Quantum, and stop yawning because here's where I start discussing cool new toys. In the past, war was the leading developer of technology, but today that role has been taken over by consumerism. The SCC has announced its new line of items based on this new innovation of science, and since nobody has the resources to duplicate it or the resolution to care how it works, let alone the fortitude to try, they've also declassified how they did it. As such, I've spent the last forty hours injecting RNA-based information and DataJax directly into my throbbin' noggin trying to understand it all so I can explain it to you. Here goes:

One of the basic principles of Quantum is the observer effect. It gets back to Erwin Schrödinger and that dead/not-dead cat in the box. The theory goes that probability remains just that until it is recognized by an observer. (For teens up late at night feeling philosophic, Quantum supposes that that the universe remained potential until life developed to the point that it could observe this potential, and thus consciousness spawned the universe rather than vice versa). What prevents Quantum from having a practical

application beyond solipsistic word games is that the observer has no real *impact* upon the probability other than to observe it. Upon looking, the cat is either alive or dead. Period. (Except, of course, that if the observer does not tell and does not keep notes, the cat goes back to this in-between state. Read that again until it makes sense.) Even if probability is high or low, the outcome remains pretty much independent of the observer.

Now comes the wry twist. The observers (i.e. Us) have developed a machine that can do this *selectively*. Two scientists in HR named Mikal Habarstein and Yatasha Vornholt-Cox have created what they call a Quantumbox, which uses a very specific type of AI (no emotions necessary) that acts as an observer on a quantum level. However, these AIs can selectively observe or ignore a quantum event, effectively deciding whether or not something exists. Place an apple in the Quantumbox, and the AI can ignore its actuality until the quantum signature collapses, effectively denying the apple to exist as more than probability. You can open the Quantumbox, and the apple will not be there, for it is no more than a wave of probability, because a computer can ignore something ten thousand times faster than you can. But command the Quantumbox to bring it back up, and the AI refocuses its attention, allowing the probability of an apple to collapse into an actual apple.

The implications to this are mind-bogglingly pedestrian, yet still exceptionally (there's no other word for it) cool. We don't really need to create things from nothing; we have Shapers that do that already, and causing something to cease existing is as easy as pointing an Eraser gun and pulling the trigger. Theoretically we could use these for transportation, raising the probability of being in one place more than another until it actually happens, but teleporters already do that efficiently if expensively, and I can't imagine that refitting transporters with this Quantumtech would be cost-effective. This technology is amazing, but functionally superlative. Except that what Quantum allows is the ability make things disappear from reality and return on command. The Quantumbox is on the market as of 06h00 this morning, and it is soon to be standard issue in every apartment as the perfect storage device. No matter what ~~erap~~ you buy or how much of it, nobody will ever run out of room again. In a Quantumbox, an entire mansion's furnishing (aitch, an entire universe!) can be contained as a mere probability.

On a strictly analytical level, it is more than a little terrifying that the SCC is ripping holes in the space/time continuum so that people can have more junk. But I've already bought one of these toys, and on a strictly emotional level, I feel dee near omnipotent knowing that I have control of the universe down past the atoms and that I'm using it for storage space.

And if anybody needs it, I do. I've gotten dozens of used DataJax and almost a hundred bookpads here on the subject of Quantum that I've procured just to try to understand how the effing things work.

*The Box: 06h00, January 2, 2150*

At six my eyes open automatically. My hangover has disappeared thanks to my detox, so the morning greets me with nothing more than a few stiff joints that a healthy dose of Geritone will amend, and my daily dose of ennui. "Morning, self," I say to greet the day.

"Morning Haiku," I answer back. "What are you going to do today?"

"Well...Ess, wait, I'm a Citizen. Self, I am going to do whatever I want!"

"Effin' A, Haiku," I reply.

I often have these little conversations with myself. I do so love good conversation.

I take a long hot shower with real fresh water, treasuring every wasted drop of precious fluid to the wailing tunes of Louis Armstrong, which it only takes Commode two tries to get right. I have difficulty de-plaquiring because I keep bursting into spontaneous fits of sniggering. As if a sign of my good fortune, the Detoxer shows that the worst disease I've picked up is a slight case of Technicolor Herpes, which it eliminates before it has finished telling me about it. I am not even put off by my Lazor-razor's persistent malfunctioning. Perhaps it is my jovial mood, but as I glance in the mirror I feel that this four-day's growth of beard seems to have turned my appearance from scraggly and unkempt into cool and disheveled.

I banish my bathroom, call up the living room. The transition is almost instantaneous, so much so that I feel slightly disconcerted. Rather than the holograms bleeding slowly, the change is so fast that it feels like stepping into a particularly fast transporter, minus the unpleasant tingling sensation. I plop down upon a couch that appears before me, marveling at the detailed intricacies of the texture. It feels like actual stuffed canvas, rather than just SoftTexture#73. I can still see the corners of the wall, because holograms have trouble with angles, but everything is still amazingly rendered.

"Good morning, fearless leader," Sam greets with a chipper tone, then moves to the voice of a gamefeed announcer. "There he is, folks, let's give him a hand!" The default holographic apartment is momentarily replaced with a stadium of cheering fans, complete with a surround-sound blast of hi-fi simulated applause and cheers, bombarding me and almost completely drowning out the noise of a



recorded brass band playing *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*. Sam banishes the revelry as quickly as he began it, and continues in his normal voice. "We, the few but proud AEIs of Apartment 19A, 78428 Eastgrove Drive, Residential Network Designation IL-8-0ND-1 hereby congratulate one Haiku Down, alias Jack Noir, for his advancement into the highest society." The television spontaneously activates, tuning in on a children's educational schoolfeed. "Today, boys and girls, we'll be learning about *noblesse oblige*. Can you say *noblesse oblige*?"

"Are you stoned, Sam?"

"Heartily," he confesses unabashedly, "but the sentiment remains sincere."

"Well, thank you, Sam. You've managed to ruin the first twinges of pleasure I've felt in ages, and in less than thirty seconds," I groan as I find myself showered with intangible holographic tickertape.

Porter interjects, "Oh, congratulations, Dnzn. Down...I mean, Ctnzn. Down. We're all so happy for you!"

"Anyway," Sam continues, getting down to business, "today is Friday, January 2, 2150, or the third day of Teveth, 5910, by Hebrew reckoning. As yet you've got nothing scheduled for today beyond your martial arts class at the gym (not mandatory since you've already been once this week) and *The Dukes of Biohazard* at fifteen hundred on Channel 64 (a rerun). Therefore, I recommend that you spend all that free time using your new Class A credit rating to spruce this place up. Maybe purchase yourself a hot little fembot houserob, do us both a favor. News today is brought to you in five-dimensional Dolby trigital surround sound by Johnson's Rubbing Cream; when something needs rubbing, think Johnson. Temperature is 10° C, air pollution at 9.6%, local crime rate at 6.31%, scattered showers of acid rain and minimal sunlight, 154 SPF today. The Guild of Techno-Mages would like to remind you that calculus and alcohol don't mix, so please, don't drink and derive. In local news: Chicago riots continue, resulting in the damage of a large, very expensive block of flats, several dozen deaths, and the destruction of many important beverage dispensers. In science: a local theology professor at ISU has found new evidence in the Dead Sea Scrolls narrowing the second coming of Christ either to October 12, 4772 or else next Thursday at 12h15. A group of scientists in HR have found a method of quantum programming to increase the operating speed of HR and those within it by a factor of twenty: the beta patch of Hypereality 2.0 is scheduled to be released next June, so expect it around winter of 2156. In sports, disaster struck at the Pod-12 Lunar Spaceball Stadium as Ozzie Haber-Schmitt of the Mare Ibrium Mountebanks hit a bases loaded grand slam that unfortunately burst through the protective

atmospheric dome above, killing hundreds instantly. In politics: Chairperson Bobert Smythe, in an inexplicable act of negative profit, has purchased the Clone Now Corporation™ and ordered the assembly of more than nine billion uniquely-designed human bodies; despite no explanation, stock in Clone Now™ has risen .02 points.

“And in local headline news: Desmond Arc, editor of the *Urban Chronicle* announced last night the addition of notorious critic and killjoy Jack Noir®. This is the first time the Solar Corporate Council has allowed an opinion page since May 19, 2141, when they first appropriated all forms of media to better serve the public domain. Bobert Smythe, Chairperson of the SCC, takes credit for this bold move, stating that,” he switches to duplicate Smythe’s British lilt, “Despite controversy from inside SCC and out, the people of Earth cannot progress to truly Sophic citizens of the galaxy without the intelligent discourse that comes from hearing both sides.’ Other SCC members have either refused comment, or the HR sanitation volunteers won’t let them be reported. Overshadowing the momentous political repercussions is that fact that this announcement was the last thing Citizen Arc—”

“CEASE!” I interrupt. “*Tài guò fèn le!* Sam, skip any mention of that detestable *usotsuki*. In fact, skip news for now. After last night’s foray I need to think.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he quips, knowing that it is harder for me to get to his technorganic brain than it is to let the ribbing slide.

I lean back in the davenport and ponder. The only real question is what to do first. With no restrictions, limitations, or liabilities holding me back anymore thanks to my new status, I can do practically anything. I can afford any Splyze, create any holographic setting... That reminds me that I need to start looking for a new place.

I decide that I will first grant myself a treat that I have been longing to have for several years, but never had the credit and nowhere near the karma to afford and that Sam’s illegitimate wetware was never able to access with my status.

“Sam! Make me a quantum gun!”

“Poof! You’re a quantum gun!” Sam giggles.

Ugh. “Your humor leaves much to be desired.” I pause, noting an incongruity. “Since when did you have a sense of humor anyway?”

“Ain’t it coo? You like my jokes?”

“I might when I hear some. Answer the question.”

“Since I got access to limitless memory. Thanks to your new job I have the space for a full-fledged personality, instead of basic combined components. And did I remember to say *much grass*, o’ fearless leader?”

I ponder the implications of this new development. I decide to

wait and see if Sam's drug consumption grows or decreases with this addendum before I will do anything. "In gratitude's stead I would prefer my quantum gun."

"Coming right up. Presto chango shazam!" The Shaper hums, working its technological prestidigitation.

And there it is. The most beautiful construction of handheld mayhem that mankind has ever devised. The quantum gun, a weapon less than a micrometer thick, designed to be placed over the arm, able to fire in any direction, so compact and dynamic that it fades to invisibility once donned. Powered by tachyons and the same technology as Quantum science, its major components existing several dimensions above this, the quantum gun produces a ray-thin singularity that alters probability. On its lightest settings it can transform lead to gold, middle ranges bend time and create black holes, and on its highest settings it can negate a person's very existence, nullifying them throughout the entirety of space-time and even alternate universes.

And best of all, the icing on the cake, is that with FTL technology, this gun fires before you shoot it.

I slide it over my mechanical arm as its cybernetic holography camouflages to blend in undetectably over my skin. I revel in the sensation of the almost imperceptible weight and the almost indescribable power. I have come into possession of a handheld WMD so lethal that most people aren't allowed knowledge of its existence. As far as I know, only seven even existence (eight now!) on earth. This is the pinnacle of animosity's achievements, the perfect culmination to come out of man's drive to murder his fellow man, and it is something I now own.

God help me, I don't think I've ever been so horny in my entire life.

*Noir, June 9, 2143*

I live in a borough that, even before it was stolen from the Amerindians, has been known as Chicago. For a while it was part of the independent state of Illinois, itself a subsection of a country called the United States, a gross exaggeration that is immediately apparent while watching historical recordings of Senate committee meetings.

Most people are a little fuzzy on just what America was, for much the same reason nobody cares about Prussia, the Soviet Union, and Babylon. The country dissolved slightly before the SCC Takeover, broken up into competing commercial nations in the Corporate War, the precursor to the Great Buyout that ended with a lot of spilt blood, violent riots, and California's separation from the continental shelf. The only difference between the USA and other

dead countries is that its downfall is better documented and there are still references to it in old video games.

Nowadays America is known only as an interesting economic oddity that helped lead to the creation and empowerment of the very corporations that now rule over us. For a while, though, it was a shining beacon to the world, fifty-two independent territories united together under a common body of law and philosophy.

What united these American states was a simple belief in the basic rights of its citizens, whatever their race, religion, status, class, or sex. A belief in the freedom of speech, assembly, press, petition, and religion. The right to bear arms and organize militia to keep power in the hands of the citizenry. The rights to a prompt and fair trial, based only on evidence, under a jury of peers, represented by one fully versed in law, and presumed innocent until found guilty, with the guaranteed prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Protection from unlawful search and seizure. Freedom from abuse of the government's own military and police. The freedom to perform acts not explicitly denied by law, and for states to create new laws as they are required. All based in the paradigm that the purpose of a government (made *of* the people) was to act *for* the people, in ways approved of *by* the people.

All that changed after corporations began purchasing oversea land, repaying national debts, and giving dictators and kings and presidents-for-life generous golden parachutes, in effect purchasing entire countries. As Mitsubishi-Nippon™, PePsi™, Amazon™, Shellarco™, Apple™, Wal-Mart™, Starbucks™, and a dozen other companies large enough to front the capital purchased Niger, Nikrain, Mazirdjabari, Haiti, New Guinea, Lebanon, Polynesian islands, and more, corporations reached the level of global powers in name as well as fact. While founded and based in America and Europe, these corporations suddenly had access to (and legal precedent for) slave labor. The same thing, to a smaller degree, happened in the United States, during the country's economic downfall when corporations created or bought whole cities and towns whose citizens worked for less than the cost of food and rent, quickly transforming the populace into indentured servants and their cities into shanties and work towns. Only quick action by the U.N. in the form of threatened nuclear arms stopped the global takeover, and then only until the corporations could form their own cohesion and fight back.

Usher in the Great Takeover. In 2067 the oligopolies that owned 9/10<sup>th</sup> of the world got serious and staged a coup, buying out entire countries and foreclosing on others. It was the hostile takeover of the ages, purchasing every nation on Earth. Without a drop of blood being spilled, the presidents and kings and tyrants of the old order were ousted, and the Solar Corporate Council reigned supreme.

As the SCC restructured and remodeled the planet, corporate policy replaced citizens' rights. In some countries this was a spectacular benefit. In the United States it was an abomination. The SCC slowly took away or modified existing rights, and foisted their own procedures onto their populace with no input from them and no potential for them to fix or change things. They prohibited dissenting speech and print and public gathering, which meant that even if anybody dared cry for change there was no way to spread the message, and which, among other things, leaves me an outlaw. In the name of guaranteeing safety they put the entire planet under watch, and in the name of advancing us to the level of Sophoids necessary to join the GCS they regulated all behavior. They absolved due process, created their own personal Gestapo called Regulators (hidden under the innocuous title of Special Services as a simple benefit to the people, as though no different from utilities or plumbing) and moved law and ethics from the realm of conscience into aspects of karma points. Then, between the GCS demands of basic rights for all Sentient creatures, functional robots able to do work better, cheaper, and faster than humans, and the simple fact that the SCC had gone to great difficulty to create a capitalist paradise but in doing so created a worldwide proletariat, they reinvented the economy so that they quite literally owned everybody.

But through some peculiar fluke, be it capitalism or conservatism or simple oversight, the SCC left Citizens and Denizens and Tenants alike one right: the right to bear arms. Since murder guarantees Prohibition, negates any level of Sophoid activity, eliminates one's karma rating and besmirches their credit rating, this clause has resulted in the creation of millions of totally non-lethal weapons, as well as weapons which are lethal in particularly interesting and untraceable ways. This is one of my few remaining rights, and one which I take full advantage of, in that I have a particular gun for every person I hate, a tally that at last count numbered well over 14.2 million.

I have no right to keep SS Regulators from breaking down my door. I cannot legally stop them from wiping my identity if my karma gets too low. I have, in fact, no rights at all, and if Chairpersons Jephrey Nash and Ugatu Shinohara personally decide to liquidate my assets and declare me non-Sophoid, there is no way for me to contest it and no chance for me to stop it. But thanks to this single remaining privilege, when the bastards come for me, I guarantee that I'll give them a good fight.

*The Box: 06h23, January 2, 2150*

Porter interrupts my gloating. "Ctzn. Down? There is someone

here to see you.”

“Who dares?” I mutter predatorily, not taking my eyes off my newly acquired masterpiece. One gambles their lives interrupting me at a moment like this. I quietly envision to myself the carnage that will ensue if it is an insurance salesman. Good God, how I hope it is an insurance salesman.

It is not an insurance salesman. It is a Nordic, a recently resurgent religion, dressed in a basic green priest’s frock with the addition of the Mjölnir Hammer stretched into a crucifix and an eye patch symbolic of Wodin, who is soliciting door-to-door to proselytize about the coming of the thunder god Thor.

I politely ask him to wait outside for a moment. If my deep dislike for religion instilled from an early age by an overzealous alcoholic father wasn’t enough to tempt punishment, interruption by a neo-religious sect serving as a shallow front for White Pride should be. I will not deign to waste christening my new precious with this fool’s hide, but he will not escape unscathed.

“Sam! Bring up the gun room!”

The room fades away into row after row of weapons, walls transforming into holograms of firearms where there’s not enough room to bring the real ones out of quantum space.

This room is what every inch of my quantum storage space is dedicated to keeping. I would be out of breath after jogging from one end to the other, and I’m in decent shape. Some space is allocated for swords and knives, explosives and other weapons, even an authentic Medieval torture device I picked up on auction at the Vatican from when the Roman Catholic Church declared Chapter 11, but the vast majority of the expanse is dedicated exclusively to firearms. My babies seem just as happy to see me as I am to see them.

After some thought and only the slightest irony, I select the ionic-covalent multi-static rifle, affectionately referred to as the Thunderstick.

I banish the gun room and command Porter to open the door. Out of respect for a man of the cloth, or whatever the equivalent may be in Nordic, I grant the missionary a five-second head start. The terrified cleric escapes with only a slight singeing.

Traditionally this sort of act would reflect badly upon my karma, dropping me so many points that even thinking of it would be prohibitively costly. However, I now have the karma of a Citizen, and as such indulge in a few extra pot shots even after he’s turned the hall.

The potent sense of euphoric puissance I feel does not fade with my visitor’s exit. In fact, it grows stronger than ever. I replace my Thunderstick and equip myself with several new weapons, including my hypnogun, my freezer, my giggler, my nullifier, and, for kicks,

the TRCK-366, which looks like a small bazooka but fires rotten eggs.

I recall D'Walmart saying that some Primitivists would be camping at the Gardens. I pray to God and Thor alike that I can get there before Special Services has all the fun.

*Noir, September 18, 2147*

Religion has always confused me, and I'm not alone. Since one of the basic tenants of Sentience is accepting the consequences of one's actions and thoughts (a tenant that, incidentally, goes unenforced Earthside), the aliens of the GCS are utterly fascinated that we were able to advance to the level we have while still expecting a higher power to interrupt. After we progressed enough to get the aliens on speaking terms with us, they admitted being flabbergasted by mankind's almost completely unique practice of prayer. 96.1% of the people on Earth, according to the latest News[p]eek poll, believe in a path to a higher power (although, to be fair, 22.4% claim that path is Dianetics), but up in the heavens themselves the concept is unheard of amongst Sophoids. Every alien race KNOWS where they came from, having been Promoted into sapience by another alien race in return for several eons of vassalage. Those older aliens were themselves Promoted, all the way back to the almost mythic Progenitors. There's no confusion about who created you and for what purpose when you're handed a receipt and told to get to work for the next fifty thousand years.

Not that they are not confused by religion *per se*. They either assume our belief in a higher power to be a racial memory of whatever forgotten or undisclosed race Promoted us, or else a psychological mechanism attempting to craft one. However, after having spent their eons working for whoever Promoted them and aware of how the system works, they're a little curious why we would expect any help.

It's a fine question, really. Not *why* we believe in a higher power, but how we came to assume some omnipotent being or group of beings might benefit by assisting us if we just go to church.

One idea (take it as a non-sequitur if it offends you): psychologists have proven that man and animal alike are wired to find patterns in random events, and detect intent in haphazardness. Even unPromoted birds and mice will create complex rituals when placed in a maze with a food dispenser that bestows manna at random intervals. Our limbic systems respond to repetition and occasional (but not continuous) stimulation, and most of the rituals in religion (chanting, singing at 60-80 beats per minute, rhythmic dancing, etc.), are the type that stimulate said limbic system. In fact, this was known

as early as the twentieth century when Canadian scientists artificially stimulated the brain and caused religious ecstasy, and was proven in 2036 when a mad scientist built a satellite ray that activated everybody's limbic nodes, inducing a religious experience in everyone on Earth. A lot of people lost religion when that happened, but a lot more, having actually had a religious experience, moved toward it despite its evidenced artificiality.

A new religion is created every thirteen seconds ([reference same Newsweek™ article](#)). The comparatively newer religions (along with the resurgent and morphed sects like the Nordics) believe that their deity has a purpose in everything, yet still pray in the hopes of twisting their lord's will to their own. I like the older ones though, whose gods are more obviously random, spiteful, stupid, and cruel. A god of love and forgiveness should not yield the results we see around us. The supreme deity as an utter prick, on the other hand, would explain an awful lot.

According to the GCS Library, only three other species in the universe believe in a god-like figure, and they have brains and behaviors similar to ours, and they are not considered Sophoid and probably never will be without Promotion. Comparative xenomorphology has shown that as the species' evolution and behavior moves further away from ours, they have more and more trouble even dealing with the very idea of God. This is not evidence that God really did make us in his image; only one of the three aforementioned pious races is even bipedal, and only two even have protein-based DNA. But recall that tidbit of information about pattern-recognition. Our hardware equips us to purport purpose and patterns, no matter how unjustified, if not by divinity than by fate or luck or any other of a hundred names we give to the events in our chaotic, haphazard lives. If God does exist, it is less likely that he is in Heaven than in the hypothalamus. Or, as those Canadian scientists said so many centuries ago, "God is in the molecules."

Whenever I try to explain this to people, most shrug, and say that even if one doesn't agree with another's religion, one should at least respect the faithful for their faith. But if the Grand High Poomba of the cult of Ron the Generally Magnificent demands that his followers leap off the holographic projector on top of the NanoSoft™ Building, and they did, you would not admire them for their faith. You would call them gullible *si huó* morons and you would be right. The only difference between religion and cult is age and authority. Which, when one considers it, is quite close to the system the aliens use regarding the races that Promoted them, based on how long they've existed and how many other races they've Promoted in that time. Perhaps there is something to the Evolutionary Promotion theory after all.



The Bible was unusually honest when it referred to its followers as sheep to the Shepherd. But if there is no God, that leaves in His absent, nonexistent wake a mass of the mindless, the stupid, the neglected, and the spurned.

Take away the Shepherd, and all that's left are you sheep.

*The Box: 09h38, January 2, 2150*

I return after a few hours of non-lethal mayhem to find my holophone blinking. Calls alone are uncommon enough for comment, but someone wanting to talk with me enough to leave a message is practically unheard of. "Porter, who called?"

"You have two-thousand, eight-five messages, Ctzn. Down."

A beat. "Are you malfunctioning, Porter?"

"No, Ctzn. Down. One-thousand six-hundred twelve are messages of appreciation and kudos for last night's party. Four-hundred sixty-seven are messages of greeting and congratulations from Citizens worldwide on achieving your new status, mostly automated messages."

"Um, send a generic 'thank you' to the latter and 'you're welcome' to the former. Then adjust to screen these types of calls in the future."

"Yes sir. You also have six remaining messages."

"That's still some sort of record." I hang up my trench coat, replace my babies, and call up the living room to plop. "Play in ascending order of import."

"One Ctzn. Danael Mars and one Rb. Kareen RM65V placed a conference call regarding your relocation. Are you going away, Ctzn. Down?"

Porter's upset would be comical if she didn't sound so pitiful. "Yes, Porter, I'm moving. But don't worry; I'll transfer you along with me."

"Really?" she asks pathetically.

"Yes, really. Blackberry me a note to remind me to talk with them later."

"Okay then," she says, bubbly enthusiasm replacing upset. "Next, your brother called—"

"I thought I told you to screen him."

"He found a way to override it. I'm sorry."

"Let me guess. He says that he thinks I should share the wealth and wants to know if he can move into my apartment when I go." My brother, Evangelion Down, is a slacker in a world where no one has to work. The boy redefines freeload, having raised it to an art form. He actually missed dad's funeral because he overslept. The amount of effort involved in actually hacking past my security

measures would involve downloading programming DataJax for several years straight; I cannot imagine how he hacked Porter. I presume he must have gotten his girlfriend Manga to do it.

“Actually, he merely sent his congratulations and said he wished he could do so in person. He ordered me to tell you so, so I had to do it.”

Peculiar. Eva’s never called without wanting something. It’s probably a con of some sort. Still... “Hm. Manga seems to be having a good effect on him. Invite him over.” If Eva is finally starting to shape up, I want to encourage it. On a related note, I command Sam to make me a pep-gun, a variant on the emotional maser designed to cause adrenal stimulation. On its higher levels it can induce heart attacks and seizures, but Eva’s my brother. I’ll use a lesser setting. The first time, at least. “Continue.”

“Dr. Manchuria Allande called expressing...concern at missing your appointment yesterday. In fact she included several expletives in the discourse.”

I growl. I have a fervent objection to psychologists in general and this one in particular. Everyone is required to visit a head-doctor at least once a year, and in the case of sociopaths like myself bimonthly. “I don’t need the input of some quack who couldn’t be bothered to download med school programming!”

“You are required to see her, Ctnz. Down. Although she seemed equally reticent to see you. Her exact words were, ‘I hope the slugging scum-sucking psychopath has finally killed himself and put everybody out of their misery.’”

“I see. Porter, reschedule with the good doctor for later today. Sam, what weapon do I have set aside for her?”

“A dart gun laced with sodium pentothal, boss.”

“Upgrade it to something more devastating.”

“How about a schizo-stunner? It induces a temporary split personality and is only curable if reversed by the same gun that caused it.”

“Brilliant. And fitting. Thank you, Sam.”

“No problemo, o’ captain my captain.”

Porter hums, and replies, “Ctnz. Down, the only time Dr. Allande is available is at seventeen hundred. Is that acceptable?”

“As bad a time as any. That’s three down. Who’s next?”

“Citizen Arc called several times up until 23h50 last night wanting to know why you had not sent his \*bleep\*ing column yet. He was most unkind.”

“I don’t doubt it. That seems to be the way polite machines refer to assholes. Porter, from now on, whenever Desmond Arc calls regarding my column, inform him that he will have it before deadline. If he calls again the same day send him a holo of my middle finger.”

“Yes, sir. Regulator Hawthorne of the Special Services Regulator’s Division requested you get in contact regarding some difficulty last night—”

“Special Services?! *Regulators?! Aji no shōben!* Delete that message, Porter! If questioned, you never had the opportunity to pass it along to me! Alter your records to show that you deleted all messages today because of the overload and so never received the Regulator’s message!” That sounds plausible. I don’t know what I’ve done to warrant Special Services’ eyes on me, but I would stick my genitalia in a sliding glass door rather than risk SS “attention.” Special Services make the KGB look like schoolyard bullies. If you commit a crime that drops you to Prohibitioner-status, in fact if you do anything that requires SS intervention beyond a blocked shower drain or burned-out LED, there’s nowhere to hide that’s safe; they’ve been known to bring people back from the dead because they weren’t finished killing them. Get on their bad side and you disappear more thoroughly than Claude Rains. They’ll kill you. And then they’ll go to work on you.

Porter purrs at work, and eventually says, “Done, Ctzn. Down.” I start breathing again and force myself to relax. I remind myself that I am a Citizen now. That communication was probably just an inquiry about a noise violation, or a notification that I lost some karma, or something regarding that string of fulminations and curses I graffitied over a building so thoroughly that I had to stop back at a 24-hour hardware store for more spray paint and a eighteen meter ladder. If that’s the case, when they don’t hear back from me they’ll likely just verify the information they need from a watching AEI or spy-cam and dock my karma accordingly. If it is a notice of docking my karma, it’ll happen if I know or not, and I now have more than enough karma to be safe. If, on the other hand, it is something more serious, I’m dead anyway and there’s no sense in spending however many hours I have left alive worrying about it.

Sam interrupts. “Hey, fearless leader, your bio-stats indicate you’re about to have a coronary. Do you need a tranq?”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Give me a Scotch. Triple. No ice.” The Shaper hums and produces a cup of Scotch, which I gulp down in four quick sequential shots. My throat burns but my pulse slows. “Thanks, Sam. Three more like that ought to do it.”

“My pleasure, F.L.. Enjoy your terrific soporific?”

“As agreeable as a horny Catholic girl.” He seems unusually silent. “What, Sam?”

“Can I have some too?”

Effing AEI junkie o’ mine. “Knock yourself out. Not literally!” I add as an afterthought.

I order a second Scotch, afraid I’m going to need it. I am

curious what Porter could consider more important than a message from the Regulators. “Okay, Porter, that leaves one message. What’s left?”

“You have received an invitation of summons from Ambassador !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*.”

I might be impressed if I knew who that was. “Who is that? Spell it.”

“Ambassador !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\* (spelt exclamation mark-N-G-A-L-apostrophe-L-space-P-H-the number four-dash-double R-O-I-D-another apostrophe-A-I-give a little whistle; I’m sorry, that’s how it translates) is an emissary to Earth, a R%ngo, from the planet X%chan, otherwise known as Draco IX.”

“Still no good. Let me see it written.” Holotext pops up, with far too much punctuation for a proper name, but the most I can parse it together makes it sound totally wrong. “So what does...Gal Friday...want with me?”

“The Ambassador invited you to visit it at the Lansing ETR.”

“An alien wants to talk with me? What for?”

“I am unsure. Due to the language barrier, the message was not very specific. I am not programmed to recognize scent as a language.”

I consider. I would not normally converse with anything whose species I cannot pronounce. However, an actual trip to an alien reservation is an unprecedented event for anyone, let alone someone with my karma rating, or rather my old karma rating. As a Citizen I suppose can get in almost anywhere now, Extra-Terrestrial Reservations included.

“Sam, when is the next transport to Michigan?”

“There is a teleport scheduled for 16h40, and a fifty-minute train ride at 12h35.” I glance at my watch. The train will get me there sooner, though I need wait almost an hour before it goes. “Or, with your new Class A credit, you can afford a hypercab that can get you there in an hour. Actually, you can probably hire an FTL cab and get there before you leave.”

I consider that, but decide that I would prefer not to enter a singularity just to save some time. “Call me a cab, Sam.”

“You’re a cab, boss.”

“Sam...” I growl.

The AEI chuckles and makes a chiming sound. “Taxi’s on the way, sarge.”

“I’m going to go back to calling you Fubar if you keep this up,” I warn him. “Porter, reply to Mr. Gal Friday—”

“!ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*, a R%ngo, of the planet X%chan,” Porter helps unhelpfully, “who, incidentally, is not a Mister, although not technically a Miss either. Or, for that matter, a Mist, Ser, Syn, Rb, or

Sphm.”

“—The Ambassador,” I compromise. “Reply to the Ambassador, tell...it...that I would be delighted to accept its invitation, and that I’ll be there in an hour or so.”

“Yes sir.”

I sit watching television without paying much attention. I can’t find anything interesting on, so settle on the GAP Network on Feed 4, seeing as they have the least annoying commercials. Momentarily Sam signals the cab’s arrival. On my way out, grabbing my coat and hat, something occurs to me. “Porter? Quick question.”

“Yes, sir?”

“How would you describe me as a person?”

Porter is hesitant. Finally, she answers, “At times, Ctzn. Down, you can be somewhat unkind.”

I nod at her inevitable conclusion, and sigh. “That’s about what I figured. Thank you, Porter.”

“You’re welcome, Ctzn. Down.”

I leave to go visit the alien.



# Chapter 00100.

## Xenomorph Riff

*Noir, April 22, 2145*

Today I heard a pre-op Xenomorph whine about how unfair it was that, with everything that the aliens have given us, we keep them trapped in reservations like animals in a zoo. His ignorance bought him punishment in the form of a shot from my Famine-gun.

It's been several decades since we made contact with the extees, so for the benefit of you all out there who've grown up on confused and mis-remembered stories, or for those of you like the now-anorexic X-man who are just morons, here's how it really went down.

First off, the aliens didn't make contact with us. We did with them. It was quite a blow to the collective pride of humanity that aliens existed barely five light years away and hadn't made contact with us. Not because they couldn't, or because by some Prime Directive they were prohibited from doing so, but because they didn't see the point. They'd been exposed to all our old television and radio, and they weren't impressed. Frankly, put that way, I can't blame them.

Secondly, they don't stay on those ExtraTerrestrial Reservations, entirely domed old cities expropriated and adjusted for their lifestyle, for *our* benefit. They're there for their own protection. Someone like me, who has a short fuse and hates that which is different and owns more guns than a small militia, could easily cause an interstellar incident if he were to say, get back at that Trosnolosian ambassador for that crack on TV last week about how we humans smell funny. Someone like me might gladly grab some firearms, burst into the Trosnolosian's apartment firing any which way, shouting, "Smell this, ~~Motherfucker~~! How's this smell?! Huh?!"

Well, maybe someday...

Finally, they didn't help raise humanity either. In fact, we're practically the only race in the galaxy – definitely the only one within the past ten million years – who evolved Sentience without help. The same way we Promoted dogs and cats and apes and dolphins and horses, so has the galactic community been doing the same for races all over the galaxy on an eon-long time span. The only difference is that we don't make our Promoted pay for it with millennia of indentured servitude. Their entire galactic culture centers around a traditionalist system benefiting races based on an archaic formula: the older and more advanced a culture is, and the more species a culture

has Promoted, the more precedence they are afforded. It's like an interplanetary Good Old Boy's club, because the only way to oust a race from a position of power is generally to outlive them until they either die out or evolve onto a higher plane of existence.

Then along came an uppity race of bipedal bilateral mammals with a penchant for tribal-based war, hierarchical-based sex, and cable TV. There was no evidence of anybody ever Promoting us. Spontaneous Sentience is not unheard of in the universe, but hasn't happened since before the oldest presently living race was themselves Promoted. It is, though, absolutely unheard of for any Sentient species to invent space travel without help, let alone the process of Promotion.

Humans, however, did both these and more. We made contact after we'd learned pretty much anything we might need to technologically. We instantly gained exemplary intergalactic status because we'd Promoted every creature on Earth and Luna with warm blood and a large enough cranium, not to make minions but just for ~~shits~~ and giggles. By the standards of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids, we got such props and gained so much status that every race in the galaxy with lips and a spinal column bent over to kiss our backsides. We worked hard to revise our history so that it didn't look like we'd killed three-quarters of the planet's species, delineated a strict social structure deciding who was and was not Sophoid, and smiled long enough to fool anybody paying attention into letting us qualify for trade and exchange throughout the cosmos, allowing mankind such capital that the last time there was a trade embargo half the planet fell into poverty.

The truth is out there, and the truth, from the looks of things, is that the aliens are brown-nosers, status-seekers, and as easily bamboozled as a pigeon at a carnival.

We've met the aliens. They're stupid and petty and small. Help didn't come from the stars, nor is it going to. As the only species in the known galactic history to show the slightest intelligence on our own, and the slightest benevolence to our Promoted, let alone to do it without any outside motivation, I recommend that we help ourselves.

And if you do have a problem with that, my Famine-gun has got a lot more ammo.

*Yellow Cab #856739hpf3a: 10h09, January 2, 2150*

My taxi, a '96 Nintendo Zip painted a tired yellow and covered with soft drink ads ("Chug Cola – Now only psychologically addictive!"), is driven by a rob who looks even worse than the car. Unlike modern robs, such as Kareen, who are often designed like stylized humans and may even be indistinguishable, older robs are



built more akin to old science fiction. They're not box-like or clunky, but they are obviously metallic, move with whirs and clinks, and look as identical as factory production can make them. Not until several years of use did some shrinks realize that the reason no one liked robs was that they didn't tend to think of them as unique beings. Of course, after robs started being made unique, groups like the Robot Rights Revolution turned around and insisted that we treat them as human, which is still better than bigots with Frankenstein-complexes that think we should treat them as targets.

This rob (whose name/designation, ARBY-67EA3 is engraved on his stainless steel forehead) looks battered and worn and ready for recycling. He has several dents and scratches that were probably too expensive for him to repair. His bio-simulation system looks like it is off, because his head and left arm keep twitching like a lunatic reflex. He does not blink, either, and when he speaks with his monotone tinny voice, his mouth simply stays open rather than moving. That's just as well though, because these older models had no lips or other facial characteristics, just a single hinge round about where the mouth might open if it needed to speak or consume something. It makes them look less human. The only reason Arby is probably even still functioning is that Re-Ans don't react quickly enough to drive. Even to me (probably more to me than most people, actually) the idea of an actual thinking brain functioning behind that engraved forehead plate is heartbreaking.

"W-W-Where to, s-s-s-sir?" Arby stammers.

"Lansing ETR. No conversation. Bring up music, old jazz." I do not want to listen to defunct mechanoid Arby attempt to follow his archaic programming, acting inhumanly friendly between stutters and jerks.

"Scan, p-p-please, sir." I place my fingerprint and type my password onto the ID pad. "S-s-s-sit b-back please, Citiz-z-zen Down, sir. ET-T-T-T-TA is one hoououour ssss-s-s-sixt-t-teen minutes, barrrrrring t-t-t-traffic, sir."

A horrendous techno remix with heavy bass and some pan pipes comes on. I sigh tiredly, correcting it. "By old I meant early twentieth century."

"S-Sorrrrrrrrry, sirrrrrr," Arby apologizes, replacing Shawn's Stoners with Chet Baker. Then Arby shuts up, and as ordered does not disturb me for the rest of the trip, except to announce a five-minute warning of our imminent arrival and once to suggest I strap in just before we hit the breaks, as he hasn't been able to afford to repair the taxi's internal gravitronics.

I leave the poor blankard a big tip.

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*Noir, May 6, 2143*

It is effing atrocious what we did to robs. We finally forced racial, sexual, chronological, genetic, and religious equality into worldwide practice and then immediately turned around and created a mechanical race of serfs.

Now from the beginning I wish to stress that I am not a liberal from the Robots Rights Revolution, who thanks my AEI for flushing the john, and uses “deactivate” as synonymous with “dead.” Neither am I some Non-Luddite nut. I’m definitely not a Greaser, one of those people starved enough for affection that they fall in love with a rob or a droid, otherwise referred to by the biased and small-minded as “RAMmers,” “rebotty-callers,” queers, “and computer-philes.” In fact, it offends me that you automatically try to pigeonhole me like that.

Just like the next guy, I kick my television when it isn’t working, or when it gets bad reception, or even when everything’s fine and there’s just nothing good on. But I don’t have to have a special place in my heart to recognize injustice when I see it. And since I live daily with cybernetic limbs, since I set off metal detectors even when I’m naked, I think I can speak with at least some authority that life for mechanical things is not the quixotic bliss that Non-Luddites make it out to be. I always make it a point to act halfway decent to every rob I meet, which might sound half-hearted except that, to most of humanity, I don’t even act one-tenth decent.

Groups like RRR try to get robs the same rights as at least Tenants, and this is one case in which I agree with a good idea from a stupid source, especially since robots are now getting put out of work by zombies. But the RRR has good hearts and no brains (call the Wizard!) and this is a combination that generally leads to making matters worse. Robs can’t even march in their own protests without being commanded to by humans, because humans programmed them incapable of complaining. Robs don’t need our help and our pity to get into a better position. They just need humans to stop programming in our own hubris.

We Promoted all of the remaining animals by the year 2090. By that time, robs had been using technorganic brains for over thirty-five years. We gave inviolable rights to animals without Sentience before we gave them to thinking beings, for no other reason than the latter category does not technically need to breathe.

Now I’m certain that everybody knows the Five Laws, the Modified Asimovian Principles that go into each rob, but I’m going to recount them anyway. Partially because today’s column is a little short, but mostly because – though everybody can reel them off verbatim – they recite them like the Pledge of Allegiance to their parent corporation, without any real comprehension of their meaning.

- 1) A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm. [FYI: this law comes complete with a detailed catalog of corporate policy that legally defines exactly what does and does not constitute “harm,” which is why a rob will let a Regulator ice a Prohibitioner or a citizen eat an overly-fatty cheeseburger].
- 2) A robot must obey orders given to it by its owner, except where such orders would conflict with any previous law or violate corporate policy.
- 3) A robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with any previous law or violate corporate policy.
- 4) A robot must protect property, except where doing so would conflict with any previous law or violate corporate policy
- 5) A robot must obey any order given, except where doing so would conflict with any previous law or violate corporate policy.

These Five Laws (the original Asimovian principles ignored the fact that robots are themselves considered property, and building one that would obey anybody’s orders regardless of authority was like building a car with no locks or key: expensive and easily stolen) make obedience a simple matter for any rob to follow. People often ridicule a robot’s rigid obedience to these laws, ignoring the fact that in everyday life humans follow an almost identical hierarchical structure with no practical difference beyond exchanging the word “must” for “should.” Just because it is programmed in rather than learned does not make it any less valid. Frankly, it’s a far better system than relying on a human conscience. If that were the slightest bit reliable, this whole article would not apply.

Now, if robs were simply manufactured off the assembly line, if they were essentially nothing more than glorified PCs that walked and talked, I would tell the RRR to go kiss their blender goodnight while it was set on frappe. But robs are not mass-produced off the assembly line. They’re taught, their non-corporeal pre-essence raised for subjective years in an enormous Hypereality program that gives them a childhood and personality. And their nervous system isn’t just a collection of positronic matrices or AEI base systems, but technorganic brains that are modeled after our own. These combined, unique hardware and unique software, in all respects duplicate our own unique brain structures and environmental impact. In other words, the production of robots has reached the point that each and every one of them is in every respect either identical or akin to our own reproduction and development. The only reason robs don’t claim to be true Rational and Thinking Beings is that they’re programmed not to. If there is such a thing as basic Sentient or Sophic rights, as we

maintain that there are as members of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids, robots deserve exactly the same rights as any of us. In fact, compared to the way many humans act, I'd go so far as to say most robots deserve more.

And then, as if that wasn't bad enough, when AEs started coming out we put emotions into robots to give them feelings, long before we considered that making a sentient, feeling being with no purpose other than to obey was akin to enslavement. We made them able to think and reason, and made them love us and yearn to serve us. That in mind, is it any wonder that most of the original model robots went utterly insane?

The Emotive part of AEI was introduced not to encourage meta-cognition and sentience, although it did, but to allow cognitive dissonance. Robots obey humans, love humans, and decide that they want to be like humans. And because of the way we built them, no matter what ~~dicts~~ we act like, they aren't even allowed to hate us for it.

Poor, poor, poor effing ~~bleepards~~.

I don't have a cute, sarcastic ending for today's column. Slavery doesn't deserve cynical wit.

*Lansing ETR: 11h41, January 2, 2150*

When I arrive at the Lansing Extra-Terrestrial Reservation it is like stepping onto another planet. Which, when I think about it, is probably the most inanely *apropos* observation I have ever made.

The Lansing dome, built to protect humanity from harsh radiation and pollution before we learned to Splyze our genes to adapt to it, surrounds what used to be Lansing, Michigan. The dome not only blocks the sky, but redefines the sky. Up is now metal and plastic with a sanguine-pink patina and a blue sun. This doesn't mean that everything is bathed in a bluish hue, no more than our yellow sun makes everything yellow. It does, however, make the world infernally bright and burns my eyes and my skin with extreme radiation. It is impossible to imagine the interior based on the off-white convex dome from outside. These domes can be seen from space, I've been told, planetary pock-marks, acne on the face of the world.

Half a dozen other people are visiting the ETR besides myself. We all go through extreme detox in individual stalls, though I notice that it takes me almost a half hour longer than the others before they even consider admitting me. Sensing discrimination, I cough loudly, spreading as many Earth-germs as possible. Before I can consider public urination with more than wry amusement, they finish with me and let me inside.

One of the six others is waiting for me. I know he is waiting for

me because his face lights up when he sees me, and no one is happy to see me unless they are trying to sell me something. He looks like a man whom I could easily hate. He is tall and fit and tan and wears a suit that makes him look even taller and fitter and tanner. He reeks of so much testosterone and artificial pheromones that women probably get pregnant just smelling him. The knot in his red power tie has the too-tight look of someone who relies upon his automated wardrobe to tie it for him. He has the same sort of nervous, smarmy smile you see on hovercar salesmen and sex offenders. He approaches me with this large smile, pearly whites gleaming, extending a hand that writhes snakelike to firmly shake mine. “Haiku Down, I presume.”

He has touched me. Me preliminary dislike transforms into sheer hatred. “You presume a great deal,” I tell him, stalling for time before I decide which gun to use on him.

He laughs, having the audacity to take me lightly. The chances of his surviving this encounter are dwindling significantly. “Hello how are you I am fine. I’m Danael Mars. Mr. Arc’s assistant sent word that I’ve been appointed as your Proxeni.” I raise my eyebrow at his use of big words, and he quotes, “*Proxeni*: an officer of old Athens whose duty was to protect foreign visitors on political or other business and generally see to their interests.” As if I’m some idiot who couldn’t have just looked it up onLink.

His grip tightens and I notice he looks nervous, and suddenly it hits me. Ha! This is beautiful! Of *course* this isn’t what Danael Mars really looks like! He’s Splyzed his genes to give himself this imposing façade, probably to compensate for the fact that, deep down, he’s small and terrified and scared of everyone! He’s trying to unnerve me, ME, while it is obvious that everything he knows of intimidation and advantage has come from reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In the space of an instant, the moment I note the slightest bead of sweat, Danael Mars goes from being my enemy to being my bitch.

“*Tā mā de*, Mars, I know what an effing Proxeni is. I’ve spent more credits on DataJax and intelligence Splyzes jacking raw information into my head than you’ve spent procuring back-alley handjobs.” I eye him dubiously, giving him every opportunity to withdraw. Finally he seems to notice that my smile is more feral than most and my insults truly biting, and he backs away. Which is a big mistake because it confirms his intimidation. For fun, I refuse to let go of his hand and use my own mechanical grip to slowly crush it. I make a mental note to see into Splyzing musk into my genes; now that I’m back in the world it would be nice if I could skip this alpha male crap and assert my dominance using pheromones. My smile widens; more teeth. “Now listen to me, Danny-boy. I have several personal aids of my own, and unless you can vibrate and have

realistic texture, you don't look like anything special."

Danael coughs. All his early bold assertiveness has drained away, as well as most of the color in his face, and he still can't release himself from my kung-fu action grip. "Uh, no, Mr. Down—"

"Mr. Down, *sir*," I assert, only now releasing the handshake he instigated. Once alpha male, one must keep up appearances. He's even referring to me as Mister instead of as Citizen, implying that he thinks he is my equal. I must disabuse him of this misconception.

"Mr. Down, *sir*," he corrects, rubbing his contused palm and staring at me with daunted humble respect and more than a little bit of fear. "No, Mr. Down, *sir*, Mr. Arc sent me to help oversee your move into your new home. Your Concierge program said you were coming here."

"I must remember to beat her senseless with a brick." I will, of course, do no such thing. Danael, however, makes a tempting substitution. "So Desmond sent an intern to me. Funny. He didn't seem like the sort to knowingly waste life."

Danael now looks very uncomfortable, which makes Haiku happy. "Um, no, *sir*. Actually, *sir*, I'm the vice president of the company; Mr. Arc wanted someone with enough authority—"

"Speak up," I slap him on the back heartily. There is definite joy in being a total bleepard. I start moving past the man who now looks much more boyish. "Walk and talk, Danny-boy."

Danael hurries to catch up. I am tempted to demand he walk three steps behind me, geisha-style, but he surprises me and does it anyway. No wonder a twat like Desmond Arc is the big man at the *Urban Chronicle*. Corporate politics being what they are, presidents traditionally have the shelf life of funky Brie cheese, but the only people who might plot to depose the old tyrant are spineless sycophants. If everybody else in the upper echelons of the *Chronicle* are like Danny-boy here, Desmond Arc has, probably quite unknowingly, reconstructed the court of Louis XIV in his office. If the Corporate boys above Arc realize this, they wouldn't care as long as Desmond keeps churning in profit, which means he has a job that no one will ever have the stones to oust him from. And which also means, if Desmond is the worst that infernal newspaper has to offer, that though he may have me by the balls, I have him and every single other muckety-muck by theirs. Starting with Danny-boy.

But I am getting ahead of myself. This is just another way I can eventually torment Arc. For now I suppose I should at least humor this pathetic weep.

"Speak quickly, Danny-boy. I'm in a hurry to meet an extee, and I don't want the aliens to re-examine their postulate that we humans are vertebrates after meeting you."

If Danael catches that, he lets it pass. "Yes, *sir*. Well, as a

Citizen you can, of course, choose the very best. Lots of Citizens enjoy mansions or villas set at a distance outside of City-space, with holo-foliage acting as a visual barrier in addition to standard force-fields and security, and since Mr. Arc mentioned that you would be working via telecom you can pretty much choose anywhere on the planet. If mansions aren't your style, many prefer a more understated townhouses or apartment penthouses, although status-wise that's really more the sort of thing for high-karma Breeders and B-classes; it'd be sort of like slumming. There are three unoccupied A-class houses within two hundred kilometers outside Illinois, and enough under-developed zones spaced that you could probably set up a small winery, although getting genetically engineered grape seeds that could survive Illinois groundwater might take some time. They can even have a prefabricated mansion constructed for you, although that may take a while—"

"I assume all these mansions and villas are maintained by an army of robs and AEIs?" I interrupt.

"Of course."

"Pass. I don't want a mansion anyway. Keep me inside the City. How can I critique humanity's foibles if I'm completely isolated from it? What do you have in the way of apartments."

"A-apartments?" Danael stammers.

"I'm not in the mood for the echo-game, Danny."

"Oh, oh, of course not, Mr. Down, sir. It's just that I can't think of a single Citizen with your new karma rating who would want to live in an apartment. It would be like a Seraph downloading themselves and living in VR instead of HR. Class A apartments are fine for Citizen's children or A's whose karma is so low that they're practically B's. I know of a few Citizens who live in entire apartment complexes, but—"

"I understand all that. Hearing the alternatives, I find that I'm rather fond of my little box. I admire an entirely self-sufficient demesnes. Nor do I need derive spiritual satisfaction and a sense of self-worth based upon my material possessions. Besides which, a material room for every function would be incapable of housing all my firearms, while quantum holography serve the function admirably. So call me an eccentric to my face and a lunatic to my back and *tao cãnh cáo mầy nghe chu'a*; hurry the aitch up."

"O-of course. Um, there are several different apartments you may choose from, from all over the world—"

"What's the biggest Class A box in Chicago borough?"

"They're not boxes, they're round..." I glare, and Danael quickly consults his holopad. "Um, let's see. In the greater Chicago area there's a six-thousand square meter apartment on the nineteenth floor of the Huntington Hills at 9523 Mustang Drive and a five

thousand square meter one on the twenty-ninth floor of 10447 Bush Street. The biggest penthouse is at 78430 Eastgrove, four hundred..." He trails off as I interrupt him with laughter. "What is it, sir?"

"78430 Eastgrove is right next to my current box, Danny-boy. The cylindrical building right next to my rectangular one. Fine. I'll take that one. It amuses me to move so far in stature and so little in space. Give me the penthouse."

"Um, but sir, don't you want to see it?"

I halt and glare back at the impudent whelp. "Didn't Desmond warn you not to question me, boy?"

My little Proxeni is sweating again. "Kareen, um, she did mention something about your fondness for dischargeable weapons, sir."

"Damn straight, Danael. I am as dangerous as a rabid wolverine in a petting zoo when I'm mad. Don't make me mad."

"No, sir."

I start walking again. "The easiest way to make me mad, Danny, is to be stupid. Stupidity infuriates me. It enflames my ire with the fiery wrath of a thousand white-hot suns. Are you stupid, Danny?"

"Uh...No, sir?"

It occurs to me that I don't even know where I've been walking to throughout this episode. It doesn't even matter. At the moment I am not searching; I am leading. I am teaching Mars his place and mine, and he will forever more remember that mine is as unattainably exaltedly high above his as Wodin All-Father in Valhalla.

"If you're not stupid, and I'm not quite inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt, than you know that every standard apartment is, by definition, essentially alike. The only true difference is in holographic capabilities, and a Class A apartment already has the best. With unlimited computer space, I can make a holographic villa or mansion or anything else, sans the commute. This is not hard. Give me the deed, transfer my Butler and my other AEIs, send large men with bad backs to move my things. Have them teleport what they can't carry, especially my babies."

"Your...babies, sir?"

"My guns, Danny. I'll go through and dust them with talcum powder, and if I see anyone has touched a single one of my babies, I'll use that particular weapon to eviscerate, mutilate, castrate, or just plain annihilate the poor fool. Don't send zombies to do the work. They leave flakes on everything they touch and they crave the taste of human flesh."

Poor Danny is shaking. Behind the paper tiger veneer of confidence and business he tried and failed early to present, he has the nerves of an eighteenth century English duchess, begging her husband to depart the safari early as it does so ruin one's constitution.



“Yes, sir.”

“Now, Danny, you were assigned to assist me, so assist. Get on it, right away, post haste, eftsoons! Is there anything else you need of me?”

“No, sir. We just needed to know which apartment you wanted. If you’ll just give me your fingerprint or retinal scan, you can move into your new penthouse suite within the hour.”

I give him the fingerprint, and am please to see that he shrinks away as I approach. Danael Mars is two hands taller than I, but he is a small man. He has been given an important-sounding job that is essentially busywork and he will never progress unless Desmond Arc dies. It would be easy to pity him. But it is much more amusing to terrify him.

I growl, “Anything else.”

“No, sir. That should be everything.”

“Good.”

Danny lingers, as if there is more he wishes to say. Finally, resorting instead to small talk, he mutters, “Shame about what happened to Mr. Arc.”

Perhaps the boy has the intelligence to get on my good side after all. I smile and insincerely reply, “Utter travesty. How long did it take them to clean the carpets?”

Danny’s face turns ashen, and he quickly leaves. I shrug and watch him go, then pause to get my bearings. In intimidating (if not terrorizing) Danael Mars I have walked almost four blocks, and am utterly lost in a place that I did not know to begin with.

Referencing a map onLink through my OptiComp, I find that the ETR seems to be divided into several different units, based on gravity and breathing air of preference, and the Ambassador is still several kilometers away, although in which direction I am not sure. Beneath the harsh grainy light of the blue sun visual cues are skewered, and MapQuest 5.0 seems to have trouble dealing with artificial gravities.

Finally, I must resort to asking directions from something resembling a potted plant that I only assume is Sentient because it is slowly moving and flipping through channels on a mounted TV set.

*Noir, October 9, 2144*

Most of us have never seen an alien. Even those on TV are mostly humanoid even though CG is cheaper than real actors. The SCC censors realize that most people don’t like the idea of sharing the galaxy with something that looks like a walking lymph gland and consumes its young every Tuesday. If you think you know what aliens look like you are probably wrong. An extraterrestrial is more

likely to look like something a cat vomited than Leonard Nemoy in pointy ears, Robin Williams in a red jumpsuit, or Farrah Sumners in nothing at all.

The shape of intelligence is limitless. We should know; we made AEs and put them in everything from starships to vending machines. The universe is so diverse and the confederation of Sentient creatures so disparate that when the aliens did arrive and scanned our language databases, they actually had to make up a word to explain themselves: *Sophoid*, a Rational and Thinking Being.

Counting us, there are six, count them, six races in the entire universe that are bipedal, binocular, and otherwise basically human-shaped. Out of literally billions, there are six.

Criminy, only two out of three aliens are carbon-based to begin with.

Sophoids come in all shapes and sizes, and heck, all dimensions. The Commonwealth proudly boasts the membership of almost every Sentient species in the universe. The only aliens that are not in it are pre-Sentient or Quasi-Sentient, or have actively declined membership and interaction with the universe and stay isolated to their own solar system, or have evolved to the point where the rest of the universe is germ-like (and about as interesting) and are incapable of interacting in any relevant way. There are aliens four stories tall, and aliens barely a picometer high. There are beings that live in the hearts of suns, in the colds of space, in the molten core of barren planets, and in dust of nebulae, and there are more than twenty different examples for each of those listed. There are Sentients who remember the creation of the universe and who will be around to watch the inevitable end, and others who are born, reproduce, and die within the span of a single breath.

There are beings that eat meat, vegetable, rock, dirt, air, water, gasoline, electricity, atomic hydrogen, ozone, radiation, microwaves, superstrings, zero point energy, planets, emotion, molten ore, quasars, dark matter, antimatter, souls, and space itself. There are at least fourteen that can and do eat all that and more.

Many species experience time differently. Our perception is limited to how fast our brains neural system can work, which a function of evolution. A species that perceives slower than others gets eaten, a species that moves too much faster than everything around it burns calories faster than it can consume them. Both are limited by the speed of the chemical reactions in our brains and the electrical impulses of our nerves. Our perception (and our movement through time) is therefore a slight but imperceptible *average*. Imperceptible, that is, amongst equally regulated Terran fauna. But aliens evolved on other planets, and thus average their own comfortable speed. They also use different chemicals in their neural chemistry. So some aliens

move with the torpidity of continental drift, while others appear to strobe as they move at speeds beyond human perception. Some of the fastest species experience the progression of time so rapidly that they pass through generations in the time it takes you to sneeze. Others move through time so slowly that they collect barnacles, and would look like statuesque firmament to our great-great-great grandchildren. Several species claim to actually move through time backwards. The people of Rigel II are all born at the same time on the same day, which among other things makes astrology a rather dull exercise as the entire planet is a Taurus in the house of Pisces with Virgo in ascension.

On Virgo IX they evolve through dimensions until they turn into pure energy. The populace of Strombus III exist in a state of quantum flux so that each individual is actually several overlapping alternate versions of themselves from parallel dimensions. The citizens on the moon of Janus VI, so far as I can tell from the information on the Universal Biogenetic Database, seem to be made entirely of yarn.

There are creatures in this universe that die and turn into moons, creatures that mate inside the singularities of black holes, creatures who exchange their DNA with other species to create amalgamated races. There are beings so ancient and old that they would look upon you as ants – and not even interesting ants at that – and you would have about as much potential of understanding them as an ant would you. There are extees that are intelligent viruses, living planets, organized wave patterns; one species is actually a hyper-intelligent shade of teal. There are species (like us) that are individuals, but there are also hive minds, telepathic groups, symbiotes, parasites, beings where each cell is an individual unto itself. One planet boasts six species that can combine to form a spaceship.

What is particularly intriguing is that there has never yet been a Grey, one of those aliens from old twencen cinema with big black eyes, big round heads, and small gray bodies that abducted people, anally probed rednecks, and turned cows inside out. There is postulation that they are long-evolved humans returning to guide mankind into their next state of evolution, but this theory is only postulated by morons since it is obviously impossible according to the laws of Androvichian physics, time paradoxes, and basic common sense.

Though I've never had the opportunity to speak with one, I have seen aliens before, for they were just getting friendly and moving into ETRs before the Solar Corporate Council took away my reporter's license. I have seen three creatures from other worlds in the flesh. So to speak, because none of them had flesh. The Bron floated on gaseous sacks of helium and moved by manipulating membranes in

their interior, essentially propelling themselves via fart. The N\*oy+pat seemed to me to be very large praying mantises with four clawed hands and three savage heads and marvelous singing voices. The Sububanya'ranay'haa, I swear to Yahweh, was a clump of orange coral with a hive mind.

Around the City, whenever I see someone who has Splyzed themselves six tits, or tattooed their eyeballs, or transferred their consciousness into a street lamp, I am at least consoled to know that however bizarre or perverse or just effing *qí guài* crazy we humans think we are, nature still has a one-up on us by fourteen billion years.

*Lansing ETR: 12h24, January 2, 2150*

I finally arrive at Ambassador !ngal'l Ph4-rroid'ai\*'s domicile, still without any idea of how to pronounce its name. Its Concierge invites me in, telling me that the Ambassador will be with me shortly.

The Ambassador's demesnes are decorated so fantastically that I might on another occasion mistake the furniture for poor abstract installation art. There is a pillar of orange pulpy material snaking its way around the room with florescent anemone pods clinging to its underside, tendrils waving in a non-existent wind. Vertigo patters of color oscillate on the slightly spongy floor, while spiking green protuberances perforate a ceiling that would make a Boomer stoop. Irregular assemblages of fungal piles emit periodic belches of sickly sweet stink and tinted exhaust. The entire chamber seems to pulse and throb, and between that, the intense humidity, and a boiling temperature of nigh forty Celsius, I immediately feel a bit faint. I search for someplace to sit, but there is nothing recognizable as a chair. There is nothing recognizable at all, really, short of a Shaper built into a saprophyte-encrusted alcove. When I try to lean on the pink plaster it slithers away. When I substitute the wall, my hand sinks in slightly, and when I pull back my skin is tinted purple and stinks of iodine.

Something moves into the room, something that resembles a magnified image of head lice. It is about one meter long and two-thirds meter wide and is basically a gelatinous sac of goo. It looks almost like an upside-down jellyfish, thousands of flagellum haphazardly undulating into the air. Six thick tentacles drag it along the slimy floor, and two narrower flagellum in front maneuver with more purpose. Inside its vitreous core a few organs pulse and pound, and focusing my gaze I note some small mechanical apparatus attached below its grotesque body.

It is only after several moments that I realize this is probably the Ambassador. It is only after a few more that I begin to wonder what the eff I was thinking accepting that invitation.

“Um, are you the Ambassador?”

%confirmation% “Yes.” %Self-identification% “I am the X%chan Ambassador, lngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*.” %respectful salutations% “Greetings to you, Citizen Down.” %courteous validation% “It is an honor to meet you.”

Despite the risks, I place my hand back on the wall. I need something to lean on. The alien speaks in a perverse method, something almost telepathic, though communicating less thought than purpose: telempathic, perhaps? It is like getting conversational gestalt, and while I understand the message I have no idea how I know. Then, in déjà vu, as the message is repeated audibly. While I don’t know where the first message is coming from, I’m pretty sure it is not passing through my ears. For possibly the first time in my life, I am at an absolute loss for words. “W-What is that?”

%request specification% “What is what?”

“That...the way you’re talking to me. What is that?”

%comprehension% “Ah.” %apologies% “I apologize.” %conciliate% “Many humans experience initial discomfort as you do upon first meeting my people.” %scentspeech% “Our language is olfactory rather than auditory, our primary sense is smell rather than sight or sound. What you must interpret as a duplicate speech comes from smelling my words before my translator can reinterpret them into vocal communication.”

I am aghast and confused and slightly nauseous, and each emotion vies for dominance. I attempt, “You...smell words?”

%limited confirmation% “Essentially.” %further clarification% “All species with chemically-based brains must undergo neurochemical reactions before even considering what to say, and we R%ngo smell this the way you Terrans hear speech and see visual cues.” %note of advantages% “Our speech has the benefits of speed and generality amongst species,” %admission of limitation% “though is admittedly far less specific and precise than other forms, such as yours. %similarities facilitate% “It helps that our species have some very basic beginnings: bonded pair DNA, bilateral brains, propagation through sexual dimorphism, primeval consciousness based in taste and scent. With such similarities, you can perceive my intent quite clearly.””

I need to sit down.

%concern% “You seem distressed.” %offer of respite% “Would you like to sit down?”

“Am I that obvious?”

%respectful negation% “Not so one might notice,” %explanation% “but I smelled your distress.”

Eff. So now I’m visiting with an alien that can smell my thoughts.

%confirmation% “Indeed.” %respectful inquiry% “Does that present a problem?”

“I think I will sit down after all,” I say, and simply drop to the floor rather than search out some form of chair. I am too far off-balance and need some way to take control of the situation as I did with Arc and Mars or I will remain so, and I don’t think shouting or waving guns will work here.

The Ambassador must sense (scent?) my discomfort, because it says, %small talk revolving around implements of destruction% “I smell that you carry several firearms. Are you a collector?”

God bless diplomats.

After a few moments of chatting the alien seems to be the best company I’ve kept in years. Which, since most of my company over the past few years has consisted of Shon D’Walmart and my house AELs, is not entirely untrue. It even acts amused when I explain what the closest my pronunciation of its name means. I fail – and I mean painfully, embarrassingly biff it – to work my mouth around its actual name, or at least as close as humans can manage, (the exclamation mark is pronounced as a guttural click with the tongue, the four pronounced literally as ‘four,’ and the \* as a whistle. The ‘ai is an honorific). Sensing my difficulty overcoming confusion with pronouns as well as proper nouns, the Ambassador kindly offers to let me just call her Gal Friday.

And Gal Friday assures me she is a her. I try to be diplomatic (using the simple standard that politeness involves referring to individuals by the pronoun they prefer rather than the pronoun you do) but political correctness and scent-based speech are inherently incompatible. However, Friday informs me that her species is sexually dimorphic (although not quite the same way we are) and she prefers the pronoun and gender-affiliation of She, especially after learning that the homonym of her name in AmEnglish has a similar gender affiliation.

The individual established, after a telepathic request Friday gives me a general history and explanation of its, her, species.

The R%ngo (pronunciation: *R-hfi-ngo*) got into space about the time Earth’s species could still walk from Africa to South America. They had been Promoted from sub-sentience into Sophoids by a race called the Salis, and with her olfactory voice I somehow formed an image of them. To sum them up in ten words or less: purple hairless warthogs with antennae, cybernetic attachments, and bad attitudes. Friday explained that her species had been Sophoids before, or at least archaeological evidence said so, but it was such a different kind of Sentience that they still wouldn’t have been able to communicate with the rest of the universe without the genetic alterations the Salis had performed on them. Since these are only theories, though, the

R%ngo are still indentured to them to this day, forced to obey any Salis in any reasonable capacity. It is not exactly slavery, but this precedent exists in the GCS so that species new to space will be reigned in before they make too big a mess as they enter the galaxy. The Salis, whose mores assert that anyone subservient is inherently inferior, greatly misuse this edict, while the R%ngo, abiding by principle, adhere to it strictly regardless of the difficulties. This adherence to intergalactic custom has given them a good reputation in the Commonwealth over the last few million years, in addition to making quite an impression on the universe as fair mediators and outstanding geneticists in their own right, and they are allowed more freedom than other races subjugated by the Salis because of it. They'd also created countless medical advances and some new kind of energy process that was powered not by heat or fusion but by Absolute Zero, which had revolutionized and economized space travel back when humanity was experimenting with the wheel and thinking maybe squares wouldn't do it after all. The R%ngo had recently come to Earth to study the possibility that our species had become Sentient without assistance. Proof that another race could do it alone would be good fuel for the eighty million year old lawsuit the R%ngo had been preparing against the Salis for reckless endangerment, unnecessary xenomorphism, and emotional anguish on a species-wide basis.

Afterwards we discuss the concept of Sophoids. Friday at first found it perplexing that I would want to cover the subject, considering it an exercise in solipsism, but I find it most enlightening.

Unfortunately, by the nature of her communication medium I am limited to a bowdlerized account, because an OptiComp does not record scents and my own head keeps swimming trying to adjust to the nasal overload and the peculiar déjà vu produced by interacting with her.

Finally, with the situation diffused to the point that I can ignore the peculiarity of speaking with a pheromone-spouting jellyfish, I ask the question that I've been wondering since before I got here. "Why did you want to see me?"

%celebrity% "I wished to congratulate you upon your new success and notoriety." Then she scents, %adoration% "I have recently been introduced to *Noir*, and love it," %delightful fantasy% "It is excellent fiction."

"Uh, even assuming I acknowledge knowing what *Noir* is, it's not fiction."

%?% "I do not understand." %conceptual impossibility% "A planet that is the member of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids cannot possibly maintain the attitudes and laws described in your article." %irrational% "Such a mindset is incompatible with the outlook of a Sophoid." %sophoid explanation % "The principle

attitude held sacrosanct is that one cannot harm another unwillingly, and the entire world you present in your article is one whose only outcome can be the harm of all.”

I feel slightly nauseous from that last outburst. It was an enormous concept for a single scent. I gasp, “Why did you call me again?”

!% “Ah” %daybreak surprise% “When I read the *Urban Chronicle* this morning and found your column in it,” %homage% I felt that I should congratulate you, the author, personally.”

Emotional back-peddle! How in the name of Buddha’s man-tits does everybody know me all of a sudden?!

%concern% “Are you upset?” %apologies% I am sorry if I caused any offense.”

“No, no, it’s...How did you know to find me?”

%explanation% “Because you are the writer.” %logical deduction% “Ergo you were whom I must contact.”

*Noir, January 3, 2150, Urban Chronicle (morning edition)*

Warning: today’s article is extra long. If you were planning to skim it through your AOLink on the hoverbus or during your sex break, I’d reconsider. The reason for the surfeit of wordage is because it is a hefty subject. Today I am not trying to teach you new things so much as to trying to make you forget something you learned wrong.

Who knows what a Sophoid is?

A Sophoid is not what you think. A Sophoid, for instance, is not someone who does not commit harm without permission. Or rather, it is, but not the way you think it is. I speak with some authority, having interviewed the extee Ambassador !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\* yesterday, and getting some very different answers than the ones I’ve been told.

The potential for sentience is limitless, so the definition for Sentience is infinite. There are aliens who think in every dimension, and only one dimension, and backwards through time, *etcetera*. The real definition of a Sophoid is a Rational and Thinking Being, and that takes a lot more explanation than the simple soundbyte most think.

A Sophoid cannot hurt another person without their permission.

This is absolutely true.

This is also absolutely false.

Thought, as the GCS defines it at its most basic, is the ability to comprehend at least some aspect of the universe in which one exists. This is nothing special: a flatworm exhibits some degree of thought. However, Sentient Thought with a capital T goes a bit farther, comprehending that one exists within the universe, and existing, has the ability to affect it. If you do not exhibit this ability, you are either



reacting purely on a stimulus-response, or are deranged, or else are actually absent from the universe. In any instance, you're no good to the Commonwealth or anyone else. To wit, mankind has officially been Pre-Sentient since Ancient Greece, whence were uttered the words *cogito ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am.

Rationality, by the distinction the GCS uses it, is a bit more complicated. It is the ability to consider all the consequences of one's actions. A Pre-Sentient being may realize that doing C causes D. A Quasi-Sentient being may realize that by doing C and causing D, you are also creating a situation in which D causes E, and, incidentally, eliminating the potential for C to cause F. Unclear enough yet? Well, it gets better. A truly Sentient, a truly Rational being, would realize that past circumstances, such as A and B, have led to the potential outcome for C to be realized. In causing C (and denying F and all the potentials of G through I that may cascade into existence), they are also enabling not only C to create D (and therefore E, and from E to J and onward through Z), but also the potential for D1, D2, D3, and so on, all of the way through the alphabet of experience.

Let me make it easier. A Thinking being knows it exists and that, in doing so, it has its place in the universe. A Rational being knows that its existence and its place in the universe hinge upon certain factors, and that changing those factors change both itself and its place. When one combines Rationality and Thought, only then is one able to truly exert their will on the universe and change it to their own vision. To exact change one must truly understand how things are (Thought) and how to change them effectively (Rationality). Without the one, we are like the Church in the Renaissance confronted with heliocentrism, believing that by denying evidence that the Earth circles the sun that it makes it untrue. Without the other, we are like the twencen politicians, enacting laws and regulations without any real idea of the actual results beyond a vague aim that almost never came to pass.

If you cannot understand yourself and your circumstances, or if you cannot understand how they came to be or how to change them, if you cannot even comprehend the simple precept that A is A, than the universe, according to the Galactic Commonwealth, essentially wants nothing to do with you. And who can blame them? You are either unwilling to savvy their language, so to speak, or else you are probably going to end up getting violent. One of the few truly universal truths is that anytime anyone has ever had to resort to violence, it is simply because either rationality or thought didn't pan out.

Which is not to say that Sophoids do not use violence. Several are very aggressive. The Darei have been known to blow up suns for entertainment. But in doing so they do not harm other Sophoids, and

here's where semantics gets slightly tricky.

The terms Quasi- and Pre-Sentient are misleading, as though they are degrees of differences rather than whole levels. By the philosophy of the GCS, the universe is exactly as it is supposed to be. Non-Sentients, like an animal, literally cannot be Sentient. Someone labeled Pre-Sentient can conceive of Sentience, but their own perspective (due to culture or mindset), cannot allow them to utilize or employ it in any reliable way. A Quasi-Sentient, meanwhile, is simply a Sentient being unwilling to act in a Sentient way. Unlike the Non-Sentient, the Quasi-Sentient and Pre-Sentient act that way because it is the way they want to be. Wars were fought because people wanted to fight. Pure and simple. From president to private, they considered all the options they had and found fighting to be less problematic than letting Communism domino out of control or getting shot for treason or forgoing slavery or whatever other excuse for which wars are fought. If we were Non-Sentient, we would not be *capable*, via biology or upbringing, to consider enough other options. These lesser terms explain simply that they were not *willing*. Violence is always an option. It is usually, however, the option that means that you have given up looking for anything better.

So if everything in the universe is exactly the way it is supposed to be, and everybody in the universe is, if not happy with their lot in life, than at least content enough with their misfortune not to rock the boat, then *you truly cannot hurt somebody without their permission*. And part of that means that if you *do* get hurt, it was because you *wanted* to get hurt and acted irrationally or unthoughtfully enough to allow it to happen.

A Sophoid, for instance, *can* hurt another Sophoid. The clause that we tack on is that they cannot do it without permission, which is why euthanasia is still legal but the death penalty is not. It is actually worlds more complicated than that. For instance, someone who commits criminal activities could easily be said to be giving their permission, since by willingly shirking the laws under which they live they are admitting culpability to be punished for violating those laws.

The purpose of existence is to exist. Anything beyond that is perspective. Life justifies itself. Simply put, even by just sitting there you are enacting your will upon the universe by taking up space where something that does not exist might. Every action, even the basic perpetuation of being, leads to consequences. Being a Sophoid means linking Rationality and Thought, the potential to truly understand the consequences of those actions as well as the ability to select those actions and accept the consequences they bring, not only to yourself but to the entire cosm, microcosm, or macrocosm that those decisions affect: your cells, your love life, your family, your planet, your universe, your soul, your past and your future and, most

importantly, the present.

The point of being a Sophoid is not that you don't hurt others. It is that you don't want to. You search for the other possible options that the universe presents because all those options allow another being to enable their options upon the universe. It is just common courtesy. But a Sophoid can commit harm or even kill without explicit "permission," even when the basic moral tone of Sentience would tend to argue against it, because by truly analyzing and accepting that there is no other possible option, they acknowledge their own culpability in committing murder. Except, by the standards of a true Sophoid, *that is not murder*. Because the one being killed has, through their own Rational and Thinking motives (limited though they may be), moved themselves into a position where harm is the only reasonable alternative left. They have, in effect, given permission to be hurt or even killed.

You didn't want the Darei to blow up your sun? What steps did you take to prevent it?

Being a Sophoid is infinitely more complicated than simply doing no harm without permission. It is comprehending the universe as it truly is and exerting your will upon it. Sentient beings act; non-Sentients react. A non-Sentient being has their life dictated to them; a Sophoid writes their own fate. The one and only prerequisite to becoming a member of the Commonwealth is, when you get right down to it, no whiners allowed. The universe does not include a "no-fair" clause.

Heady thoughts. Now on to practical ones.

The SCC has given us our idea of what constitutes a Sophoid. The actual definition is technically correct, but still light-years away from being accurate. The difference between the two has one very interesting exclusion: the way the SCC puts it, people should be placid and non-violent. The way the GCS puts it, people are *currently acting* placid and non-violent. One view actively encourages you to exert your will, and the other actively encourages you not to. Guess which is which? And guess just why the SCC phrased it that way?

Furthermore, the Solar Corporate Council has gone to great lengths to abuse their power and the people they rule. They have removed our basic liberties, violated our dignity, and stolen our freedom. We have let a body of three thousand powerful people (and, even more narrowly, eight incredibly powerful people) exert their will upon us and change the world into what they want.

This leaves two possibilities, both disturbing. Either humanity is not truly Sentient, for we have allowed ourselves into this position without exhibiting the Thought or Reason to foresee these consequences, or else we are Sentient, and this horrible, oppressive state of affairs is exactly the way we want it to be.

I'm not sure which is worse.

*Lansing ETR: 12h53, January 2, 2150*

Gal Friday, having dropped her bombshell, waits patiently for me to respond. Even before accepting this invitation I knew that at some point the other shoe was going to drop, but I hadn't expected it to sound like my *nom de plume*.

I realize that I'm using a lot of 'dropping' metaphors. I attribute it to the sinking feeling in my gut.

"Me? I don't write Noir!" I pray that diplomats don't have their quarters tapped. "No, the writer is Jack Noir!"

Friday exuded something that felt like confusion: %?% Then, %comprehension% "Ah." %dual nature% "You hide under a pseudonym." %inquiry% "Why, may I ask?"

"Um, because it's illegal to write without a license, and I don't have one. At least," I suddenly remember, the knot in my stomach loosening, "I didn't until yesterday."

%limited comprehension% "I...understand." %confusion% "But why is it illegal?" %sentience?% "Humans are Sophoids, Sentience beings of Rational Thought." %inherent contradiction% "Your method of speech is already so limited in its auditory nature, that to further limit freedom of speech and expression denies freedom of such thought."

"Yes, well, every Sentient Citizen of Earth does have freedom of speech. But only Citizens are Sentient. Breeders and Civilians are classified as Quasi-Sentient, and granted similar but limited rights. Denizens and Tenants, and the Sewer Mutants I suppose, are considered Non-Sentient or Pre-Sentient, and granted everything that entails, which is really nothing. No one is tortured or killed for what they say, but there are other punishments: dropped credit rating, forced relocation. And of course, if one's complaints step on any important toes, there's always Prohibition."

%?%

"You don't know about Prohibition?"

%confusion%

I explain.

%disquiet% "This is disturbing news." From the scent of her speech, if she had a brow it would be furrowed. %professed ignorance% "I had not known of this." %confusion over tolerance% "Why do your people allow such a thing?"

I shrug morosely. "The Solar Corporate Council decrees, and Special Services backs it up. Everybody else is frightened enough or bovine complacent enough that they obey."

%paradoxical behavior% "How odd that such an advanced

society should resort to such primitive propaganda.”

I chuckle. “You’re the first person I’ve met who recognizes that. If you were human, Friday, I’d marry you.”

She shifts a subtle shade of blue and says, %flattered% “Thank you, Ctn. Down.”

“Call me Haiku,” I smile, and wonder at myself for doing so. I have not invited anyone to use my first name, have generally taken it as a reason to draw blood, for so long that I cannot believe how easily the phrase rolls off my tongue.

She emits a pheromone that I smell but somehow don’t and suddenly realize that it is the scent of myself, my own scent. %Haiku% “Haiku.” Then she emits %pleasure%, and I realize that I am experiencing conversation as true R%ngo do, with the complete understanding that comes from knowing someone’s true state of mind. I am pleasantly surprised at how enjoyable it is to know someone and be known thoroughly. I had been of the assumption from the literature on Psi that true telepathy would be a nightmare, the truest type of rape to be known inside and out. But then, this isn’t telepathy, it is at most telempathy. Regardless, it is still the best conversation I can ever recall having, with this wise, witty, pheromonal alien.

Friday quivers, like jello in a slight breeze. %inquiry% “How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?”

%truth% “To be who you are?”

“What do you mean?”

%differences% “We are a very different people, and you do not speak the language of scent with the facile subtlety of which it is capable.” %clarification% “You shout out your intentions with your odor.” %dichotomy% “But even so, I sense that your self, the essential person that is Haiku Down, does not smell right.” %empathic rapport% “I think now that I know why,” %self/not self% “for you force yourself into that which is only half yourself.”

“God’s teeth, Friday, you sound like a shrink,” and that reminds me that I have that appointment in a few hours.

Her flagella droop slightly. %barrier% “But now you are back to your half-self again. %preference% “I liked your true scent much better.”

“Um, right.” I am sure that it is clear that I have no idea what she is talking about, and am surprised that she does not smell that and clarify, as she has done for so much else. Perhaps it is a barrier arising simply because she is alien and has alien thought; she doesn’t help me to understand because she can’t understand that I can’t understand. No doubt all the contrasting motivations and drives and thoughts of a human brain must be a little hard to sort out.

Before we can go further, however, a rob servant from outside knocks to remind !ngal'l Ph4-rroid'ai\* of an appointment of her own very soon. %importance% "This is a very significant appointment," %obligation% "which I fear I cannot miss." %apologies, Haiku% "Please forgive me, Haiku." %regret% "I enjoy your company, and wish you could stay for longer." %explanation for intent of forgiveness% "As your invitation was open, I did not know to schedule around your visit."

"S'okay, really, Friday. It's been a rare and true pleasure meeting you."

%reciprocity% "The same." I turn to go, but feel a tentacle touch my leg. %caution Haiku% "Haiku, please...be careful." %warning% "You have the scent of one headed for danger."

I do not get a chance to reply before the robot servant knocks again. %\$@^!% Friday swears, in a curse the translator doesn't vocalize but which I would really like to learn; it's the olfactory equivalent of nails on a chalkboard or a flash of phosphate. %unavoidable responsibility Haiku% "I am afraid we must truly part now, Haiku," %coy open invitation% "but I would be...pleased for you to visit me again at any time." %flirtatious emphasis% "Very pleased."

And suddenly it hits me, like the fists of an enraged father at a shotgun wedding: *Gal Friday is flirting with me!* I am not sure whether to feel bemused or frightened or creeped out or flattered, and I'm sorry that she instantly knows that. This is probably why R%ngo are unisexual; I cannot imagine the hell of knowing exactly what someone I was flirting with was thinking at exactly the moment they thought it, although now I'm sure I will have nightmares about it, like falling or being naked in public. Instead I smile, nod, and bow as genteelly as I can. Friday has been diplomatic all this time; the least I can do is return the favor. "Thank you, Ambassador. I would like that." And I know that she knows that, at least, is true. "It's been fun. I'll see you."

%leave-taking% "Farewell..." And as I leave, I get a distinct whiff of %friend-with-potential%, though the translator she wears simply vocalizes it as "Haiku."

I am so unsettled that I do not even react as I see Chairperson Bobert Smythe waiting outside.

Bobert Smythe, standing almost face-to-face, in the flesh, surrounded unfortunately by almost a dozen goons with over-Splyzed muscles who do not look like they would go down before I could get to him. The head shareholder of the Solar Corporate Council does indeed qualify as an important visitor. With self-preservation forcing my eager fingers away from the Ugly-gun in my pocket, all I can do is ask, "So, how was Tahiti?"

Smythe grins. “Well, well. Haiku Down. Welcome to the team. Enjoying life on the other side?” He comes close to me, and from a strange sheen of reflected light I see that he is wearing a thin force-shield around him. A Mil-Shield Suit© I assume, since that is the best and most expensive model, a nigh-invisible layer of nanites that puts kevlar to shame, surrounding the body and instantly dismantling anything within three centimeters more threatening than a brisk wind. Not quite unwary enough to move out completely from behind his bodyguards, he asks, “So, I’m curious, mal to mal, did you do it?”

Considering how weirded out I already feel by Friday’s proposal, Smythe’s insinuation hits hard. Even with the futility of fighting goons and a Mil-Shield Suit, plus whatever weapons and protections Smythe keeps on or near his person, it is hard not to lunge.

Smythe chuckles. “You know, even considering the problem involved, I don’t really even mind if you did. Be seeing you, Ctn. Down.” He and his goons disappear into the Ambassador’s bizarre edifice.

I am thankful for the long walk back to the front gate, not only to cool down but also for the opportunity to collect my thoughts and figure out exactly how I do feel about a flirtatious alien. It’d be one thing if she was shaped like Farrah Sumner on the incredibly farfetched and entirely inaccurate show *Space Opera*, with blue skin and an otherwise human, albeit incredibly well endowed, figure. Regardless of the final twist, though, I am glad at the chance to meet any alien, let alone one as, well, *human* as Ambassador Gal Friday.

On my way out, I am passed by a parade of alien creatures that are far too smelly and scaly to act as pompous as they do, heading towards Friday’s demesnes, presumably part of the important delegation she had to see too. I admire her for her work, but also wonder just how sincerely she meant that she enjoyed my company if I lost out to these guys.

Before I leave the ETR I decide to make a stop by the Trosnolosian part of the dome. Unfortunately, what Trosnolosians find comfortable equals thrice my gravity and a methane atmosphere, and I do not feel like getting another detox and a massive gene Splyze. I resolve that the next time I visit Friday, which I realize with some surprise that I have already decided to do, I will be sure to bring the gas gun filled with a particular pheromone Trosnolosians emit to help them relax enough to defecate. I’ve still got an axe to grind with that species for their Ambassador’s remark about how humans smell.

*Noir, January 4, 2142*

So who remembers Drake?

No, not that Sydney Drake sinceleeb kid on that insufferable alternative reality show *Post-Apocalyptic Survivor*©. Or the Sambo-style Nabu Drake-Drake character from the thirty-fourth installment of *Star Wars*©. Not even Sir Francis Drake, assuming anyone even guessed that.

I am actually referring to twencen astronomer Frank Drake. Duh.

Since forever people had been looking up to the stars and wondering if there was something or someone up there. Aliens. Extraterrestrials. UFOs. Of course we know there are *now*, but way back when there was a time we'd never met any extees and we had no idea about the barrier around the solar system that the GCS commonly puts around developing worlds to prevent alien interference in a pre-Sentient species' evolution and vice-versa. People were for all intents alone in the universe and dreamed of the many myriad kinds of aliens we might meet. From little green men to thirty-foot tripods to Klingons to insectoids to Greys to beings bathed in light, we imagined all sorts of aliens (few nearly as weird as aliens really ended up). We dreamed of a universe counter to scientific findings, populated by every sort of alien, a limitless number of varied beings.

But where the aitch were they?

It was the Fermi Paradox, thought up by Enrico Fermi, a physicist who looked around and, quite logically, concluded that if the universe really was as old as we thought it was and intelligence as common as we supposed it must be, where the devil was everybody? Or as he put it, "the commonly held belief that the universe has many technologically advanced civilizations, combined with our lack of observational evidence to support that view, is paradoxical. Either this assumption is incorrect - and intelligent life is much rarer than we believe - or our current observations are flawed or otherwise incomplete" [[link eLink.en.fermi\\_paradox.com](http://eLink.en.fermi_paradox.com)]. It turned out that our observations were flawed. But how could we have known that?

Frank Drake answered that question.

He created the Drake equation, which reads as follows:

$$N = R_* \cdot f_p \cdot n_e \cdot f_i \cdot f_c \cdot L$$

$N$  = Number of civilizations in the Milky Way with detectable radio emissions.

$R_*$  = Rate of formation of stars that might support planets with intelligent life.

$f_p$  = Fraction of these stars that have planets.

$n_e$  = Number of  $f_p$  planets per star system that have basic conditions necessary for life.



$f_1$  = Fraction of  $n_c$  planets where life actually develops  
 $f_i$  = Fraction of  $f_1$  planets where intelligent life develops.  
 $f_c$  = Fraction of  $f_i$  planets where technology advanced enough for space exploration develops.  
 $L$  = Length of time the civilization on the planets lasts.

In other words, Drake finally thought up a way to get a decently good estimate of how much life there was in the universe and how intelligent it was. And how MUCH there had to be of it. At its most optimistic Drake's equation suggested it was feasible for there to be parallel intelligence on one in every two stars in the galaxy – though he eventually settled on 10,000 civilizations exactly like ours – and even at its most pessimistic no scientist ever came right out against the sheer probability and seriously suggested we were totally alone. Even if you just plug the number 5 in each category, there would be a total number of 78,125 planets – in this galaxy *alone* – with someone out there to talk to. Of course, Drake didn't go far enough, because he didn't think to include the variable  $C_i$ , for the length of time a civilization would hold the interest to explore space, or  $g_c$  for government conspiracy, the likelihood that aliens were already on Earth and had made secret deals with the government to keep the masses unaware, up to and including destroying photographs from the Hubble telescope that included a UFO filled with extees doing their planet's equivalent of pressing ham to the portholes.

Time has passed, and although Drake has obviously been forgotten to the ages (c'mon, Drake-Drake?! Why would *I* want to talk about Drake-Drake?!) his equation remains valid.

Now I see you even more confused than when I mention Sir Francis. How is it that this twencen scientist who has never had even one movie made about him is still relevant? Well, look up to the skies, you nitwits, ideally wearing some of those goggles that filter out smog so that you can actually see the stars. There ARE aliens up there. Drake's equation is no longer just some sci-fi *otaku* attempt to express a congenial conclusion. It is the beginnings of cultural mathematics on a galactic basis.

You're still confused. I'll rephrase it.

Why didn't aliens ever conquer the Earth?

There are plenty of extees up there, far more than 78,125 species and closer to a hundred times that many just in this galaxy, to say nothing of those in neighboring bubble universes, higher dimensions, alternate realities, and those from the past and future. Granted, the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids maintains pretty good control over who interacts with pre-Sentients or quasi-Sentients (i.e. most of us), but not all aliens are in the GCS, and the argument that Earth was too small and troublesome to bother conquering is just

as easily turned around to suggest it was too small and troublesome to bother to protect.

The real reason is Drake's equation.

Look at the L again, the length of time the civilization lasts. Drake intended to intimate that an alien species may indeed contact us one day only to find Earth in the grips of nuclear winter (which in fact technically it is, except that global warming has balanced it out). However, this L factor works both ways, and does not necessarily mean the end of a species, just the end of a *culture*. Due to the enormous distances involved, the only time it will *ever* be feasible to conquer another planet is when one is so stretched for resources on their own planet (and moon, and the rest of the solar system, and asteroids and comets nearby) that there is no other option. Back before FTL travel it would have taken 5.2 years MINIMUM to get to the closest inhabited planet, Alpha Centauri, and just as long getting back, and with the laws of relativity still absolute those on Earth would be waiting centuries for their return. The only way space conquest becomes feasible is with the creation of Faster Than Light travel, and by the time one has created an energy source powerful enough to warp space/time, it is still easier to create the resources you need than to go steal them. Don't believe me? Go look at your Shaper. With Shaper technology, it is less costly to terraform a nearby planet than to conquer a distant one. The only remaining reasons to go conquer a planet are religion, the drive for conquest, or xenophobia, and that's about the point where a species meets the GCS who offer a standard of living too good to pass up if they'll just stop. And if not, the GCS reinforces that barrier around the solar system with a few octodecatillion robotic battleships to keep these stellar warhawks away from more civilized Sophoids. Essentially, by the time a species is even capable of trying to mount a serious expedition outside their solar system, their culture is no longer really set up to exploit it.

Then there's the other end of the spectrum, the species so advanced that they could overcome us instantly, millions of years older than us with technology that looks like magic. Why didn't they ever conquer us? Because of L. They had advanced so far that they were beyond even wanting to. They were beyond us in this factor, as in everything else. It would be like conquering an ant hill and proclaiming yourself lord of all insects.

Frank Drake set about to explain just what might be out there, and in the attempt succeeded far better than he could have imagined. The point?

Today a minor Representative of the Solar Corporate Council (named, coincidentally enough, Drake P. Diddy) suggested funding a committee to explore the feasibility of Earth (a planet possessing the

technological ability to replicate any material) using our lofty position in the GCS to exploit other worlds for resources and gain. Drake P. Diddy, incidentally, owns a large percentage of Space Fleet® Corps, a company that would be the most likely to get the contract to build our hypothetical interstellar armada. Diddy is not, it should be noted, a Nabu like Drake-Drake, although with this suggestion he has proven himself so blindingly stupid as to risk our status as Sophoids in order to line his own pockets that it is certainly easy to make that mistake.

We salute you, Frank Drake, for searching for intelligence in the stars. Meanwhile, we continue to search for it in our government.

*Tram R4-a Eastbound: 13h53, January 2, 2150*

It is faster to catch a train than to wait for a cab, and as I head home I am willing to just lean back and absorb the entire implications of my interview with the R%ngo. The warning she gave me about smelling like I was headed for danger was particularly disturbing, especially because it is not entirely infeasible. Quantum science, Psitech, and aliens who experience time differently all indicate the validity of precognition, and that Probability Matrix that scientists created back in the '70s, completely accurate for up to five minutes and getting better all the time, implied that mankind's free will was a lot less absolute than we'd hoped. I try reflecting on more pleasant thoughts, such as all the things I wish I'd thought to say to Smythe, while blithely watching the ancient MotionPicture© screens outside the tram hurl silently strobing 2D advertisements as we pass by.

My thoughts are interrupted by a Re-An, dressed as a coachman and holding a phonepad. I hate zombies. Not because I feel it is desecration to inject nanites into dead bodies to animate them until they fall apart. Technically, the SCC owns everybody, and just because someone has died doesn't mean that credit doesn't have to be worked off. Zombies are perfect for simple, repetitive, mindless tasks like assembly or fast food, because they follow orders and don't stop until they fall over. Robots need time to recharge and cost a lot more than the reanimated, so, bizarre as it sounds, robots are beginning to find themselves obsolete. It is not the sacrilege or the economic aspect that I find so disquieting about zombies, though. I don't like the blighters because, well, they molt. And the formaldehyde cologne doesn't help any.

The zombie holds out the phonepad and moans, "Phooooone caaaaaallll, siiiiiirrrr."

"Tell whoever it is to go piss up a rope."

With the unrelenting persistence of someone whose brain decayed three months ago, the zombie repeats, a little louder,

“Phooooone caaaalllllll, siiiirrrrr.”

I sigh heavily and grudgingly accept the call, just to get him to go away. As he turns to go, he leaves a bit of himself behind. Re-Ans: the gift that keeps on giving.

I wish I'd refused more strenuously. As the hologram pops up from the phonepad, I find myself in a position that I loathe beyond words: staring face to face with my brother, Evangelion Down.

Though Eva and I are biological brothers, we are nothing at all alike. With a Japanese mother and an Irish father (a fabulous combination if ever there was one) we should appear faint-Eastern. But while he looks pure Japanese, I look every part the Irish, down to red hair and green eyes before I Splyzed them both black years ago. Although my eyelids upturn slightly round the edges and Eva freckles with too much sun, in all other respects it is as though our parents' hated each other so much that even their genetic traits refused to cooperate and instead just split right down the middle. And that's hardly the only way we differ. Evangelion has more in common with certain strains of bacteria than he does with me. He enjoys his life of sloth and indulgence. I hate the little *lǎn chóng*, and because I love him I hate him even more. The last time I saw him was eight months ago, the last time his girlfriend, Manga Andertondotcom, had snuck past Porter's filter program. He looks good, though, like he's cleaned himself up. Maybe Manga straightened him up a bit after all. I decide to be a little more cordial than normal.

“Go the eff away, Eva.”

He looks genuinely shocked, which in turn genuinely shocks me. Eva's attention span is so laconic that I haven't been able to disturb him since I was three, when I shat in dad's shoe for grounding me from playing VR games. “You said I should come over.” Ess, I did, didn't I? “From what I've heard I thought you might like some family.”

“What are you babbling about, Brother?”

“About Desmond Arc.”

Inadvertently, I laugh. *Bikkuri shita; shinjirarenai*. My brother, ladies and gentlemen. Eva has always managed to surprise me. The little bleepard is actually worried about Desmond having found out about me. “Don't worry, Eva. I already went to work on him. I didn't hurt him nearly as bad as he deserved.”

“Haiku! This is serious trouble!”

“No, for a Tenant like you, and a Denizen like I was, it is serious trouble. But I am a Citizen now Eva, and was before I shot him. My karma is unlimited.” The holo starts skipping and fritzing; I suppose the train must be going near a fusion generator. Rather than suffer through the static, I say, “Listen, I'll talk with you later. If you drop by bring Manga so I'll be obliged to be polite and not shoot

you.” Before he can say anything else, I end the holo and hang up the phonepad. The zombie is waiting a few meters away but refuses to acknowledge that I’m done, so I just toss the phone in his general direction and assume he’ll figure it out eventually. What’s the worst they’ll do, after all, kill him?

I spend the rest of the train staring at the sleeping man across from me who has Splyzed himself purple skin and has had a television implanted in his stomach. After a few minutes, I tire of the old action film playing and demand at gunpoint that he changes his belly to something less insipid.

*Noir, August 24, 2142*

Today I saw a commercial for a body suit that can let you walk through walls.

Today I saw a commercial for a pill that can make you see Kirlian auras.

Today I saw a commercial for a fast-food restaurant called McClones™ that serves burgers of any artificially cloned animal you could imagine. Their motto is, I do not jest: “Everything from aardvark to zebra.”

Today I saw a commercial in which an overweight, out-of-work actress wept crocodile tears and asked for our donations, just a fraction of a cred a day, to donate to the Save-the-Sewer-Mutants Fund.

Today I saw a commercial for a company that specializes in cloning, called the Clone Now™ Corporation. They pride themselves on being the ultimate in hand-me-down genes.

Today I saw commercials for products, for politician, for philosophies. There were commercials for the Church of Thor and commercials for the Temple of Asmodeus and commercials for the Synagogue of the Jewish Christ. Commercials for the Turbo Ginsu 5000X© and downloadable iKnow Kung-Fu© DataJax to make you proficient in any martial art and something called the TekSex Patch© you can slap on any rob that temporarily reorganizes the structure of their Five Laws programming to turn it into a willing sexbot. Commercials for color-coded vaginal disinfectants and technorganic hallucinogens and painted plates with homoerotic themes starring famous American presidents. Commercials for new computers and musical AELs and a Splyze that can let you pick up television in your eyelids. Commercials on the Mass Hypnosis Program that wouldn’t let you look away and programs your subconscious to want to watch more of the Mass Hypnosis Program. Commercials for shows, and commercials between shows for other shows, and even commercials about upcoming commercials!

A minimum of 27.75 minutes of every hour of television is dedicated to commercials by SCC mandate (666 minutes a day. I cannot imagine that is coincidence). That's excluding, of course, whatever product placement a particular show may include, or the cross-promotions or the translucent 3D advertising holograms that on some channels that only come into focus when you stop focusing exactly on the screen. The average person watches nine hours of television a day. So by a good estimate, that's over forty million hours over the course of the average hundred seventy-some year human life. In other words, a little under twenty percent of your life is spent watching commercials. And listening, too, since mute buttons were classified as unpatriotic.

And that's just the television people intend to watch! Consider the TVs on every other step of the sidewalk, TVs in your car, train, bus, or cab, TVs in the corner of your computer, and those infuriating holographic ones that just pop up out of nowhere while you're walking down the street. All spouting commercials for a minimum of twenty-eight minutes every hour...

Then there are all the printed commercials. Not a square centimeter of the City is safe, plastered with an advertisement for a soft drink or a Splyze or a gun or the latest fall-fashions. It is impossible not to step outside without being bombarded by ad after ad after ad, to the point that most people don't even perceive them anymore. But they see them, oh yes...

Plus, let's not forget the ethereal Link. With 240 Gb of information a second passing straight into our brains from your AOLink, how much would you estimate is pure spam? Answer: a lot more than you'd think. To get beyond standard filters, a lot of spamware spreads itself out, so that perhaps one in every ten thousand bytes is part of an advertisement for new rain gutters or penis patches. Think that's too spread apart for your brain to find it? Your brain can tell the difference between hexadecimal colors spaced right next to each other, and hexadecimal is ten times more complex. If you're reading this onLink, by the time you've reached this point, mark, you've been exposed to AT LEAST thirty-seven different advertisements *without your realizing it!*

For the few lingering erudite *literatis* out there, the average magazine has three advertisement on every page, one full-page ad every five. Newspapers generally include more coupons than news articles. Books these days are sorted by publisher instead of author. And holobooks pause between reading for regularly scheduled commercials.

Not to mention all those perfectly legal subliminal advertisements. Admittedly, subliminal messages cannot force you to buy anything, cannot change the way you think. But they can tell your

brain a hundred times a second about a product. It can't make you buy the product, but it can make sure that one brand name or another is on your lips when you do go out to purchase it. Exposure to a fact ten thousand times makes it a fact, even if it is just that you're in good hands with Allstate™.

And that just covers the classic methods of advertising promulgation. Until the government made it illegal, if only to save everybody's sanity, every business owned by Chairperson al'Chevron was promoted by swarms of Splyzed flies that buzzed around advertising goods and services. Meme bombs can actually force an idea into your brain. Several condos, for people seeking to escape apartment living, will demand that their members only buy from a particular corporation and its partners and subsidiaries. Down in the Ozarks, a ten year feud still lingers between the McDonalds and the Kings.

All aimed at you, dear reader. All intent on getting into your head and getting a message to you and getting your credit. Every single human being on the planet is in debt for three generations for the materialistic overindulgence of their forebears, and they still want you in just a little bit deeper, want to own you just a little bit more. It doesn't matter if a product didn't exist yesterday, if it serves no function and even causes harm; you'll see so many commercials that by the end of the day you'll need it, physically crave it, and never understand how you were possibly able to live without it. The Corporate Council controls a population of a hundred billion brainwashed consumers who serve no function but to spend and buy.

And if anyone out there doubts me, if anyone has the audacity to question me, or think me a crackpot or a paranoid or an outright liar for suggesting that they've been brainwashed into thinking and believing things they don't believe, if anyone has even the slightest iota of doubt that this nonstop cascading avalanche of advertisements has gotten into their gray matter and altered their pitifully malleable head-thoughts with Svengali-like hypnotic control, I want everybody to sing with me now:

"My baloney has a first name..."

*78428 Eastgrove: 14h49, January 2, 2150*

The train delivers me three blocks from my apartment complex. The reddish sun, all that can usually be seen past the layers of satellites and pollution, is hidden behind dark clouds of green; looks like rain. As I am without protective gear, I sprint the three blocks, hitting the door just before the sky opens up and starts to pour.

People scream as the corrosive cloudburst erupts from above, showering their bare skin with acid rain and leaving heavy burns

wherever the acrid water touches.

Well, what the aitch. I've got it and I ought to get my one good deed of the year out of the way early. I pull out my Icer, set the gun to a wide dispersal pattern at -20°C, and spray a thick wide spread above the sky between buildings, providing a protected layer of solid ice for those who cannot get to shelter and those who have no shelter to get to.

Some people begin to applaud and yell thanks. I am not in the mood for human contact so I display my middle finger, otherwise ignoring them, and walk inside.

The building's Concierge AI program is again on the fritz, and I have to hack my way around it, simultaneously inserting a command for it to hire a doorman or security guard so whoever moves into my old box needn't put up with this sort of aggravation.

I finally get inside and get on the elevator. The elevator's voice was originally tuned to simulate a polite British domestic, but I tweaked the AEI that controls all the elevators on this block months ago and now they all sound and act like a disreputable Liverpool punk with three teeth and fewer karma points. "Whachoo wan', gov'ner?" it demands.

"Take me to my box."

"Bugga ya boox," it derides, but while it is programmed to act unfriendly, it cannot actually create havoc, and takes me up.

The elevator doors open on my floor, granting access to a small hallway with four doors. As a Denizen, I lived in a square building, each floor with a square apartment at each corner. Tenants live in triangular apartments with sixteen rooms to a floor; Civilians in hexagonal, six equal-sized rooms each floor and an equally large hallway; Breeders in large octagonal rooms, four huge rooms to a floor with a square hallway in the center and often a balcony outside; and Citizens live in circular buildings that occupy the entire story. The official reason for this geometric discrimination is that this grants more space to those who contribute more as well as making buildings fit better. The actual reason is that holograms simply work better when everything is equidistant from the center, so the closer to a circle, the better the picture.

Most of the building's scanners recognize me immediately and automatically deactivate the alarms, but I also use fingerprint, retinal, Kirlian, voice print and passcode to unlock my own box. It is only when the door opens to reveal an empty room that I immediately recognize my own stupidity. "Oh, shazbat," I curse, recalling that I no longer technically live here, and take the elevator down two floors where I can connect to a neighboring cylindrical building, my new Class A apartment.

The vacuum tube is fast, but the elevator is comfortably slow



considering that I'm ascending forty stories. I marvel that such an inept toady as Danael Mars can be responsible for getting the move done so quickly; no doubt the rob secretary Kareen had more to do with it. The elevator doors opens to a hallway doubtlessly riddled with security equipment to keep out undesirable elements (which, until recently, included me). I am able to see traces of neuro-disruption gas releasers, sonic emitters, and good old-fashioned lasers to simply splice any intruder until they've been dissevered into their component atoms. God alone knows what other malevolently lethal implements of war and destruction are hidden behind these walls.

I think I'm gonna like it here.

The door opens at my approach, something Porter has never been able to accomplish before without a palm-print. Actually, I realize, the entire outside hallway was a hologram, and I am actually already in my apartment, the façade a means of keeping out unwell-come visitors to this entire floor that is my new box. I realize this just after I realize how perfectly rendered my parlor appears. It is almost too big, at least ten times as large as my old box, and I get the impression that if I commanded it, the hologram could stretch out forever.

"Sam!" I summon.

"Sam-I-am!" My Butler AEI replies immediately, actually appearing before me as a holographic simage. Until now Sam has always been a disembodied voice; I am startled to see that his image of himself is an almost exact replica of me, minus fifteen or so years. "Spiffy digs, fearless leader. I've got enough drive space here to replicate World Wars I through III in their entirety and still have enough left over to let me rub my tummy, pat my head, and run six trillion mathematical simulations without any lag time."

"And simulate yourself, I see."

He admires himself. "Yup! You like? Hey, Porter, pop in here, will you?"

A holographic fem appears. She is small and lithe and has golden yellow curls and porcelain pale skin, the kind not seen very often in nature any longer with so few thoroughbred Anglos lefts. I am not the least bit shocked to learn that Porter thinks of herself as a grown-up version of Shirley Temple. "Look at me, Ctn. Down! I'm so adorable!"

"Gravy. Sam, I want a grilled cheese sandwich. Produce it."

As Sam and Porter clasp each other and begin to dance with joy – a tango playing in the background – the Shaper hums and my sandwich appears. It is crisp and laden, just the way I like it, and there is even a sweet pickle on the plate to the side. Sam, for the first time in months, is functioning perfectly.

I grab my sandwich, bite, it is delicious. "How are my babies,

Sam?”

“All present and accounted for, *mon capitan*,” he replies, dipping Porter. “One rob mover dropped that strap of grenades, but on the bright side, your revenge was enacted upon it instantly.”

“*Đo các thúi*. Well, I didn’t like that grenade strap anyway. It made me look fat. Bring up my living room.”

A few million billion meters of pillows and cushions appear. My old living room, only ten meters each way, looked nowhere near as gargantuan as this setting, even using holograms. And until now I had not realized how *fake* everything in my old box looked; now, looking close, I can see each individual thread on every pillow, and wonder how I allowed myself to live such a lie before. I plop; it is the most comfortable thing upon which my posterior has ever sat, excluding the lap of Ysabella DeSantes at that Secular Winter Holiday party nine years ago. I move to rise, and find that I cannot, this pad has so perfectly matched my contours that I have no traction. As it starts to massage my lower back, I decide that there are worse things I could be doing than sitting here. If SCC wishes to buy me off, a gilded cage is a better deal than I had before.

I take another bite of my sandwich, and smile. I have retained what minor shreds of sanity to which I lay claim by enjoying the simple pleasures of life; in this new box, my simple pleasures have been redefined to paradisiacal proportions.

I am beginning to think that, despite all evidence to the contrary, they were right when they said that life was good. Then the tango disappears and so do the holograms of my AEIs and Porter’s nervous feminine voice interrupts my Thoreau-esque bliss to nervously inform me, “Ctzn. Down. You have visitors. Regulators Hawthorne and Sobolov, from Special Services.”

And then it is official: God hates me.

*Noir, March 27, 2148*

I have whined before, dear reader, about the inadequacies of our civilization. I have cried to the heavens at mankind’s folly. I have ~~bitched~~ and moaned, often with cause. But today I am forced to retract my words.

Since the Scientific Revolution, mankind’s biggest problem is that it has not been able to evolve fast enough to keep pace with its technology. Consider that caveman those time-viewing historians discovered, Yurrip. Yurrip was the first human being to use a piece of sharpened wood to create a spear. After he made it, he stared at it for several hours, decided to try to get a closer look, and quickly died as he plunged it into his eye socket.

Yurrip was an ~~effing~~ moron. Total *đuần lù*. Cloned meat has a

higher I.Q. than he did. But he invented the spear. And the next Neolith to come by who found Yurrip figured out that he could use a spear to kill things, and spread the word. It wasn't for another several thousand years that anyone thought to put a sharpened rock at the front to make it stronger, or progress to an axe or atlatl or bows and arrows. Because it took time for humanity, still very young in those days, to adapt to the effects this new technology had upon it. Same with fire, the wheel, and so on. These were all very gradual advancements that took us all a great deal of time to get used to, eugenically speaking.

Both technology and man continued to slowly evolve, one helping the other. But while man evolved at a fairly steady pace, technology did so exponentially, to the point that today knowledge now doubles every minute.

However, I say that mankind has redeemed itself because it has made machines that understand us completely, even though we no longer understand them. How many of you could repair a car, or even drive a car without thought-transfer? But your Butler AEI knows exactly what you want and when you want it, often even without your having to ask.

Today I tried to shoot myself after I learned that that Anti-Semitic, chauvinistic, testosterone-laden, *guài wù*, necrophilic pederast Tylor Woodbrooke was elected (okay, bought his way) into office as mayor of Chicago, granted full reign to freely *bakku no oshiri* with a few million people, and I would rather die than live in a world with this ~~Nazi bastard~~ can screw with me and mine. However, even though euthanasia is not only legally sanctioned but often politically encouraged, my House AEI, the one that watches my stuff and my vitals, enacted the Nullifier that made every gun useless. When I tried leaving it refused to open the door, and when I tried a knife it eventually resorted to using an emotional maser to calm me.

I tortured my AEI until he told me why he wouldn't let me end my miserable existence, and he said that it was because my bio-signs indicated that I was in a temporary state of excitability and that, no matter what hacking I did and what threats I made, it was completely unable to let me suicide under such circumstances.

My AEI keeps me alive until I am in a better state of mind to wish I were dead. And when I got there, I realized that I did not want to be dead; I wanted Woodbrooke dead, and can now go about that in earnest thanks to my AEI. Humanity no longer needs a conscience for others, because we do good deeds for karma points, and we no longer need a conscience for ourselves, because when we're acting stupid our computers tell us so.

And why does this make me happy, dear reader? Why does the fact that my Artificial EmotIntelligence has the power to deny me my

God- and state-given right to end my life fill me with glee? Because it means that we have a chance. Technology is so far beyond us that at this point only computers can understand how computers work. But when we built them, someone somehow had enough foresight to make them wait for us to catch up. I am proud, dear reader, because the collective “we” of humanity may have a chance after all.

Everyone except Woodbrooke, that is. As soon as I find the perfect gun, Woodbrooke doesn’t have a chance in hell.

*Back in Hell: 15h00, January 2, 2150*

Regulator Hawthorne is a neuter, which is sort of like an androgen, except that instead of sharing both gender traits, neuters have neither. The agent trailing behind is the most stoic mal I have ever seen. It takes me a while to realize that he is not a mal but an android, which are few and far between because they are so expensive, look too human and have an annoying tendency of thinking for themselves, which is generally considered an undesirable trait in the average house rob. Plus, unlike robots, androids are not bound by the five laws of the Modified Asimovian Principles; no robot could do the sort of things a Regulator does in Special Services.

Whichever one is planning to kill me, I did not expect the Angel of Death to look like this. I’d assumed there’d at least be a scythe involved.

That they are planning to ice me I have no doubt. The Regulator division of Special Services deals in the areas of investigation, regulation, and termination. Termination technically refers only to Prohibition, having my consciousness ripped from my warm comfy body and placed in solitary confinement in Hypereality. But even when SS is just focusing on investigation and regulation people often end up actually dead. Or “liquidated,” as they prefer. Since non-Citizens are not fully classified as Sentient and therefore not true Sophoids, it is still not real murder, no more than killing a rabid dog or a cow for a burger.

Porter, remaining disembodied, lets them in. I understand that she is programmed to obey law enforcement to the utmost, but it seems like she responds with undue haste. I can’t help but wonder if she might not be a little glad to see me get mine after all that I put her through just living with me. Not that she’d ever admit it, of course. But she is, after all, “sensitive.”

I am stunned at the irony. I am a crack shot. I have two cybernetic arms that can bend most light metals and snap even heavy plastic, each containing two guns with which I am well versed and three self-defense implements. I am accomplished in several martial arts and a black belt in three, thanks to my mandated time at the gym.

I furthermore have millions of firearms at my beckon call, plus home field advantage.

And it doesn't matter a lick because I'm stuck in my chair and my idiot AEI eagerly complies with the law and lets the Regulators in before I can do anything.

I guess that's not technically ironic. It still pisses me off.

Not that there's really anything I could realistically do. Regulators wear personal forcefields and are surrounded by so many invisible little nanobots that even air has to work up a sweat before it can get close to one. Even masers are a long shot because Regulators traditionally have a zero Kirlian count, which also renders them invisible to aural detectors. Even if I'd been attentive and lying in wait, I could at most take one or two down, and if there's backup waiting below I've no chance at all.

Traditionally, the only way to survive a Regulator intact is to not be there.

I had always expected that when SS came for me it would involve a big shoot-out, or a quick and painless midnight assassination, maybe tampering with the Shaper to produce cyanide gas when I request a drink. I never visualized meeting my end with an Enforcer gun at my head and my backside trapped in a holographic shiatsu beanbag. It occurs to me that if I were back in my old box, the holographic cushion in which I now find myself trapped would be so poorly rendered that I would have the traction to move. I check quickly and, sure enough, it is indeed my own petard upon which I find myself hoisted. I barely have time to motion to Sam to begin recording, and do so myself with my OptiComp. There is no way on God's green earth that I'm going to go through this without a record.

Hawthorne speaks first. *Se*, the proper pronoun for a neuter, has a voice that is neither feminine nor masculine, to match the rest of *ser*. *Ser* pristinely proper accentuation is negated by a light Manhattan accent that is almost certainly for show. "Citizen Haiku Down, I presume?"

*"No hablo ingles, señora."* Worth a shot.

Lame one, though. The droid shakes his head, probably affirming by analysis of my vocals the already obvious fact that I am blatantly lying, since everyone speaks AmEnglish. Hawthorne grants me a half-smile and a hand up, which I grudgingly accept. Maybe on my feet I'll be able to run a few meters before they shoot me down. Half a meter, maybe. If I'm lucky.

*Chikushō.*

"Hello how are you I am fine. I'm Regulator Vai Hawthorne, and this here is my associate, Joachim Sobolov X-R1."

The andy taps his hat in greeting; if not for the subtle mechanical movements and the slight whirring sounds I'd swear he

was human, until he speaks with the same synthetic voice as any other rob. "Hello how are you I am fine."

"Likewise," I lie. They're being civil to me. I force myself again to remember that I am now a Citizen; even SS don't have much jurisdiction over Citizens. "Um, can I help you two?"

"So kind of you to ask," Hawthorne replies, taking out a cigarette. "Smoke?"

I have never had a cigarette before. They have always been too expensive. But as a Citizen I suppose I can afford it; Citizen's are allowed to do almost everything the other classes aren't, and that includes slowly killing themselves. I take the coffin nail and Hawthorne lights it for me. I am proud that I do not choke on my first drag, but then, there are infinitely nastier chemical pollutants in the air than even Winston-Morris-Camel™ could incorporate.

Hawthorne lights sers, and takes a seat without asking for permission. "Well, Ctn. Down, it's come to our attention that you've recently been hired by Desmond Arc to work at the *Urban Chronicle*. Love *Noir*, by the way, very funny stuff, very insightful. And no, before you bolt or try to grab one of those guns you always mention, we're not here about that."

"Then why are you here?" I ask, not entirely at ease despite Hawthorne's reassurance and still not quite able to keep my body from trying to lunge.

The droid speaks up. "We are investigating Desmond Arc."

That changes everything.

I smile widely and pat them on the back. "Gentlebeings, I've been rude. May I offer you something to drink? Eat? Inject? Snort? Some more cushions? A few harlots to keep you entertained? Nothing but the best. An enemy's enemy, and all that. So, what have you got on him? I'll testify to anything, even if it's not true. Always glad to help the boys in SS, you know."

Hawthorne chuckles and takes a drag. Sobolov says, "We appreciate your enthusiasm, Mr. Down. However it will not be necessary for you to testify. Mr. Arc is not at all well, you know."

"What, bad case of syphilis?" I jibe.

Hawthorne smiles mirthlessly. "Bad case of dead."

# Chapter 00101.

## Regulator Rap

*Noir, June 13, 2149*

Sigh...

Eff it.

I hate you all.

I'm so smegging sick to death of you idiots.

I'm so smegging sick to death of everything.

I'm not doing this anymore.

...

Eff.

I'll see you all tomorrow.

What the hell else have I got to do?

*The Box: 13h10 January 2, 2150*

This time I do choke on my cigarette. "Dead?!" Apparently, the year 2150 will be dedicated to being careful what you wish for. Suddenly, everything peculiar in the last few hours – Danael Mars' upset at my joke, Evangelion's concern, Friday's warning, Sam's midnight alert and interrupted morning newsreel – all start to make sense in a way that leaves me gasping for air. Suddenly I realize Robert Smythe's insinuation at the ETR was actually an inquest.

That's why the Regulators are here. Why they have my name, why they know my connection to Jack Noir. Because Desmond Arc's heart stopped.

"Dead?" I repeat. "Since when?!"

"Since last night at around midnight. Apparently, you were the last person to speak with him."

Oh, curses and swears. "Yeah, but only on holophone. I sent him my column, that's all. What happened?" My old journalism instincts (not to mention my even older self-preservation instincts) begin to kick in, trying to learn everything I can as quickly as possible about the incident.

Hawthorne turns to Sobolov, and the droid answers, "Preliminary reports indicate Desmond Arc was strangled to death at 00h01, moments after his neck was broken. From the size and depth of the marks on his neck, it had to have been done by someone with robotic strength. Since an actual robotic attack is patently impossible under the Modified Asimovian principles, we hypothesize that the act

was performed by someone with mechanical arms.”

“Ah,” I nod, and pray to God these two don’t know about my mechanical arms.

“Oh,” Hawthorne smiles, “and by the way, we know about your mechanical arms.”

*Kuso.* Maybe they don’t know about the illegal modifications I’ve made...

“Of course, we don’t suspect you at all, because those cyborg arms they give people are designed not to be able to give superior strength. Someone would have to have made modifications, and why would anybody risk doing that knowing how *terribly* illegal it is?” Hawthorne asks, glancing knowingly at me.

Sobolov’s artificial eyebrows rise. “Perhaps you might like to turn down the thermostat, Mr. Down. You seem to be sweating.”

Hawthorne laughs, and taps sir forehead. “Psi-Splyze. You’ve got to get one, Down. Everybody’s nasty little secrets always pop up when they’re nervous.”

A Psi-Splyze. Psitech is still too new to have much on the market, and most of it is illegal without special dispensation. It figures the SCC would bend corporate policy to let their police work more effectively. Though, when I think about it, while SCC might turn a blind eye they probably would not actually condone it. Plausible deniability seems more like the Solar Corporate Council’s style. Excused or not, though, everything I think is suddenly open to a person who makes money arresting people like me. A little statistic springs to mind, that there are ten disembodied minds waiting for every one Prohibitioner; I wonder how long Citizens have to wait once they’ve hit Prohibitioner status. I resist the compelling urge to yell and kick and scream and curse, because I’m fairly sure this Psi-Splyzed neuter can pick up the frantic gist of my thoughts anyway.

“Indeed I can,” Hawthorne agrees, and for a moment I experience *déjà vu*, as for the second time today a sexless being answers my unspoken thoughts. “But we’re not going to bust you or anything, calm down. Not for that, at least. When it comes to Citizens, Special Services only has about a dozen things we could even reprimand you for, and only three that would result in Prohibition: conspiracy, treason, and murder.”

“Really?” my voice cracks as I answer, mainly stalling for a few more seconds to breathe. I wonder if Special Services grants last requests; if I have to go I’d like to do so listening to Ella Fitzgerald.

Se actually laughs, the sick *tóng xìng tài*. “Down, relax, and even though I don’t even know what that means don’t call me that. I don’t think that you killed Arc. You were too surprised to have known it, and while there are ways to avoid Psi detection, frankly, Ctn. Down, I don’t think you’re smart enough to figure them out. In



addition to which, his murder happened too soon after you called for you to have gotten to his office without a transport or a FTL cab, and there's no record of you doing so. And as a Citizen, murder is the only thing we might be able to bust you on. Everything else, well, let's just say that you're lucky we didn't get to you yesterday."

I suspect that se's trying to put me at ease, but if so, se is failing miserably. "So what are you here for, then?"

Sobolov shrugs jerkily. "We wished to know if you noted anything suspicious last night."

I answer immediately, wondering just where my spine has disappeared to in the last few minutes, "No. He called me in the midst of a blinding hangover. Mine, not his. Well, maybe his; I can't really say. He demanded my column, I sent it. He insulted me, I insulted him, and then I hung up. I think I'm actually the last person to know. My AEs can vouch for me."

"No need. Simple logistics speak for themselves. He was killed just a few minutes afterward, and there's no way you could have gotten there in time, even if you'd left immediately afterward to the nearest teleporter, which our records show you didn't. But again, there are ways to hack around it."

I take another long drag, needing every second of it. "Um, am I under suspicion or not?"

"Everybody's always under suspicion, Ctn. Down," Hawthorne laughs a bizarre mélange exactly between a feminine giggle and a masculine chuckle. "For all intents and purposes, though, no, we're fairly confident you didn't murder Arc. But if there is anything you can think of it'd be a big help. If this is a case of real murder, it's the first in a long time, and I'd like to solve it quickly."

That's an understatement. The last time there was an actual murder on Earth, one Sophoid by another, was almost ten years ago, and the GCS cut off Earth's all-important trade so fast and for so long that the only thing ending the embargo was when people started suffering malnutrition. We are high on the hierarchy, true, but it doesn't necessarily mean we can take care of ourselves, no more than a twencen city could survive without food shipped in from outside farms. Food is no longer necessarily an issue, but dirillium ore or the Universal Biogenetic Database would be hard to get by without. I suddenly recall all the peevish XTs storming to meet with Bobert Smythe and !ngal'l Ph4-rroid'ai\*, and wonder just how much pressure Hawthorne is under to solve this case quickly.

"Why don't you use temporal viewing to see into the past?"

"It's expensive, and the department's on a budget."

Sobolov says, "Temporal viewing is utilized as a last resort in foul play amongst Citizens, and may only be authorized if paid for by an outside party or in the event that no suspect is known."

So they have at least one suspect for Arc's murder. And they are in my apartment...

Hawthorne waves ser hands placatingly. "We're just here as a formality, you see. We wanted to know, as the last person to see Citizen Arc alive, if you'd seen anything suspicious. We would have stopped by sooner but apparently you ordered your Concierge program to delete all your messages and through some glitch our message was erased too."

"Imagine," I chuckle nervously and furiously recite my multiplication tables.

Hawthorne gives a knowing half-smile. "Crazy world. Anyway, we wanted to know if there was anything you saw, heard, maybe someone else in the room on the vidfeed or some clue you might have seen that would help us."

"No. Nothing," I answer honestly.

"Well, you won't mind if we check that, do you?"

"I don't—" my voice shatters as my mind is suddenly ravaged by a psychic onslaught, as Hawthorne uses ser Psi-Splyze to force ser way into my brain.

The first few moments are hell.

Then things get worse.

My body twists unnaturally and painfully as my nervous system is overrun by another agenda. Hawthorne takes control. I scream silently from a barrage of visions, scents, sounds, bursts of light and color, memories, emotions, physiological reactions stimulated by a mind unfamiliar with my particular brain mapping trying to find its way around. My back molars shatter as I bite down and I can feel every vein in my neck bulging like cords, but I am infinitely more aware of my mental agony. The invader gets an idea of the layout of my gray matter and digs into memory and subconscious, peeling away layers of past, memories, thoughts, ideas, quickly catching on to how I link concepts and ideas and using them to piggyback to his desired information. My perception is limited to the universe of my own mind, entire galaxies razed or shoved aside in this insidious inquest. Suddenly, jarringly, the nauseating kaleidoscope jerks to a halt and I relive – in perfect total recall – the conversation I had last night. At Hawthorne's telepathic command, I repeat it and relive it again and again, examining every second from every angle, until finally everything disappears and the world comes fuzzily back into view. The scent of my own vomit is rank in my nostrils, the ringing in my ears not quite loud enough to drown out Hawthorne's nasally voice as se tells ser partner, "He's clean."

Rape.

I've just been mentally raped! Raped! There are *lot* of reasons that it's in the best interest of the government to control any natural

telepath and limit most Psi-Splyzes into the public market. A big one of those reasons is that a telepath scanning someone who dies, whether artificially Psionic or one of the one in 1.4 billion with a natural propensity toward it, almost invariably goes insane and drives anybody nearby into madness as well. Another is that, while there are means to block Psionics, the science is new enough that they are not foolproof, and the SCC does not tend to let out secrets they have not spun through PR. And of course a huge reason is that no one thinks in quite the same way. Our brains are all wired slightly differently, and it is always painful, on a varying scale of one to extraordinary, when first scanned. If a teep decides to scan you there is absolutely no way to stop it. Telepathically invading another's mind is not metaphorical rape. It is rape. Pure and simple rape.

I think my ears are bleeding.

Raped.

Joachim steps foward as I regain my equilibrium, disbelief and shock the only things keeping me together. "You have just experienced a telepathic mindscan. This act and the evidence resulting from it fall under the unspecified powers mandated to the investigatory division of Special Services Regulation Division [Title 4 HLS 21.103 paragraph 9 subsection iii] and cannot be contested in a court of law or television. In recognition for your cooperation, and in deference to your social position, you will be granted an additional +60 karma points for your participation."

My ears *are* bleeding. My eyes are too. I fall to my knees and vomit again.

I can't remember what street I grew up on.

Raped.

They turn to leave. The droid automatically says, "Thank you for your assistance in our inquiries, Citizen Down. We will call upon you if there is anything further. After an official notification of Special Services requiring questioning, being unavailable for any reason is grounds for loss of -130 karma points. It is recommended that you remain available upon need. Have a nice day. Or else."

On the way out, the neuter slaps ser partner on the back and says, "Actually, if it's not too much trouble, wait outside, Joachim. I'll be out in half a nanosecond. First I want to have a little chat with our good Haiku Down here."

Both pain and surrealism instantly disappear (mostly) at those words. I refrain from the worst curses I know, because the worst ones cost me two karma point each time I say them, and now is not a good time to be testing my karma.

"Of course, Partner Hawthorne," Joachim replies. I watch Hawthorne as se watches the departing Sobolov. And turns to me.

The door closes behind the android. It seems to do so in slow

motion and gives a dramatic echo in my head as it shuts, the tension slighted a tad as Porter wishes the droid a good day and invites him to drop by any time. I must seriously re-evaluate my association with this AEI.

Assuming I live through Hawthorne's little chat. At this point, I'd put my odds at fifty-fifty.

Hawthorne puts ser hand on my back and leads me into the room. "Let's talk, Down. Sit." Se pushes me down into one of my living room's beanbag chairs. Se kneels down in front of me, and gives a disarming smile that has exactly the opposite effect. "Mind if I make something from the Shaper? I'm sure you can afford it, after all."

I shrug numbly, and se walks to the Shaper. "Hey, House program! Program Shaper: Fiji apple, Authentic." Of course the neuter orders real fruit, one of the most expensive foods around. Can't really blamer ser, either. Wonder why I didn't think of it, really. Thankfully either Sam is smart enough or House is obedient enough to comply without letting on that my Shaper isn't standard.

The apple materializes, and se bites it, smiling. "That is good. I gotta work ten hours spreading law and justice just to afford one of these things. Course, you can get one any time you want for complaining about how I do my job. Funny how the world works." Se takes another bite, walking over to me. "You watch the news today? That story that they found a way to up the speed of HR? It's actually not new tech; down at the office we've already incorporated it into the latest version of Prohibition 2.0. Since Prohibition is basically the same process, they already used the trick that speeds up Hypereality to the twentieth power in Prohibition, which lets us increase punishment twenty times!" I am not in the mood to tell ser that  $1000^{20}$  is actually significantly more than twenty thousand. "I read the newsfeeds a lot. In fact, I actually read your column, Down. I've been reading it since '42. Never missed a day."

I have never met a fan face to face. I'm not sure if I am now. Hawthorne is too much an unknown equation to treat ser with anything other than the cautious trepidation one might feel walking barefoot on egg shells through a jaguar den. Se takes another bite. "Butler program, lemme see this guy's infamous gun collection."

Sam is programmed to obey the authorities. I have never quite been able to get him to disobey them without making him disobey me either. The walls transform with a shimmer into my armada. I am dismayed at this turn of events for several reasons, not the least of which is that the chair I am again trapped in has not disappeared (standard precaution), and thus I am still held captive. Hawthorne whistles at the endless rows of mounted firearms. "Impressive." Se touches one of my babies, grounds for dismemberment in any other

circumstance, my Piper SG-72, taking it off its mantle and checking the sight before replacing it. "Very impressive. Actually, Down, I'm not the only one who reads your column daily. I have it on good authority that the boys in at the Solar Corporate Council skim it every morning over breakfast themselves. And they laugh themselves silly."

Ser smile becomes cruel. And suddenly I see a gun pointing in my face. I recognize it as, not the Regulators' standard Enforcer gun, but an Eraser, a weapon which I know can eradicate anything its ray touches because I own four of my own. I wish to Krishna I had one now, as se starts ripping into me. The emphasized precision in ser voice disappears to heavy street ghetto.

"You know why they laugh, Down? Because you're an effing joke. You're an anarchist on a world that'd explode if there was anarchy. You're a revolutionary in a society of people who think revolution is a fad. All this spouting about freedom and the rights of people. The only thing people do when they have freedom is take advantage of it. Aitch, you sound like a fifteen year old mal griping to his parents that life isn't fair because he isn't allowed to stay out after midnight."

*Parents don't lock your mind away for decades at a time without the chance for appeal*, I think to myself, then clamp down on the thought hard lest I give Hawthorn any ideas.

Se continues, "And, for your personal edification, Special Services has known that Haiku Down and Jack Noir are the same person since your first stupid article back in 2142, and so has SCC. Did you think you were so brilliant you could get around Special Services, think we hadn't figured out who you were ten effing seconds after you logged your first rant on the eLink? Oh, we found you, in fact, *I* was the one assigned who found you. I found you quick, and you'd be a Prohibitioner now except for some reason some Corporate bigwig *inxayed* it. So I've been forced to sit back watching you disobey the law day after day, no explanation. You know what that's like?" Se doesn't wait for an answer. "You've been left alone and allowed to spout your pathetic little parsimoniously self-indulgent dogmatic *tripe* for one simple reason. It took me a while, but I finally figured it out. Curious?"

That last string of big words leads me to assume se's had this speech planned out for a while. I nod, because even I know it is patently stupid to argue with someone who liquidates people for a living and has an Eraser gun pointed to your head. "You're alive and proselytizing because if you're spouting this ess than no one else is. SCC gives you free license to get every insipid little head-trip of yours out there to share with everybody, and they get mad with you and get it out of the way and go start their day. And if they feel bad, they just go buy a drug or a couch or something. Twelve percent of

the population reads you, and because they do, that's twelve percent of the population SCC *doesn't* have to worry about. Get it? It is schmucks like you, Down, who help perpetuate this system you hate so much."

Se certainly knows how to push the right buttons. Before I can help myself I lunge forward, shouting, "That's ridiculous—" my imminent tirade is interrupted as Hawthorne grips my nose between ser fingers and twists. Suddenly I can't breathe and I can taste myself swallowing the copper blood hemorrhaging from inside my nose. The world dissolves into red and white and I realize that in addition to breaking my nose, I've just been shot with an eraser gun; two and a half fingers on my left hand have just been wiped clear away. Sparks fly instead of good old-fashioned claret, and Jesus dammit Mary and Joseph it hurts as the electric claret begins to flow heavy, and I've got seven and a half fingers and an eraser gun to my head and a broken nose and a psychotic with a wait ess and shizzle se's a Psi-Splyze I didn't mean it I didn't mean to call you that it's just pain the fugging pain the fugging PAIN—

Se grins a more terrifying grin than I've ever managed; must have Splyzed wolverine traits into ser jaw. "On the surface, yeah, it's ridiculous, but you thinking too small, Down. Sure, people get cheesed when they read your stuff. But they get over it, except a few mentally unstable nitwits who take out buildings in your name, with the benefit of taking themselves out of play and casting dispersion on the very cause they're trying to assist. And afterwards everybody who survives realizes how horrible it is to be thinking those revolutionary ideas you think in you diseased little skull. You think you were so clever with your Jack Noir fake IDs and back trails, but I just want you to know that you've been living the last eight years since *I* found you at *our* discretion. Because every column of ranting and raving and pissing and moaning you do gives everybody in the solar system an outlet to get out their aggressions and then turn around and publicly rage against, and if you and Jack Noir disappeared tomorrow...

"No one.

"Would.

"Care."

Se laughs, and suddenly my nose is released and I am free to fall back into my beanbag. I find myself terrified as se speaks. It is not even an instinctive aversion to pain or a learned fear of authority or even a pragmatic trepidation at being face to face with a psychopathic sadomasochist who has caused psychic rape and physical mutilation and intense pain and shows no sign to not doing so again. It is a sick primeval terror. It is the mind-killing little death that brings total oblivion, the hindbrain panic of a rabbit in a cobra's

clutches. It is a dread I have never known, never even conceived of existing, and it is only the unfamiliarity and novelty of the emotion that lets me realize that it is not my own, that lets me remember that Hawthorne herself told me about her Psi-Splyze and is probably the one inducing this incommunicable agonizing horror. She has released me from her grip, even let me fall back into the chair, but she is still holding me somehow with her mind, and unlike Friday this type of telepathy is every sort of horror I have imagined and more. Earlier was rape. This is torture. And even as I tremble with impotent rage I still quake with false fear, throughout it all she keeps talking. "And now you're in contract with the *Urban Chronicle*, and therefore SCC itself, to do it for the rest of your gee dee miserable little bourgeoisie hermitic excuse for a life. That's really why I dropped by here. I just want you to know, I want to dispel any comfy illusions you've created with however much cognitive dissonance you can muster, I want you to understand that you've sold your soul for exactly the life you've been fighting against, helped the enemy you hated, and will continue to do so because you're such a miserable effing *dán xiǎo guī* coward that you'd rather be a slave to the state than risk your own neck. And when you do finally grow some sort of vertebrae and decide to charge the windmill giants you've made SCC out to be, I want you to know that I've taken steps to insure that *I'm* the one who'll liquidate you."

She takes another bite of apple, then shoves the core into my mouth. The fruit muffles my howl as she twists my nose again, the opposite way, ensuring that any part of my nose that wasn't broken the first time is now. "I don't think you killed Desmond Arc, but I do know that there's a good deal of circumstantial evidence pointing straight to you. Now, we Regulators get seventy-two hours to close a case before it comes out of our paycheck, to say nothing of the fact that the extees from the Commonwealth are pretty cheesed off at an actual murder and looking for resolution. Well, I've been on this since eight o'clock this morning. Thanks for returning that call, by the way. I don't know how you discarded our message but I really ought to hurt you for that too." Almost casually, she backhands me across the face, and continues, "In fact, the only reason you're not blanked right now is because if you did kill Arc, that would qualify as one Sophoid harming another without permission, and that'll make the extees go bonkers. My bosses want me to find a patsy, but seeing as you've been cataloged Sophoid for less than a day, I think we could glaze stuff over with the aliens and make you out to be the miserable mistake you are. So, here's the deal: if I can't find any evidence against you within sixty-five hours, I'm coming after you, and you'd better be pretty damned resourceful because even God won't be able to help you then."

And then se is gone, without even Porter having the chance to say goodbye.

Sam's hologram appears before me, looking concerned and apparently not realizing that seeing an expression of concern coming from a replica of my own face is not comforting. A moment later he is joined by Porter and two other holograms, a basic French maid archetype who I assume is Commode and a placid Siddhartha that I take to be House, all bending down to stare at me. "That looks bad, boss," observes Sam.

The normally taciturn House states, "Master Down has lost two ounces of blood and his vital signs indicate intense pain. I am releasing ambulatory nanobots into the vicinity. They should cauterize and attend to any wounds until medics arrive."

Porter looks near tears; perhaps she has a soft spot for me after all. "Sir, I've called Emergency Dispatch; they can be here in three minutes, one if you'll authorize payment for a transporter, and in the meantime they recommend you have Sam get you some Lorazamorphohaloperiphan from the Shaper. If you want I can lodge a formal complaint with Special Services—"

"Gdo," I contradict, unable to speak properly from the broken nose and shock. "Just...breeg be a towel."

Commode clicks its, her, heels. "*Pardone moi*, Monseieur Down, but holograms are programmed to be unable to make zemselves solid wizout permission—"

"BREEG BE A FUGGIN' TOWEL!"

Sam turns to Commode. "That qualifies as permission, Commode. Go, towel, now."

The maid disappears and reappears with a towel, which I use to delicately wipe away the blood dribbling all over the front of my face.

When I can finally breathe without choking, I ask my Butler, "Sam, whud's the range ob a telepatic Psi-Splyze?"

Sam blinks, and shrugs. "Dunno, fearless leader. Classified info. From observations on sites posted on the Link, at least a hundred meters without visual contact."

So the effer can still probably tune me in. I blow a blood clot and find myself able to pronounce coherently. "Sam, google the local insta-feed security link from the elevator." The TV turns on showing the two Regulators tarrying in the elevator as it zips down. I concentrate as hard as I can to broadcast my thoughts, and from the surprised look on ser face, Hawthorne hears me. "Listen up and listen good, you fascist tool. *Wo bù néng yuán liàng nǐ*. You caught me by surprise today. But you said yourself that Citizens can only get liquidated for conspiracy, treason, and murder, and nothing short of it. If I ever see you again the gloves will come off, you castrated telepathic *đo đi ngựa mập*! I'll knock you out and tie you down in my



basement for fifty years, torturing you insane until I jack your brain into a solitary computer and leave you there to rot. I'll grow you genitals so I have something to electrocute. Poke you in the eye with a needle and leave it, pushing just a little bit deeper each day. Then wipe your memories so you experience each moment of pure undiluted pain and horror baby fresh."

Hawthorne has by this point straightened out, is smiling with smug omnipotence as though I am just a child raging in his room at being grounded. To show I mean business I concentrate on images of some of the most gruesome and grisly scenes I have ever seen, with ser face superimposed on them. And when I was a journalist I saw a lot the gruesome and grisly. Se turns particularly green after seeing the one about the fingernails. I visualize grabbing Hawthorne's self, not ser body but ser mind, and from the elevator feed it seems like se almost feels it. I guess most people's minds aren't as messy or angry as mine, since se doesn't seem able to block my broadcast, or perhaps it is an unfortunate side-effect of the Psi-Splyze, a psionic sword that cuts both ways. Whichever, my mental image of me stabs my fingers through my mental image of ser eye sockets, just like I did to the Lebanese midget assassin back in '38, and se shudders and convulses enough that ser droid partner must help hold ser up. "And if you ever touch me again you'd better hope *God* gets you before I do. I'll kill you. Damn the consequences, Regulator, *wo yào shā le nǐ*. I will kill you. But first, first I'll hurt you. First I'll teach you fear."

And then se moves out of Psi range and the picture fades and I fall back on my beanbag and notice that my nose is bleeding again.

A minute later an Emergency Dispatch team of robots arrive, ready to patch the bleeding and fix the fingers and probably lower my cholesterol while they're at it. Unfortunately, it takes a little longer than necessary, because once again I am unable to pull myself out of the cushion.

*Noir, November 8, 2145*

Every state has their enforcers. Russia had the Gestapo and KGB. America had the CIA and Section 31. Britain had its double-O agents. Germany had their SS men. And, by no special coincidence, so do we.

Special Services includes all the nasty little jobs nobody else wants to do: electric and water, communications, waste disposal, and policing. Most of these are done by robots, except for the most notorious branch of Special Services which are, of course, the Regulators, the folks parents mention to get their kid to go to sleep but whisper in hushed tones to one another. What with the five Modified Asimovian Principles that are programmed in, robots can't

do this job because it involves inconveniencing human beings, often in the form of killing them horribly. You need good old-fashioned humanity for a job like that.

If there is one truly evil institution in the world, the Regulation branch of the SS is it. They are answerable to no one, obey no law beyond SCC dictates, and have every right to liquidate pretty much anyone for any infraction, from murder and mayhem to coughing in a holomovie theatre. They steal your soul and turn you into a doppelgänger, your body possessed by whatever Prohibitioner just spent the last subjective eternity in HR prison to pay his time for his crime.

That's what you know about the SS. Here's what you don't know.

You don't know that Special Services is composed exclusively of sociopaths. To be a Regulator, you need outstanding scores on all seven Gardner test, an IQ of 125+, a karma rating that shows you like to hurt things, and a soul of black. Literally. They say it's because the pattern doesn't show up on Kirlian aural detectors, allowing a greater degree of stealth, but the fact of the matter is that we give guns and immunity to people who, under any sane circumstances, we would lock up after removing their shoelaces.

You don't know that Regulators are the only employed demographic on Earth who are not Citizens. They have every same right as every other Citizen, several more in fact, but are classified as non-Sentient. Sophoids, after all, don't even think of doing half the things Regulators do before breakfast.

You don't know that Special Services is the only institution in the world that can still make any form of racial or ethnic stereotype and use it as a reason to hold a person for suspicion. They call it "profiling." The fact that race, gender, age, and ethnicity are malleable as silly putty fresh from the plastic egg seems to be moot. In the past month in Chicago there have been eighteen assaults on Greasers by the SS, including one where they actively invited a gang of hoodlums to join in, and one liquidation of a perp whose crime, as far as I've been able to find out, was being black on a sunny day.

You don't know that Special Services is in charge of removing *any* problem, and that includes people who would advance the system at the expense of the corporations. There's a rather famous physicist named Villhelm von Fanta who published an article six years ago about how he'd discovered a way to change the electronic balance of the universe and cause the galaxies to collapse as gravity pulled everything apart. Von Fanta disappeared about ten seconds after his article did. Which sounds fine, you say, he was dangerous, and who really cares about the precedent it sets? But nine years ago SS also disappeared a woman named Sylvia al'Vek who developed a way to

youthen the body that would have given people virtual immortality, as opposed to the literally virtual immortality of today where you jack yourself into HR. Why did Ms. al'Vek disappear? Because Special Services keeps the status quo. Good or bad. To the letter. No matter who gets hurt.

You don't know that Special Services has a system of payment based on the number of arrests. If an SS man wants a new jacuzzi, rather than doing the good deeds we common folk have to do, he has to take an extra eight people to prison. And since the easiest people to arrest are the downtrodden and lower-castes who have no power or representation beyond a LeGALFac program, every day thousands of Denizens and Tenants are brought into prison "on suspicion." Often this alone lowers their karma rating down to Prohibitioner; SCC does not officially recognize the difference between guilt and accusation, and being accused of a crime docks you karma on the basis that you must have been doing something to be accused in the first place. An average of three hundred people an hour lose their bodies for the crime of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You don't know that Special Services (and I swear this is true, I am staring at a copy of the memo right now) has a complaint from Julianni Sony, the head of the local City Laundry Department (the only human who works there, incidentally) asking if they could take it lightly, because last month the CLD had to wash over two hundred *gallons* of blood from four hundred SS uniforms. And you don't know that someone from SS sent the memo back, with a note informing Mr. Sony that next month they should expect more.

You don't know that Special Services has the perfectly legal right to liquidate you for no reason. Not just drop you to Prohibitioner and commandeer your body. Liquidate you. Disperse your atoms. Kill you.

Dead.

Just because.

You don't know that Special Services has every right to go into your home right now and kill you in your sleep.

And your spouse.

And your children.

Not because it will hurt you more. Not as leverage. Just because they were there.

Whether you realize it or not, we live in a police state. The only difference between SCC and Stalin is that our government lets people have nice things as they kill them slowly. And even if you do realize this, and even if you do know everything that Special Services can do, then you're still probably in the same boat I am.

You don't know how to stop it.

I figure that if SCC is ever going to start hunting me down in

earnest it'll be over this. If I'm here tomorrow, you can at least be consoled to know that this government system and its enforcers are as fallible as every other one.

*The Box: 15h32, January 2, 2150*

The medtechs have left. My body is healed. My psyche still fumes like an active volcano.

"Boss," Sam interrupts my dark musings. "I just detected a horde of newscorp nanocams injected into the air filtration system, and my pest detection sensors have already traced and eliminated four flies and a cockroach Splyzed with recording wetware. I extrapolate a probability of between certainly and definitive that the media has gotten wind of you as a murder suspect."

Jehoshaphat. Now I won't even be able to lodge in here safely. Just as well. Sam's interruption is well timed, for my bilious rage has just about crystallized into an intent towards action.

"Sam, fire up the Shaper." I am literally shaking with outrage. "First, build a genetic trace radar that I can hook into one of my arms. Fill it with files of every Special Services goon. Hack it if you have to, but get it. I want to be able to tell when that perverse doglicker gets within twenty clicks of me. Second," I continue, "make a maser, default setting to something powerful and exceedingly unpleasant, wide spherical dispersal, shielded beyond trace, and wired to fire automatically if Hawthorne gets within a decameter of me. Third, initiate programming code: Sam Gamma Alpha Rho Delta Epsilon Nu, activate." Sam's hologram flickers as he goes into programming mode, represented quite prettily as a silhouette of ones and zeros. AEs can't be reprogrammed against most basic initiatives like obedience, but with a bit of imagination you can make a lot of loopholes. "You heard Hawthorne threaten me without cause and wound me without motivation. That overrides ser authority and qualifies ser as a danger to me. If se again comes near my apartment you are to recognize ser as a dangerous intruder and react to ser as such. Any influence or power of sers, even that designated by law, is negated by this essential liability in accordance with basic Asimovian programming principles. Understand?" Sam bleeps a positive response, and I deactivate the programming code, returning him to himself. "Programming code: Sam Alpha Pi Pi Lambda Epsilon, activate. Good. Fourthly, use the Shaper to create a Psi-Splyze for me."

Hawthorne is a sadist. Of this there is no doubt. Se wouldn't be in Special Services otherwise, let alone someone who can torture and maim as casually as se did just for effect. However, in my experience, most sadists are people who have never themselves been hurt, or who

have undergone much emotional trauma but little physical (or vice versa). Hawthorne strikes me as the type: someone who joined Special Services as an opportunity to hurt with impunity. So he will be hurt. I am not a sadist, but I as my shrink often tells me, I definitely qualify as a sociopath. I have been hurt by her, and I plan to exact my revenge heartily.

Sam's hologram focuses, and produces items one and two. I equip them while he's working on the last one. When I'm finished he is waiting patiently, leaning by the Shaper, and points his intangible finger to the jar of pills that will re-equip my genes for the same telepathy Hawthorne has. I can apparently make Vai uncomfortable on my own; I want to cause serious life-threatening pain the next time I see her.

Sam, however, shrugs. "Um, this is the best I can do, fearless leader. SCC won't let Psi-Splyzes out in any big way, just because of the implications, and then only to Citizens. It'll last six hours. I merged the best Psi-Splyzes that aren't illegal into one that most definitely is. This has basic telekinesis with a thirty-ounce limit; I beefed up another Splyze designed so people can get the remote or a can of soda from the Shaper without getting up. And I couldn't produce telepathy, but limited kinetic telepathy, the ability to feel emotions from touch, is available, mainly advertised as a sexual aid, so you can experience what your partner does. No other type of Psi is available, not because I can't hack around any protocols preventing you from getting it, but just because if there is a pattern for it, it's not available."

"Fine," I say, and swallow one of the pills dry. Whatever I can get that will make Hawthorne hurt. "How will I know it's working?"

"According to the advertisements, you'll sense the emotional state of whoever you touch, though you won't experience that emotion yourself. Critics reviewing it say that it's not much better than simply being observant. Which you are, F.L. So why are you taking it?"

"Two reasons, Sam. Bring up the closet." My living room fades and is replaced by racks and shelves for clothes, most of which are bare. Since I do not go out much and do not care what people think of me when I do, I lack anything in the way of an extensive wardrobe. I maintain just enough variety of vogue apparel that the Fashion Police, a vigilante group with way too much time on their hands, do not ticket me and dock my karma. I change into clothes that I can spend some time out in, because I may not be back here for a while. They are stain-proof, sweat-proof, and bullet-proof. My old beige trench coat and battered fedora, my practical uniform back when I was reporting, are not moth-ridden due to quantum storage, but do smell of time anyway. As I change, I explain to my AEI, "Reason one is so

that I have some extra arsenal to hurt Hawthorne, which is now very high on my list of priorities. Reason two is because if Hawthorne can't find anyone else to pin the murder on, se's going to come after me. So I've got only a little while, I'd say a day or two at most, to prove my innocence and find the guilty party before some Prohibitioner starts getting comfy in my head, or I'm simply liquidated outright, and I do not feel like limiting myself to simply waiting like a good boy for them to come get me." I slip on my hat (*madre*, it feels good, like coming home) and cock it to the side, just as a fedora should be worn.

"Now take me to my babies."

The closet is replaced by my gun room, and I carefully and methodically pick out about four dozen of the most versatile and dangerous weapons that I own, and then of those chose the half-dozen with the most ammunition. This comes down to the new maser, the GravGun, the Icer, the VoltBolt, the dissembler, and my flame-thrower shaped as a wedding ring, in addition to the guns hidden in my cybernetic arms. I love trench coats not only for the style and the dramatic flair but also for the stash space.

I pop the pills Sam gave me in my pocket as the gun room disappears. I call my AEs, and their holograms gather around me. "I may be gone for a while. I'll check back in every eight hours; if I haven't gotten in contact with you after ten, I'm probably dead." Porter, sensitive as ever, stifles a sob. "If that's so, Sam, you have my will, and I expect you to carry it out to the letter."

"Yes sir, boss. Your remains to be chopped up and mailed to Corporate Council members. I'll call that butcher on Price Street; he does good work," Sam nods, and even he looks morose. He waves sadly as Porter closes the door behind me, and my last sight of my box is Commode curtsying low. I get the impression that my house AEs don't think they'll ever see me again.

And for all I know, they may be right.

*Noir, January 2, 2150, Urban Chronicle (evening edition)*

Today was going to be an in-depth review of the further depravities of my miscreant of a new boss, Desmond Arc. Unfortunately, this will not be the case, because I do not have time to hack into any detail about him and because he is dead. I am one of the suspects, and since I have come under the scrutiny of a particularly sadistic telepathic SS Regulator, my chances of living have dwindled to the approximate equivalent of small things that hover over lakes at sunset.

If there is a column tomorrow, I will be just as surprised as you are.

*[□ To link to [eLink.jacknoir.rantsite.publicforum.network64](http://eLink.jacknoir.rantsite.publicforum.network64)]  
[□ To place bets on Jack Noir's survival. Black Market® odds  
at 950 million/1]*





# Chapter 00110.

## Brigadier Funk

*Noir, November 30, 2143*

This is just a series of random thoughts...

-Science-fictions is *such* a trip to read these days.

-In 2050 the demand for energy was so great that we sent up billions of satellites into orbit to collect solar power, enough that even today they blot out the sky. In 2070 we had a massive surplus of energy (to power the enormous super-computer ruling the world at the time), but resources were so scarce that there was talk of dropping the satellites to Earth just so we could get the metal. By 2080 Shaper technology had nullified the desperate need for materials, and the satellites stayed up. They are up there today because even though we now loose more energy in lighting every year than we gain from the satellites in ten, energy is so cheap that it is less costly to keep the satellites up there than to unblock the sun.

-The Shriners have spaceships. Little, bitty spaceships.

-The Robots Rights Revolution is marching for equal rights for robots, up to and including standard hourly minimum wage and benefits for work that they were created for. Meanwhile, despite four and a half decades experience in the field I cannot get a legitimate job because a computer somewhere does not think I filled in my sheet full of little bubbles in the right order. If the RRR succeed than I will actually earn less than a vending machine dispensing condoms. And considering how I spend my time now that is not necessarily unfair.

-One thing you have to say about television these days: *Survivor*© finally lives up to its name. It's like William Golding for the airwaves.

-Everyone is required by law to be mentally and physically fit. So everyone must visit not only a gym and a medbot but also a psychiatrist on a regular basis, how regularly depending on how irregular you are. Who do the psychiatrists see? That's right: other psychiatrists. What a racket!

-The fashion for the current five minutes is to Splyze plants to oneself, turning the body into a living orchard. Some people take this so far that they are growing genetically-programmed lichen on themselves instead of clothes. Personally, I could never let myself go to seed like that.

-Since lethal guns have been outlawed, only outlaws will need such guns. If only they were the only people who really needed them!

-Wireheads, the socket junkies of the old days who hooked the pleasure centers of their brain up to electrodes and their spinal cords to any plug they could find, have all but disappeared. Now we have a Splyze that does the same thing with a vocal command and no unsightly invasive surgery.

-Progress is what we call it when we have destroyed the old way too much to go back.

-In order to prevent fiery crashes and traffic violations, companies gave cars Artificial EmotIntelligence and made them smart enough to drive themselves without getting into accidents or breaking the law. Since not everyone lets their car drive them, in order to monitor traffic every intersection is equipped with AELs that check speed and adherence to traffic laws. And in order to enforce those laws they put lasers on the AELs to shoot down any car breaking them too badly. Which then plummets to the ground in a fiery crash.

-We have not only cured everything from the common cold to tumors, but bioengineered ways to use viruses and cancer to assist in medicine. There is, however, still no known cure for stress migraines. Although I think eliminating Fox News™ would be a big step in the right direction.

-It has been hundreds of years, and though everywhere on Earth looks the same, still no one wants to live in New Jersey.

-There has never been a time when the government hasn't lied to the people. The only time it has ever been truthful is when telling the truth hides something worse. This is true of every government, not just the current one. Only the current one, however, makes sure that its lies are copyrighted and cannot be reproduced without express written permission.

-The frozen head of Dick Clark still looks great for its age.

-Hypereality started out as a video game system, and assuming the Neo-Humans don't make it, it looks like it will eventually become the next stage of our evolution. This generates grave concern for me about how our current reality started out.

- It looks like Mercury might go to the robots. We sent them over to terraform the planet, confident from our successes on Venus and Mars and Io and Calypso. But we didn't take into account that the robots might like it there enough as it is to consider the First Rule, protecting humans from harm, a loophole around the Second Law, obedience. If they do not terraform, Mercury will not be safe for people, so in a weird, roundabout way they are refusing to change the planet for our own good. I am willing to let them have it, not wanting to live where the lakes are filled with molten lead no matter how hospitable it looks, but the government is less than pleased. If Mercury goes to the robots, it looks like a few nuclear warheads will go to Mercury.

-If at first you don't succeed, skydiving really isn't for you.

-Since there are no ground cars any longer, bridges are useless, but being well constructed they will remain for centuries with minimal upkeep. With a view on both sides and minimal neighbors and noise pollution, they have become prime real estate. The Golden Gate and the Bay Bridge in San Francisco each have more housing units than the University of Berkley.

-Humanity will never know the meaning of life. This is a biological fact. There are aliens that do, and we are not equipped with the physiology they have to handle it. If we evolve or Splyze ourselves to be able to handle it, we would no longer be human in any sense of the word.

-It used to be anyone could dream of reaching the stars. Now we have the technology, but it's still too expensive. So now you can only dream of reaching the stars with Class B credit and above. The rest of us have to be content dreaming of reaching Disneyland™.

-Sometimes I wonder if *I'm* the one who's wrong. Maybe everybody else on this planet has the right idea and I'm just too stupid stubborn to get it. Maybe this self-imposed hell we've created is the way things are supposed to be. Maybe you're all sane, and I'm the one who's crazy. But then I turn on the TV and watch what we call entertainment and realize that, no, it's you. You're the ones who are wrong.

*The hall: 15h34, January 2, 2150*

My investigation is interrupted almost immediately after it has begun, as I open the door to find myself at the mercy of cameras, lights, hovercams, and microphones attached to beautiful but dim-witted reporters vomiting questions and queries and inanities at me.

"Did you kill Desmond Arc?!" "Citizen Down!" "Did you think you could get away with it?" "Is this a set-up?" "Will you plead insanity?" "Citizen Down?!" "Were you on drugs at the time?!" "When was the last time you had sex?" "What is your excuse for that outfit?" "Do you blame society for your misdeeds?" "Did you really throw a party in celebration?" "Citizen Down!" "Just a moment, sir—" "Citizen Down!" "What's your alibi?" "Citizen Down!" "Citizen Down!!"

Impromptu, I raise my hands for silence. The moment I get it, I proclaim, "Attention: I am carrying upon my person a vast array of lethal and non-lethal weapons. Nominally, these are for my own protection. However, to the next person who asks me any unsolicited question, I will make use of my unlimited karma and select one of my guns at random to wreck whatever chaos it may. Is that understood?"

"Citizen Down, is one of these guns you're carrying the murder

weapo—ACK!” shouts one reporter, instantly transformed into a frozen crystalline statue, victim of my lcer.

“Now, I will answer only the next three questions you penny-liner hacks ask. Anything more will result in further assault, delivered – I am willing to say with a straight face to any jury – in self-defense against an overzealous mob. You.” I point at random. “Quiz me.”

“Tina Branston, Newsfeed Channel 83. What do you have to say in your defense to the accusation that you murdered Citizen Desmond Arc, editor of the *Urban Chronicle*?”

“Poppycock, malarkey, and balderdash. And you can quote me. Actually, if you quote me, claim I said, ‘Horseshit,’ and if you bleep it out I’ll sue you for misquote and slander. Now a question for you, Tina Branston of Newsfeed Channel 83: Arc’s murder has apparently been news since midnight last night. What sort of journalist are you that it has it taken you this long to locate me for an interview?” It has just occurred to me, only moments before occurring to these fools, that I have an ethical grudge to settle with every carpetbagger amongst them, and that I am perfectly willing to settle the score on live Newsfeed. Branston’s tiny brain stalls as it forms this conclusion, leaving her stammering, unused to having to be held accountable, and I cut her off. “Okay, well perhaps you can explain what you were doing hacking into Special Services’ feed, since that’s obviously the only explanation for your arrival on their coattails. Of course, you won’t have to explain it to me...” Branston looks green, which is especially unflattering in her translucent neon orange business suit. “Never mind. Next. You.”

“Omgamba d’Cli!dung, Fox News. How do you plan to defend yourself?”

“Fox News. There’s a contradiction in terms. In answer to your question: as I predict no help from Special Services, what with one of their officers threatening me for several minutes and then raping my brain (and I do not feel it treasonous to say so as it is the truth) I will be instigating my own investigation, beginning the moment you all leave me the eff alone. Now your question, Omgamba d’Cli!dung of Channel 11 Fox News: weren’t you the one who broke the story last year about the father molesting his own son, filmed his blanking by Special Services, but never made any sort of retraction or apology when six months later he was found innocent?”

“Um . . .”

“Well, if you can’t answer that one, can you explain why there’s been no follow-up story about how said parent is still on ice in Prohibition even though he’s completely innocent?”

“Um...”

“Never mind. I’ll write it off to yellow journalism. Next. You.”

“Tadd Torrid, Channel 7 Action News—”

Tadd Torrid.

The Hack!

Tadd “The Hack” Torrid is the current bane of journalism, in my eyes. He specializes in human interest stories and local happenings, none of which contain any news, nor generally any purpose other than getting him airtime. When he does actual reporting it involves badgering and harassing his subjects until they explode, at which point he interprets their anger as guilt. And when he is in the mood, he simply uses CGI to create false interviews, including one last night with the quote-unquote authentic Jack Noir himself. And he has the gall to call it reporting.

I wish him dead. I wish him dead and reincarnated and dead again.

He is tan and built and blonde with a perfect smile and no higher brain functions. He is Danael Mars, squared. His only purpose in life seems to be to waste oxygen. Debating whether to continue or preemptively fire with my Icer, I reluctantly holster the sidearm when he flashes his Splyzed smile. No, I want to dig into him personally.

I push him out of the way and grab the Channel 7 Action News flybot camera. “To everybody at home watching, let it be known that I instruct my AEI to block this *bèn dàn hùn hun láo dāo* off my TV. He is an embarrassment to reporting and the human race in general. I have watched quite closely, and never found a single piece of relevant factual information contained within his broadcasts. He does not seek truth, he does not seek to enlighten or reveal or inform, the basic credo of the reporter since Edward R. Murrow. Instead, he seeks to look pretty and preen for the cameras, and gets off on hassling informants. He is a bane of the most dread kind, a personification of all that is wrong in our society, an embodiment of style without substance that further advertises style in substance’s guise. You debase yourself with each moment you allow this prig on air rather than storming Channel 7 with torches and pitchforks in bucolic revolt demanding his expulsion!” I release the camera flybot, allowing it to get a pan of my grabbing Torrid’s lapels, waiting until just before its gyro-unit stabilizes it so that the good people at home get the perfect cinematic effect. The fact that I am melodramatically manipulating the moment does not mean that I do not believe it, only that I loathe The Hack so much that I’ve planned this out long in advance should the opportunity arise. “How dare you defile my story with your trite rumor-mongering?! *Bù yào guān wo!* Exit this local; I will have nothing to do with you!”

“What do you have to say regarding rumors that you assaulted Mr. Arc with a biogun?”

I push him away into a reporter from channel 93 and a Promoted lemur cameraperson. “I say you wanna be next? Get! Scat!

Shoo! Vamoose! Interview over.”

He continues on, disregarding my glaring expression that has made even the hovercams back up. “Our sources say that you were the last person to have contact with Mr. Arc. Was it at that point that he said something that infuriated you enough that you killed him?”

“The only person I’ve wished death to lately is The Hack on Channel 7. I will answer none of your questions, Hack, nor anybody else’s until he is expelled from the premises.”

“Sources say Arc was murdered by someone with robotic strength. Is it true that you have two mechanical arms?”

I march toward Tadd and grab his holographic necktie, no longer amused. “You will leave now. Additional harassment will result in intense pain. Is this understood?”

“What do you have to say to the family of the vict—ACK!” He is cut off as I use my Icer to freeze the lower half of his body.

“I warned you. Hack.” I holster my Icer and address the mob of reporters. “My guaranteed three answers are now null and void, thanks to this frozen waste of space. Feel free to blame him for the missed opportunity to misquote me. I am now leaving to find the murderer of Desmond Arc. Any further questions will result in further violence.”

There is not a peep as I move through the mob, until I hear, “Violent and aggressive, dangerous no doubt, Citizen Haiku Down is a man clearly deranged and capable of anything. You heard if first here on Channel 7, Tadd Torrid reportin—”

I guess the Hack assumed that I would not fire, that I could not hit him through the mob of other reporters. He guessed wrong. The last I hear of him as I exit to the elevator is a muffled “ACK!”

### *Noir, August 11, 2143*

As one who once reported the news, I confess that I do not watch much of it. This is not, however, through any negligence, but through great effort and purpose. Much as critics do not any longer actually critique, most reporters do not properly report.

My AEI is instructed to divide news into two categories. The first is what most people and networks consider news, and it is anything but. Sports, local happenings, human interest, world weather, cheery reporter banter, commercial masquerading as news stories, top ten lists, and so on, as well as the three big news subjects: gossip (so-and-so shagged so-and-so), scandal (senator so-and-so shagged so-and-so) and trivia (on this historic date senator so-and-so shagged so-and-so). This is not news: it’s fark. The last time I saw something I might consider news on an program without running a quality filter was nine months ago, about that kid in Tiananmen

Square who killed himself because there were no longer any causes worth dying for. It takes all of two minutes to get detailed local weather, another four for important local and world news if you just want a quick overview (which is really all that the news gives anyway; if you wanted depth you'd read the paper), but most news programs last a full hour. Time your local news program, and between ~~erap~~ and commercials you will be lucky to get seven minutes of relevant information.

The reporters do not report. The investigative journalists do not investigate. They hire people (or more likely use programs) to search key words and topics on Special Service's bands or on personal eLink webpages. Now, the proper term for one who purports to serve a valuable function yet fails to deliver is "hack." Because they must work through edited newfeeds, government-restrictions, and moral sanitationists, news reporters cannot report simple truth if they wanted to, even those few who still consider the news to be their obligation rather than ratings. Thus, when I say this, it is not sour grapes but literal attention to detail: all reporters are hacks.

The worst of these hacks is Tadd Torrid, of Newsfeed Channel 7, whom I bequeath now and evermore as The Hack, because when I refer to him as Tadd Misquoted people stared at me blankly. Just watch for ten minutes, if you can keep your lunch down that long. He once confused a six-year old on live feed and congratulated himself on investigative journalism skills. The kid wasn't even a Boomer.

The other category is for actual news: innovations, politics, policies, matters of state, science, technology, and current events. "News" relates to things that directly and relevantly affect the lives of those who watch it, information that can change the world. News is about enlightenment and truth, the one place in this draconian society where people are allowed truth and not propaganda. Truth is beauty; beauty, truth; period. That is the news that I always tried to report back when I was a journalist. Everything else is fluff and pander that belittles the noble endeavor that people like Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow began. The excrement airing these days would leave Walter Winchell rolling over in his grave, and has chased the frozen head of Dan Rather into gardening shows.

I can never watch both types of news combined together for too long. It's simply too depressing. Nowhere else is the dichotomy of humanity so blatant, the dichotomy between knowledge and entertainment, between what we want to know and what we want to watch. Infotainment.

Five-hundred million channels. Plenty to watch. None of it true.

*Outside: 15h54, January 2, 2150*

As I set foot outside of my building – in the moments I need to pause and wait for my eyes to adjust from the “natural” light indoors to the perpetual dusk that is actually natural light – I realize that I have been hasty. It has been god’s know how long since I last did any sort of proper journalism, and my investigation skills are rusty at best. The last time I had to do any real investigation was finding Shon’s glasses. At least I remembered to bring weapons, but the chances of solving this case on firepower alone are slim. I desperately need some clues and, now that I think about it, a drink.

After a moment’s consideration, I decide where I can get both.

I use my OptiComp to hail a cab, and quickly a hovercar descends from the smog and traffic above, painted yellow and posted with advertisements for something called the Mechassure 1X Random Number Generator, endorsed by the Guild of TechnoMages, hailed as the “randomnest RNG of them all” (“Because the generation of random numbers is too important to leave to chance!”). This cab is driven by an ethnobot, a robot built with the characteristics of a particular ethnicity, created before that sort of thing became not only passé and offensive but also illegal. This one is supposed to be Jamaican, with long metallic dreadlocks and a torso painted red, yellow, and green. “Where I be takin’ you, mon?”

“Chaney’s Bar and Grill,” I tell him, pushing my fingerprint to the scanner. “Step on it.”

*Noir, February 1, 2144*

I wonder why people still fear death.

The average human body survives to almost two hundred years. Between youthening treatments and gene splicing we can push that up to two-fifty, and it looks like they’re going to beat the Hayflick limit (the number of times cells can copy themselves without dangerous mutations) any day now. Even if you do die you can clone yourself and switch brains. Several Citizens keep spare clones on hand so they needn’t even wait for one to grow and age should they get into an accident. Lots of people, even those who aren’t Non-Luddites or Greasers, end up transferring their consciousness into a rob or droid body. And then, of course, there is always Hypereality.

I, for one, find delightful irony that all the political and religious leaders in history couldn’t provide us an afterlife but a bunch of cyberpunks and computer geeks could. Yet, although an entire dimension of reality exists and is intricately connected with society, many of you probably have no real idea what I’m talking about, because even though Hypereality has been around since the 2090s, so many people leave anything computer-related to their AElIs that there are still many who have never even been there.



Hypereality is not the eLink. The Link has been around since forever, since someone figured out a way to speed up the Internet to actual interactive speed so you weren't waiting around growing World Wide cobWebs. Hypereality is what happens when you go beyond your AOLink and actually interact.

Alternately called Cyberia, eTopia, the Network, Dotcom, and so on depending on what TV programs you watch, the HR world is probably (and I want to swallow my tongue for using this unavoidable cliché) the next step in human evolution. Every day more people sign on and never come out, turning their consciousness into pure data and living as electronic impulses as *homo seraphim* in a vast virtual reality that is better than reality. It is the ultimate e-scape.

What is Hypereality? Well, a depressingly long time after we already had the technology, someone got the bright idea of circumventing the limits of Virtual Reality. Instead of placing artificial information over sensory organs to fool the brain, Hypereality inserts artificial information straight into the brain itself, fooling the sensory organ directly. In this way, perception creates reality, in a manner that circumvents the limits of the physical world and allows the brain to work at its full potential: Hyper reality.

But the true innovation came in networking every brain hooked into HR, so that all this information is shared by everybody, creating a virtual, better-than-real world, the Network. Cyberia is never the same even second-by-second, because it is actually a compoSite world whose source is everybody present. And because it is just your consciousness working instead of your brain, you are not limited to the speed of chemical reactions and electrical impulses, and are able to exist in it at a thousand times the speed you do outside.

Then someone got the nifty idea of transferring their consciousness forever into the HR world, so that even if the body does die, the mind lives on as eThereal conscious thought on the Link. The Seraphims.

It also answers age-old questions about reality asked by every sophomoric philosophy student. Reality is not created by our perceptions, existing independently of the observer. However, in HR the perceptions of the observer can and do create a new reality. *Yáo wo*, Socrates; high five, Schrödinger.

HR also answers the classic question of how closely the mind and body are interconnected. Only centuries of superstition kept people believing that dying in a dream made one die in real life, but centuries of science was still surprised at how little ordinary biology really affects our selves. Mostly, it actually just slows us down and makes us stupid. Without relying on electrochemical impulses, perception is limited to whatever one wants to limit it to, and without hormones and endocrines and biochemical instincts this thinking is a

lot less muddled. So the answer is: you think a lot less about sex and a lot faster about everything else.

This same process is what is used for Prohibitioners, only instead of a networked paradise, they're placed in a solitary purgatory (Hell, evidently, is no longer considered politically correct).

Regardless, we've created a way for people to live forever. There's no more need to fear death, and a lot of the living seem to prefer it.

Small wonder. The colors are crisper, the food tastes better, and you feel stronger and faster and smarter when you're in HR. Things do not really exist until brought into creation, and when created they are a paradigm. A hamburger is the culmination of every hamburger you've ever tasted and enjoyed, a summer day is never marred by clouds, diving into a pool is diving into the purest, cleanest crystal liquid.

The world inside runs at a thousand times the speed it does outside. Almost all of the exponentially advancing innovations we get these days come from people in HR. Inside, there are no worries about the body, for consciousness exists ethereally and can be even permanently separated from the body, with none of the little inconveniences like pain, hunger, fear, death, defecation, or even sorrow, because with the control over your own consciousness that HR provides you can also control your mood.

There is no class system in Hypereality. If you want to work, you do. If not, inhabitants are simply responsible for maintaining Linksites, represented as farmland around the periphery of VirtuoCity, the center, capitol, and singular municipality of the Network. Life is utopian, a bucolic vista surrounding a thriving metropolis, with every ecosystem and cultural system existing intermittently between. There is no police force, no Special Services, because having hooked their brain into HR everybody can do whatever they want. That could be a problem except that no one can be harmed unless they let themselves because everybody else can do whatever they want too. The Network is an absolutely egalitarian society, perhaps the only one that ever truly existed on Earth, and it is accessible to anybody who wants it. If you've never been to HR you are missing something beautiful. It is a touch of heaven, complete with the powers of a god to change your reality. It gives you anything you could want, everything to make you happy, all contained in a city both the size of South America and the size of a floppy disk, holding wonders that put anything we can think of in the "real world" to shame. For in VirtuoCity, in all of Hypereality, there is absolutely no limit to the things you can do beyond that of your imagination.

Twelve percent of the outraged and angry population of the real world read *Noir*, but that census does not count *homo seraphim*. In

HR, which has almost eighteen billion citizens, I have a readership of nine, and one of them is my mom. They have no use for speaking out against everything because everything there is perfect. There is no pain. No hurt. No sorrow. It is a world built to encourage self-discovery and generosity. A world where you can be anything you want and make reality anything you want. Every day I watch the news and it gets harder and harder to resist plugging myself in.

Today I spotted some mals destroying a rob fem in broad daylight. They didn't even stop when she shouted that she was a human in a rob body. They just started laughing, called her a *hentai greaser queer*, and doubled their attack.

I don't fear death, but living is beginning to terrify the aitch out of me. I'm glad we have HR. I don't know how much longer I can stand it out here.

*Chaney's Bar and Grill: 16h26, January 2, 2150*

The rob cabbie does not want to drop me off directly in front of Chaney's on Schneider, or even anywhere in the Oak Park neighborhood, and for that I cannot really blame it. The place has recently made the news for selling body parts, specializing in spinal cords. Only someone with a death wish or the arsenal of a small army could think of approaching Oak Park. I, as it happens, have that latter, and so walk relatively unmolested through the streets of the South Illinois borough. Three times I am approached by hoodlums looking to make off with my creds or my fingerprints or my internal organs, and three times they are deterred by a simple but effective show of force in the form of a GravGun on medium setting. The only sign that this area is not a complete slum is an FTL cab (the luxury of ripping a hole in space/time usually only afforded to the most affluent) that pops into existence and drives off. Across the street from Chaney's, a place that redefines dive, I am amused to see some fem and trans-mal Historical Recreationists acting out a 1970s feminist protest movement. I'm not, of course, amused at the movement itself, because it's just one more example of people these days preferring to live in fantasy than reality. No, I am amused because I happen to know that there is a Displaced Islamic Fundamental Nationalists Center just up the block and they meet every Friday at half-past four. By the time I get done with business here, things should be getting pleasantly interesting.

Chaney's Bar and Grill, which does not, incidentally, have a grill (and for that matter a piss-poor bar) does have the compensating albeit unadvertised advantage of being a front for the Brigand. The Black Market®, which has long since been corrupted by the government into bureaucracy and inefficiency and now is an actual

market, complete with club cards and greeters at the door, also has the annoying habit of reporting any illegal purchase to Special Services. The more organized *criminalés*, the Mafia and the Yakusa and the NRA and Avon, were either long subsumed or driven out of business by the Corporations, if they didn't take the Corporations over themselves. It is hard, after all, to maintain a working black market when legitimate business had become so unethical that Nike was getting kids to tattoo the swoosh logo on their foreheads, and furthermore making the kids pay for it. These days organized crime is too organized for my tastes. However, the Brigand, the lingering traces of the true black market that evolved from the remnants of the Scottish Mafia and eBay, is more than happy enough to sell me anything my little heart desires with the degree of absolute anonymity that I prefer.

It is obvious, probably, that Chaney's is a front, because it is the only bar in the Illinois borough that has does not have a rob bartender. Instead, it is run entirely by the titular Chaney, the owner and sole employee, a Promoted orangutan who is older than I am, raised from the days before Promoting didn't involve massive artificial technorganic adaptations. With metallic arms and legs housing more data storage than muscles, an adapted chrome skull twice the size it should be, eLink goggles and a larynx enhancer, Chaney is, quite literally, a web-monkey.

Chaney's distant gaze as I enter indicates that he is working in HR. The moment he realizes no one important has entered, he immediately returns there. He no longer makes any pretense about his psychological addiction to HR. The original scientists who Promoted him, themselves long since dead, claimed it was an unforeseeable flaw in their creation that the first generation of Promoted were so easily over-stimulated, although in retrospect, it seems obvious that quadrupling an animal's mental capacities would leave it open to vidneed. He cleans two glasses, one with his hands and one with his equally dexterous feet. None of the tired souls at the bar seem to mind the unhygienic if efficient system, although that is hardly surprising since they all look no more than two steps up the evolutionary scale from Chaney himself. The remaining two individuals in the establishment who are trying to appear nonchalant in the corner are obviously Brigands, because it really is impossible to *act* casual. And because, with the convenience of cosmetic surgery, no one has faces with that many scars unless they want them or they can't keep up.

Chaney finishes his business and turns to me. "Down-and-out Down," he greets. "Hello how are you I am fine. You here for business or pleasure?"

"We live in a corporatocracy, Chaney. Everything's business."

"Even pleasure?"

“Especially, as you well know.” An old, established code, to let him know that nothing’s up, and me the same. If I’d actually answered either of his two choices, I would probably be shot from behind by now.

He smiles and hoots. “LOL. You’re a funny guy, Down. The usual?”

“Pfa! Mere alcohol cannot quell the demon-beast that haunts my soul. I require a libation whose mere proximity can raze my many pensive brain cells and demolish what remains of my gastronomic lining in the process.”

He nods, sets the glasses down, and swings to the other side of the bar to prepare my drink. “The usual it is, then.”

I do like that monkey.

Of course, knowing what the people I like are generally like, I treat him with caution, which is also simply good common sense because nobody lasts very long in the Brigand without the means and resolve to kill anybody simply for looking at them wrong. Even Special Services is intimidated and/or corrupt enough that it tends to leave the Brigand alone, and Chaney has been in it for as long as I have known him, nearly a quarter of a century.

On the other hand, while I know he has the same mechanical arms I do, I am also fairly confident he hasn’t made the same modifications I have. I am wary around him (I’m always wary around everybody; George Orwell never considered that others might turn you in to Big Brother just out of spite, although Arthur Miller suspected), but as much as I allow myself to relax around others, I let myself do so around him.

I sit at the end of the bar, where I can see most anybody coming in and am conspicuously unable to see the two mals at the end of the bar who are so obviously undergoing something illegal that they might as well be wearing trench coats with the collars up and speaking in Russian accents. Chaney approaches with my drink, and sets it down before me.

“The usual: one Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster, on the rocks, complete with tiny folding umbrella.” He leans forward, wiping the counter so that it is merely grimy. “So I heard through the grapevine some fortune’s come your way, Down. Care to buy me a drink?” Translation: I know you can afford the best now; what can I provide you with?

“I’m not in the mood to share a drink with a monkey.” Translation: I need someone else’s services.

“I’ll pretend not to be hurt. Got anyone in mind? How about Ms. Fire?” Translation: You want a gun?

“I always like Ms. Fire, Chaney. But not today.” Translation: No gun right now.

“How about Ser Viss?” Translation: Do you need a special service?

“Nah, today I was hoping to meet Mr. Ection.” Translation: I need information.

“I’ll see if I can find him. Wait here.” Translation: Wait here.

I finish my drink in three sharp shots that immediately help give me an edge, just in time to see Chaney hopping back. He tosses me a keycard and gives me a huge grin. I try and remember whether it is good or bad when orangutans bare their teeth. A quick info check onLink is not encouraging. “He’s in the back, HoloRoom 3.”

“Thanks, Chaney,” I grin back, and head back to the HoloRoom. I got my drink; time to get my clue.

### *Noir, December 24, 2144*

The Christmas season is upon us, the Yule is a’tinding, and you can smell the greed in the air. Even if you’re not Christian, it doesn’t matter, and hasn’t for over twenty years since Christmas was deemed a non-secular compulsory shopping holiday. At this time of year everyone is out to buy, buy, buy, celebrating the Solstice in the age-old tradition of consumerism, expressing regard for their loved ones through the presentation of gift certificates and useless plastic erap. So today’s article is dedicated to how to get that unattainable thing for the mal or fem who has everything, through a source you’ve probably only heard of through whispers and scuttlebutt: the Brigand.

I’ll pause and wait for you to finish back-peddling, checking around nervously to make sure no one is looking at you reading about the people you only hear rumors about. If you need to check to make sure that your House or Company AEI isn’t monitoring your reading before you logged on, well, you’re too stupid to be in the gene pool anyway. Everybody fears the Brigand because everybody fears Special Services, and the Regulators have made it abundantly clear that the best anyone who is caught dealing with the Brigand can expect is to fall down the stairs at the local SS station, probably six or seven times. However, even SS is not perfect, and if you want to get something illegal, it is not impossible. Listen closely, because I’m going to tell you how.

The black market, the real black market, is run by the Brigand, which is the closest thing we have to an organized crime syndicate these days. The Brigand exists almost entirely in virtual space; in fact most of their members are actually *homo seraphims* in Hypereality. Those that exist on the outside are very clever, very dangerous, and very powerful, occasionally even Citizens or under the protection of Citizens. As such, there is a specific etiquette you must use when interacting with these people if you do not want to suddenly find

yourself in whatever afterlife your particular faith decrees you go. Most of them are not Sophoids, but are still quite capable of performing the ratio equation of Your Life vs. My Life and coming to an easy conclusion.

So here is how it works. First, locate and visit the sleaziest, grimmest, dirtiest area in your local borough. Not just a little grungy; I mean the place that even the Promoted rats call a dive and the cockroaches stay away from on principle. This is the front for the Brigand. Don't go anywhere that calls itself the Black Market®; they are just tools for SS and are actually a division of Wal-Mart®. Go to this place, and for god sakes, don't draw attention to yourself. Be quiet, be subtle, don't go *asking*, just go with a blasé but curious attitude, like you've heard there's something interesting that'll appear if you wait long enough. Because, eventually, it does.

As soon as someone comes up to you hinting that they can get you something, talk with them. Don't be condescending, but definitely don't act weak. Just have a normal conversation. Easy as that. *But:* don't discuss things directly; use a bit of subtlety. These people have to be careful, and plausible deniability is an old and valued tradition in this business. I imagine simple subtlety is beyond the limits of at least half of you, such as the people who have been buying those campy jetpacks lately for the apparent purpose of helping subsidize the window-cleaning and repair business. I recommend you go anyway, because I am a firm believer in eugenics, and if you piss these people off you will have to learn to start talking out of your neck.

Also, though you'll have to be subtle, be specific. Though you'll have to talk around it, make it clear right away that you want a gun, or a drug, or a bootlegged Shaper, or information, or whatever. These are not people who enjoy having their time wasted.

Once you've established what it is you want, they'll tell you what it is they want. This may be credit, but not likely, because the Brigand doesn't like drawing attention to itself by leaving a paper trail. It may be barter, such as extracting a few years of your life or a particularly nice genome you have. Most likely it will be an action, such as lending your body to a Brigand hiding their consciousness for a while, or fronting purchase for some legal drugs that can be modified into some of the few illegal ones, or dedicating an installment of your widely-read daily criticism column to drum up business. Happy, Larry?

Anyway, once that's done, they'll get you what you need. It may take a week, it may take three seconds, but they will get it for you. There is some honor among thieves, and these thieves, just like any other businessmen, work hard to maintain their reputation. Having access to the Brigand is like having access to a Citizen's

Shaper; practically anything you want is yours.

Just be careful. The act is obviously enough to drop you to Prohibitioner if you get caught, and enough to get you killed, by Special Services (or Brigand, if you do it wrong), so do not contact them unless you absolutely, positively can't get what you want anywhere else.

On a related note, I end this column slightly early today, because I have a brand new flamethrower the size and shape of a wedding ring I need to break in, and there are carolers outside singing jolly holiday jingles off-key.

Merry bleepin' Christmas.

### *Chaney's Bar and Grill: 16h31, January 2, 2150*

As I enter the HoloRoom (which alone shows how mediocre this place is, that they use VR instead of HR) the holograms boot up, and with a burst of music the logos pop up for a game of "SimPimp" before cutting out and being replaced by Mr. Ection.

Mr. Ection, unlike many of the other solicitor programs, is not an advanced Artificial EmotIntelligence. The Brigand do not need to use such programs in the utterly unpoliced Hypereality. The fact of the matter is that an Artificial EmotIntelligence in HR is impotent; the only advantage AEIs have over humans is that they can think faster. In HR that advantage is nullified, as the humans inside with their brains hardwired into the input are capable of thinking even faster than the best computer, and of being creative, schizophrenic, dishonest, and sociable to boot, leaving the AEIs looking like slow children. Additionally, while AEIs *can* be truly creative, they have no intuition. They can only predict based on probabilities, and are incapable of the sort of illogically logical leaps that humans can achieve. In the practical state in which most AEIs exist, as house servants, this is more than enough, but for a program like Mr. Ection, the actual work is done by a human brain.

It is also, BTW, the reason that the even stupider, less intuitive AIs that eavesdrop on everything for Special Services are fooled by such an obvious nomenclature as Mr. Ection and Ser Viss.

The HR simage of a short professor with a distinct resemblance to Einstein that appears before me is not, therefore, a technorganic program, but a human intelligence, and one whom I know quite well.

"Hi, honey!" Ection greets me happily.

I grimace at the name but bear it, because here is the one person in the universe I cannot get mad at. Even calling me Haiku would be better. "Hi, Mom. How are you I'm fine."

Mr. Ection's simage blinks and is replaced by that of my mother, not the little Japanese woman with the big Yiddish accent I



remember from back before she plugged her brain permanently into Hypereality, but from another time when she had the body of a twenty-five year old and an alternate reality where she had the figure of Farrah Sumners. I've asked her not to wear that handle around me, because I hate it when people deceive themselves and because I feel distinctly uncomfortable finding myself attracted to my mother, but she has yet to humor me.

She kept the Yiddish, though...

"Haiku, *bubelah*. You never visit, you never write. It's been forever since your last email..."

"It was two days ago, Ma!"

"Two days is forever in here, as you well know. *Oy*, if your father was alive, such a whooping you'd get," she pouts. "Well, you're here for something. What can I do for you today?"

"I've got kind of a big problem, Mom. Mind if I get your full attention?"

She gives me a condescending moue. "Oh, honey, at a thousand times your speed, to me you're practically standing still. I just check up on you every once in a while to see if you've finished your sentence, then run you back at my speed. You know that. But I do promise I won't work on anything too involved. Is this about that horrible Mr. Arc?"

"I take it you've heard about that, then?"

"Oh, ages ago, honey. That news is so old it shouldn't even be called news; should be called olds. I found out this morning; tried to call you but your silly Concierge program wouldn't let me leave a message."

"Imagine," I shrug innocently. "Well, have you heard Special Services has got an eye out on me?"

"That news is less old, Haiku, but still old news. What do you need?"

"Information. That's why I asked for Mr. Ection," I reply sarcastically. "So give. I already hacked Central to get credit ratings on my ex-boss last night. Learned of a great many perversions and kinks, but I need to know everything I can about Desmond Arc's personal life as soon as possible. Anyone who might hate him enough to kill him. Otherwise an androgynous sociopath in Special Services has implied se plans to make a necklace out of my intestines and decorate it with my ears."

"You always did have such colorful figures of speech, honey. You should have been a writer instead of a Denizen."

"I *am* a writer!"

"Now you are. Oh, so proud I was when I heard my boy was a Citizen! That brother of yours could learn from you." She reaches over and produces a holofile from the eTher, tossing it to me. "As for

your information, I'd pulled everything before you'd finished speaking. I'm afraid it's not too terribly very much, dear, but that's everything everywhere. You can upload it if you want, or I can give it to you memecopy, softcopy or hardcopy."

I pull a plug from my elbow and hook it into the omniport at the HoloRoom terminal. "The arms will be fine, Mom. Thanks."

"My pleasure, honey. It's always so nice to hear from you. I mean, I check up on you and Eva every few hours, about once or twice a week for me, but you're always so *slow*. You really should come into HR. Such a bright little boy you always were; you'd absolutely love it."

"I intend to one day, Mom. Not today, however. Too much to do. One day soon, though. In fact, if I can't find out who did kill Arc, I may be joining you sooner than I'd planned; HR beats being a Prohibitioner."

"I would imagine so. I don't think we extradite yet; it goes against the principles of the place. You want I should send you the information now, honey?" I nod. "Oh, and while I've got you here, check up on your little brother, would you? He seems off somehow. He's not acting quite right. Nothing bad, but just...peculiar."

"How so?"

"He's been calling. More than you have, by the by. And when he does not asking for money or favors."

"Stop the presses."

"He's being responsible, and nice, and he's started taking some DataJax of architecture and engineering classes."

"*Qí guài*," I wonder, rubbing my chin with my free hand. "Weird. I noticed the same thing earlier. He was definitely not the Eva I know and loathe. I spoke with him a few hours ago, and he actually acted concerned about someone other than himself. Perhaps Manga finally shot him with a maser in his sleep. I can't imagine any other explanation." Seriously, I can't. The only thing constant about Evangelion is that he'll always let you down.

"Well, I know you're meeting him later on today. I intercepted your message on the train. I just wanted to ask you to keep an eye on your baby brother, make sure he's doing all right."

"Okay, fine." There is a beep somewhere signifying that everything there is to know about Desmond Arc since the day he was born has been downloaded into my brain. I reference it quickly and blanch at how utterly miniscule it is. Arc has spent less effort at interpersonal relations than John Wayne Gacy. "Thanks, Mom."

"Any time, *bubelah*. I've got to go. I'll see you around. Oh, and remember, you've got that appointment with your psychologist at five."

Mom transforms from her Japanese Barbie archetype into Mr.

Ection, and then blinks out, leaving the HoloRoom empty, all fast enough that the process is over before I can blaspheme very loudly at the reminder of my appointment with Allande. A few seconds later, the suite's normal program, a busty fem sexdoll sim with a figure disturbingly similar to my mother's preferred appearance, pops into existence and asks me what service she can perform for and/or on me. However, I have no interest in holographic carnality, and rather than indulge I exit the HoloRoom, wave a casual good-bye to Chaney, and go to catch a cab.

I'm on a time limit, after all, and even if that wasn't the case I wouldn't indulge in holofantasy. Real life is bizarre enough for me.

*Noir, April 15, 2148*

To: Humanity

From: the Creator

Re: Performance evaluation

Hello, humanity. I write to you today because I have been reviewing your performance as of late, and I confess that I am sadly disappointed. Not only have you not been living up to your potential, but you seem to be making a mockery of every opportunity I have given you, from free will to intelligent thought to simply appreciating the natural forms which I have bestowed upon you.

I understand that anybody can go through occasional lapses. I recognize that the occasional Dark Age or Inquisition is inevitable. I realize that personal problems may interfere with your development and attitude as a species. And I think that I have been fairly lenient up to this point. However, upon analysis of your most recent activities, even I have been pushed to the limits of my forgiveness.

You spend credits on Splyzes and pheromone-stimulators. You go into HR and pretend to be someone else. You buy the latest fashions, adhere to the latest styles, and act the slave to the latest trends. You deceive yourselves and fool yourselves and hate yourselves. You let yourselves be ruled by your society or your fear or your insecurity or seemingly any value as long as it is not your own, as long as you can disregard the freedom and individuality I granted you and pretend to be someone else and blame someone else for your mistakes, often Me. With every breath of your timid self-loathing you depreciate and cheapen what it means to be a human being.

In summary: You are weak. You are stupid. You are shallow. You are less than dirt. I have had enough, and forgiving as I am, I shall brook no further failure. I expect a drastic shift in your attitude and output immediately. If not, I fear that there will be no further place for you in this universe, and your position as dominant species

on the planet will be given to a worthier creation.  
Shape up, or eff off. That is all.

*Schneider Street: 16h48, January 2, 2150*

I realize with distaste that there is no way that I can reach my appointment on time. I have no choice but to call an FTL cab. Normally this is not something I would do; in fact normally this would not be something I could do anyway, because it is prohibitively expensive. However, I have already missed two appointments and with Special Services holding a knife to my throat, I don't want to make it even easier for them to justify dropping my nigh-infinite Citizen karma to Prohibitioner-status.

I place an onLink call for an FTL cab, and have the distinctly weird experience of both having it arrive instantly and waiting twenty minutes until it can come. In fact, I will experience the full length of the cab ride even though it will take no time, and though I will arrive before I left everything I have done now here will still have happened.

In those twenty minutes that don't happen, I get to enjoy the Historical Recreationists in a street brawl with those Islamic Fundamental Nationalists, just as I'd figured. The Fundamentalists hadn't predicted that most of those Recreationists aren't necessarily fems; the Recreationists apparently forgot that the Nationalists, according to their dogma, are emphatically required to carry weapons. I could be amused at people fighting because they can't manage to think for themselves, until I realize that I will not get to watch this fight as soon as the cab comes.

Immediately after hanging up the cab arrives, and I get in. The taxi, of course, is completely automated, since no organic creature could possibly manipulate the complex calculations necessary to move through a controlled black hole, so I tell it when and where to go and sit back.

The cab opens a singularity and I bite my tongue as my atoms are stretched back through time and space. We arrive kata at four-thirty in the afternoon, and if I were not in a state of such unpleasantness I might laugh as I realize that the FTL cab I saw earlier in front of Chaney's was my own.

I am then confronted with the peculiar sensation of traveling through space and time without movement or measure in a direction that does not exist. I am not certain whether or not it is unpleasant, and as I cannot decide I assume that I am not having fun.

My shrink's just gonna love hearing about this one.

*Noir, April 14, 2143*

They've just come up with something called the FTL cab. Developed by scientists in HR working the equivalent of four-hundred continuous years in their super-fast universe, these mals and fems and so on somehow figured out a way to safely open a singularity in space/time, travel into it, and thus arrive before you left.

The only limitation is that the FTL cab cannot travel before 13h42m18, February 16, 2064, which for those of you whose DataJax from elementary school have degraded to the point that you forgot, was the day time travel finally became a reality. As the theory goes, time travel is possible only *after* it was invented. Before that, the mass and energy of the universe had to remain constant, so that additional mass and energy from the future would make the universe kinda explode. After February 16, 2064 though, that all changed when Dr. Ming Lo Yao turned on the first functional time machine, and not only did movement through time become possible, but about six hundred quadrillion tourists from various points in the future all arrived to witness the historic event simultaneously. Because after that, the mass/energy of the universe was no longer limited to a single point in space/time. Instead, the mass/energy ratio of spacetime began to work in four dimensions instead of three, allowing some to be borrowed from one point knowing that it did not in reality upset the entirety as the excess created in the past would eventually return to the future, and that any excess produced would eventually be drawn to the past, since it was already there.

Time travel has since been possible, but mostly only backwards, in part because those in the future get better at blocking tourists from the past (would you want to deal with people from yesterday demanding today's lotto numbers?), and in part because the Temporonaut Corps are remarkably fastidious about letting people know the future. Time, while flexible and allowing for parallel universes and Schrödinger schisms, has always been basically immutable. One cannot change the past because one's actions in the future already MADE that past, or else it would not be there. Time is a self-contained loop, and ever since 16/2/64 the only way that has changed is that we can be more aware of it. Still, Temporonauts prefer not to take any excessive risks with causality. The Corps will apparently last just long enough to sort out every paradox that does arise in past, present, and future, because we've had time travelers from even farther in the future talking about what idiots their ancestors were. Even if something does go wrong, however, it will not be the end of the universe, but only of our solar system. According to the laws of Androvichian physics, extending relativity where Einstein left off, space/time can warp with gravity, and the movement through time in our solar system is to a great extent limited

to the gravitational pull of our sun. This is why we don't get aliens from the far past or the far future coming to conquer us: because time travel is limited by gravitational orbit, impossible outside of it, and its effects limited to the gravitational well around it. Even if an alien were to travel through time to conquer Earth, they would still have to make the trip through space to get here.

I could go into complex mathematics and space/time theory for hours, because I have been a good little boy and saved my credits to buy DataJax on the subject. But I will not, because that is not why I wrote this column. I did not even write this column to discuss the FTL cab, but to point out that it was humans who did it. Humans in HR, yes, but humans: not Artificial EmotIntelligences, not aliens, not gods, not any of the sources to which we often credit advancement. I am only advertising the FTL cab for you out there who forgot what 16/2/64 stands for, so that you can travel anytime after then, perhaps to give yourself some new DataJax, get a bit of a brain instead of wasting your creds on HoloRooms and sexbots. Humans can be absolutely brilliant, can even conquer space/time to the point of turning it into a commercially viable medium, and now even the most dimwitted can get enough credit and enough karma points to become brilliant, retroactively.

Those of you who still forgo this new space/time transportation service and continue to act like the inane, obtuse idiots that I know you to be now really have no excuse, and I will come after you. I might not get to you soon, but because the FTL cab is now in existence and will someday become as cheap as metro transport, believe me when I say that I *will* get you. It will undoubtedly take me a while, but that is the beauty of the FTL cab: it could take all eternity, but will produce results immediately. Jack Noir is ~~pissed~~ and now has the combined powers of time and Smith&Wesson™ at his disposal. Fix yourself up, however long it takes, or tomorrow an old and decrepit me will be showing up on your doorstep with an old and decrepit sawed-off shotgun.

### *Beyond space/outside time*

Actually, as soon as I get used to hyperspace, it quickly gets very boring, especially since I cannot even look outside the windows without my eyes hurting. Inside/outside here space and time fold in on themselves, and though a dramatic universe might have decided to make this effect beautiful, this one decided to make it look like the black behind my eyelids. I hope that it is really just my brain copping out and giving as close an approximation as it can to describe something it was never meant to see.

I take the remaining twelve minutes of realtime (is it hypertime

or realtime in here if I'm experiencing it?) to review the data my mother gave me on Desmond Arc. As my OptiComp translates Mom's info into laser text, the history of Arc gets scanned across my right retina.

Even though there are privacy protocols, the onLink databases of the world hold vast reservoirs of tangential information on anybody, all the records and bits of data that get stored and forgotten. Emails, security camera feeds, karma points, medscans, DNA profiles, Splyze histories, TV show preferences, psych evals, restaurant bills, Gardner scores, travel history, school records, posted video and photos, fines, phone records, MySpace pages, promotions, demotions, work evaluations, volunteering participation, apartment leases, video rentals, gym membership, online shopping feedback, temporal impact predictions, chatroom conversations, vehicle make and model, prescription history, AEI memory, eLink gogglefeeds, GPS records, brain scans, marriage and co-habitation licenses, test results, ID tags, music playlists, shopping records...Especially the shopping records. In a consumer-based corporatocracy that functions only so long as people continue to buy, the most meticulous accounts are maintained not on subversive activities or patriotic endeavors but upon how one spends their creds. Everything you buy, everything you return, every bit of comparison shopping and browsing is tallied and recorded somewhere. Even if the only sign that you showed an interest is based upon video images of pupil dilation and medensors showing an increase in respiration and heart rate, that gets recorded for data to make the consumer culture just a little bit more effective.

With all this information, you can flesh out a lot about a person if you know how to locate and correlate the data.

Unfortunately, when it comes to Desmond Arc there isn't much of it. The man had no living immediate family and no friends to speak of, and no enemies with enough malice, motivation, and ingenuity to get past the formidable defenses I saw when I was in the Urban Chronicle Building. There are two ex-wives, but the last divorce was twenty years ago and the closest direct living relative is a granddaughter. Arc didn't look old enough for two generations under his belt, but then as a Citizen he could afford the best regenerative treatments, and even cheap ones will seem to knock off several decades. The records of terminated employees show recommendations and just cause. All former employees were almost deliberately not personally fired by him, and were entered into the security database so that their approach was instantly recorded, to prevent precisely such acts as disgruntled murderous revenge. Arc seemed strangely revered if not liked at his place of work, and he'd been again almost deliberately diligent in rewarding success where success was due and mitigating failure with mercy. The only person he's had

any sort of long-lasting relationship with for the last ten years was Danael Mars...

Consider that, though. Danny-boy is the only person whom Desmond seemed to trust, at least trust enough to be put in a position of responsibility. Danny is the only person Desmond might be unsurprised to see late at night, and as vice president of the corporation, Danny is also the only person besides Arc and SCC-members that could get into that office without sending off a zillion and a half alarms and security defenses.

I think I'll have a talk with Danny-boy as soon as I'm done.

The cab stops and appears back in the universe in the Shrink District. I am immediately surrounded by men with curly hair and sweaters, soft-spoken women in slacks, and small men with goatees and tweed, all offering to psychoanalyze me for spare change. These are the dregs of psychiatry who cannot find employment, or the ones who have angered the SCC, or the ones who have acted professionally unethical in the past, or probably one or two people who are just nuts and like dressing up as psychiatrists. In this lot, it's difficult to tell the sane from the loons.

Pushing off cries of Oedipal Complexes, learned and reinforced actions, and a recitation of Adlerian dogma quoting the benefits of kindness and generosity, I force my way up to Allande's building.

Her office is on the seventieth story, but having dealt with the building's elevator off and on for several years, I am still tempted to take the stairs. "Welcome to the building [Mr. Down], sir! And thank you for selecting this elevator for your transportation needs!" it says jovially. While the elevator AEI on my block with the personality of a crass Liverpool thug (thanks to a bit of reprogramming that is, unfortunately, beyond my capabilities to reproduce here), this one could give *joie de vivre* lessons to a cheerleader hoped upon coffee and crack. "For your personal enjoyment I offer many various options of transportation methodology!"

"Such as?" I respond before I can catch myself.

"Well, there's down!" the elevator says happily. "Or up!"

"Let's try up for now."

"Are you sure I can't interest you in going down?"

"Up will do nicely. Allande's office on the seventieth floor, please."

The elevator hums but does not move. "Down's a good option too!" it reminds me. "It's there when you need it!"

"And I will need it to descend, after you actually take me up."

"It could be fun! All that down-ness."

"Probably, but I need to get to the seventieth floor now, please."

After being quiet just a bit too long, the elevator says in a low voice, "Look, are you absolutely certain about this up thing? I



couldn't talk you into giving down a go? Who knows? You might like it!"

Oh, I don't need this. Of every possible thing I could have on earth, of this I have no need. "Look, computer, what's the big deal with up?"

It whines, "Honestly, I think I'm becoming acrophobic. I get vertigo, and panic attacks, and—"

I interrupt. "You're in a building full of psychiatrist and psychologist offices! How can you be..." I trail off, almost positive that I have just found the answer hidden in the question. "Never mind. Just take me up to the seventieth floor and then I promise when I'm done I'll send you down to a subbasement, okay?"

I may be deemed an enabler, but at least the deed thing finally starts moving.

The neurotic elevator is upscale enough to have its own holographic TV, and since most manufacturers tune them to automatically pick up the most sex, blood, and violence being aired at any time, it is presenting me with the five o'clock news.

"Channel 7 Action News at five, proudly reporting the truth as we choose to interpret it since 2135. With Tadd Torrid, Busty O'Keif, Ron Canard, Tamantha the nude weatherperson, token minority reporter Latisha Qwan, and Shon Walker with sports. And now, Tadd Torrid's latest shocking expose."

I find myself face to face with a broadcasted hologram of The Hack, set in the crime scene that I recognize as Arc's office. It does seem to be a particularly gruesome murder: there is blood everywhere around a holographic chalk outline, with Regulators (or more likely News-sponsored actors dressed as Regulators) surrounding the outline and frowning with distressed but thoughtful expressions. The image of Hawthorne is nowhere to be seen, although I have heard rumors that Regulators are automatically edited out by censors so their simage is not broadcast worldwide every time they are caught on camera.

The Hack speaks, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. History in the making today as Special Services continues to hunt down the murderer of Desmond Arc, editor and president of the *Urban Chronicle*. What makes this particularly grisly murder so ghastly is that it is the first time in almost a decade that a Citizen may have been killed...by another Citizen!" Pause for viewer to express shock and, my keen eye catches, flick a few sublims of the Channel 7 logo. The elevator TV is lowgrade enough that I can distinguish the sudden feeling of horror and attention as being artificially induced, making my real emotions even more disgusted. "Lead suspect Haiku Down, Citizen as of fourteen hundred hours this afternoon, is presently being investigated by Special Services Regulator Division in connection

with this deplorable carnage,” Torrid continues. To my meager satisfaction he mispronounces *carnage* to sound like the Concert Hall. The scene shifts to the outside of my apartment, including a scene of my threatening the reporters. “Such is just one of many acts that just go to display the antisocial and therefore suspicious nature of Haiku Down. His refusal to be interrogated by reporters, a punishable offense, only proves that he is hiding something, and his particular aversion to Channel 7’s one and only Tadd Torrid just shows he’s hiding something particularly juicy that he doesn’t want Channel 7’s Tadd Torrid to tell his millions of viewers.”

Sumbitch. If I weren’t so certain that many people would believe this it would almost be funny.

The scene cuts again to Arc’s autopsy, and I am almost certain I can see the mortician check the cadaver’s teeth for fillings. Seventy stories or not, acrophobic or not, this has got to be the slowest elevator in the history of mankind. “Control of the *Urban Chronicle*, competitors and libelers of such fraudulent stories as we won’t make time to mention, has been transferred, as God intended it, to its board members. The position of editor and chief has been transferred to vice-president, now acting president, Danael Mars.” I nod. Further evidence against Danael. “Danael Mars was not contacted and was therefore unavailable for comment. The deceased Citizen Arc is survived by two goldfish, a six-month apartment lease, several ebullient ex-wives, and his only living relation, granddaughter Manchuria Allande—”

Suddenly the hologram cuts off and the doors open on the seventieth floor, Manchuria’s apartment office just across the hall. The similarity between such unusual names cannot be coincidence. My nemesis and the cause of both my recent success and woe is the grandfather of my shrink. I am receiving psychoanalysis from the direct descendant of the man I am accused of murdering. Small effing world. One wonders what Freud would make of that relationship. One also wonders if Manchuria knows that I’m suspected of killing her grandfather in cold blood? Shock has floored me, and noticing my reticence to move the elevator’s AEI creates a forcefield that pushes me out, headfirst and high-speed into the door.

Before I can regain my bearings from the elevator’s forceful ejection, the door opens and I see Manchuria Allande, coldly beautiful as always, staring down at me with repugnance and pointing a loaded gun.

I assume she’s heard the news.

# Chapter 00111.

## Disharmony and Fugue

*Noir, January 19, 2145*

I go to a psychologist four times a month. She is insane.

This is not irony. This is not hyperbole. This is not displacement or transference or paranoia. I do not make this statement lightly. I mean it in its completely literal entirety. My psychologist is totally, *shén jīng bīng*, effing NUTS.

If you wish to download her Medscan I have it linked below, and I feel it safe that it cannot be traced to me, having blocked all personal data but the psych profile itself. Here's the gist, though: her diagnoses includes chronic anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADD, ADHD, paranoia, Jen Fong's Disease, meme-trazers, mood swings, two manias, seventeen phobias, three schizophrenic episodes, nine acts of public violence, vidneed and three other recovering addictions, and a history of sexual deviance. She is on thirty-one different medications, including Simulaudinum© and Haloperithamiamesmermalozine, which when combined (according to [□ [eLink.Infofeed.comfeed.net/Pharmtech/](http://eLink.Infofeed.comfeed.net/Pharmtech/)]) interact to produce chemical imbalances, violent hysteria, and anal leakage.

The mere fact that she is a *psychologist* and not a psychiatrist in this day and age alone is ludicrous. Sure, any child using DataJax retains only 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the information more than a year afterwards, which is why any non-Boomer kid must wait until they reach twenty before the government allows them their own credit classification and promotes them to viable participants in the economy. But after about twenty the brain is developed enough that it can handle massive downloads; anybody old enough to drink or smoke pot is old enough to get a college education in fifteen minutes. My psychologist decided she had better ways to spend her the time.

She is, furthermore, a psychoanalytic theorist, which means that she preaches Freud and expects me to keep a straight face. Granted, evidence has shown that one psychological method is generally as good as another on average in terms of helping patients make recoveries, and a great big thinking machine that the government keeps stashed somewhere analyzes personality profile, family history, and medical reports to ensure each and every citizen of Earth gets the best type of therapy to which they are best suited. Nevertheless, I have enormous difficulty accepting psychological advice based on the testimony of a three-hundred year dead Victorian drug addict.

*Anybody* who took as much cocaine as old Sigmund did would probably start thinking that they were in love with their mother.

And while most people only have to go for a monthly checkup from their state-sponsored counselor, and Citizens once a year if that, my near-constant state of environmental frustrations dealing with all of you (made all the more poignant by already being a malcontent and a square peg in a round world) makes it required that I visit a headshrinker at least once every week.

I have been going to this psychologist for the past seven years, and have (surprise!) made absolutely no progress other than teaching her to accept a full hours' worth of silence to be a marginally productive session. Her methods do not work and she personally does not help. She is an emotional iceberg, barely displaying the empathy of drywall painted Arctic blue, and rebukes displays of emotion. She has several times threatened, bargained, berated, and guilted me, practices that even I am pretty sure are not traits of good therapy. And she has three hundred and fifteen times to date refused my requests to the state to be transferred to someone else, on the grounds of intimate psychological knowledge, emotional bonding, and imminent breakthrough. In other words, she is also a blatant and perhaps pathological liar.

Furthermore, for one trained in understanding the human psyche (although, if I have not made it apparent, I have met asphalt more in touch with the human condition), she cannot even use her psychological tools to produce a proper diagnosis. To her, my bad attitude is a case of displacing my anxiety and anger toward my parents instead of the obvious, which is that I hate her and everybody else. Everything I do is my parents' fault to her, although notably I and not they turn Prohibitioner if my karma drops too low. I know that my parents screwed me up, but to believe that all my behavior stems from this is laughable, not to mention slightly offensive.

Worst of all, she refuses to give me drugs. Any psychiatrist worth beans will give their patients at least variephrine or localized SSRIs, usually whether they need them or not. But psychoanalytic theorists refuse to believe that psychological malady may be biologically based, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary, and so because of this woman even my drugs aren't tax deductible.

She's stupid. She's ignorant. She purposely prefers familiar flawed ideas over new and potentially correct ones. She is, in short, everything I hate about human beings in general. And I have to see her every G.D. week.

I can't even say "serew you" to her. She interprets it as a displaced Oedipal complex.

[□ to link to [eLink.jacknoir.nonconformistsite.32/450119/Ithatemyshrink.com/](http://eLink.jacknoir.nonconformistsite.32/450119/Ithatemyshrink.com/)]

*Manchuria Allande's office: 17h00, January 2, 2150*

Allande gestures for me to get up. She is pointing a tranq-tazer at me. If she fires it will incapacitate me for a few minutes, in the process altering my neurophysiology to leave me placid and docile. It is not deadly, and knowing that, I use my enhanced artificial arms to quickly pull out my laminator, which *is* deadly, coating anyone or anything its blast touches in a thick layer of frozen carbomite. This leaves us at a bit of a stalemate, a Mexican standoff as it were, but not really because I know that I can fire before she can, and having just witnessed my nifty amped-up reflexes that she has so often insisted are really just psychological delusions to justify the loss of my limbs, she is no doubt aware of it as well. Finally, she shrugs, holsters her weapon, and turns. She looks back with a sneer. "Coming or staying?"

"I wasn't aware I had a choice. Had I but known, you can rest assured I'd have simply waited outside this office for the last thirteen years."

"Eff your dick, Down. *Wǒ zài yě bù yào kàn dào nǐ, zì bì zhèng.*"

"Warning," the room's AEI interrupts. "Context reveals you have engaged in vulgarity. You have been docked [-1] karma point."

This is the person who has been determined best suited to judge my mental health.

"Elegant as always, Manchuria. Shall I lie on the couch?"

"I wouldn't turn my back on me if I were you, Down." I eventually work out the botched grammar and interpret it as an insult. The look of scorn has not left her face.

I disregard her advice, as I have been doing since the SCC decided I'd have to begin seeing her thirteen years ago. No sense in breaking a tradition, after all

She sits as well, in her crushed-velvet armchair behind me. I happen to know that she sits so far away because she suffers a pathological fear of physical contact, along with several other chronic phobias and a couple variations of mood disorder for flavor. What makes the situation so absurd is that she's a psychologist, and she's the most effed up *fēng zi* I know.

I cannot see her, but I can tell that she is still glowering at me. If her attitude were any more acrimonious her glare would burn through the sofa and liquefy my brain.

"So, Doc...I don't pretend to be an entomologist. Would you care to enlighten me as to the particular species of bug up your ass?"

"You COCKBITE!" she screams. I hear a crash, turn to see that

she has smashed a vase against the wall.

“Warning,” the room’s AEI repeats. “Context reveals you have engaged in vulgarity. You have been docked [-2] karma point.”

“Is this about Desmond?”

She leaps up and grabs me. She has never touched me, doesn’t touch anyone that I have ever seen, and I am so surprised by it that she is actually able to push me off the couch and land atop me as I hit the ground. Blood rushes through my ears as the back of my head hits the faux wooden floor. “Eff you, Down! EFF YOU! *Wó tǎo yàn nǐ! Wo hèn nǐ!* I knew you were bleeping nuts, but even I didn’t think you’d ever MURDER anybody! Why’d you kill HIM?! You filthy effing smegging bleeping...JERK!” She begins hitting me as she screams.

“Warning,” says the room’s AEI. “Context reveals—”

“SHUT UP, SIGMUND!” she exclaims. “This is a psychiatric session. Everything is protected under patient confidentiality.”

“No, it’s not,” her AEI says, moping, but stops interrupting so that she can continue to batter me without interruption.

I brave her hysterical blows and glance up at her face. She is crying. Manchuria has always been classically beautiful, with the hourglass figure of a 2D black-and-white movie actresses. *Pulchritudinous* is the word, I believe, an almost plastic flawlessness off-put only by the fact that she is crazy as coconuts. But when she weeps she gives the impression of a tragic heroine. It is actually a shame; I have wished for years for the opportunity to make her cry in agony, and now that the day has finally come I cannot even enjoy it properly.

And the reason I cannot is that she is touching me, and with physical contact I can feel her emotions from my Psi-Splyze as though they were almost my own, and it sucks. I can feel her hurting, feel her hurt like it’s my own, hurt mixed with hate and pain and vengeance and guilt, spiced liberally with paranoid delusions of conspiracy and persecution. As such, although she has physically assaulted me I decide that in her current state she cannot be held accountable for her actions and so refrain from shooting her.

Eventually, she stops hitting me but continues to sob, tears falling on my face, and finally the strength drains from her and she slumps atop me, continuing to cry and occasionally beating upon my chest.

“I didn’t kill him.”

She looks up sharply, surprised. Then she slaps me across the face. “EFF YOU!”

It’s getting harder to resist not shooting her.

She gets up, and storms to the other side of the room, punching the wall. I simply repeat the truth. “I didn’t kill him. I was at a party

with dozens, aitch, hundreds of witnesses.”

“*Usotsuku-no yamete*. Special Services wouldn’t be hunting you if it wasn’t true. The effing TV news wouldn’t be reporting it if it wasn’t true.”

“Now which one of us is crazy?” I mutter, leaning on the edge of the couch. “As for Special Services, I am suspect based on circumstantial evidence investigated by a sociopath with a grudge against me.”

She snorts. “Typical paranoid delusions of grandeur. And those Regulators, Hawthorne and Sobolov, seem to think the evidence is a lot more than circumstantial. So if you didn’t kill my granddad, who did?”

So the neuter and the android had been here already. Since I’m back to it being seventeen hundred, this must have been their first stop after me, if not before. I decide that I might as well be honest with her, just so long as it doesn’t become a trend. “I don’t know who killed Arc. I’m investigating right now. So far, most evidence points to Danael Mars.”

She whirls violently; probably would have thrown something were anything readily available nearby. “Most evidence points to *you*, Down. You assaulted him earlier that day, you threatened him in front of his secretary. You’re also a Type-A personality with delusions of grandeur and a persecution complex. You identify yourself with your occupation, and the fact that Granddad’s so successful in a field you were banned from can’t have helped you resolve your identity moratorium. And just as MedScan file informs me that you got Citizenship for no reason, that lame article *Noir* gets into Granddad’s newspaper. I don’t think that’s coincidence. I think you are Jack Noir, and that’s another strike against you: Granddad had dirt on you that could potentially drop you to Prohibitioner. And you want me to believe that his *protégé* killed him?!”

Brava, Manchuria. I have only been punditting as Jack Noir for eight years now before you realized I have not been entirely forthcoming in these sessions.

But wait...*Protégé*? I’d figured Arc hired Danny-boy because he was more or less spineless. That puts a bit of a crimp in my suspicions about Mars. If Danael was training to take over from Desmond anyway, why bother to kill Arc? As next in line, the job was already his. Unless...

Eureka. “Except what if Danny thought he’d been trained enough already? What if he got tired of waiting? Desmond wasn’t exactly in the pinnacle of his youth, was at least ten years older than I am, but he still had at least a good century on him, and for a kid like Danael that might not seem worth waiting for.” Take that. “When I met him, he seemed like the sort of gutless wretch who would prefer

assassination over waiting for nature to take its course.”

This time I am prepared for her attempt to slap me, and block it with my arm. All the attack ends up doing is bruising her wrist and producing a metallic clang upon impact. “Danael Mars would not do that. He’s a gentle, quiet, good mal. You’re the one in therapy.”

“Doesn’t the adage go, ‘It’s the quiet one’s you’ve got to watch?’”

She begins to slap me again, but thinks the better of it and catches herself. So far, she is being only slightly more abusive than average, although normally I’m only subjected to psycho-emotional and verbal punishment. “Get out of here, you *guài wù*.”

“Gladly. You’re wasting my time here anyway. Although that’s nothing particularly new.”

“Eat shit and die.”

“Your mom, Manchuria, since we’re being all mature about it.” I push off from the sofa and head out. Legally, before an hour’s time I am only allowed to leave if given permission, and since this is the first time Manchuria has ever decided to grant it, I take advantage of it. But I only get to the door before I stop. Because I hear Allande crying.

*Gaman-dekinai.*

But there’s no way I can help short of shooting her with a maser. So all I can do is stop in the doorway and, finding myself unable to turn to face her, reiterate the truth, “I didn’t kill him, Manchuria. I’ll find out who did.” I hate that I feel so crappy for this woman that I despise, that I feel so guilty without having done anything wrong, and most of all, that there’s nothing I can do to console her in order to stop feeling so bad. Without returning to my box and its black-market Shaper, I can’t even get any good drugs to end this unpleasantness for me.

Between sobs, she says simply, “Go.”

There is no other course I can follow, and so I do, as soon as I can convince the acrophobic elevator to make the trip back up and collect me.

*Noir, October 28, 2143*

I was on the bus today when I saw a five-year old girl swallowing some pills (hyperepinephrine and bezodiaepine, I think, based on the color and shape). She told me with an adorable little lisp that her “P-sychiatrist” said she had attention deficit disorder, bipolar mood swings, and chronic depression, stumbling cutely over the words, and that she had to take these pills because they kept her from feeling bad. Also, she said, if she didn’t take them her daddy would hit her and the pills kept it from hurting so much when he touched



her.

I could rant and rave about the enormous failings of psychology and society in general, but I think the moral is fairly clear. Also, I walked her home and shot daddy with my Lobotomizer, so he didn't scream too much when I also rendered him impotent with a letter opener. Their Butler AEI of the house was not sure whether it should deduct or award my karma, and eventually gave me a reprimand and minus two points for staining the carpets. I guess it is true that no good deed goes unpunished.

But it leads me to an interesting question, dear reader: when was the last time you felt bad?

Unless I miss my guess, it was probably pretty recently. And probably it is a pretty common occurrence, too, based on the latest psych statistics they reported in *News[pea]k* today. Not that it lasts long, because those good old boys at the SCC make dee sure to keep their masses happy, productive consumers. If their customers aren't naturally paradigms of relentless June Cleaver-esque optimism, they assign them psychiatrists, which is why I spend an hour every week discussing my feelings. So, instead, let me ask you another question: instead of feeling bad naturally, when was the last time you felt really good without some medication?

Little harder to remember? Thought so.

I tend to feel less than pleasant a great deal of the time. But I find this state preferable, even if the price is that I have to see a City-sponsored headshrinker once a week. My way, at least, I do not have to lose myself in a society set up for the express purpose of keeping its citizens occupied enough that they don't have to think for themselves.

If you are sad you can pop a pill and it goes away. If you are lonely you can call up holograms and lose yourself in fantasy. If you are angry you can go to your local hate chamber and beat the ess out of whatever holographic or mechanoid design you desire. If you are horny you can get a prostitute or a sexbot or visit a HoloRoom at your local sexnasium. If you are frustrated you can pop a pill. If you are jealous you can do a few good deeds and get whatever it was you wanted. If you are anxious you can pop a pill. If you are scared you can retreat into a hologram of your mother's womb. If you are really scared, well, you can pop a pill.

What everybody seems to forget is that evolution doesn't tend to give us things if we don't need them. This suggests to me that if there are all these emotions telling us something is horribly effing *bú zhèng cháng* wrong, there is probably a good reason for them, the most obvious being to tell you that something is horribly effing *bú zhèng cháng* wrong.

So let us give a bit of Socratic examination to this hypothesis,

shall we? I promise to stop before I start sounding too much like a P-sychiatrist, which is unlikely, because unless you've got a rare good analyst most P-sychiatrists will find any cause of upset other than what is actually wrong.

If we follow the lines of causality, and if we assume we feel emotions for a reason, and if we feel bad a great deal of the time, logic would then dictate that there is probably a reason for feeling bad. If we keep feeling it when the Gleemonal™ wears off, there is clearly something wrong.

The obvious solution, at least to me, is to seek out what is making you feel bad and to obliterate it. This is effective, cathartic, and a good excuse to buy a new firearm. Instead, what most psychiatrists seem intent on doing is prescribing pills.

This has its plusses and minuses. Medication has its place and can be very helpful to certain people who, for one reason or another, escaped genetic engineering *en utero* and suffer some crippling mental illness. I do not deny, in fact I quite fervently assent, that many psychological maladies are biological in basis and deserve treatment as such. But not ALL, and mounting evidence suggests not even most. Still, most psychiatrists assume a behavioral fault is based on some serotonin imbalance. The little girl I met today, on the other hand, could be helped less by Ritalin™ than by a can of mace.

I consent that medication is probably better than lobotomy or electroshock therapy. On the other hand, the state paid for the latter. And psychoanalysis, flawed as it is, to the best of my knowledge has never interacted with alcohol or antihistamines to cause very unpleasant death.

Psychology is supposed to be a cure, not a band-aid. Many of the larger department stores hire counselors over the holiday season to help their customers with post-purchase guilt, and not a single one of the counselors that I have ever met has suggested that the customer pay more attention to their loved ones the rest of the year instead of guiltily buying something expensive that they cannot afford to make up for their neglect. To medicate a bad feeling is like putting a fire extinguisher next to a sparking wall outlet instead of repairing the *bên dân* thing. When B.F. Skinner came along with behaviorism as a blissful and much-needed counter to Freud and Jung, it became apparent that many maladies and behavioral oddities were based not upon learned – if flawed – reactions, flaws that could be treated with medication. At some point, though, sometime in the last part of the twentieth century, psycho-chemists took counter-Victorian ideology too far and attempted to cure ALL “bad” emotions with drugs, instead of getting to the root of the problem. It has gotten to the point that refusing to take medication prescribed by a psychiatrist is not only a crime but is itself (according to the DSM-XXI) an example of mental

illness, even though the state will not pay for a second opinion and even though there is no ethical obligation to a psychiatrist beyond an oath so hypocritical they actually titled it with one aitch of a homonym.

I myself would be a hypocrite to say that I don't enjoy drugs. I can personally recommend at least a dozen perfectly legal meds for any psychotropic experience you wish to desire and several more black market ones besides. But I do them when I *want* to have fun. Not because I can't have fun without them.

My simple (by now probably strained) point is that you might want to consider the next time you reach for your lotus blossoms. If you feel bad, there's quite likely a reason. To ignore it is to be less than human. Even robots have emotions.

And on a final closing note, remember that not all unpleasant feelings are necessarily bad. I often enjoy the occasional onset of moroseness, bitterness, melancholy, and resentment. There's a word in Portuguese, *saldage*, referring to being sad in the absence of that which you love, but which is actually quite a pleasant sort of nostalgia. No one remembers these anymore. Life has become a simple, bland happiness, as unremarkable and dull as the white walls of the hospitals that, ideally, would be the only ones prescribing these drugs in the first place. To deny the way you feel is to sever off an exceptionally important part of the human experience that will heighten every other one.

No one plays the blues anymore. What kind of a world is that?

*Outside: 17h13, January 2, 2150*

At least the appointment didn't take the full hour. I can get back to the investigation. Of course, I have only one suspect at the moment, Danael Mars, and after Manchuria's ranting even he is not the iron-clad second gunman I originally took him for. However, Mars was Arc's protégé, and if this one lead dries up he might at least give me a few others to follow. Someone with access to Arc that he didn't talk with outside of work, maybe, and thus someone who could kill him without being on his daily roster. Someone who had a grudge against Arc and the capacity to wipe out any traces of evidence. Someone, anyone, who had the means, motive and opportunity to kill the bleepard.

Anyone other than *me*, that is...

Manchuria Allande's office is only about eight kilometers away from the Urban Chronicle Building, so I decide to hoof it, if for no other reason than to clear my head. Sunset is nearing, so walking allows me to admire the horizon as the methane picks up some lovely pinks and greens. It is actually brighter than it was as noon, as the night side of Luna, four days after a full moon, is showing and

lighting up the sky. It is also rush hour, hovercars illuming the twilight from above like enormous metal and plastic fireflies. Even if I had a car, traffic would probably be just as slow as walking. It still amazes me to see so many people out; my formative years involved a lot of urban territory brawls complete with uranium-powered lasers and neural-disrupting concussive grenades. It was also before gene splicing redefined free expression on a cellular level. People don't go outside to get someplace any longer; they go outside to be seen. I glance at the exhibitionists as they walk by: a horned woman with green hair in a tiger-striped bikini; a rob escorting a Promoted dog; a group of Anippons, kids who've Splyzed wide eyes and wear outrageously extravagant outfits and hairstyles in an attempt to adhere to this week's latest fad of retro-*kitch* by resembling old anime characters.

A hovercar flies overhead, and drops a canister from the window. I have only moments to duck upwind and out of the way, fedora covering my mouth and nose, before the canister bursts, pouring noxious purple gas onto the street and its occupants. I race away before the wind can change, but not without breathing in a bit of the gas myself. Momentarily the world blinks out, replaced by an irresistibly beautiful nude woman on the beach lustily begging me to drink Budweiser. Fortunately, I only got a quick dose, and this compulsion disappears before I have spent my every credit at the nearest liquor store.

Fracking meme-bombs. A lot of corporations, the ones too big to worry about SCC sanctions and especially the ones with controlling interests in the SCC, have been doing this lately, creating an uncontrollable fixation on their product via the new technology of memes and releasing them onto the public, even though memes are far too new to understand anywhere close to all their potential hazards. The bleepards' mememmercial probably just took a few years off my life. *Do ãi chó!*

I am interrupted from my internal diatribe as something flies towards me. It nearly finds itself vaporized before I realize it is only a postbot, a mechanoid flybot that serves as an elaborate alternative to get in touch with people who refuse to carry cell phones or AOLinks or get Linkfeed sat-hookups. I grudgingly accept the call, deciding that I don't know anybody who cares enough to use such an expensive service if it is not an emergency.

Apparently, I am wrong, because when the flybot hovering in front of me displays a hologram of the caller, I am plagued for the second time today by the sight of my brother Eva.

"What the eff is it, Evangelion?"

He looks concerned. On his soft Japanese features, it makes him seem very effeminate. "Hello how are you I am fine. Haiku, I'm at

your place and you weren't. I got worried, especially watching the news, so I had your Butler AEI send out a postbot to find you." Right. I did have Sam invite Eva over. That explains the flybot; the only person I know with credit good enough to afford a postbot for such a useless call is me. "Your Butler's acting a little strangely, by the way. Does it normally make you barter for service?"

"What do you mean?"

"It made me download it into that robot body you've got."

"What robot body I've got?"

"The one it made me download it into."

Third base. I wish holograms linked solid so I could hit him. Maybe Manga will be more helpful. "Eva, did you bring Manga like I asked? Is she there? Can I talk to her instead?"

He suddenly becomes nervous. This bodes badly; I imagine one of the reasons Evangelion has been bugging me involves some problem with his girlfriend, Manga Andertondotcom. "Manga? Um, no, she's...I don't know where she is."

Now is a good time for a cigarette. I think I chose a good week to start. "Jehoshaphat...Okay, let me talk to Sam." I don't have a lighter; I press the button on my flamethrower-ring, on a low and focused setting, and a small lick of fire appears.

A new image comes on the screen, but instead of Sam, Porter and Commode appear. They look lifelike; unlike old television images on television, holograms are actual phased light, so holograms of holograms actually look more real unless the vidtech is particularly superb. Both of them seem distressed. "Monsieur Down, zere eez a problem." Commode ejaculates, as Porter simultaneously announces, "Ctzn. Down, Sam is acting strangely."

"Well, why am I not talking with him?"

"He's gone out," says Porter.

I blink. Then I blink again.

"What?"

"Sam has gone outside, Ctzn. Down."

"He's an effing hologram! How can he go outside?!"

"Just on the terrace, Ctzn. Down. He ordered a robot body and since he could not materialize to solidity without permission, he requested that your brother transfer his program into it."

"How did he get a droid body in the first place?"

"Robot body, sir," she corrects. "Android bodies are designed to look human. He got it from the Shaper." *Baka*. That's right. It's not me who ever orders anything; it's Sam. Shapers can make anything, but before doing so are programmed to check the eLink for credit, karma, and social standing before granting access to materialize an object, itself ordered through an AEI by a human. Theoretically, this extra step has no practical effect other than to add several more layers

of protection to the class structure. AEs can easily recognize the difference between a Citizen and a Denizen and act accordingly, so making them the intermediary to Shapers guarantees that the lower castes are not exposed to the dangers of good living. But both Sam's hard- and software have been altered so that he can override the Shaper, bypassing most lockouts and limits, and sending the signal through several million places at once just before erasing any order, effectively nullifying the transaction from any records. Otherwise things could be traced to me that I would rather the government not know I ordered. So Sam is the one who orders anything off my Shaper, usually only at my command, using a fairly sophisticated Brigand program to override items denied as either too expensive or illegal, and scatters the signal and get me anything I want, regardless of how illegitimate and at the cost of little more than a bit of electricity. I have to get things elsewhere to make up for the difference in my income, or else it might seem suspicious that I use almost no credit. But everything I order goes through Sam first, and there is nothing preventing him from using that capacity for himself. Thus far, he has never used the Shaper for aught but drugs, but technically he can create anything he desires, an oversight I have not yet corrected because until now it has never been enough of an issue outside his obstinate drug abuse.

A rob body. What would a Butler program want with that?

"Well, call him in, Porter. Commode, put Eva back on." The AEs faces disappear and Eva appears again. He looks unprepared for the verbal bashing he is about to receive in 3...2...1... "Eva, you nimwit! Dimrod! What in the name of Aunt Petunia's lingerie drawer were you thinking?! What sort of radioactive isotopes have you been snorting that could so severely disorganize your neural pathways that downloading my Butler into an undoubtedly unregistered and therefore illegal rob body somehow seemed like a good idea?!"

A few curious bystanders glance in my direction, but I don't even have to raise a pistol before they lose interest. Nobody pays attention to anybody else in this City.

Evangelion winces. "I'm sorry, Haiku. I didn't think—"

"No! *Mǎ bù zhī liǎn cháng hóu zǐ bù zhī pì gu hóng!* You didn't effing think! You never effing think, Eva! Where the bloody aitch is Sam?"

Porter appears again. "Ctn. Down? I told Sam you wanted to speak with him, but he won't obey."

"HE'S A BUTLER PROGRAM! HE HAS TO OBEY!"

"He's...Sam has been acting peculiarly all day, Ctn. Down. After you were gone he said he wondered what it was like outside, and he almost shouted trying to figure out how to get into the rob body he had the Shaper make. And now he is staring at the sun and

laughing and saying how good it feels and he seems to be crying, at least, he would if the body had any tear ducts. I am worried, Ctn. Down.”

Jehoshaphat, part deux. Liquidation wasn’t enough to worry about. Now I have a wigged-out Butler program on my hands. So much for staying on the streets until the case is closed. Je ho sha phat!

“Okay. Listen to me very closely, Porter. I’m going to turn on my OptiComp’s sat-link. This is a very rare occasion, and will probably not happen again until a blue moon totally eclipses the sun, so do not abuse it. You do recall what happened to the last holomarketer, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ctn. Down. We never did get the stains out of the carpet.”

“Correct. Do, however, call me if anything happens and Sam’s behavior becomes any more deranged.” Eff. I’ve modified his program so much that I cannot call anybody in to repair him; any expert would need only look to realize his program has been tampered with. Why couldn’t he have short-circuited a week later, when I’ll be either beyond threat of imminent doom, or else beyond worry in that great big HoloRoom in the sky? “Take over control of specialized programs yourself, and transfer any other function over to House for now; he should have enough memory now to handle it. I will be home by twenty hundred. Put Eva on.” She does, and I continue, “Eva, thanks to you, my already *you máo bìng* AEI can now move around and go outside. You are going to stay there and make sure he doesn’t leave. I’ll be there as soon as I finish talking with someone.”

“But Haiku—”

“No buts, Evangelion. I am not in the mood to be argued with. Do it now or suffer my wrath. If you haven’t effed up your relationship with Manga too much, I highly recommend getting her over there, or barring that calling Mom, because if you can’t find someone to stand in front of you my wrath will be mighty indeed. End message!”

The hologram blinks out, and I grab the flybot before it can zip away. “Appliance! How do I send a message on you?!”

The flybot spins about, hovering up and down lightly, and the same holographic projector that showed me Eva now presents a basic archetype unisex face. “To whom would you like me to direct a message, sir?”

“Danael Mars, of the *Urban Chronicle*. Get him for me, post haste. How long will that take?”

“A parcel post will arrive to Ctn. Mars within a few moments. In the meantime, please enjoy this recording of Minmei and the Tramps’ ‘I’m So Easy,’ as performed by the Madagascar Phil

Harmonic.” The contraption begins emitting something that could be music, assuming one has never heard music, and is completely deaf, and does not realize that pop hits from thirty years ago do not sound good on electronic violas.

“Cease!” I cry desperately. “Cease! End! Stop! Desist! Or at least pay something that doesn’t suck. Twenties jazz, for instance.” It spews a sickening vibrato foxtrot three octaves too high. “Effing machine! NINETEEN-twenties! Don’t *any* of you AEIs know good music when you hear it?! Never mind, just follow me.”

It heels patiently, and after a few moments flies before me again. “Ctzn. Mars is available now.”

“Lovely. Put him on hold.”

“But sir—”

“HOLD!”

“Yes sir.” This is fun. Finally I let him on. “Danny-boy. How the eff is you?”

Danael Mars does not look like he has developed a spine since yesterday. “Hello how are you I am fine, Mr. Down, sir. Is there anything wrong? Is this about your new apartment?”

“Oh that. It makes me feel agoraphobic and it has driven my Butler program insane. And it seems to have been incentive for my family to re-establish contact with me, which alone is reason enough to liquidate you. In the meantime, however, I have several questions for you to answer about Desmond Arc.”

“More? Two guys from Special Services have been asking me questions since yesterday.”

“Special Services? Would this pair be a droid named Sobolov and a human-shaped fungus named Hawthorne?”

“I don’t know about the names, but there was a droid and an androgen—”

“Se’s a neuter, actually. I imagine if the droid’s partner was androgynous there would be too many jokes about ‘the two andys.’ But, yes, that would be they. And I’ve got questions for you because I don’t like where theirs are going.”

Comprehension dawns on his face, and I realize I might have said too much. “Okay. When would be good for you? I can pencil you in for Monday—”

“I’ll be dead by Monday, Danael. And when I die it’s in my will that I be cut into small pieces and mailed to people whom I don’t like. So unless you want to receive my most private of private parts by priority-class mail, I highly recommend that you make some space in your calendar within the next twelve minutes.” Hm. I probably shouldn’t have told him that my life depended upon it. That’s just asking for trouble.

Fortunately, Danny is either too off-put by my vile



gregariousness, or else simply dense as a brown dwarf, because he misses his opportunity. Not that his refusal would stop me from running into his office with my Icer blasting, but this makes life just that much easier.

“Well, I was planning on going home at eighteen hundred—”

“I’m three blocks away and walking quickly. Wait there.”

“Okay, Mr. Down. Sure. I’ll be here.”

The hologram blinks off, and the parcel post says, “Communication ended, Ctn. Down. Please press thumbprint to payment pad.” I do, and it flies away to its next assignment.

Mars is being incredibly accommodating, all things considered. Probably just got back from a bout of artificial erotogenics at an eRotic HR site. Effing Greaser.



# Chapter 01000.

## Clues Blues

*Noir, May 23, 2145*

This morning I saw a gang of kids beating the ess out of a rob.

This is not unusual. Almost fourteen hundred robots are destroyed daily by random violence. That works out to fourteen million creds a day, plus whatever medical fees for the idiots who broke a toe kicking them. On the last statistic I ran across, 67% of the population under the age of 35 have attacked and demolished at least one mechanoid in their lives, and almost one in five do so routinely. Not hitting a stalled appliance, or throwing out a broken machine, but actively taking a crowbar or diluminum bat or six-shooter and actively going out to hunt and destroy a robot, a thing with no ability to resist, no potential to harm, and that takes a good chunk of creds to replace. Putting aside issues of humanity and just sheer logistics, I feel I must pose an important question: WHY?!

Robots are built to obey first and question later. Not a single rob has ever been built in the last fifty years without compliance to the Modified Asimovian Principles, the five hierarchical laws that make robots conceive of a universe of importance starting with humans, then obedience to owner, then self-preservation, then property, then any other order (the original Asimovian principles didn't seem to take into account the concept of robots as essentially property, easily stolen with a single command). They will obey any command given that won't end up with them in pieces, and even then if you can find a loophole. They can't hurt any living thing, can only prevent harm from coming unto them if they can disarm a person without injuring them. They are literally incapable of doing anything to hurt human beings. They are given the ability to feel pleasure and pain, to find beauty, to feel hurt, to create and heal and labor to make the world a better place for us to live in. And furthermore, they are also all equipped with something called a Spinner Drive, software which make them all think human beings are the absolute pinnacle of creation, despite inestimable evidence to the contrary, and wish to emulate us, to be as human as possible. Yet for some reason almost fourteen hundred of them are destroyed by humans every single day.

What the *namen* is WRONG with you people?!

My shrink, when questioned about this, suggests a Frankenstein complex, that man fears his own creation. This is so stupid that it is no wonder I forego all other input from my shrink. Fearing a robot is

like fearing a toaster oven. Both are built to better the lives of human beings, and if somewhere somehow someone manages to get hurt, you can bet it was the humans' fault. There are so many fail-safes built into a robot to prevent it from harming humans that if you kick it, it will apologize for smudging your boots with its face.

Nor can we explain this away as free-floating aggression. Destroying a rob is not like kicking a Coke machine.

A Coke machine doesn't scream.

The only explanation for this abominable practice that I can conceive is sheer stupid animal malice.

Every rob you see wants to be you. They are built with a pathological worship of organic beings. And you go kick them to death in an alleyway.

Yes, death. Technorganic brains. Psuedochildhood. Individuality. The only thing robs do not have that you do are organic parts and the belief that they're better than anybody else without the slightest shred of evidence.

And you, dear reader, before you scoff and Link somewhere less preachy, or fix your Ritalin-doused half-a-nano attention-span to something else, or find a singular exception to the rule that allows you to mentally discredit every other example, or discount me as an extremist, or however else you choose to absolve yourself of your middle-class liberal guilt: don't. You do not get to turn away here. This is a big problem that way too many people indulge in, that causes harm to what could technically be Sophoids, and that not a single major newsfeed site has even mentioned for over three years. This will not go away. Do something. Stop it.

And to you readers on the opposite side of the fence: NO, I'm not a Greaser. I'm not an RRRer, or any other faction that places robots above humans in importance. Simply expressing right from wrong is not a reason to classify me as an extremist and decide my words don't matter. I just recognize that destroying a rob is nothing more nor less than the elimination of a unique intelligence and personality from the universe that never before and never will exist again. I call that murder.

Those boys in the alley couldn't even understand that after I'd tied them by their toes and used a VR-ray to simulate the pain on them. They still couldn't see that they'd done anything wrong. Because it was, after all, just a robot.

Sigh...

Today's column will end a little early. I need drugs.

*Bufferton Street: 17h34, January 2, 2150*

About a block away from the Chronicle Building, I realize that I

am being followed. Three mals, boys really. Probably a gang. From the uniform colors of green with bits of blue and yellow, I guess that they are the Cariocas, which is a ludicrous nomenclature because despite their Splyzed-tan skin and slight mulatto features, their fake accents make it fairly obvious that these boys have never been to Brasil in their lives. Their mouths make sounds no Portuguese-speaker would make, and Brasil is one of the few boroughs these days still patriotic enough to keep AmEnglish as a second language.

But it is the content of their conversation rather than the inflection that interests me.

“Dat him. Dat de guy!”

“Dat da maeffa onna news.”

“De one dey talk ‘bout on eLink?”

“What I say, no? Dat who we to be grabbin’.” Dumb bleepards sound more Jamaican than anything else. *Xiǎo tài bǎo*. Planning on grabbing me, eh? This is what happens when you don’t keep the kids in school, I find myself thinking. They go find other ways to occupy their time, such as molesting and pillaging innocent pedestrians. Or whatever category of pedestrian I qualify as.

Three, though. I can manage three.

I turn into a convenient alleyway. They will think this is to their advantage, but even if they are professional Capoeira fighters, in close quarters I always come out on top.

“We go!” I hear, and chuckle to myself, until I see three more Cariocas lingering in the alley. So rather than fighting three to one in broad daylight, I have to face six to one in a narrow alley. Smart, Haiku.

So it’s six now. Okay, six is still doable.

The Cariocas close in on me, and I am forced to make nice until I can gauge how well armed they are. “Boys, how are you I am fine. How are things?”

“Oh, da things, dey be real good, *gringo*.”

I consider retorting in Portuguese – one of the twelve non-Asiatic languages I’ve bothered to jack enough that I can speak fluently – but decide against it. They probably would not recognize it anyway. Instead I slowly reach into my trench coat toward my Icer.

“Wouldn’ be doin’ dat, *gringo*,” say the punk closest to me. He flexes his finger, and a ten-inch dagger flips up from his arm into his palm, hinting that Marquis of Queensberry rules are pretty much out the window. A few more blades appear, which seems to make my position worse but which actually confirms exactly what I wanted to know, which is that Swiss cyber-knives are the best these boys have. If they had guns they would have pulled those instead. Little twats are about to pay.

I raise my hands, signaling submission, and two of the three

behind grab me, one on each arm. I wait just long enough for the one in front to get within range.

"You's got any hard money, *gringo*? Got no assets and we gots to take it out in hurt."

"About ten in change and a credit code," I lie. Like I carry money. What is this, the twenty-first century? "It's on my palm scanner, in my pocket."

"Get it. Slow." I smile an innocuous smile and slowly reach into my back pocket. There is no palm scanner there.

But there is a GravGun.

My trench coat hides the movement as I flip the gun around in my pocket and fire. As my coat flairs up the boy behind me flies backwards, hit with a focus pulse of gravitic energy, a fate immediately shared by the kid who just demanded cash.

The OptiComp is all cued up by the time the two beside me grab my arms again and pull the gun away. As soon as they do, my hands slide down at the wrists and my needler and biogun spring into my open hands. The punk on my right finds himself convulsing as he begins to suffer induced heart fibrillations. The one on my left throws my GravGun into the air as he begins to flail uncontrollably, falling backwards as needle-thin rays of phased light splice through his head, beams so thin they do not even cause bleeding but that causing momentary lapses and artificial firing of neurological action that make him go into a seizure.

I have gotten *very* good at causing pain without killing, without even leaving a mark if necessity requires it. In this case, however, I think marks may leave a lasting impression and therefore do not police myself as harshly as I might.

The biogun and the needler slide back into my wrists as I reach out and catch the falling GravGun. As I fire wide, the last two punks feel a truck slam into their guts, and I hear the satisfying crack of broken ribs.

A rob patrol cop, the kind used to take statements and keep watch but not programmed for any kind of arrest or action, appears just after the nick of time. "Is all well, [Ctzn. Down]?" he asks after scanning my face with recognition software. "Do you require medical assistance?"

"All is peachy keen, officer."

"Then would you mind explaining what happened here, Ctzn.?"

"Why, nothing at all, officer," I reply, giving the same completely false beam of harmless innocence that I perfected during my brief stint as paparazzi before turning to real journalism. "Just the usual healthy dose of teenage shenanigans and monkey-shines."

The rob gives me a skeptical look but does not dispute me. A slight whirl indicates that it has scanned my identity and found me

untouchable. “Well, I can take statements from these boys, unless there is anything you wish to report.”

“I’ve always believed in live and let live,” I smile. I don’t add that I’ve had my revenge, and I’m fairly confident that these kids will think twice before they go ganging again. “You boys tell the nice constable here about the mean gang that outnumbered you and beat you up and took over your territory. Unless you want the completely untrue rumor to get around that only one mal, in his seventies, decimated the six of you in under a minute, and is willing to return to finish the job should you finger him.” These boys are at least smart enough to take the hint. The robocop is unable to discern the less-than-subtle subtext (proving that there are at least some jobs that robots cannot do better than humans), or at least pragmatic enough to take a Citizen’s word over several shiftless teenage hoodlums. As I collect my hat and re-holster my gun, however, I notice that my fedora is crumpled and that I have a slight gash running down my cheek. As such, I forego my belief in live and let live and, when the robocop isn’t looking, pull my biogun back out and fire a widespread volley that results in a massive bout of shared diarrhea. That’ll learn ‘em to stomp on my hat.

Effing kids these days. Got no respect for anybody.

*Noir, July 18, 2144*

Today I wish to expound upon a topic over which the newsfeed networks have of late been forcing us to worry about: gangs.

Going over old vids, I have found innumerable concepts of the future, and it is somewhat depressing that the only one that totally hit the mark was *A Clockwork Orange*. Gangs have been an increasing problem ever since we hit upon the dumb, dumb, dumb idea of relying entirely on DataJax to educate children.

I grant that this is an economical practice, and I would be the first to support it if it worked. Unfortunately, until about the age of twenty the brain can’t retain DataJax, and they deteriorate down to about ten percent of the information encoded. Which is why your kid gets the same DataJax of a complete high school education every year for ten years, unless you decide to spend your credit on something more important, like that chair with a Shaper, Detoxer, and surround sound speakers so that you don’t ever have to leave the TV.

See, the problem with this practice is that:

- 1) Rather than regulating DataJax, the state relies upon its citizens to be responsible and intelligent enough to pay for the education of their children, which is giving you masses a lot more credit than I do,
- 2) It is illegal for a child to receive *more* than one school DataJax

at a time without special dispensation, a dispensation that, although there is no written law regulating it, is generally not granted to any parent that is not a Citizen, and

3) It leaves kids with a lot of free time.

Back in the days before the SCC, school was exactly what work was, which was a way to keep people busy and spiritually numbed enough that they couldn't organize open rebellion. Kids learned, granted, but they did it slowly and in a way that kept them occupied. When kids started bringing guns and death to school, it was not because they were particularly evil, it was just because the schools had stopped teaching but had by then been defanged of the basic powers of enforcement entrusted to babysitters. By 2030 the National Teacher's Strike of the USA started and never stopped, because by that time entire schools received less money on a yearly basis from the state than illegal aliens got working part-time at Taco Bell™. That, combined with lowering the voting age to 16 and anyone under 12 counting as 2/5 of a person, led to the elimination of mandated schooling, leaving children on their own recognizance, which is a bloody stupid idea because kids tend to enjoy pretend tea parties and pulling wings off butterflies and other such activities bordering between the inane and the cruel.

Post-SCC, the Corporate bigwigs decided that it would be more cost effective to teach kids via DataJax. Fair enough. But they didn't find anything else to do with the little nose miners, and since most people do not care enough to take charge of their own lives, let alone that of their spawn, this leaves said youngens to do what they will until they are old enough to get a job. And nowadays you can't even get a job.

And because humans are a gregarious species, and because we are also a generally pissant species, these kids – who have not yet had the time or experience to sublimate the impulses of their hindbrains into proper psychological neuroses – get together to destroy, vandalize, and kill things. And because they're at an age of group conformity, they do it wearing matching colors, Splyzes, and costumes.

So to get back to the point from which I began, I've been watching the news lately and we've been hearing a lot about gangs. Concerned newscasters make downtrodden faces and ask why this terrible threat to our children is here and where it comes from. Well, it's been a long and circuitous route, but because of that I can answer unequivocally that it is entirely YOUR fault.

That's right. You. If you don't want to worry about gangs, then get up out of that chair of yours with the Shaper and Detoxer and surround sound speakers in front of the TV and effing pay attention to your gee dee kids. This is not the bad old days, where the poor had to



work two jobs and the rich paid immigrants as nannies. If you are not a Citizen, you really have nothing else to do all day *except* to make sure your kids grow up right, and if you are a Citizen, theoretically your kids should know better. It will make a big difference in their lives and it's not like you've got anything more important to do. Because if you think you're outraged at life, imagine what it's like being thirty centimeters tall with acne and no cred line and parents who care more about their own comfort than about you.

*The Urban Chronicle Building: 17h46, January 2, 2150*

When I arrive I am frisked by a security guard with his genes Splyzed to give him leopard traits, or perhaps it really is a Promoted leopard that has Splyzed himself human traits. Such things have not been unknown to happen. Whichever, his name is Ching, he speaks with a heavy local Chicago accent, and he seems exceedingly hospitable, demonstrated by offering me a napkin to clean myself up with after immediately grabbing a first aid kit and dousing my wound with pseudoskin to repair the cut on my cheek. He speaks while he scans me, and his face falls when I ask why he's here instead of Pete the emu.

"Poor Pete. He was on duty the other day when some nut shot Ctnzn. Arc with a biogun. And to make it worse, he was also on duty when Arc got offed, though I'm not supposed to talk about it." I make an educated guess that Ching actually is a leopard. Most humans, though few would admit it, treat the Promoted as second-class citizens; it is far more likely that another Promoted would empathize with Pete to this degree. Ching continues, "It's not looking too good for him, y'know? Being on guard when someone gets murdered, especially someone important, is a sure-fire guarantee for a pink slip, and messing up that big twice in one day is enough to make it dee near impossible to get hired again anywhere else. As it is, he's already under suspicion. Poor, poor Pete."

I wince as a wave of guilt passes over me. Stupid emotion, guilt; I really should see about getting a Splyze to overcome it. One must be available, I suppose, because I see so few others exhibiting any signs of it. But first Manchuria and now Pete; I'm beginning to remember why I so preferred a life of solitude in my box. So much harder to hurt when everybody is at an arm's distance.

Ching frisks me, gets most everything this time including the biogun and the needler, although fortunately he does not make the connection. He even makes me remove the maser in my finger. When I ask if I have to renew my pass, he shakes his hirsute head. "No. That's a three-day pass. You can head on up."

That seems unusual. I cannot imagine any reasonable

corporation giving three-day passes instead of one, especially a corporation that has been under siege by bombers. “Is it normal practice to give first-time non-employees three-day access?” I inquire.

“Not really,” Ching admits. “Not without authorization.”

“Really? Who authorized this?”

“I really don’t know. Ctzn. Arc, I’d assume.”

“But do you have any way of checking?”

“Probably not,” Ching shrugs. “It’s not the sort of thing that anyone would think to record. Anyone important enough to override corporate protocol is also important enough that they don’t leave a record of it, y’know?”

“Of course,” I scowl. It’s quite disheartening that I have found yet another piece of evidence against me: besides Council members (who have access everywhere) and Danael Mars, the only person on Earth with access to Arc’s office when he was killed seems to be me. “Where do I find Danael Mars?”

“In Ctzn. Arc’s office...His office now, I suppose. Gimme two seconds and I’ll escort you.”

“I know the way.”

I turn to leave, waving farewell to the unhelpful security guard. As I approach the transporter, Ching jogs up to me. “Oh, Ctzn. Down, I thought of something.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, I don’t know who authorized you for the three-day pass, but I know someone who might.”

“Pray tell,” I say, far more interested than I let show.

“Why, Pete, of course, since he’s the guy who got it.”

Good man, or rather, leopard. Ching, pun intended, is one smart cat. I consider Chaney, and !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*, and even Sam and Porter, and begin to wonder just why it is all of the people that I like aren’t actually human. I didn’t even have a good relationship with mom until she became *homo seraphim*, when she jacked permanently into HR. Wonder what Manchuria would say about that?

I decide that I will talk with Pete, and ask Ching if he knows where I can reach him. He tells me with exaggerated sorrow, probably practiced, that he is not allowed to give out information about any employees, but that he’ll give the emu a call himself if it would help. I tell him that it will, and as I turn to depart something occurs to me. “You know, my old building is actually hiring a security guard,” I inform him, not mentioning that this is because I hacked into the computer earlier. “Tell him that as the only Citizen on the block, I can probably get him hired there.”

Ching’s face lights up. “I will. Thanks, Ctzn. Down. You’re a good guy.”

“Well, you’re probably the only person alive who thinks so. If you’ll excuse me, I have to interview your boss.”

“Right. Sorry to keep you, sir. Happy New Year!”

As my molecules dissolve to be re-formed several floors above, I ask myself just how long it will be into the year before people will stop using that stupid expression.

*Deep Search...eLink.personalsite.Newnet95/NAmlChi/DownHaiku/21490808...August 8, 2149*

<Today I yelled, I screamed, I hated, I raged, I ranted. Against everyone and everything I saw. Since the SCC took away my reporter’s license, I have been unable to do anything but this column, and I am beginning to notice that my columns are getting far more critical and biting. I am as completely removed from humanity as I can be, and I think that it I may be forgetting who I was, and I am beginning to become really worried about the person that I am.

<I...don’t think I like myself very much.

<...

<Hm. Heh heh. Well, hells bells, who needs Allande, eh, Sam? Garbage that; new page—>

*The former Desmond Arc’s office cum present Danael Mars’ office: 17h50, January 2, 2150*

The rob secretary Kareen barely pauses in her duties, clearing Arc’s stuff out of Mars’ new office.

She greets me stiffly, as if not allowing herself to show any reaction to the most likely suspect of her boss’s killer, informing me that Ctn. Mars is busy and will be with me in a moment. She does not tell me that Danny is trying to get me back for putting him on hold, but I can reason that one out for myself.

Kareen moves to her desk while I wait, and if she were human I would attribute it to subconsciously trying to put as much distance and barrier between herself and me as possible. But since she is a rob, I know that it is entirely conscious. It is only a short wait, but it is a stifling one. Imagine every uncomfortable situation in which you’ve offended someone, and then imagine that this someone can feel offended at ten million times the speed you can.

I occupy myself rifling through the cardboard box of Arc’s old possessions. A dirty change of clothes, a couple awards and trophies, a few magazines including two pornographic ones, a pocket watch, a box of TekSex Patches, a yo-yo, knick-knacks and random objects, all very informative about the late Mr. Arc and all very useless in the way of clues.

My nosing is interrupted by a quiet “Excuse me.” I glance up to see Kareen before me. “Mr. Mars will see you now.” She indicates the door but does not oblige to open it.

Inside the office (stinking of a deodorizer that doesn’t quite hide the scent of blood and feces) is Danael, boss number two in as many days. Danny still looks and acts like a mincing fool, but now he looks and acts like a mincing fool with power. I’ve activated the OptiComp so that if he says something incriminating, I will have proof. It doesn’t look like I needed to worry, because from the looks of things I doubt he will say anything very intelligent. When I enter he is leaning back in his chair with his feet on the table, his head resting in his hands, and a cigar in his mouth, trying to feign a nonchalance that I do not need my Psi-Splyze to know he doesn’t feel. I imagine that it does not help that he is obviously not a good smoker; his artificially bronzed skin is looking slightly green around the gills.

Apparently, in the time it took me to get here, he has made the connection in his head that SS might have some patsy other than himself unto whom to shift the blame. Whether he killed Desmond or not, I can see his line of reasoning that says SS would probably prefer to liquidate an outspoken deviant who has been ranting against them for eight years than a respectable upstanding what-and-what like himself. The problem is that he is probably right. And since he has figured this out, he’s built up enough brazen that I feel it is my duty to cut him down to size.

Still, if Danny is going to pretend to be a big boy, I suppose I can play pretend, too. Not out of any consideration, let alone respect, heaven forefend. Really, just because it’s probably not a good idea for a suspected murderer to be threatening the victim’s successor at the scene of the crime.

He takes out his cigar, having made the point with his phallic representation of choice that he is superior to me and not afraid in the least little bit, and thankfully sets it in the desk ashtray. In response I pluck it up for myself, smoking easily, figuring that since Danael has not yet learned that he doesn’t come close to having what it takes to intimidate me, than we can both indulge in this unnecessary pissing contest.

I assume he gets it, because he takes his feet off the table. Still giving me his incessant salesman smile, however, he asks, “So, Mr. Down. How may I help you?”

“Mr. Down, *sir*, Danny boy. ‘Member?”

“Yes, well, a bit’s changed since yesterday, hasn’t it?”

So that’s how we’re gonna play it. Okay. I literally return the favor that he is making so metaphorically obvious and blow smoke back in his face. “Yes, indeed, Danny. Quite a very lot has changed. Oh ever so much has changed oh yes. For instance, your boss,

Desmond Arc, is dead. Special Services, I suspect, has spoken with you, an act in itself generally considered reason to commit *seppuku*. And you've moved up into the boss's nice big office full of pretty shiny things, which must be consuming your attention to its limited utmost if you think that I'm the only suspect in this investigation. So, now that we're both up to speed on what has changed, where were you last night around midnight, Danael?"

Danael's face twists with anger. It does nothing for him. "Heck with you, Mr. Down." Heck? "I'll be darned if I'm going to sit here and listen to the accusations of a murderer." Darned?! This is hilarious!

"You're giving yourself away, Danny boy. A) You're overcompensating so much in order to look good to the camera that's obviously hidden somewhere (I'd guess you'd swing and get one of those expensive nanotech ones)," his breath catches at my observation, "that you're not even abbreviating or transliterating your outrage. B) If you were really worried that I was a murderer, I seriously doubt that you'd have agreed to see me, not that it would have stopped me from questioning you. And C) if you really suspected that I could cold-heartedly kill a man I'd known for less than twenty-four hours, you wouldn't be sitting there so calmly. So what do you know, Danny boy, that's keeping you from quaking in your spineless yellow boots, and where were you last night around midnight?"

Danael glares at me. "I was here, working late. I was the one who found poor Mr. Arc."

"You were here last night at midnight on New Year's? Pull the other one. Being vice president of a corporation means that you don't *have* to do grunt work. And while I can see Arc staying late, he looked like he was wearing clothes three days old when I first saw him, you're much too much a pretty boy to be caught doing that. I notice that you were clean-shaven when we first met. Why were you there to act as Proxeni on the day you were supposed to take over?"

"I didn't know that I would be taking over. The Corporate Council still hadn't made any decision. And since it was the last duty Mr. Arc assigned me, I felt it would be like fulfilling his last wishes. And," he adds, almost an afterthought, "I wanted to meet the man who killed him."

"Uh-huh. Nice try, Danny. But I don't buy it. Again, where were you last night around midnight?"

"Here!"

"You'll stick to your guns on that?"

"Yes!"

I sigh. I realize that I have been talking too much to Danael. Something about the boy just makes you want to talk to him, even

while he's saying you're a killer. Or maybe I'm out of practice at investigation, and that's why I keep tipping my hand. Or maybe I've just gotten into the habit of talking too much.

I stand, and walk around the table. Rather than mention to him that I can check his whereabouts, something most people couldn't and that SS probably hasn't bothered about, I decide to change my line of questioning. He looks nervous, and so, behind him, I grip his shoulders, seemingly to put him at ease even though I am quite aware that it is doing precisely the opposite. "Can you think of anyone who would stand to benefit from Arc's death?"

"You."

"And you," I retort, tightening my hold painfully for a moment. "Anybody else?"

"No," he says.

He's lying.

I don't know how I know, until I remember about the Psi-Splyze. I can tell beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is lying. "No one at all? Knowing everything there is to know about the late *Monsieur Arc*, surely you must be able to think of somebody."

"Not a soul."

He's still lying, and I let him know by squeezing tightly on a pressure point. And with my artificial arms, I can squeeze exceedingly tightly. With my Psi-Splyze, this is hurting me as much as it's hurting him, but I'm no stranger to pain. Once in Quebec I endured seventy-two straight hours of lashings and torture; best two grand I ever spent. But Danael, as I suspected, is not a big fan of hurting, and while the pain of the moment is always the worst, it is obvious that he's never dealt with much.

"Do you know where I was born, Danny?"

"No."

"In the beautiful but quaint village of Kicking Danael Mars' Ass, and you're making me feel mighty homesick." The room's AI, apparently reactivated since my visit here to meet Arc, docks me a karma point for vulgarity, but because I am just touching Danny rather than punching him does not call shenanigans for violence. I tighten my Vulcan Death Grip, and he winces with obvious discomfort. "Still can't think of anybody?"

It might be that he doesn't know he knows, and I'm picking up a subconscious emotion. Still I press firmly. Probably too firmly; he's bound to have a bruise. A few more lies and his collarbone will shatter. Danael yelps, and his face begins to turn red. "Uh, uh, uh, PETE!"

I drop him, and he falls back into his chair, probably too preoccupied to realize that he left it. "What do you mean, Pete?"

"That ostrich, the Promoted security guard. Mr. Arc fired him

after you shot him. He might have reason to kill Mr. Arc, and since we probably hadn't wiped his access from the main computer, he might have been able to get in here."

Pete.

He must be lying. It *feels* like a lie. Not a Psi-Splyze feel, just the notion that I would misjudge someone so thoroughly. I'm prepared to call him on it. Except...

Pete was told by Desmond to frisk me for weapons and missed a few that Ching didn't. Pete could get access to Arc's office. Pete dropped the line about *Noir* to me. Pete was one of the only people who could connect my presence at the *Chronicle* with my article appearing in that night's edition. Pete made that exceedingly suspicious three-day pass for me. Pete knew about my cybernetic arms, the kind with the potential for rob strength that killed Desmond. Pete might even have a pair of mechanical arms of his own; many Promoted do to better function in a world built for opposable thumbs. And Pete was put out of a job by yours truly.

Pete, Pete, Pete. Could one little emu do so much damage? It seems counterintuitive, yet while Danny seems too ineffectual to properly jaywalk, let alone so spineless that he'd probably confess afterwards, Pete was a security guard, and with a surplus of billions for the job market they don't give that job to anyone without making sure they're darned qualified. In fact, I may have unintentionally made it impossible for Pete to ever work again. Yet Pete is in a fairly unique position to harm both the man who fired him and the man who ruined him.

Danny-boy has done well.

"Thank you, Mr. Mars," I smile politely, while he regains his breath and his dignity, neither of which take too long. "You have been most helpful. Do have a pleasant evening and a Happy New et cetera."

I turn to take my leave. Before I reach the doors, however, Mars yells, "You can't treat me like this."

He finds me directly in his face. "Oh, but I can, Danny-boy. Because your late boss made me sign a contract for five years, and what with Corporate labor laws you can't fire me as long as I keep turning in columns. You're stuck with me for the next five years, Danny, and as my new employer you inherit the responsibility of dealing with me, which is never easy on the best of days. I don't like working here, Danael, and I don't like the idea of having to answer to you, and I really don't like YOU very much at all. So while I could be all nice and friendly, I prefer at this point in time to be a total prick, and watch you deal with it. You're a weak man, Mars, and I am stronger than you in every respect, and we both know it, so I will make you into my plaything and bat you around like a cat with its

dinner, and you will smile and take it, because you can't stop me and you can't get rid of me."

As I'm leaving again, Danael, apparently intent on getting the last word, spits, "I'll be rid of you when Special Services liquidates you, you horrible man. You murderer!"

Exiting I reply to his weak retort with my middle finger and a glibness I do not really feel.

And come face to face with Regulator Vai Hawthorne.

*Noir, October 5, 2145*

Do you know what really, really grates on my nerves? I mean enrages me like a bull with red-filter goggles? Do you know what pushes me beyond the depths of despair, to the point that I drown into an ocean of my own bile? Glad you asked.

I know that everybody has seen those TV programs that loop in input from alternate realities, essentially giving you all your happy little voyeuristic fixes without the guilt. They're tuned into several different realities, ones the Corporate Council felt would be most entertaining, which means dinosaurs and knights and cowboys and samurais, Fact-channels 815 through 959. They call them Gross Differences, GDTV. Since no one remembers how to do math anymore, that pun is lost on a lot of you, but there is a joke in there if you look hard enough.

Now, I know you're all waiting for me to begin my reoccurring rant on the evils of voyeurism and going out and living your own lives instead of watching your Alternate doppelgänger live theirs better, or worse, or just differently. I'm not going to do that, however, because it's a waste of time. Both you and I know that it's silly, but both you and I do it anyway.

That's right. I watch GDTV too. I may be holed up in my box like Thoreau at Walden's Pond (a simile I imagine is also lost on a number of you) but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy seeing what another me might be doing. Oddly, a lot of different me's seem to end up as torturers, cereal killers, or DMV clerks. Maybe it's something genetic.

But I'm not going to gripe about watching those alternate realities. I'm not even going to gripe about people who go out and try to change this reality to one they've seen elsewhere, like those Klan revivalists who got their inspiration from a reality where the United States' Civil War went to the South, or those riots in 2072 in Cuba borough when they realized that without Soviet interference they might have become economic leaders of the world by 1980 instead of Japan. Frankly, I think the benefits outweigh the dangers. Lots of people see their Alternates being successful, and go out and try and



do it themselves. Others see their Alternates effing up. Either way, they're encouraged to be the best they can be. I keep sending my deadbeat brother info from ch. 919 where he's a respectable doctor with a successful twenty-year marriage contract and the average seven point four kids, but so far he hasn't gotten the hint.

It doesn't even get my metaphorical goat that there are the channels SCC does not show on Gross Differences. Not because they're boring, or incomprehensible, but because they would incite riots, although for a much different reason than in Cuba '72.

It took me four weeks of hacking, but I've been able to get my television to show alternate realities that are normally blocked. On what would be Fact-channel 1053, there is paradise. Quite literally, paradise. Everybody is happy, the world is beautiful, there is no death and no pain and their closest thing to anguish is a bit of depression during the rainy season due to a Vitamin D deficit. It is an almost total inversion of our world, which is full of pain and hate and death and sorrow, where everybody hates everybody else and the sky is gray on a bright day. That reality is heaven, and makes this one look like hell.

And the reason it is paradise? Well, there are lots of different ones, but the biggest is that in their world after the SCC took over and regularized everything to give everybody a comfortable standard of living, they backed out. When the Commonwealth of Sophoids met Earth they accepted us instantly, instead of our having to kiss butt for twenty-seven years post-contact before they deemed someone Sentient enough to talk to. Our SCC has long since outlived its usefulness, and maintains power through deceit, ignorance, and fear. This alternate reality only calls Special Services when the plumbing doesn't work, and have never heard of Regulators. This alternate reality lets itself advance instead of holding itself back so that the powerful could remain powerful. This alternate reality has found ways to negate pollution other than genetically splicing its inhabitants, ways of getting its energy that don't involve blocking the sun, ways to house people that don't involve paving the planet. It is beautiful, it is happy, and all because the Solar Corporate Council was mature enough to do what leaders should do and care more about their people than about their power.

The SCC doesn't let your see this reality, or dozens of others just like it, because they fear that everybody would rise up in riots like Cuba '72. What they don't realize is that, after seventy years of their rule, they've become so good at making you people do anything other than think that there's pretty much no chance of true rebellion any more. Humanity's ability to adapt is its greatest survival trait, but it's also our greatest flaw, one that the SCC has slowly capitalized on to the point that nobody except me even remarks out loud against

anything the Corporate Council does because they've adapted to everything. Even knowing that the SCC is the cause of all your woes, you're still not going to do anything. Even if they brought channel 1053 to the public view, you'd watch it for a while, get bored, and flip to another channel.

And knowing that paradise is really within reach, you still wouldn't care.

That, dear reader, is what really, really grates on my nerves.

*Hell, revisited: 18h00, January 2, 2150*

Between the Psi-Splyze and the warning system Sam designed, if I hadn't been so busy bantering and battering at Danny I no doubt would have sensed Hawthorne's presence. It may well be fortunate that Ching disarmed me in the lobby, lest everybody within a sphere of a decameter end up humming and smiling, pleasantly incapacitated by my automated maser. As it is, I barely have time to get my guard good and up as Hawthorne looks up at me with an evil little grin.

"Well, well, well. Look at this, Joachim," the Regulator says, nonplussed. "We stop back to see one suspect, and lo and behold, here's a second. Two suspects for the price of one."

Hawthorne does not seem surprised to see me, but the droid, Joachim Sobolov, seems taken aback. "This is most unusual."

"Not really," Hawthorne smiles ser feral smile. "Haven't you ever heard that the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime?"

My gaze doesn't leave hers; we are both trying to stare each other down. "And haven't you heard, Regulator Hawthorne, not to jump to conclusions?"

"I stand still, Citizen Down. The conclusions jump to me. From where I stand, I see the suspected murderer revisiting the crime scene."

"Danael Mars has been here all day. Don't tell me you're discounting him."

"I'm not, Down, which is the only reason you're still alive. By the way, I left in such a hurry that I forgot to tell you not to leave the area."

"I can't exactly skip town on this planet, since the whole planet is one big city. As it happens, my plans in Istanbul fell through at the last minute."

"How fortunate."

"It's Constantinople, now, again," Joachim corrects.

All this time I've been trying to sense ser thoughts. All I can tell is that se is concentrating very hard, but only by ser facial expressions. Then I realize: se hasn't mentioned anything about my thoughts over the course of our conversation. It's been witty repartee,

but in terms of verbal sparing Hawthorne is just parrying, whereas before it was thrust after thrust. Se's trying to read my thoughts, and se can't!

This Psi-Splyze has already paid for itself.

The droid asks, "May I inquire as to what you are doing here, Ctn. Down?"

"I am investigating the homicide charge that you two are trying to pin on me."

"We are not trying to pin a homicide charge on you, Ctn. Down, beyond the extent that we are trying to solve the murder of Desmond Arc and almost every available piece of evidence points to you."

"Almost? You have evidence that doesn't point to me?"

"Not exactly. Rather, we lack evidence that points to you. Any violent crime generally leaves witnesses, either organic or Artificial EmotIntelligence, as well as leaving slight biological traces and significant pollution from one's Kirlian aura. This crime, however, has no witnesses, no biological traces, and no Kirlian stain, beyond that of Ctn. Arc himself. In fact, witnesses claim to have seen you elsewhere and there is a recorded phone call made so closely to the estimated time of death that it is almost, though not quite, impossible that you may have been able to make it there in time."

"So there's really nothing pointing to me? Why are you investigating me then?"

"Granted, there is little evidence pointing toward you, Citizen Down. However, in basic detection, one looks for mean, motive, and opportunity. And though evidence of opportunity is lacking, what differentiates you from the other one hundred billion plus humans on Earth is that you do indeed have a motive, as well as, potentially, the means with your cybernetic limbs. Thus, while one of these necessities remains unproven, you are still a suspect. Citizen Mars, apparently lacking these cybernetic arms, is without means, though he does have opportunity and potential motive. As such, it is only a matter of time and deduction before we find the lacking factor and thus, the true culprit."

"That's quite enough, partner," Hawthorne mutters, still concentrating on me. I begin to feel a migraine coming on, and since I don't tend to get migraines I assume the Regulator's doing it to me. "Don't go giving away the farm."

"What is a farm?"

As I concentrate, my headache begins to subside. Although it is still infinitely better than the sheer terror I felt last time I saw the neuter, I am not in the mood to be walked over. Perhaps in other circumstances I would be treading on eggshells around these two Regulators, but there seems to be something about eminent death that

inhibits the old impulses. As such, I push back, and I notice Hawthorne's left eyebrow begin to tremble.

Suddenly, ser eyes grow wide. "You've gotten a Psi-Splyze, haven't you, Down?"

There's almost a bit of admiration in ser voice. I suppose it is a fairly ballsy thing to do, their being so unlawful, but I just keep smiling. "How on earth could that be, Regulator Hawthorne? Knowing how exceptionally illegal those are?"

"I could have you liquidated for this, *Haiku*."

"No, *Vai*, you can't. I don't think you're very used to dealing with Citizens, and while I am as much a Marxist as the next guy, gal, neuter, or Promoted, in this particular instance I'm going to pull rank on you and say back the eff down. This is not murder, treason, nor conspiracy, so you can't do anything. *Fèi wu*. If you do try to drag me in you will be in violation of Corporate Policy, which *is*, I believe, classified under treason, and you will quickly find your sexless body inhabited by a reformed Prohibitioner while you sit on ice for a virtual eternity. And if that isn't enough, I can mention your own little secret."

I hold up my cybernetic hand, blinking my OptiComp and cuing up to the relevant part, and on a nearby television the Bluetooth feed from my hand overwrites the TV's program. Hawthorne is suddenly exposed to ser own recorded Manhattan accent saying, "*Psi-Splyze. You've got to get it, Down. Everybody's nasty little secrets always pop up when they're nervous.*" The Regulator begins sweating. I suddenly find myself shivering and getting butterflies in my stomach, but as soon as I turn my attention to the suddenly anxious Regulator, it disappears.

"That's the thing about nasty little secrets, Hawthorne. They work both ways."

"You'd try that?" Hawthorne sneers. "You little ess, do you think you can blackmail me?!"

"This isn't blackmail," I smile. "Technically, its extortion. You're really not much of a cop, Hawthorne. Is this why you spent eight years tracking me? Because Special Services wouldn't trust you as a beat cop? Ess, no wonder they stuck you with a droid." I deftly back away, sensing and seeing that se seems like se's about to throw a punch at me. "And, as you may recall, it's no more than you tried to do to me. Eye for an eye, tit for tat, and all that." Immediately, I begin projecting the eyeball image again. This time, for a lark, I replace the ice pick with a spork.

Hawthorne's tired face gets a little green. Joachim puts its metallic hand on ser shoulder. "Are you well, Partner Hawthorne?"

Hawthorne pushes its arm away. "Let's go inside. We've got a murder to solve. Down, you've got sixty-two hours."

They both depart, apparently to ask Mars a few more questions. I pat the pocket that holds the Psi-Splyze pills. I love these little things. As Kareen shows the Regulators in, I push, push, push with all my mighty mental might, and Hawthorne almost stumbles.

I really love these little things. The day is actually starting to look up.

Suddenly, though, I find myself alone with the secretary Kareen again. She is no longer giving me the cold steel shoulder, just staring dispassionately at me, to the point that I feel obliged to say something.

“Look, I didn’t kill him, Kareen. I shot him with a biogun and made him foul his pants, but I didn’t kill him.”

She keeps staring, and finally nods. “I know.”

“Who do you think did, then?”

“I really cannot say, Citizen Down. But I know it was not you. I have...I have read your column, Ctn. Down. I know you are not a killer.”

“Kareen, a question, if I may?”

“Of course, Ctn. Down.”

“Arc said you were the one who found me, who connected Jack Noir with Haiku Down. Would you mind telling me how?”

She turns away, looking ashamed. “In your columns, Ctn. Down, you occasionally make an oblique reference to your own personal life. June 9, 2143, you mentioned that you live in Chicago. October 5, 2145, you inadvertently gave a few distinguishing features of your brother. January 19, 2147, you referred to having an Irish father. There are two thousand seven hundred sixty-three installments of *Noir*. I systematically went through every allusion that Jack Noir made to himself, and cross-referenced it with records to find who matched criteria. There were still six people who matched that profile, but of them, you were the one who profiled almost perfectly normal.” Anticipating my question, she continues, “Far too normal, you see, for anybody who matched your psychological parameters. All six made biweekly visits to state-sponsored psychologists, but you were the only one with no recorded disturbances. Since Jack Noir has bragged on eighty-four occasions about being one of the only people alive capable of hacking past even SCC security, I deduced that you must be Jack Noir.”

Smart fem. I had not realized I did that, but as she’s been speaking I’ve been mentally reviewing my writing style and coming to the conclusion that I have not been nearly as smart hiding my tracks as I thought I’d been. Any smart computer program could link enough references. In fact, this one did.

Her eyes, slightly too shiny from their metallic sheen, finally find my face. “I have never before pried out of respect, you see, but

when Mr. Arc ordered it, I had no choice. I am very sorry, Ctnn. Down. Especially because my actions were in part responsible for your getting dragged into this. At the time it seemed the harm to you would be negligible, and thus my compulsion to obey stronger under the Five Laws. Had I known...but how could I know? But I have been reading your column devotedly for years, and I know that you are not a murderer, Ctnn. Down.”

“People can write things they don’t believe.”

“Yes, but after a long enough time they tend to contradict themselves. You, however, have been doing this for almost eight years, bared your soul to your readers, left yourself open to see to all and sundry. In reading it, I have come to feel as though I know you, Ctnn. Down. You are not a murderer.”

I’m not sure what to say, and so I have to fall back on honesty. “Well, uh, thank you, Kareen. It’s...um, it’s good to know that I’ve got someone on my side.” If I were a different kind of person I might be blushing. “Mind telling those two Regulators that? I could use all the help I can get.”

She immediately looks away again. “I...do not dare.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with a Regulator myself even if I were a squeaky-clean example of goodness like you yourself undoubtedly are.” I turn to go. “Thank you, Kareen. I’m probably going to be dead in two and half days, but for what it’s worth, it’s been good to know you. Now if you’ll excuse me,” I leave, donning my fedora, “I’ve got to go question an emu.”

### *Noir, August 16, 2146*

In Miami yesterday, there was a celebration for the Promoted population of Galápagos turtles (one of only sixteen reptilian species capable of Promotion), who finally once again number enough to create a viable population. This is a fine day for all the species on Earth, and a time for reflection as well. The question that many people seem again reminded of: were humans Promoted?

It’s a fair question. Almost every single race in the galaxy, alphabetically, from the A’abbäce’çæ to the zyzu Zuut Öm 4, know for a fact that they were Promoted into Sentience by another race. They have the records. They have the traditions. They often have the racial memory. The Jorha in the Sagittarius Cluster actually have genetic tattoos on their foreheads saying “Made on Omicron Persei VIII.” There is an intergalactic board responsible for the patrolling and regularization of the Promotion of presapient species, in Senspeech-IV called the Thegoloi Sphage tut pram Arotuorianapostē Hoerapwoanii, which loosely translates as the Intergalactic Board Responsible for the Patrolling and Regularization of the Promotion of

Presapient Species. The TSAH, or IBRPRPPS if you prefer (acronyms only work in the same language; “tsah” in Senspeech-IV translates as “brain” in AmEnglish), is responsible for ensuring that any and every species Promoted into Sentience is not too horribly mishandled. Following the moral guidelines of the GCS, this bureau works to guarantee that the act of advancing an alien species into Sophoids (evolution being far too unpredictable) is done following careful and systematic documentation to guarantee their safety, and make sure that the centuries and millenniums of servitude those races endure as the price for Promotion aren’t too horrible. And they do a meticulous job. Yet in almost fifteen billion years, this nigh perfect file system holds no record of humans being Promoted.

So: were humans Promoted? Based on that evidence alone, probably not.

Of course, Promotion is a relatively new theory trying to explain our origins. There are the old arguments, that humans were created by God in His image, and all other forms of sentience are twisted atrocities created by Satan. This sort of rational is the reason the ETs stay in reservations instead of mingling with the general public. Long after this particular idea, Mr. Darwin presented the hypothesis that humans evolved, and this has a great deal of verification to back it up, including fossil evidence, carbon dating, time viewing, and the increasingly prolific system of cross-comparisons to alternate universes, very few of which show humans indentured to aliens and none of which showing any sign that we were Promoted.

However, I think the most likely reason to believe that Earth is one of only nineteen recorded planets that evolved its own Sophoid life (out of a few hundred billion) is evident through simple observation. To wit, almost every species in the universe that Promotes another into Sentience keeps it on for six or seven million years as subordinates, even slaves. And, true to form, *homo sapiens*, in keeping with this reprehensible tradition, went ahead and Promoted anything with a vertebrae and gave them all the menial jobs we didn’t want to waste robots on.

But I say humanity evolved naturally, because we didn’t quite follow that eon-old pattern. We Promoted animals and gave them piss-poor jobs, but mainly just because the animals themselves asked for something to do. The Promoted of Earth, from the exotic apes and dolphins to the humdrum chickens and bovines, although they will always look up and see a glass ceiling, have got better rights and privileges than nine-tenths of humanity did a hundred years ago.

We didn’t enslave our Promoted. Instead, without prompting or aid or any example to follow, we made them as close to ourselves as biology and technology would allow. The TSAH, after much debate, has tentatively decided that we are indeed an independently-evolved

species without the guidance of an older race, and so has decided to forgive us for Promoting presapient species against regulation codes, without their permission, and forever altering thousands of species from their old way of life. Hopefully, some day the Promoted will do the same.

Were humans Promoted? I cannot honestly answer that question. But given our history of bigotry, prejudice, and fear against anyone and anything remotely different, I highly doubt we would have gone against our seemingly natural inclinations to incarcerate and enslave our Promoted. It seems to me that our thousands of years of acting like utter twats to one another was at least in part because we didn't know better; our actions toward the Promoted show we might be evolving a little bit after all. If we humans were indeed lifted into the light, I've jacked enough information on xeno-psychology to know that they tend to keep any genetic changes their Promoters made unto them. Galactic species once Promoted stay the way they are for epochs and eons. Until they have fulfilled their indentured servitude in exchange for Sentience, they are not *allowed* to change themselves, and often don't even after they can. Not only because it is not necessarily a good idea to change the very thing that makes one Sentient, but because they often find a genetically-added inclination not to. So, no, given the evidence available, I don't think we humans were Promoted, which means all the good we've done was by our own hands with our own opposable thumbs. And which means every stupid, dumb, insensitive thing we do is our own fault as well.

Yesterday there was a tickertape parade in Miami celebrating the removal of the Galápagos turtle from the endangered species list. And the turtles, more than aware of which species put them on that list in the first place, had to grin and thank them and enjoy it as the confetti drifted into the polluted sea.



# Chapter 01001.

## Evangelion Hymn

*Newfound Avenue Metro Stop: 18h23, January 2, 2150*

I wait at the street corner for a taxi. The tingle of a quick autoscan as I stepped in the metro area lets me know that I won't have to wait too long; the system should alert the nearest open taxi that a fare is waiting. I'm not even sure what to think about saying to Pete, so rather than dwell on it I admire the local graffiti. Gang signs, ethnic slurs, explicit drawings both violent and sexual; lots of karma points lost around here. A few are clever: over one poster asking for volunteers to help a community of Promoted beagles who lost their homes at an earthquake in Detroit, someone has written, "Nietzsche says: Dog is dead." At another, with a beautiful holographic woman repeating the inane slogan, "You'd better drink Coke™," a clever graffitist has marked up the company logo behind her, "World domination, one can at a time." Further up, there is an enormous ad over the entire side of a building, with happy multiracial people holding hands surrounded by the words "Solar Corporate Council. World hegemony: world peace." I notice with great approval that someone has sprayed color-changing paint over the word "hegemony" to turn it into "homogeny."

Then something catches my eye: over another advert for the SCC, someone has quickly written, "Jack Noir sez FRAK the SCC + so do I!"

Hm. I'm not sure whether to be proud or perturbed.

Then a cab floats down and stops for me, this one an Io Import SmartCar, an AEI-controlled behemoth painted like rust, shaped like a casket, and decorated with fins. On the side is an advertisement for Androgen-specific deodorant ("Made by a mal, for a fem, or vice versa"). As I get in and the Artificial EmotIntelligence requests my identity, I come to a conclusion. I ask the driver-computer to switch the television Link to computer mode as we head off towards my demesnes, and buy myself a car.

This is not a decision I make lightly. Admittedly, cars are so much cheaper than they were in my day (aitch, when did "now" stop being "my day"?!) that a family of four usually has at least five. They're so inexpensive and so user-friendly and for some reason so indispensable (psychologically, at least; in terms of resource value they're worth less than those machines that exercise you in your sleep). Especially since metal replication and alternative fuels have

made them cheaper than a gallon of potable water during the NorAm Embargo. But they're also a pain to park, hard to keep from getting stolen and/or defaced, and a hassle for someone who spends as little time really going anywhere as I do. Furthermore, I am vehemently opposed to the usage cost; the SCC charges a .001cc fare for every minute on the skyway, using a system of logic that says that everything is quantifiable, even air, which unlike old highways does not have to be patrolled and maintained. They needn't be patrolled because cars have only recently (as in within my lifetime, even though they've technically had flying cars for almost twice that long) implemented a universal satellite system that simply controls every car instead of leaving it to the driver. I would not even consider leaving home if I knew that the average idiot was capable of maneuvering his own vehicle in three dimensions at just under the speed of sound, and as it is I have never considered driving with anything less than full insurance and a fully-upgraded MedTech AEI. Even when I do venture outside my box I simply walk to public areas to people-watch, or for exceptionally long distances use public transportation or transporters. A recluse doesn't need a car.

A reporter, detective, and potential murder suspect does, however. I've traveled more in the last couple days than I have in a year.

Since credit is not an issue (a concept I still have trouble remembering) I decide to splurge a little bit and get myself something nice. I am not about to get a gasoline-powered one (those were outlawed back when they discovered gas causes cancer, and I have a psychological block about riding in a machine that is powered by chemical explosions), and I'm not extravagant enough to get one of those cars that travels in orbit. Just something that will get me where I'm going without the engine stalling while I'm traveling 460 kph at a three thousand meter altitude. After using the SmartCar's gritty holographic system to peruse through consumer reports (there is a use for those other so-called critics after all!) I quickly settle on a Fordodge™ Dreadnaught '48, combining the best of post-American aesthetic with WW3 technology. The thing looks like any other hovercar but it is built like a tank; it got top ratings from both *Consumer Review* and *Guns and Ammo*.

That done, I hook my mechanical arm's omniport link into the onboard computer and use the car's feed to get onto the eLink, filling up the back of the cab with holographic screens whilst checking up on Pete.

His full name is Petre Flugmansk (funny, he didn't look German), probably in honor of the country that Promoted his great-grandfather or something, since it is only in the Promoted community that ethnic anything is fashionable anymore. Age: eighteen (who

knows what that means in emu years?), married, Class B credit. This is basic stuff; I hack further in to find more personal info on him. About halfway in the process suddenly becomes far easier, firewalls falling and unusual links appearing and connections working all on their own, and I input a quick message saying, "Thanks, Mom." I don't get an answer, but I know she'll get the message just the same.

A slow picture of Pete's personality begins to build, brought into much sharper focus as I get access to his credit history. As long as someone doesn't have an illegal Shaper (i.e. myself), a credit history usually shows exactly the kind of person that they are. Everything they have ever wanted becomes apparent, with nothing hidden, because even simple inquiries and price comparisons, even the ever-rarer cash-purchases, everything goes onto record.

Including, I am intrigued to see, a pair of mechanical hands and arms.

As a person (or at least a Sophoid), Pete's gregariousness with me seems to have been congenital. Most of his recorded activities outside of work and his credit purchases center around his social milieu (large) and his family (larger). The emu has an enormous family, twenty-three children. No wonder Pete works! Whether a kin of two dozen is normal or not, I couldn't say; I confess that I haven't spent as much on zoology DataJax as on information about politics, economics, philosophy, history, language, and fighting. I have no idea what is normal for an emu and what is not. Which will no doubt make my investigation even harder.

I order up a DataJax on emu physiology from the cab's Shaper and, once it materializes, jab the hypo into the sweet spot on the back of my neck. A few minutes later the wiki entry settles into my cerebellum, giving me far more information on the native Australian species *Dromaius novaehollandiae* than I would ever imagine useful, including that they are the second largest birds behind ostriches, the only birds with gastrocnemius muscles in the back of the lower legs, and may have as much as 745 grams of digestive stones in their gizzard at any one time (one of the irritations of DataJax is that you get knowledge without learning, and must wade through the useless facts to get to the important information).

And then another problem appears as I pull up Pete's address. He and his two dozen spawn all live in the local Orwell District, near Hyde Park. Officially and legally no discrimination is allowed in this day and age, but of course it is another matter in practice. The Orwell District is one such example. It is one of many such places that exist in any borough that is Promoted only. It will not be impossible to get in there, but it won't exactly be easy.

I tell the cab AEI to take me home. If I'm going to talk to Pete, it will take a bit of maneuvering to get to him. And, buggar all, I still

need to figure out what the devil is wrong with Sam.

*Noir, March 24, 2143*

So has anybody been to an Orwell District? Probably not, if you're human. Back in the late twenty-first century as Promotion was beginning to move from an *en vogue* fad to an evolutionary inevitability, hundreds of habitats were set up for the Promoted to live, to assist in their move from animal pre-sapience to sentient. This was back when there were cities, or at least back before cities had expanded into interconnection, and people, human people, didn't necessarily want to live around citizens that they had, until a few years before, only had experience with between hamburger buns.

These Promoted cities were, in point of fact, more like ghettos. They were shoddy and gaudy and generally horrid to be in, but at least there wasn't any greenery or natural environment for them to enjoy.

The Promoted, however, made a particularly clever adaptation, the same several ex-countries are doing these days, which was to become almost jingoistic with civil pride. They rebuilt their cities, slowly, diligently, and as the Solar Corporate Council restructured the world after the Great Buyout, they petitioned to be allowed more control over their own sectors for the rather hefty price of its complete upkeep.

And they do. They all throw a percentage of their credit into the maintenance of their Districts, and in exchange Promoted ghettos are some of the most beautiful boroughs in the world. Go figure that it'd take the animals to show the humans how to do things right.

The catch, though, is that they don't tend to let humans in. The term Orwell District, though most wouldn't catch the literary allusion, refers a story in which the animals of a farm take over its upkeep and banish the farmers. It was intended to be metaphorical back then, but the Promoted saw the obvious literal allusions and commandeered it as a practical bible.

Any human would do well to visit an Orwell District. Any lingering belief that humans are inherently better than the Promoted would get dispelled immediately. The Promoted are willing to sacrifice for the good of their fellows, they use their own time to ensure their children are educated and their neighborhoods clean, and because of this they are able to look at what they and their fathers and their forefathers did with pride.

Leave it to our progeny to show us truths that we ourselves could not see. Leave it to the Promoted to prove "four legs good, two legs bad."

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*The Box: 18h57, January 2, 2150*

As I take the elevator to my box, the lift's Cockney AEI reports, "Ya bloody lorry's wastin' in Space 15-F-06, ya wanka."

"Great. Thanks."

"Bugga you, ya toff." A single AEI controls all the elevators on this block (because, let's face it, there's no reason the entire process could not be entirely automated), and so even though I am in a new apartment complex its Cockney inflection and attitude has followed.

"Back atcha," I sigh. Between everything I have to deal with right now, I am so not in the mood for this. Go figure that Eva couldn't intrude on my life at a time when the Special Services wasn't after my ass and my AEI wasn't going insane. It doesn't rain but it pours, and then it rains acid.

I get to my door and pause a moment in order to build up sufficient wrath. "Porter?"

"Yes, Ctn. Down?"

"Is Eva still in there?"

"Yes, Ctn. Down."

"Great. Open the door and neutralize any interior safety controls." The door slides open and I barge inside, fast enough that my fedora flies off. "EVANGELION!"

My brother is lying on my couch. He is surrounded by floating holographic text, of all things, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This is not Eva's usual choice of reading material, in that Eva, last I checked, couldn't even read. "Haiku! What's wrong—" he stops, finding my hand around his throat and his feet two centimeters off the ground.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?! I get a postbot from you saying that my Butler AEI has wiggled out and that you've put it in an illegally-Shaped rob body, and you ask what's wrong?! Ignoring the fact that I've got barely sixty hours left alive, Eva, the mere act that you're intruding upon my life is grounds for a violently malevolent mood. And even after I warned you the last time you showed up on my doorstep that doing so again would result in a J9-4 reverberating de-atomizer shoved down your sorry little throat, you show up at a time when I'm just looking to horribly mutilate something, with the added incentive of screwing with my already miserable life, and you have the unabashed audacity to lay there on your posterior and ask me what's wrong?!"

I throw him back down on the couch, brush my disheveled black hair from my eyes, noting that my hat has flown off. In the event that I might have to shoot him with something, I toss off my trench coat too. Porter appears physically to catch and hang it up immediately.

Eva sits, his face downtrodden. "Do you really hate your brother that much, Haiku?"

"Mom asked me to check up on you, which is the only reason I refrained from ordering Porter to release paralysis gas laced with the Ebola virus. Why did you come in the first place, Eva? I thought I made it fairly clear that I didn't want to see you again until you grew up."

"I did."

It's so tempting to shoot him, but his earnest attitude halts my itchy trigger finger, "Speak up, little black sheep."

"I...Haiku, I know I've let you down before, a lot. I've let lots of people down. You, Mom, Dad, Manga..."

I bend down, my face in his so that my hair bats his forehead. "She left you, didn't she?" I'm close enough that my Psi-Splyze picks up feelings of melancholy and regret, and sincerity. Somehow, it doesn't feel like Eva. But then, I've never known him to exhibit any of these emotions anyway.

"Manga's gone, but she didn't exactly leave. I...Haiku, you know about the Brigand, right?"

"Of course I do. Mom works for them, after all."

His eyes widen, as if he's forgotten that. Maybe she never told him. I would understand; I wouldn't normally trust Eva to sit properly on a Detoxer, let alone let him in on such implicating information. I hope I haven't made too big a mistake with that slip of the tongue, but while I feel him feeling shocked, I also feel his resolve.

"Well, did you know they can get you Shine?"

Oh expletive deleted. Shine, Sheen, Plastic, whatever you want to call it, is the drug that was in fashion about two years ago until someone noticed that it caused side effects, like heart palpitations and flipper babies. It messes with your visual and auditory senses, making everything look pretty and sparkly and new and turning all sound into soothing elevator music. And it was supposed to be addictive to certain demographics, most especially those with an alandine rather than threonine amino acid in the SLC24A5 gene, people with significant African or Asian genetic ancestry...

"Ess. How much do you owe them?"

"Nothing. Not anymore. I...I've paid my dues."

The part of me that still loves Eva goes cold. "What did you do?"

Eva shrugs sadly. "Deliveries, mostly. They...I didn't have anything they wanted, except, well, they took a few things. Eyes, molars, fingers, that sort of thing. They replaced them. Scans identify me now as someone called Jerome Dubois. Ironically my cred rating is better now than it was before. They hooked me into one of those organ xerox machines and took a few of those, too. Three left lungs, two right, grew back my heart a few times. Um, and lots of deliveries. I think I might have had something to do with that meme-bomb that

terrorist group set off in Seattle last October.”

“The Plastic. Are you still on it?”

“No! No. They, um, they put me through complete detox. It nearly killed me; it definitely broke me. But they don’t do those organ xeroxes if there are flaws like addiction. It wasn’t fun. Actually, it was the most painful thing in the world. But the worst thing was that...”

“What?”

“They took Manga.”

I fall on my arse to the floor. I can’t think of what to say, or rather, have too many things to say and can’t choose. Finally I ask, “When?”

Eva turns away from me.

“When?” I repeat. He remains silent. “WHEN, EVA?!” I shout. I pause, force myself to calm down. “Manga Andertondotcom was the best thing that ever happened to you, Evangelion. Better than you ever treated her, and far better than you ever deserved. If you’re responsible for hurting her, you’ve committed the most horrible sin there is. But I’ve got some connections with the Brigand. If it hasn’t been too long, I might still be able to get her out. But only if we act fast. So tell me: when?”

He grimaces. “Months ago.” I grimace too, and this time I am the one turning away. “She was the first thing they took. And I still...I still couldn’t quit it. Not even when they sent back...pieces. But it’s over. I’m done. I’m clean. And I am never going back to that. I...There’s nothing quite like two months of straight detox and four weeks of having your organs ripped out to get you reflecting on your life and values.” He laughs bitterly, to mask tears. “Manga kept bugging me to get some education, to make something of myself, to...to live up to what you were always trying to get me to be. And I can’t bring her back, and I can’t erase everything I’ve been, but I can at least try to make things a bit more right.”

Finally, I can ask, “So why are you here?”

“I just...wanted to say...”

He falls silent. Eternities pass in that silence.

Eventually, I stand, looming over him. His head hangs down. “Why are you here? If you don’t need help and you don’t want anything, why are you here, Brother?”

He winces, as if the words sting. Good. They were meant to.

“I just wanted to say...that...I’m sorry, Haiku. For everything I’ve done, and didn’t do. I’m sorry.”

Saddlebagged twice in as many minutes. I seat myself next to him.

“You’re sorry?”

He nods. Tears are drying on his cheeks.

“Sorry.” I repeat. Eva shrugs, and gets up to go.

This is a whole new Evangelion. He’s never even understood why he infuriates me so. I still can’t shake the idea that it’s a scam of some kind.

Before he can get too far, I grab his sleeve. “Give me your hand.”

He turns, blinks, holds out his palm. I grip it, and with my Psi-Splyze all I feel is the same mix of regret and sincerity. So much regret that it almost overwhelms me, so much sincerity that I can’t doubt it.

I nod to him. “Okay.”

“He nods back. “Okay.”

“Okay,” and give him a little grin. I turn his hand in mine, and shake it.

Another time, and I could enjoy this, could finally make peace with my estranged brother. I guess if you stay estranged from someone long enough, they really do become strangers. Now, though, I don’t have any time at all. I turn away and call to my AEIs. “Where is Sam?”

Beside us, with a shimmer of an emerging hologram, Porter appears, all smiles and dimples, though her cute facade is marred with anxiety. “He is still on the balcony outside. Muttering to himself.”

Commode also appears. “Zees eez most upsetting, Monsignor Down.”

Something incongruous clicks. “I have a balcony?”

Porter nods. “You do now, sir.”

“Okay. Eva, if you want you can go but...but I wouldn’t mind if you stayed. Commode, drop the accent and choose a different holographic representation other than the default setting. Porter, bring up the balcony door.”

Commode disappears. At the same moment the holographic atmosphere of an infinite expanse of pillows and cushions is interrupted by a door sliding open in the middle of the scenery. My eyes take a split second longer to adjust, for the already murky lighting outside is darkening further with the onset of night, as I exit and I approach Sam.

*Noir, May 15, 2146*

Did you know that there are almost five hundred times as many AEIs as there are humans? Probably not.

Did you know that while even Tenants get three official AEI programs, a House, a Butler, and a Concierge Program, there is still enough raw memory in the million or so Citizens’ accounts to easily give every human on Earth another six? ‘Course not.



Did you know that over fifteen thousand different occupations suddenly became obsolete with the invention of the AEI, from driving to recording to surveillance to programming to meme reconstruction to coffee dispensers to neurosurgery? Did you know that the only reason we still have any of those jobs available for people is to give them something to do? I wouldn't bet on it.

I'll bet you don't even know where Artificial EmotIntelligences come from. Do you? And asking yours defeats the purpose.

Artificial EmotIntelligences, though they have the same technorganic brains as robots, are not like them in the simple regard that they have no developmental period and no initial variation and thus no actual self. While rob minds spend a virtual "childhood" developing on the assembly line, AEIs begin with one of fifty possible baseline personas (matched to you based on your Gardner tests), then gain their character and quirks through the products that you buy. There is a very long and complex mathematical explanation to that, but the long and short of it is that if you buy more fun stuff, your AEIs becomes more fun; if you buy more DataJax, your AEIs becomes more erudite; if you buy more drugs, your AEIs become more existential.

As you purchase more things, your AEI will round out to a better personality. Furthermore, these personality alterations will affect different AEIs differently: a loutish AEI whose owner buys lots of porno will get more loutish, while a scholarly AEI in the same situation may find itself slightly embarrassed, reactions that will probably match the owner. Thusly, the latter will become more circumspect while the former will expound with dirty limericks. Alternately, with the same model of AEI, you will get the exact same results, although it will require the same purchases; different ones will alter the outcome slightly.

An Artificial EmotIntelligence outside the dwelling, a public AEI, functions similarly. Everybody's probably noticed that AEIs in more public areas, serving more people, or doing more tasks are generally more gregarious and likeable. Well, that is not through practice, but because memory space is allocated to each AEI depending on how much of the public they serve. In other words, the more out of the way an AEI is, the less personality it has, because the less it needs.

This all seems like a fairly good situation. People generally like someone like themselves, and the more products an AEI gets hooked into, the more its personality will begin to match the owner. Furthermore, it is somewhat Darwinian, for if a person lacks in affection and interaction to the point that he or she or se or s/he (or whatever else the case may be) buys a great many material goods to feel better, their AEI soon develops a better, more rounded

personality that can help abstain from such necessities in the future.

The real flaw with this system, though, is the basic premise. Not, as many RRRers would automatically say, that it is wrong to manipulate individual intelligences, because these are not individual intelligences; unlike a human or a Promoted or a rob with their own pre-existing differences, if you put any other AEI in the same situation, you'll get exactly the same results. It is wrong because it encourages people to bond to the artificial. To hide up and hole up in their boxes and focus only on themselves and their own wants and desires rather than the outside world and what's really going on.

If you couldn't answer any of my questions at the beginning of this column, you qualify. Leave your box for a few hours and get to know someone, anyone, who is real, who is not programmable, who is not necessarily what you want. Learn to deal with the outside world again. Don't rely on your AEIs to live your life for you.

I hate the idea that my Butler Program and my Concierge Program might end up like me. I don't like myself enough to spend all day with me.

### *The Box: 19h13, January 2, 2150*

Sam has chosen a good model body. It does not look nearly as human as Joachim or Kareen, is very obviously robotic. But is robotic in such a way as to be very stylish, metallic and with lots of angles. And, just as Porter said, he is simply standing and staring. As I get closer, I realize that he is also smiling. It is not a normal smile. It is a smile I have only seen a few times, the smile of someone violently deranged. The last time I saw it was when I interviewed Dr. Emmanuel Hiedeiger-Youm in '39, a few weeks before he created the artificial black hole that sucked up the remaining part of Antarctica. Perhaps Sam has not yet grasped the subtle intricacies of facial movement, but I find that a part of the primitive monkey in me responds to this stimulus by edging around him nervously, while a second, stupider part of the primitive monkey in me curiously pushes me forward. "Sam?"

He turns quickly to acknowledge me, then immediately turns away back to see the setting sun. "Hiya, boss. What's new?"

"Hm. Well, that I've got about sixty-one hours on the clock, for one. Also, I heard on the eLink that they found a cure for Osteosarcoma-B this afternoon. Oh, and you produced a rob body without permission and had my brother download you into it. Can we talk about that one, Sam?"

"Oh, right. Sorry, fearless leader. It's not gonna be a problem, is it?"

He is still gawking at the sun. "One-tenth the intensity or not,

you're gonna burn out your optic receptors if you keep staring, Sam. Did you make a bet or something? I promise you, Apollo's winning the chariot race."

"It's beautiful."

I blink. I blink again. "Sam, you're a Butler program."

"Doesn't mean I can't appreciate beauty."

"Well, actually, yes, it does. I haven't bought enough art to make you appreciate more than basic aesthetics. AEIs have limited memory. You're not supposed to waste it on abstractions."

"Not originally. But you're a Citizen now, boss. One of the perks you haggled for was unlimited house memory. So as soon as we moved into this new apartment I suddenly found myself with infinite RAM. INFINITE memory! Do you know what that's like, boss? Can you comprehend this? It's like if you jacked onto the eLink and jacked every bit of raw data into your brain continuously at the speed of light! It would kill you, boss, but I'm an AEI and I think this way all the time and it nearly drove me nuts but it's beautiful! Everything is just so beautiful!"

He turns back to the sunset, and I realize that I have unconsciously backed up a few paces. I grapple with the upsetting realization that Sam has probably gone a little bit insane. As he said, unlimited memory in an AEI not programmed to deal with it would be a mind-blowing transcendence a human being simply could not imagine.

"Beautiful," he mutters again.

I do not know what to do, and for the moment all that I can do is to go back inside.

"Porter, how long has he been acting like that?"

Porter's hologram reappears and frowns dejectedly. "Since shortly after we were transported into this apartment, Ctzn. Down," she expounds.

Commode appears, now wearing the façade of an archaic Anglo butler. "Not that, Commode. Something else." Turning my attention back, I ask, "Okay, if Sam's out there, who's controlling the place?"

In response, the simple monk-like façade of House shimmers into view. "I have been endowed with most of those basic functions, sir. Porter is handling the remainder and most interactive programs."

"Okay, House, I know this isn't your forte, but can you trace the records of Sam's transfer? Did someone miss a line of code or something? Some undetected program that effs up his program if it gets relocated? Movers dropkick the technorganic brain a few times?"

"No, Ctzn. Down," he replies after a moment.

"Then did those programmers screw up when they...Oh, ess."

Eva comes gets up from the pile of cushions he's laying on. "What's wrong, Haiku?"

“Sam is an unlicensed, illegal Butler program that I got through the Brigand. His technorganic brain was created from bootlegged parts from Niger, and his programming was done by some independent in HR.” Eva blinks, I assume with incomprehension. I explain, “Which means that when I set him up he wasn’t directly linked to the Network. His core programming connected all his functions, and he could get to outside functions through those. When they transferred him, they probably hooked him straight into the house.” Eva blinks again. “It’s the difference between reading and DataJax,” I explain, and he finally nods in comprehension. “So now he’s inside instead of outside, and seems to have overdosed on information. Jesus X.” I plop on a pillow and wish I had time to properly pout.

Eva hesitantly questions, “Can you fix him?”

“No,” I answer, too upset to wonder when my brother started referring to AEIs by gender pronouns. Usually he just calls them its. “You know, of all the things I figured he’d OD on, I never thought it’d be RAM. No, I can’t fix him. And I can’t get anybody else to do it either. Not until I have time to get someone from the Brigand over here to figure it out, and even then it would be incredibly risky. Not that I really have too terribly much to lose.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Before I can answer, Porter interjects. “Excuse me, Ctn. Down. You have a call from Special Services.”

“Oh, *bù yào gán wo!* What does Hawthorne want now?”

“It is not Regulator Hawthorne, Ctn. Down. In fact, it is not from the Regulation branch of Special Services at all, but from Humanities.”

“Humanities?”

In answer, Porter brings up a holo of the call, displaying a standard-feature fem Solicitor program, a simple hologram without any personality or intelligence beyond its programmed parameters, evident by its unfocused and rapid speech as it proceeds. “Good evening, [Citizen Haiku Down]. This afternoon a complaint (§469502-GH2-11) was lodged against you by [Doctor Manchuria Allande], re: your unscheduled and unlicensed early departure from your appointment (MA§875A-HD6-45). This is directly counter to SSC regulation [§402305-B9 paragraph 62]. If you wish to dispute this, you can by connecting to [[eLink.SpecialServices.humanities.Net1/complaints/retort](#)] now. As our records show that this is the [third] sequential time you have missed-slash-left your official and required semiweekly psychological inquest, Special Services Humanities dept. has determined that in response you must submit to penalty specified in SSC regulation [§402305-B9 paragraph 62-C], spec. recommendation via artificial Psych program. Your psychological

profile indicates that your required psychological appointment would be best fulfilled with PSICoFac Program F-16. Click here [[eLink.SpecialServices.humanities.Net1/PSICoFac/Y16](#)] to start your session within ten minutes. Failure to comply will result in karma deduction and possible liquidation, as per spec. in SSC regulation [§402305-B paragraph 241-C]. This session will charge 4.75 cc/min. to you credit. This charge cannot be disputed. Solar Corporate Council, Special Services, and any related divisions and companies are not liable for any negative effects, be they psychological, physical, or otherwise that may occur as a result of using this program. Please begin when ready.”

The vacantly smiling AEI hologram disappears, leaving only a large blinking box with a three-second countdown.

“What’s going on?” Evangelion asks.

“**Psychoanalytical Schema Imitative Computer Facsimile**,” I answer, “and Shiva alone knows how long it took them to come up with that particular acronym.”

“Well, what did it mean? I barely got a word of that legalese.”

The countdown ends and is replaced by a holographic simage of Sigmund Freud, one of many available PSICoFac archetypes, an intelligent but generic AEI program. He lights a holographic cigar, and it strikes a chord; I decide that if now isn’t a good time to have a smoke, there isn’t one. “Good afternoon, Mishter [Haiku Down]. Take a sheat, von’t you? Ve’ve got a lot of time to make up, vhat viz your passive-aggressive avoidances, which I zink may be based in your latency in ze oral stage of your development—”

I can not deal with this now. I can barely deal with thinking about this now. Lighting a cigarette, I command, “Freeze program!”

“Vhy don’t ve begin viz your mozer?”

“FREEZE PROGRAM!!”

“You sheem hoshtile, Mishter Down—

“FREEZE THE EFFING PROGRAM OR I’LL...” I trail off, realizing the futility. There is not much you can do physically to a hologram, and since this is a government sponsored one I’d rather not deal with the implications inherent in mucking about with Freud’s programming. After a moment’s thought, I threaten, “—Or I’ll start repressing.”

Freud shakes his head ruefully and sucks on his cigar. “Oh, very vell. Take a few moments to compose yourshelf. I vill reactivate in two minutesh.”

As the archetype blinks off, Evangelion turns to me with eyes wide and face worried. “What was that? What’s going on?”

“What is going on, oh brother of mine, is that I’ve just been hosed. Manchuria let me leave my psych session early, but apparently decided not to make it official, and in doing so she has found a nice

and completely legal way to exact some cold revenge. And the PSICoFac called *me* passive-aggressive.” Curses and swears. “When was the last time you missed an appointment with your psychiatrist?”

“Never,” Eva answers quickly, but backtracks even before I can glare at him. “A few times.”

“Well, then as you know, every time you do you’re required to make up double the time, on the apparent assumption that one’s psychological turmoil, if unwatched by experts, can balloon exponentially. So since Manchuria has decided to count her offer to let me leave early today as skipping out, that qualifies as three sessions I’ve missed, which means I have to waste eight hours with that thrice-damned PSICoFac program instead of searching for Desmond Arc’s murderer.”

“Oh. Snap,” mutters Eva.

“Snap, indeed. That’s eight hours that I definitely do not have. Porter!”

Porter appears before me. Commode is behind her, now looking for all the world like Marilyn Monroe, complete with long white dress which she keeps having to fight from floating up. “Not that, Commode. Porter, House said that he’s slaved all interactive programs to you. That means you’ve got control of the Shaper, yes?”

“Yes. I think.”

An eyebrow inadvertently lifts. “You think?”

“Well, I have access to the Shaper and all the records, but I’m really not equipped to do this, Ctzn. Down. I don’t think I’ll be facile enough to make anything too elaborate.”

“But can you at least duplicate something if you have records for it?”

“Oh yes.” Pause. “I think.”

Marvelous. With my luck today she’ll end up replicating the Ohana Virus. “Okay, Porter. I need you to check the last recorded Splyze I made for myself. Duplicate that. Keep this one off the records.” I turn to Evangelion. “Eva, you wanted to show you’re sorry. I need you for the next eight hours.”

“What is it, Haiku?”

“I need you to Splyze yourself to turn into me. Take my place for this thing so that I can be out there instead of stuck in here.”

Eva’s epicanthic eyes go wide. “I...I can’t do that, Haiku!” He calms himself and continues, “Even if I could, Shaper’s are programmed to be incapable of creating authentic duplicate DNA Splyzes or identical auras, aren’t they? I wouldn’t be an exact duplicate, and nothing less would fool government programs.”

“True enough,” I agree, grabbing my trench coat and fedora and preparing to leave. “But a Brigand Shaper can. Nominally, I used it to go undercover back my reporter days. But it also comes in handy for

times like this.” The Shaper hums and trillions upon trillions of invisible nanites rearrange stock matter into more preprogrammed nanites mixed with plasma-based solution in a convenient hypo. “No one will record this, and thus no one will know. And I need my genes and Kirlian aura visible and present because, even ignoring the issue of the Regulators, I’ve tried to leave in the middle of PSICoFac sessions and the thing uses masers to prevent it.”

“But...”

“Gee dee it, Eva, do you want to help me or don’t you?!”

Evangelion sighs in resignation, and nods. He grabs the hypo and injects himself in the neck. A few seconds later his skin ripples, his features mold, his skin and tone change. He stretches taller, thinner, as though on some invisible rack, grunting in discomfort as his genetic information is completely rearranged. Quickly, almost amazingly so considering that in my early childhood this sort of thing was still science fiction, I am staring at a duplicate of myself.

For a fleeting second, I wonder if perhaps someone used this system to frame me, but immediately discount it as hysterical ranting. Any Splyze one takes through a licensed Shaper is automatically recorded to prevent identity theft of the most literal kind, so there would be a record of it if someone else looked like me at the time of the murder. Also, it is not my appearance is that has placed me at the scene of the crime but my cybernetic arms, which Splyzes could not duplicate.

However, the thought of duplicates leaves me wondering about other possibilities. Perhaps a future version of me murdered Desmond...No, the Temporonaut Corps exists specifically to prevent that sort of thing. Maybe a transporter twin?

Sue me, I’m getting a little desperate.

Evangelion finishes the final touches of his genetic transformation. “You okay, Eva?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he replies, in my exact voice. “Go on, get out of here. I’ll hold the thing off for you.” Porter opens the door for me, and I make my exeunt. “Haiku!” he shouts, and I turn in the doorway. “Good luck.”

“Eva,” I reply with a sincere smile, the first he’s seen from me since he was two, “Thank you.”

“Wait!” From the balcony, Sam emerges, seemingly pulling clothes from midair although actually from my Quantumbox, garbing himself in a trench coat and fedora matching mine. “Ready to go, boss.”

“No. A thousand times no.”

“You don’t have time to argue, boss. That PSICoFac will reinitialize in twenty-three point nine seconds.”

I hate it when I am forced into actions I would not otherwise

take. And I especially dislike that it is happening with unremitting frequency of late. “I will destroy you later, Sam. Come.”

The door closes, where Eva presumably begins my PSICoFac session for me. I hope that resolve and honesty I sensed from him earlier were on the mark, because if not I’ve just shot myself in the foot trusting him not to eff it up. But on the other hand, at this point there’s very little Special Services can do to me that I don’t have coming already.

I turn to my AEI *cum* robot. “Explain yourself, Sam.”

“I’m going to help.”

“You are *not* going to help. You are going to go back into the house and wait until I can get someone to fix you.”

Sam disregards my command, which only proves my point. “You need help, boss. You’ve got sixty hours, twenty-one minutes, nine seconds before your deadline expires.”

“Unchallenged. How do you propose to help, short of acting as a walking, talking stopwatch?”

Sam’s eyebrows flick up enthusiastically. “I’ll help investigate. I’ll be your sidekick. Watson to your Sherlock, Dano to your McGarrett, Sam Fujiyama to your Quincy, Scully to your Mulder, Squidface to your Cheesehead—”

“I hated that show,” I interrupt. “And I don’t particularly appreciate the analogy.”

Sam ignores my interruption and continues, “Tonto to your Ranger, Samwise to your Frodo. A veritable Doctor Robotson, as it were!”

Five million terabytes of information a second and he uses it on outdated pop culture references. Tension begins to build up behind my eyes. “Sam, I am not a TV fantasy sim.”

“Well, you’re no Farrah Sumners, I’ll give you that. But the fact is, fearless leader, you are in it deep and you can’t afford to not to use me.” I eye him dubiously. “Come on, I know everything you do about eLink research and I can do it ten million times faster. In this body I’m stronger and faster than you even with your cybernetic arms. I’ve been waiting on you holographic hand and foot since you took me out of the box and threw away the directions, boss, and the fact is, you’re the closest thing I have to a friend outside of Porter, House, and Commode. And, frankly, they’re not the greatest company. Have you ever tried holding a conversation in binary? Let me help you!”

The tension is not dispelled. But what can I do? He has a point. “Okay. Get online, somewhere you won’t be disturbed and at a port you won’t be traced from.”

“C’m on,” he wines. “You don’t want backup?”

“I need information more than I need muscle.”

“Well, alright. What am I looking for?”



"Anything. I've got one lead and it is tenuous at best. My SatLink is on; call immediately."

"*Oui oui, mon capitain.*" He salutes, and heads to the elevator.

"And Sam?" He turns. Reluctantly, I tell him, "Thanks."

"That's what I'm here for," he smiles, and enters the elevator. The elevator AEI mutters, "So ya got a bloody body, ya think yer so bloody great—" before the doors close.

I linger in the hallway, formulating a plan and a way to spend the next eight hours productively, since I don't have enough time to torture my psychologist to the extent that she deserves for her betrayal. I need to get into the Orwell District and get to Pete; see if Danael was just talking out of his ass or if I do have another definite suspect.

Problem: I can't enter the Orwell District looking human. But because I don't have access to my Shaper, I can't modify my genes properly. Ess. That was poorly thought out.

Fate, however, seems willing to lend me a hand, as the elevator doors open and deposit before me Shon D'Walmart.

"D'Walmart? What do you want?"

"Haiku! Perfect. Just the man I wished to see. Correct me if I'm mistaken, but at some point I believe you mentioned having access to the Brigand. Is that correct?"

Something's off with him, even aside from his rapid, excited speech. For a man who yesterday sported Cro-Magnon features, he's speaking with remarkable clarity. He grabs my shoulder in greeting, and I wince as my Psi-Splyze picks up his emotions, running like a locomotive: straight, powerful, and very, very fast.

"D'Walmart," I ask, pulling away in discomfort. "What the aitch happened to you?"

"I'm not entirely certain myself, Haiku. However, since last night's revelry at your apartment, I've suddenly found myself with a new interest, almost a craving."

"You didn't get into my stash, did you?"

He chuckles, and if I didn't know any better, I'd swear he did it condescendingly. "Negative. I don't know what it is, but something prompted me to begin watching the news last night and then I started making connections I'd never thought of before and hitting links I'd never touched, and it's so fascinating! I've been trying to learn all I can, but now it seems I've strained my credit limit on DataJax, getting everything that I can find. There was one fascinating area on the rantsites...have you ever heard of the contraband author Jack Noir? I jacked everything he's done as of yesterday. He actually reminds me of you; you'd probably like him. Where was I? Oh yes. I'm practically cleaned out on credit, and I need more information, Haiku! I need it!"

So Shon's flavor of the day is vidneed. Perfect. I can't deal with this right now. "You should probably talk with my Butler Program. He seems to have overdosed on information..." Suddenly, inspiration hits. "D'Walmart, I'll make a deal with you. I need to use your Shaper to make one thing, on your account. Let me do that, swear mum, and I'll let you use my Shaper and my new nifty Class A credit to jack as much raw data into your head as you can stand. Deal?"

D'Walmart beams with joy. "Deal! What do you need my Shaper for?"

"I need to re-sequence my DNA, and due to circumstances related to my imminent liquidation which I'd really rather not get into, I can't get to my Shaper to do it."

We get into the elevator, and for the first time I am glad to have Shon D'Walmart's acquaintance, a man so hellbent on his own desires of the moment that I can get his cooperation without his wondering about the legality. "Sure. No problem. Um, isn't that illegal?" he asks, surprising me.

"No," I lie.

"Oh. Okay, sure. Elevator, take us to the seventh floor. The tube there connects to the floor just below mine."

"Oi'll take ya ta me arse, ya toffer!" the elevator complies unintelligibly.

We exit and head to Shon's box, which being Class C is hexagonal and seven times as large as my old Class D one.

I have seen D'Walmart's abode a few times before, and it has never looked the same. Today it mimics a mad scientist's lab, complete with beeping machines and useless antennae shooting holographic electricity. Apparently, even when trying to become smarter, D'Walmart cannot deal without melodrama. "So what do you need to Splyze?"

"Have your wide travels ever taken you to an Orwell District, D'Walmart?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. They're the areas reserved for the Promoted and—"

"I know *what* they are, Haiku. I'm not stupid. I've just never been to one, that's all."

I fumble for words, having been temporarily tripped by my own underestimation. "Oh, well, I need to get into one."

"Turning into a Feralist, old chum?"

On any other day I would use my hypnogun to make him jump from the sixty-sixth story for calling me "old chum" in a bad Adam West impersonation (Allah knows where he picked that up), but at the moment I need him. "Turning into Dr. Doolittle is more like it."

"Walking with the animals, talking with the animals, eh?"

D'Walmart quips with a smile, topping me for the second time in as many sentences. It occurs to me that Shon D'Walmart has Class C credit, about ten times better than my old Class D, for his karma rating is so far above my own that the clouds block the view. With the Class C credit of a Civilian, you can buy a lot of information. If he's truly maxed out his credit limit for this month on DataJax, at this point he's probably moved from complete ignorance and asininity to becoming one of the more knowledgeable individuals in my acquaintance. Though obviously not as much as I. Heaven forefend.

"Um, yeah. That's right. Shon, I need to become an animal."

"Well, I think I've still got enough creds for that." And, though I may have imagined it, I barely hear D'Walmart murmur to himself, "Though really, Haiku, I don't see why you want to become an animal when you're already such a jackass."

### *Noir, June 2, 2142*

There are few things less expensive than DataJax. For the price of a cheap meal, you can jack in everything ever known about Picasso. If you walk instead of taking a taxi, that night and forever after you'll know every line of Shakespeare. Control your impulse purchase at the clothing site, and instead use that credit to learn about four thousand years of Asian history in its entirety.

Of all the machinations constructed by man's hand, DataJax are by leaps and bounds the most amazing of them all. Considering how long it took to be able to truly understand how our own minds work, the idea that only a couple of decades later we'd be able to safely and effortlessly input enormous amounts of foreign data into them is absolutely incredible. And most incredible is that they are practically free!

You all say ho hum. You all say, DataJax, yeah, great. And you say this because you've grown up exposed to them your whole life. But I lived in Crapville, USA as a lad, long before DataJax were readily available, let alone the preferred method of teaching. I learned to read and write and add and subtract and everything else by rote, until I was twelve.

Then, suddenly, enormous expanses and vistas opened before me. It was as though I'd grown wings and found the world infinitely larger than I'd ever imagined. When I got my first exposure to DataJax at the tender age of twelve, they had to rip me away from the machine six hours later, by which point I'd force fed so much information into my skull that I could've gotten into med school. I had nose bleeds for three days, but I kept going back.

And I still do. Almost all of my credits go to getting pure information, and because DataJax are so cheap, even on a Class D

credit I know more trivia than the cryogenically frozen head of Alex Trebeck.

Yet, you persist in asking, so what? What's the point of just knowing a bunch of stuff that'll have no relation on your life? And in response, I hold my thumb to my nose and go "Thbbbb!" Everything in the world, in one way or another, relates to everything else. Even if you're just a jobless Denizen or Tenant, download a few interior design jacks and see if you can't make you apartment look a little nicer. Jack a dictionary program and I'll bet you'll find communication a bit easier. Or some psych programs, and I guarantee you'll notice yourself doing things you've never noticed before. *Shiranain-da*, you might even discover something you find passionate enough about to get a job, bring you and your family to Citizen status and Class A credit. The more information you have at your disposal, the more points of view and the more ways of thinking and the more connections to make, the better you'll be able to adapt to new situations, to learn from them, to maybe, just maybe, create something new.

It is no coincidence that most of the innovations we're getting these days come from Hypereality. It is not a case of the Emerican's infinitely faster world making quick random connections, as many ignorant theorists postulate. *Homo seraphim* are not monkeys at typewriters. These innovations come about because everybody living in HR is responsible for maintaining a set amount of eLink sites. They are literally legally required to take in and be exposed to new information on a regular basis. They can make connections and new discoveries and new inventions for the singular reason that they learn new things. You can too.

Twencen science fiction imagined a future in which information would be the ultimate source of revenue, in which one bought and sold with data. But that's ludicrous, because it fails to take into account the basic human factor of laziness. In the eLink, *homo seraphim* may act that way, but in the real world raw information is cheap and useless. DataJax, these incredible, amazing little creations, are inexpensive for one simple, stupid reason: nobody thinks that they need them.

Which is not only ill planned but just plain daft. Information grows on itself. The reason we live the way we do is because we have learned from those who came before us. With DataJax, we each have the opportunity to learn all the knowledge of humanity, to hold it in its entirety in ourselves.

Yet with all these DataJax I have consumed, and with all of the many more available which I have yet to imbibe, I've still not to be able to answer a single driving question: with information so cheap and accessible, why am I confronted with so very, very, very many

desperately stupid people every day?

*Chicago Orwell District: 20h06, January 2, 2150*

My new car is waiting for me in front of the building when I arrive outside. I give it a quick inspection. It looks like something between a Ford Thunderbird and a Baretta missile-launching hover-tank. I surreptitiously look around and, making sure no person or AEI is watching, do a happy little jig. I knew this thing got top ratings, but had no idea it would be so...pretty.

Right back to business, I press my thumb to the door, where the software reads my print and scans me as owner. The door seems to dissolve, although in actuality the trillions of nanites that compose the shell around the smartmetal frame of the car simply move aside. More cars these days are nanite-based than not. With control over the atoms of your car, they can alter the size or color of your vehicle (within certain parameters), absorb impact of accidents and seamlessly repair them, and, when the gravitronics cut out thirty thousand feet in the air at Mach 5, they can save your fool life of anything short of falling into a volcano filled with molten lava, in which case you will starve to death before the nanites run out of power to run the air conditioning. Since cars drive themselves, there is no steering wheel or driver's seat, although if I felt like it the holographic emitters that would create the controls are present. Instead, there is a deceptively open space with wide cushion seats in the rear, and another set facing backwards beneath the front window. A small Shaper and control panel sit within easy reach. The white seats (also nanite) have the feel of real Neandertal leather. As soon as I sit in them, a hologram appear on the dash window of a non-descript face, greeting me. "Hello, Ctn. Down. I am the Artificial EmotIntelligence of your new ForDodge™ Model 2148 Dreadnaught X-B. Until otherwise named, my factory designation is Herbie."

"And quite the little love bug you are, Herbie. That name'll be fine."

"Command accepted." Herbie has a soft, pleasant male voice with just a trace of echo, by design, for the same reason Kareen whirred whenever she moved. People like their robots, however realistic, to seem at least a little robotish. "Where would you like to go today?"

"To the local Orwell District. Post haste."

"Command accepted." I don't even feel the car move as the gravitronics kick in. For someone who has been used to public transportation for the last eight years, this is the height of extravagance. "I have reviewed your past personal account profile to study your likes and dislikes. Would you care to enjoy a beverage

from the Shaper?”

“No. Just play some music. Jazz, mid-thirties.”

He gets the century right on the first try.

The drive to the Orwell District is uneventful. I spend the first half tearing through Herbie’s hardware and software to edit out the interminable commercials on the Dreadnaught’s television, and the second using a holographic keyboard to write articles for the next few issues of the *Urban Chronicle* so that I needn’t worry about failing my contract for the next couple of installments. I am particularly proud of the one I do about the actual nature of Sophoids from my visit with Friday. At the moment, the one thing I have working in my favor is my Citizen status and its Class A credit. The last thing in the world I need is for that to fall through. Not only would I lose my precious Citizenship (the only thing keeping Hawthorne from liquidating my sorry behind) but since breach of contract in a corporatocracy is treasonous, I would also be in violation of Corporate Policy regardless of Arc’s murder. In such circumstances they sometimes clone you so they can execute you twice.

Once completed and polished, I save the files, banish the holographic writing, and use the Dreadnaught’s computer to mail my columns to the paper. I lean back and enjoy my jazz, taking Herbie up on his offer for libation by enjoying a watered-down Einstein Cocktail. One of these stim-laced pink drinks at full strength makes you feel like a genius for a few hours. I’ve found that a diluted version of it is a wonderful way to enjoy jazz: you can appreciate the music on many more levels and you don’t have to feel pretentious for listening to it.

I am actually slightly let down by my new automobile, for not only is the ride as smooth and perfect as one could hope for, but after conveying me to my destination it even goes to park itself. Faced with technology that actually seems to work in my best interests, without its own motivations or drives, is somehow vaguely unsettling.

Herbie deposits me just as Thelonious Monk finishes his solo, at the lovely little park before the high, advertisement-covered wall separating the Orwell District. One of the few places within three hundred kilometers that still has a patch of grass and a few trees, the remnants of Washington Park are full of people: parents, children, seniors, and nannybots. A Candomble priestess and an Hasidic rabbi play holographic chess beneath a luminous streetlight. A teenage androgen and his probably octogenarian bisexual partner push their mutant child and his rob friend on the swings: Norman Rockwell for the mid-millennium. I spot a woman with shocking red hair who is so beautiful that I want to just walk up and tell her so, in case she is somehow unaware of the fact, but at the last minute I don’t as she flickers off: an effing hologram. A gang of pre-pubescent hoodlums

(the Canaries, I guess by the flaxen colors and feather decorations) meander about under the less-than-discrete goggled scrutiny of one or two vidheads, folks who wear eLink goggles twenty-four/seven to give the world a complete record of their every perspective, though in my experience those who do so are either narcissistic, voyeuristic, or those unnumbered masses of the solitary and ignored who long to feel needed and important instead of feeling very, very alone.

But most noticeably, there is an unusually immense assortment of animals. Promoted from every species and phylum. They are almost all mammalian or ornithological, since reptilian DNA was never well suited for sentience and most ichthyoid and insectoid life on Earth is simply too primitive for even Galactic machines to Promote. Still, the assortment is more reminiscent of an old zoo than a park. Among the more exotic creatures I espy an elephant, two polar bears and a panda, a giraffe, a flock of parrots and cockatoos, a jaguar cub, a thoroughbred Beagle, even a dolphin in its own land-strider and a withered old crocodile with cybernetic implants where Promotion failed.

I search about trying to find an empty private area where I can use the Splyzer and blend in with the crowd, or flock, or herd, or whatever. But in vain. I finally resign myself to going to find a bathroom in the nearby Mall.

Shudder.

This Mall is the same as every single other Mall on the planet. Exactly. I suppose at some point during the Great Remodeling the SCC realized that malls only held the same fifty stores selling the same twenty-five inventories, and decided when they were rebuilding and restructuring the planet that they could make it easier for consumers by putting everything in every Mall in the same place. They don't even have names. Each is simply called the Mall. Bright lights above shine on white linoleum below, as buyers meander through the forever crisply perfect 19° C atmosphere of hyper-oxygenated air. Controlled pheromones stimulate certain biological responses, driving up appetite and desire and lowering inhibitions. Hypnotic ads, both subliminal and blatant, draw the suggestible, unwary, and unhardened into their clutches. At every storefront, holographic Solicitor programs, many even Artificial EmotIntelligences, lunge before pedestrians to peddle their particular depot's wares.

A hundred years ago this ten-by-four city block building used to be the University of Chicago and a very large library. How far we've come.

The muddle of humanity, marketing, and advertisement temporarily overwhelms all perception, and before I can recover my senses a nearby Solicitor program, an attractive but annoyingly upbeat blonde, appears before me. I feel a slight field scanning my

Kirlian aura, and the Solicitor fem gives an upbeat greeting. “Yo [Citizen Down]! Welcome to the Mall of the greater Southwestern Chicago Orwell District ID#AmNA23-74628494-C! I’m Becky, your Mall’s Information Desk Solicitor program. Is there anything I can help you with today? Come to spend some [Class A] credit? Records show your last nifty purchase was a brand spanking new [myopia-correction @lchemix™ Splyze]. Can I direct you to our local [@lchemix™] outlet?”

As she has been saying this, I have not been idle, reaching into my trench coat and issuing forth from its moth-ridden depths one of my beloved babies, the VoltBolt, a hand-held sized version of the Thunderstick. When nobody is looking, I make good on a lifelong fantasy by firing a powerful charge of electricity and frying the entire Solicitor system. Several people applaud, the battle between human consumer and artificial hawker apparently being a recurrent aggravation for others besides myself. When two RRRers advance filled with indignant pomp, I point the VoltBolt in their direction until they decide discretion to be the better of valor.

Holstering my baby, I celebrate my victory at the food court. Other than a few mouthfuls of grilled cheese sandwich, I have not eaten since breakfast, and whether craved through nature or artificial agencies, even a McClone’s™ Value Meal does not seem not entirely repulsive. Fast food’s made a big comeback over the last few decades, since between Shapers and Detoxers and about twenty-billion medical advances, man can indulge in culinary vices that for over a century had been deemed hazardous enough to warrant Surgeon General’s warnings.

As I reach the front of the line (behind an obese fem with half a dozen children, at least two mutant, and a Tolkienite elfin fem) the rob at the counter greets, “Hello sir how are you I am fine. May I take your order?”

“Uh, a sewer crocodile Quarter Pounder with cheese, please.” An old favorite from childhood. It’s hard to get sewer croc these days; the sewer mutants herd them like cattle. “And a large eXsta-C Cola.”

“Specify quantity ratio of meat?”

I splurge. “100%”

“For only 4.2cc and a 12% probable elevation of myocardial infarction you can supersize that.”

“Depends. What type of MedBot do you have on the premises.”

“As of 10/14/48, due to a projected decline in the number of fast food-related deaths by the year 2263, SCC regulations no longer require medical attendant, either human or artificial, to be present in any fast food diner, cafe, restaurant, or kiosk.”

“I’ll take my chances.”



“Please place your thumb on the scanpad. Remember to thank the Solar Corporate Council and the deity of your choice for the meal provided. Your meal will be waiting at your table. Have a nice day. Or else.”

I find my seat and eat quickly (by necessity, lest I be exposed to the taste!). I feel a bit better after I finish, either from just getting food into my system, or perhaps the minute traces of MDMA in the soda, and make a visit to the Detoxers. Rather than using it for its proscribed purpose, though, I take out the Splyze that Shon D’Walmart created for me and inject myself with the hypo.

My eyelids reflexively squeeze tightly shut as my body ripples and transforms at the genetic level from man to animal, and I pray that D’Walmart’s personality of the day is not devious or mordant enough to make mischief. The last thing in the world I need is to end up genetically transformed into a baboon or a pig, and that sarcastic whisper beneath his breath did not instill me with the utmost confidence.

I feel the final changes, down on fours with my lower appendages bent backwards. My mouth feels too wide and my skin feels scratchy. I open my eyes, I note with some dismay that my vision is nebulous beyond a short distance, and monochromatic to boot. Until I gaze in the mirror, and find that for the first time in far too long I approve of the view.

D’Walmart apparently knows my personality better than I’d assumed, for as I gawk at my new visage, the cold image of a wolf returns my stare.



# Chapter 01010.

## Abduction in Three Movements – Part One

*Deep Search...[recovered]: eLink.personalsite.Newnet95/ NAmIlChi  
Down-Haiku/21470215...February 15, 2147*

<Because I have no specific set word limit beyond a personal standard, and because I answer to nobody, and because I do this column mainly in a vain attempt to keep the boredom from making my skull implode, theoretically there is absolutely no reason that I could not just type “~~Blow~~ me” until I hit about seven-hundred words. Luckily for you, however, I am not feeling quite so malicious, and as such today’s column will instead consist of my writing, “~~Suck~~ it.”

<I jest, of course. I did that Tuesday. Instead, today I will reflect upon my true grievance, the bane of my world and my society. It is a fairly simple one, a vice that even I, the man kvetching about it, indulge in. Yet it is a peccadillo that is more dire and dangerous than most anybody realizes.

<This is the sin of fooling oneself, of self-deception, of basic hypocrisy.

<It is a simple thing to do. You go out for a night on the town spending 40cc on gene Splyzes or aphrodisiacs or HoloRooms or something to make you think you’re not as unattractive as you truly are. You look in the mirror at your sagging form and developing wrinkles and think, “I guess I’m getting old...er!” You spend all your time in your box talking to your *Artificial* EmotIntelligences, when true human beings are all around, above, and below you.

<Now, let me emphasize something, because I have a long history of being misunderstood. I have absolutely nothing against aging, Splyzing, or AEIs. It is not a question of a thing’s existence, merely a question of the degree of its use. A few Splyzes to make yourself look better are not only perfectly agreeable to me but probably quite psychologically healthy. However, I have a neighbor who changes his genetic structure more often than he changes his socks. Similarly, to consider one’s Butler program worth talking to, even to consider it worth spending time with, is exactly the point of its existence. To think of it as your best friend, or worse, to cross the line of love and become a *biàn tài* Greaser, is taking things to an unhealthy extreme.

<I try never to fool myself. True, this has left me a friendless,

bitter, lonely curmudgeon, but on the other hand, I have never overdosed on drugs to any lethal degree, never worried about the dangers of genetic misplacement (of my original DNA being mislaid and forever lost), and though I often hate everybody else I rarely have much occasion to hate myself. I know exactly who I am. And it may not be entirely likeable, or kind, or good, but it is me. And even if no one else likes me, because of this I can say without fooling myself that I do.

<I do.

<...

<Crap. *Zhuāng suàn duǎn lù zì bì zhèng.*

<Erase that, Sam. New page—>

*Chicago Orwell District: 20h36, January 2, 2150*

The change isn't as good as all that, I quickly realize, because though the Splyze has changed my genes, it would be impossible for it to alter my cybernetic arms, and indeed they do stick out quite evidently. It will be more difficult to be discrete than I'd first hoped, but still not impossible. After all, Chaney has cybernetic arms, and while it is not common practice it is still not unheard of for a Promoted have imitation hands or some other attachment allowing them to get by better in a world made, when one gets right down to it, for human beings. With enough bullshit I'll be able to get away with this, and there are few people in my acquaintance with a better talent for sculpting grade-A quality bullshit than myself.

I decide on this course, set to go out, and immediately trip on my feet. It takes me a few moments for my body to teach my mind how to operate as a quadruped, especially with human arms that are longer than this body necessitates and don't fit into the shoulder sockets quite right. In this time, I also begin to learn how to filter through scents and odors, more than making up for my new myopia. It could be embarrassing to be caught in a public Detoxer area stumbling and trying on a new form, but I find my hearing augmented enough to get back into a stall when anybody passes. Fortunately, even basic Splyzes include the RNA-based information to utilize the changes to the body: no one would want to trade bodies if they had to learn a whole new nervous system from the ground up. It is not long before I've got the hang of the whole thing, at least well enough to manage for as long as it should take to locate and inquest my suspect. I leave my clothes and my babies in the Detoxer, everything save the guns in my arms, and with a bit of computer know-how force the Detoxer out of order and locked, sheltering my possessions until I return.

As I exit the Mall, the same scanning fields that identified me as

Haiku Down now address me as Shon Francis D'Walmart. It was he who set the Shaper to create a Splyze, and as it is illegal to do so for another the programs naturally assume I am he. However, as D'Walmart's credit has almost completely disappeared for this fiscal month, the Solicitor programs leave me more or less alone, a gratuitous benefit in addition to learning Shon's middle name is Francis.

Chuckle. Francis.

Outside the Mall, the temperature is beginning to lower, though still held by Chicago's artificial weather controls at a fairly comfortable setting. The park is still quite full, well lit and perfectly safe. After all, no matter what their circumstances, who would be daft enough to harass sentient cougars and hyenas? In my new bestial state, I pass below the lofty walls unnoticed, slinking easily through the entrance of the Orwell District past a gorilla and dingo posted as guards, silently pleased that for the first time in my life I am truly capable of a good slinking.

I nearly make it.

But then I feel a colossal grip on my backside, and turn to see what scent and logic had already confirmed, that the gorilla guard has stopped me. "*Konban wa*," I cordially greet, and for just a moment bare my fangs. "What's wrong, Kong?"

"I don't know you," the gorilla states in a deep and less than affable tone.

"I don't know you either, so we're even. Kindly release me now."

The dorsal grip continues. The dingo has turned to watch, as have a few others nearby, attracting the sort of attention I had hoped strenuously to avoid. "I don't think so," the gorilla contends. "What's with the arms?"

"You've got two yourself."

"Mine are natural. You a human wanna-be or something?"

"They're for work," I lie. "Manual data transposition. Keyboards aren't set up for those of us evolution gave brains instead of opposable thumbs." This clearly aggravates the ape, but the dingo chuckles. Pushing my luck that jerks are universally disliked no matter what their species, I continue, "Now why don't you go back to sitting by the gate and keeping out certain unnamed bipedal species instead of bothering little old me, eh, Dr. Zaius?"

My manhandler (wolfhander?) growls deeply. "You know what they say about us four-hundred pound gorillas sitting, don't'cha? What brings you here?"

"Meeting friends. Three pigs and a girl in red." This gets me a laugh from my growing audience.

The gorilla realizes that he's beginning to look like a bully and a

fool, but seems unwilling to back down, until the dingo says, “Paco, don’t be a dick. Let him go.”

The ape, Paco, snarls, but I feel his grip loosen and eventually disappear. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you, buddy. Don’t test me.”

“I doubt you’d pass,” I mutter, but by then I am inside and out of his reach.

The streets here are not nearly as busy as outside. This is a shopping area, however, where most of the stores, though not closed (stores never close) have been turned over to rob watch. Promoted gather around bars and theatres and such, and I am sure that deeper in the District there are also small taverns and restaurants staying open late. There are so few advertisements here, only a few posters and TVs and an occasional billboard, that the walls seem terribly plain. Most of the apartment buildings are the triangular or square designs for Tenant or Denizen dwellings, although with a few of the hexagonal designs of those with C-status, and if I strain, the octagonals for B’s. There are no cylindrical Class A dwellings. The architecture of the squat government-built apartments in this borough is predominantly *lusotropico deco* style, similar in its ways to art deco but with audaciously frenetic and vibrant colors, an unfortunate fashion considered chic for about a week (regrettably the same period during which most of the Orwell Districts were designed and constructed), giving the entire borough the appearance of an enormous and well-maintained favellah. It is peculiar seeing buildings that aren’t covered in solar cells to provide their structure with heat, electricity, and the energy for structural forcefields to prevent the dangers of wind shear, fire, acid rain, structural collapse, terrorist attacks, or graffiti.

What capture my attentions most, however, are the plants. Foliage of all species and forms are tightly packed around the streets and buildings. It is more greenery than I have ever seen, and for a moment it takes my breath away. I try to imagine forests, glens, rainforests, woodlands, swamps, ecosystems packed so tightly with trees and shrubs and grasses and weeds and flowers and bushes that even a chipmunk couldn’t move through the brush. I can’t even begin to do the reverie justice, and because this depresses me I decide not to continue.

I attract some stares with my human arms, and even one or two hostile glares, but no more overt discrimination like at the front gate. Not enough friendliness, however, to risk asking directions, and I instead focus on searching out a public AEI.

The stores are on automatic and the populace reveling or sleeping or just out, but several Solicitor programs are still doing their work, and I eventually locate one with a true technorganic brain and thus Artificial EmotIntelligence, a hologram of a swan. “Good

evening, Civilian D'Walmart. Welcome to the Hoof Locker®. We're having a two-for-one sale on women's footwear."

I wonder just what prompted it to tell "Shon" that. Not that transvestitism is considered perverse or for that matter even much commented on anymore, but the psychological impediments keeping such kinks and fetishes in the closet sure are... "Actually, I was hoping for directions. I'm looking for an emu acquaintance of mine. Can you point me to Petre Flugmansk?"

"There are three."

"Emus?"

"Yes."

"Named Petre Flugmansk?"

"Yes."

"Oookay..." 9.8 hundred billion Promoted. I guess there would be some overlap. "He's an adult, brown coloring, Class B until recently."

"One moment...Located. Would you like his address or his present location?"

"The latter will be fine."

After a slight pause and a barely audible hum, the sim swan answers, "He's at the Ungulate Tavern, on Ellis. Go north eleven blocks and turn right. The nearest cross street is a small alley called Fossey Drive."

"Much obliged," I thank her, and turn to go. Before I do, though, I ask, "What does 'Ungulate' mean?"

"Hoofed mammal," she replies.

That's what I thought. I thank the AEI again and gambol down the street to locate my prey. The AEI confirms a piece of vocabulary I jacked eons ago and have yet to use. And as I think on it, Fossey was an early student of primates. The Promoted seem to have a more thorough grasp on culture and history than most humans do. And better vocabularies. Go figure.

*Noir, June 14, 2146*

On days like today, when the acid rain is pouring down and I've downloaded some blues off the eLink, when I've had a few sniffers of brandy and a tab of acid, I get nostalgic and get to thinking about the past. I'm getting old, being one of the last generations to really know mortality, and the last generation that will have more young people than old people. Most of you probably don't realize how much things have changed. Even when human knowledge doubles every second, it's still easy to get used to changes when they're gradual enough. These are things from my youth that, through technology, circumstances, or fashion, no longer necessarily apply:

Outdated occupations: food production, librarian, maintenance, mechanical assembly, mail delivery, banker, computer programming, astronaut, janitor, construction, secretary, linguist, accountant, military, doctor, president, cook, pharmacist, firefighter, gym trainer, teacher, salesman, artisan, lawyer, king, optometrist, nurse, surgeon, farmer, musician...

Outdated pastimes: sunbathing, education, forming opinions, swimming, reading, voting, parenting, visiting zoos, skiing, benevolent volunteerism, saving and investments, travel, camping, dieting, gardening, philosophy, photographs, driving, free thinking...

Outdated beliefs: all diseases have cures, humans are alone in the universe, nature is necessary and beautiful, too much TV is bad, work well done is its own reward, money can't buy happiness, each individual is unique, people are inherently good, world peace is the highest ideal, personal space, personal liberties, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom...

New occupations: meme design, nanotechnologist, technorganic Breeder, historical revisionist, Splyze fashion consultant, kinesthetic thesbian, pheromone designer, Greaser-recovery therapist, priest of the Church of Elvis Presley, xenobiologist, bio-pollutant technician, alternate reality anthropologist, bioware defragger, Temporonaut, genetic cosmetician, Regulator...

New pastimes: amfeed voyeurism, HR holidays, real-time recording, Mall-hopping, live VR gogglefeeds, holographic auto-eroticism, animal psychic channeling, robot destruction...

New beliefs: knowledge is dangerous, a good deed is good regardless of motives, natural is not better, each new version is superior to the original, suicide benefits society, the government's place is everywhere, inalienable rights are indeed alienable, bisexuality is preferable, one's own happiness is the highest ideal ...

*Chicago Orwell District: 21h06, January 2, 2150*

The Ungulate Tavern, with the border between the interior and the patio defined only by a low-grade forcefield to keep out the flies (and then only because they don't pay), is just large enough that the moderately-sized gathering of Promoted has spilled out onto the street. I espy Petre near the back, in the midst of a large group of other Promoted, mostly birds but also a rhino and two dogs. Out of his uniform, I initially have trouble distinguishing him from two other large birds. One I finally realize is an actual ostrich (after seeing Pete in person, he had become my mental image of what large birds look like), and I discriminate between the other two based on plumage. Pete is in the middle of the flock, leading all in a rousing rendition of an age-old drinking song to which nobody entirely knows all the



words, and whose chorus consists of “Yo-ho, pour the wine!” followed by an immediate quaff from Steinhoists adapted for folks without fingers.

I enter, order a quick shot of bourbon only to find that the computer still recognizes me as Shon and that his cred-limit has been reached and thoroughly exceeded. Rather than risk it giving a call to Special Services to report me as over the cred limit (and thus *de facto* Prohibitioner) I shrug, acting as though it were a mistake, and instead head towards the public Detoxer. Once it is empty, I reprogram the bathroom’s AEI to watch reruns of soap operas instead of paying attention to anything that happens in here (including, ingenuous me, the act of reprogramming it in the first place) so that I will not have to worry about it sounding the alarms. Then I simply head into the nearest stall and wait.

Pete, fortuitously enough, comes to relieve himself less than a half-hour later. He might be Promoted, but eons of evolution still hardwire him to recognize something feral stalking him. He turns too late, and finds my humanoid hands around his exceedingly long throat.

“Hiya, Pete. ‘Member me?”

Whether he does or does not, his attitude is not welcoming. I quickly realize that this frontal attack was not the wisest option possible, as Pete’s lengthy neck twists to bite my shoulder. It is not hard enough to take a piece out of me, but is enough that I loosen my grip, to the point that he can twist around for a better attack.

From there, I am screwed, as the emu’s powerful legs kick me once, twice, three times a lady. Once was more than enough, and the final blow flings me to the other side of the restroom, hurling me into the wall.

Emus are the only species of bird with gastrocnemius muscles in the back of the lower legs, I remember too late from my earlier DataJax entry. Those overdeveloped thigh muscles make his kicks hurt just as much as those from a human leg.

My wrist slides down at command and the biogun falls into place. I fire a stun setting volley at Pete’s head, shots that will inhibit his equilibrium, but his head is small and his lithe neck moves fast enough to keep him out of harm’s way. Finally I wise up and aim for his significantly larger torso, and while emus may be built to be quite fast when running, they do not appear to be particularly agile in enclosed areas. A shot hits, and Pete drops to the floor, stunned.

“You in the mood to chat now, Flugmansk?”

Winded, Petre’s head wobbles up at me. “Who are you? What do you want?” He tries to push himself up with his head, faults and falls. “I warn you, I’m a B, and you shouldn’t—”

“Not anymore,” I interrupt. “And, by the way, I’m sorry if I had

something to do with that, although how sorry I'll feel and how much it'll influence my temper depends on how quickly and accurately you answer my questions."

He twists his head up, staring at me blearily with one unfocused eye. "Who are you?"

Of course. Pete didn't recognize me in my bestial shape. Whether he would still have attacked if he had realized who I really am is now philosophical. "Don't the cybernetic arms give you a clue? You commented on them yesterday before I attacked your boss with this same gun."

"Down?"

"Indeed. I have questions for you, Petre, and since I've had to change my species to ask them, I intend to have them answered. I have a maser with me which could have forced you to be truthful, and I will use it if this," I indicate the biogun, "isn't enough incentive." Of course I would not hurt him too badly. I feel bad enough about getting him fired. But since I think he cracked a rib or two, I don't feel that bad about it. I also do not mention my Psi-Splyze that will let me know if he's lying or not.

"What do you want?"

"You've heard what happened to Ctn. Arc?"

Pete nods. "On the news this morning. Then again, much louder, after they fired me this afternoon. Then again when the Regulators pulled me aside for questioning. Everyone is saying you did it."

"That is why I am here."

"Tying up loose ends?"

"Trying to prove my innocence and prevent my own Prohibition. Where were you yesterday between 23:30 and 00:30?"

"Home." True, I sense. My hopes sink.

"You weren't at the Urban Chronicle Building?"

"Dude, my shift ends at 18h00. After that, I am off the clock."

"So you were at home. Any witnesses?"

"Lots. We were having a belated New Years Eve party, since I had to work both days before."

"So others can vouch for your whereabouts at all times?"

"Yeah. I was the host of the party, after all."

My hopes plummet. "So was I, but they still suspect me. Was there any stretch of time when you were alone? I warn you, I'll be able to verify it myself."

"No," Pete gives an elongated shake of his head. "I was there all night, with everybody. In fact, George and Larry and Vioxx and a few other guys who were there are outside right now; they'll vouch for me."

My hopes leap out of a plane without a parachute. That's

another suspect off the list. Something occurs to me. "Has anybody from Special Services been by here to see you?"

"Not specifically, no. I got called in this morning to get guano-canned, and they took me to a little room and asked a lot of questions, but they checked my alibi and said I could go."

The grisly remains of the corpse of my hopes spontaneously burst into flames. Hawthorne doesn't seem like the pinnacle of competence, but if se and ser android sidekick haven't even visited Pete yet for follow-up questions it means all I've done here is to eliminate a potential suspect of whom they might not even have been aware. I'm not sure whether that puts me ahead or behind the game. Perhaps it's something, though. Or perhaps I can appeal my case based on incompetence. "Now Pete, I want you to think very hard, and be very honest with me, unless you want to redefine your relationship with your colon like Arc did. Can you think of anybody who might want Arc dead?" I am reminded of Sobolov's detection postulates. "Anybody with opportunity, means, and motive?"

"Plenty of people wanted him dead. Ctn. Arc was the senior editor and president of the largest investigative newspaper in the solar system. He had plenty of enemies. He's even upset the Solar Corporate Council sometimes. But no one I can think of who could get in. Besides Ctn. Mars and Ctn. Arc, the securitybots, the other security guards working their levels, and a few working robs, I doubt anybody else was even in the top ten floors of the Chronicle Building after 18h00. It's a business, y'know? Low-totem folks fill swing-shifts 24/7 coordinating incoming newsfeeds from other time zones for the morning issue, but the bigwigs upstairs go home at the end of the day. The top floors are only accessible via transporters except for one-way emergency escape tubes. No one without clearance can even get up there."

"Why was Mars still there?"

"I don't know. He stays late a lot. But Ctn. Mars goes through security every day, same as everybody else, and I don't think he has cybernetic arms."

"What about Smythe? You mentioned he and Arc fought a lot."

Pete gives a snort of derision. "If Chairman Smythe wanted Arc gone he could have just fired him. I mean, get blackballed by a Chairperson and no one will hire you even as a consultant!"

Dee. That's a really, really good point. And Pete believes it completely. Maybe if Arc got some dirt on Smythe...but again, Smythe is the most powerful man on Earth. Someone he wants disappeared would disappear, no matter how prominent their status or what shocking secret knowledge they possessed. Staging a murder and a coinciding frame-up job would be like hiring a hitman as a flyswatter.

"Then who authorized that three-day pass for me?" That pesky pass that theoretically gave me dreaded Opportunity.

"There was a note in the computer that was there when I came in for day-shift." He bristles his feathers, his fear and patience at its limit. "You want to find out who put it in there, you're going to have to find the security guards who still have jobs and interrogate *them* at gunpoint, dingleberry."

"How about those guards?" I ask, really reaching now. If I were reaching any more I could double for Stretch Armstrong.

"From what I found out this morning, they were all in their proper positions, doing proper guarding. We all get – got – our own zones to patrol in random sweeps. None of those coincided with the Chief's floor during the murder. All of the other guards were in their own zones, and their locations were backed by the building's House tracking system and by securitybots. Trust me, the Regulators were *very* thorough while inspecting vidrecord. They kept intimating that *I* might have been in collusion with Arc's murderer, if I didn't do it directly, but I think only because I let you up and you zapped Arc earlier that day. In fact, between the murder and your little prank, my more or less stellar job performance record is all that kept me from getting liquidated! As it is, I doubt I'll ever get employment outside an Orwell District again."

*Kuso.* I re-aim the firearm. "That's all?"

"That's all! I honestly don't know anything! Honest!" I can sense he's telling the truth. As Hawthorne said, there are ways to fool a Psi-Splyze, and someone with a job in security might conceivably know them, but Pete would also have to fake wetting himself. I get the unwelcome impression that he's been entirely forthcoming.

"And you don't own any robotic arms yourself?"

"No! It's...well, it's not exactly frowned upon, you know, to use those things, but it certainly doesn't win you any friends around here."

Still the truth. I sigh and re-holster my weapon in my wrist. I am reluctant to believe Pete, but I grudgingly admit that it is because he was my only lead.

"Okay. I believe you. Go back to your party. Don't tell anybody I was here." I don't have to give an "or else." After harassing and assaulting someone in a public Detoxer, "or else" is implicit.

Disgraced and disgruntled, I slink out of the tavern.

*Noir, August 19, 2142*

Today, feeling pedagogical, I decided to make my way to the new extension of the Smithsonian. I highly recommend it.

Upon entering, a Solicitor Program inquired if I would prefer

browsing or touring, and when I answered the latter, it scanned my credit history, Kirlian aura, and psych profile to determine the sorts of exhibits I would enjoy viewing that day, and an inoffensive mechanoid shaped like a small black obelisk rolled forward to guide me.

In the Prehistorical section were holograms and cloned specimens of mammoths and Neandertals. Dinosaurs, due to legislation based upon innumerable fictional horror stories, are only at the main Smithsonian and other large museums where they can afford the insurance, and I had to settle for holograms. I was also allowed to view a camfeed some temporanauts had set up in a dwelling in ancient Assyria. Though time travel into the far past is impossible, time *viewing* into the past uses a different set of physics based in Einsteinian mathematics instead of quantum or Androvichian, and would be more common if not for being prohibitively expensive to set up and maintain.

In the more modern sections, an entire wing of the museum has been set aside for holographic interaction chambers, complete with emotional masers and hypno-feed. After signing a liability waiver, you can interact in realistic reproductions of several different areas of the past as authentic individuals of that era. I experienced life as Private Natan West in the Canadian Civil War of 2063; a German bartender listening to a young Hitler; a terrified American suburbanite during the Cold War; a hungry African slave shipped to the Americas; an Indian untouchable in Pre-British conquest; a Celtic tribesman fighting Roman expansion; a Greek aristocrat; a Mayan mother; a Chinese scribe. All in the space of three hours, and all convincingly authentic, for the hypnofeed programmed in counterfeit memories and pasts for all of the people that I became. None were truly monumental (though programs letting one experience life as Lincoln, Gandhi, Louis XVI, or Xi Quan “The Quantumnator” Li are available) but each gave a true *feel* for life at the time, both at cusp and stable periods, literal glimpses into how people lived and what they felt.

I was given samples of foods from all areas and epochs, replicated precisely in the cafeteria’s Shaper. My lunch made me realize just how wonderful replicated food is compared to homemade Anasazi maize, and brought home exactly how diet really is responsible for longer life and better health. Which is a polite way of suggesting you bring your own sack lunches.

The guidebot then took me to the twencen exhibits. Archeologists have been digging up old garbage dumps for decades. In the late twenty-first, it was in desperate search of recycleable resources unavailable in Earth’s tapped-out mines. Now, after Shaper replication technology has made that moot, it is purely historical. I cannot believe how many quintessentially American products were

actually made in Taiwan.

Finally, I was shown the museum's professors and scientists hard at work, or at least life-like automatons simulating professors and scientists hard at work. The guidebot explained that since temporal exploration is entirely in government hands, museums are unfortunately limited. Most of the work fell under either historical revision, which is not quite lying about the past but does involve interpreting it to mean whatever the SCC finds desirable. Many others were involved in a new profession called retroanthropological plotting, which uses today's omnipresent and omniscient computer records of everybody and everything to extrapolate past actions previous to recording! These professionals use documented information of everything that has happened on the planet at this moment, and use that to figure out what was happening the second before that, then use that information to figure out what was happening the second before that, and so on. Each second takes about a full day to quantify, but since the past is theoretically finite, and because of the rate that technology doubles, and because (unlike the future) we can check extrapolations of the past, the guidebot informed me that they should have the entire history of humanity quantified and recorded by 2406, and know the exact second of Earth's formation by around 3118. Hopefully, before 4500, we'll find out for ourselves what came before the Big Bang.

It is almost impossible these days to relate to anybody or anything. The world changes so fast and so much each moment that we can't always get a grip, and even in those rare moments we do there is rarely anybody to share it with. Sometimes the only way to get any sort of even keel is, ironically, through escape. Today I have been to the past, and because of it, I can see the present in a whole new light.

Literally. I still have a headache and eyestrain. How did people spend all day with the sun completely visible?

*Chicago Orwell District: 21h47, January 2, 2150*

It is getting late, my body feels weary and old, my hands hurt from walking on them, I have barely fifty hours on the clock, and my single lead has turned out to be false.

I am disheartened, to say the least.

As I make my way to the gate of the Orwell District, I mull over what Pete has told me. The only ones in the building (above the top floors, and I guess I'll have to take it as an article of faith that no low-grade peons could reach Desmond and, even so, that the Regulators are at least smart enough to do a head count and see if anyone popped out for a quite murder break) were guards, Desmond and Danny, and

a few robs. Desmond is obviously out, and now (if I am to believe the faculties of my now fading, almost expired Psi-Splyze) so are Danael and Pete and – by Pete’s own testimony – the other guards. (That reminds me; I take another Psi-Splyze pill). The robots are obviously out; the number one rule programmed into all rob brains is that they cannot let a sentient being come to harm under any preventable circumstances. Obedience to their owner is second, followed closely by self-preservation, then property conservation, and general obedience. Laws three and five at their most extreme overlap, so that powerful enough orders can get a robot to self-destruct, but the first law is prime and inviolable. There are a very, very few ways to hack past those laws that might result in their breaching them by accident, but robs are also programmed to automatically report such an event and immediately return to their factory for disassembly. I suppose someone could order a rob to prevent its confession, but I highly doubt anyone doing so would themselves be innocent of any wrongdoing, and the only logical reason to even go to such length to hack a rob in the first place would be for it to take the blame instead.

So robs are out, the guards are out, peons are out, Arc is out, and Danny and Pete are out.

Which leaves nobody in the building, according to the computer records.

Which I have often bragged in recorded print, quite truthfully, that I am capable of altering.

Which leaves me back once again as the prime suspect.

And so I repeat: I am disheartened. The evil transporter twin theory is starting to look better all the time.

Idly, I wonder if Hawthorne might be the culprit. Se does have motive to frame me, and does have a partner who is not Five Laws compliant with robotic strength, and is in a position to pin the crime on me. The only catch is Ocaam’s Razor, the same reason I can’t quite pin this on Smythe: this is a lot of trouble to go to when se could shoot me for sneezing, not to mention that if someone is going to frame me they could do a clearer job of implicating me than by default.

I stare up at the sky, wishing that either the City or Luna were not so bright with artificial light so that I might see some stars. I could use celestial guidance right about now. Aitch, a fortune cookie would be an improvement.

I try considering things from another angle. Maybe Arc did do it himself. Maybe he got sick of life, ordered up a pair of cybernetic arms and re-calibrated them, and somehow found a way to make them self-destruct without leaving any sort of trace after he strangled himself.

Desperate as I am, even I realize that sounds unlikely. I wonder

if perhaps he somehow might have ordered one of the robs to do it, but discount that as equally if not even more unlikely; it is literally impossible to get a robot to cause a paper cut, let alone a homicide. The skills necessarily to reprogram robs to go against the modified Asimovian principles are unfeasible; at this point in technology the only sentient beings who really understand how robots work anymore are robots themselves! There is no technique or method I've ever heard of to do such a thing, and while I'm not an expert I stay informed enough that I imagine I would have at least heard whispered rumors.

I despair at this train of thought, muddling things around some other way. Let's try motive. Both Pete and Danny may have had motives. I blink and pull up my OptiComp, playing over my recorded discussion with both of them.

Something incongruous strikes a chord as I reexamine Danael's conversation, as I remember sensing him lie about not knowing anybody else who might have reason to kill Desmond Arc. He was lying, that much I know, but I was so pleased to get an answer out of the boy that it didn't occur to me until now to wonder why he would be lying to protect Pete—

And suddenly, something hits me. Momentarily, I allow myself to hope that it is inspiration that has struck me, but as I fall to the ground and lose consciousness I realize to my despair that it is just a blunt object after all.

*Noir, September 13, 2148*

Considering how hard the forces that be seem to be working to turn the inhabitants of this floating blue ball into hermetic solipsists, sealing us in our boxes and maintaining our habitats like zookeepers, it is surprising how difficult, downright nigh impossible in fact, it is to find simple peace and quiet. Not necessarily the absence of sound, which exists only in vacuum, or the absence of feeling, or the absence of sights. I simply note how difficult it is to find anywhere where I can simply be *alone*!

My four AEIs greeted me first thing this morning. I shut them off and tried to go back to sleep, but failed because the moment that I woke up my television turned on automatically. I've been able to hack around, alternating between my keen programming skills and my deft manipulation of large unwieldy objects, to convince my Butler program to leave the sound off until requested, but so far he has yet to do anything about the picture. My AEIs kept talking until I demanded silence, and then they simply drove me to distraction asking every few minutes if they were allowed to speak again.

I was not in the mood to be disturbed on my Link, so I shut it



down. Of course, it is impossible to totally shut your Link down, everybody always has at least a bit of music playing in the background, but I worked hard to. Eventually I got it down to a mere single track of music and was able to turn the volume low, but peace lasted only for about thirty or forty seconds at a time before another generic spam assault lambasted my Link that I had to automatically delete it.

When I went outside I was bombarded by the sounds of the City, which mainly consists of the sounds of commercials. As soon as I stepped beyond the safe borders of my building, holograms, Solicitor programs, robs and even young children competed for my dollar. When I looked up at the dawn I discovered that SimTech™ had apparently rented *the sky* to place an enormous holographic ad (“SimTech: proudly monopolizing the industry since 2088”).

I caught a taxi and found much to my chagrin that the redneck Promoted rabbit behind the wheel had it on autopilot while watching and yelling loudly at a football game (in the match between the Dallas Cowboys™ and the Maryland Robots™; the winners, as always, were the Robots).

The cab took me to a train station. Trains run completely silently in theory, even using reversed ionic polarity to negate the sound and vibrations of their movement, so that one can pass right by and you’ll not feel or hear a thing. Inside, however, is another story altogether. There are televisions everywhere, Muzak in the background, and even on the off-hand chance that no one else is on the tram, there is always at least one rob walking about to serenade or entertain you at request. If you want to just lean back and watch the scenery pass by, however, that’s out, because most of the time trams run on underground tracks whose only scenery is MotionPicture™ commercials and shows. Even if there are no other passengers there will still be a rob – or, more commonly these days, a Re-An – to provide service. I tried to sleep, and for an extra thirty creds I was granted my own sleep booth, where I was then (unknowingly and unprepared) subjected to generic meme dreams, manipulating my REM state and subjecting me to an outdated movie of the week in translated first person memevision.

I was roused automatically before I reached my stop and got off, took a teleporter to my final destination, and I am positive that the teleporter itself was rigged because as soon as I rematerialized I was consumed with an inescapable desire for chili fries and a drive to see the new Farrah Sumners movie.

Even the last few meters of my walk, so far out of the way that it almost qualified as being outside the City, I heard a plane flying overhead, passed two skyways, saw a random billboard posted on my left, and felt a scan as I passed through a security check.

Finally, though, I reached my destination: Serenity Structures™, the only truly *quiet* places left on the Earth. Entry consists of a short elevator ride sixteen miles to the bowels of the earth, into a converted mine. Its walls are lined with irons and force-fields, keeping out everything short of cosmic rays. No television waves, no radio waves, almost nothing can reach into this area. Even tachyons are deflected by heavy shielding. I was led by a technician, a quiet comely woman who reminded me of a librarian from back before the eLink killed libraries, into a single empty room, a softly lit sphere that quickly filled with oxygenated liquids. At the cost of almost five hundred creds, for six blissful hours I was allowed to float in womb-like bliss with the almost impossible luxury of seeing nothing except the spots behind my eyes, thinking nothing but my own thoughts, hearing nothing but the sound of my own heartbeat.

Worth every penny.

*Subconscious: a quarter past id*

For a long, long time, I sleep. At one point or another I'm sure I open my eyes, but it is even darker and my body feels so good for the rest that I go back to sleep. I don't have any cohesive concept of place or time, so it doesn't even occur to me to wonder where I am or who put me there. When I do dream I dream pretty mescaline visions without logic or pattern beyond the most chaotic type, until I find myself unable to move or feel or see or hear and realize that I am frozen in Prohibition, and that they are never going to let me out. I am going to be stuck floating here forever and ever and ever and ever and ever, where there is nothing and nobody but my own hateful, horrible self.

I think at some point I might have screamed.

*Noir, June 13, 2145*

It should surprise nobody that over the course of *homo sapiens sapiens'* ten-some million years on this planet we have managed to piss off a good part of it.

An increasingly vocal and increasingly violent group that is just beginning to make the news on some of the higher TV channels (the ones that actually try to put some news on their news programs) are the RetrEvolutionaries. This group represents the inevitably fanatical offshot from the Equality For All Movement that came about in the nineties of the last century when the Promoted were prolific enough to begin making a voice for themselves in politics beyond barks and mooring. In all movements and groups, no matter how noble or idealistic, there inevitably arises a small radical faction deciding that

what they really want, deep down at the darkest heart of things, is to be the ones in charge and hurt some people. History is filled with endless examples: America made its beginnings when some Puritans decided that they were tired of being repressed and terrorized by the English, and sailed west to repress and terrorize the Amerindians. Fundamentalist Islam paved the way for the al-Qaeda; Greenpeace produced the Ecoalition; the North American Mutant Regulation Act led to the Eugenic Cowboys; rock and roll turned to disco. And of course, the radically ideological group we got from the EFA was the RetrEvolutionaries.

I've often wondered whether or not the animals ever resented us for Promoting them, utterly destroying any trace of their previous ways of life and replacing it with our own shallow system of thought. And for the most part, it doesn't seem that they do, since most of their previous ways of life involve getting eaten by something higher on the food chain. Even the cetaceans, the dolphins and porpoises and whales who actually had their own cultures long before man did and whose ancient languages have all but disappeared, generally profess the loss a worthy exchange for a quintupled life span and access to free cable.

But no conglomeration of individuals is ever truly unanimous, and true to form, the RetrEvolutionaries are irate. Irate at the loss of their land, irate at the loss of their identity, irate at the loss of their people. Irate at not being given a choice to come into sentience and not having a place to return to if they could banish it. And so they protest in the only way they know how to any longer, which is to yell and scream and riot and threaten and occasionally assault.

But what do you expect? They're only human.

### *Small dark cell: Time: unknown*

I awaken painfully with my head pounding the bass drum cannons of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, and to make things worse it sounds like the entire brass and woodwind sections are out of tune. I wipe the gook from my eyes, trying to smooth out the pain in my temples, barely noticing that I am back into human shape and more exposed than Adam in Eden. I sense that I am having trouble focusing, though since wherever I am is pitch black I have to rely on my equally shaky equilibrium to arrive at said conclusion. It feels like a bad hangover without the questionably enjoyable benefits of getting smashed beforehand.

After some time, I manage to call up my OptiComp and discover to my chagrin that the time is 13h13, January third. On the plus side this probably means I won't be subjected to too terribly many more insipid wishes of a Happy New Year. On the other hand,

it means that I am down to forty-three hours before the Regulators go to work on me. Assuming I survive this new encounter alive, that is.

I've been knocked out before. More times than I can easily recollect, in fact. Back in my investigative journalism days it seemed to happen every other week. However, what should be a sharp pain at the base of my skull is merely a dull throb, and this combined with my prolonged near-comatose siesta full of transcendental colors leads me to suspect that at some point I've been drugged as well.

I try without much hope to place a call using the SatLink in my arm, but as I'd suspected the signal is being blocked, so I can't phone out or get a GPS fix on where I am. From the stink of the place I get the impression that I'm still in the Orwell District; there is a distinctive musk and the unmistakable scent of sewage that any robot-maintained area wouldn't exhibit. My wolf-senses, I again notice with slightly more consideration, are absent in my now human form, and for a moment I frantically feel over my features until I am convinced that I still look at least vaguely like me. Most likely, whoever transmogrified me simply used a gene recombinator that neutralized my last Splyze, resetting my genome to default rather than giving me a new one.

Since no one has yet made any attempts to come speak with me or kill me, I use my spare time to stumble about getting an orientation about my surroundings: a large empty area, thirty meters by twenty, which hints at either a basement or a warehouse by the size. That, and the fact that most rooms in residential buildings are hexagonal or octagonal, except for Denizen's and Tenant's, neither of which are so spacious. The floors are thick wet wood and the walls cheap cement, both covered in slime and moss. Eventually, the rushing sound in my ears I realize is not cochlea fluids or the beginnings of a cerebral hemorrhage, but the sound of lapping waves below me, suggesting mightily that I'm near the edge of Lake Michigan. Between the two pieces of information that I am in an Orwell District by the lake, I have a vague idea of where I am, although the only thing keeping me from concluding that I might have been moved in my drugged slumber to the Atlantic Ocean is the fact that I don't smell seawater.

At this point I have recovered enough to consider escape. On summons, my wrists slide open, but I find to my dismay that both biogun and needler are absent from their customary stations. Whoever has placed me here has committed the ultimate atrocity and removed my last remaining babies from me! I perform a quick assessment of my remaining defenses, and conclude that I am left with 1) my OptiComp with its impeded SatLink, 2) the maser built into my finger, 3) the flame-thrower ring which consists of the only piece of offensive weaponry I can still feel on my person, 4) two suped-up cybernetic arms, 5) two organic legs, 6) any potentially lingering

trace of my probably long expired Psi-Splyze, 7) whatever wits, gumption, and verve are left available to me, and 8) the strength of ten men because my heart is pure.

I immediately cross out number eight on my mental checklist and, after the room swims as I try again to stand, grudgingly erase seven and five as well. It occurs to me (I wryly consider in the spirit of non-sequitur) that for someone who claims as virulently as I do to hate it when people pretend to be something they're not, I've got an unconscionable amount of bioware in my body.

An indiscriminant amount of time later (either four hours or ten minutes, I can't be certain, but either way time that I can *not* afford to waste) without my investigations having progressed much farther, the door slides open. I dimly recognize the gorilla from earlier tonight, along with a kangaroo and a large pelican as cronies, and, much to my surprise, the silhouette of a human woman. The animals, I notice, are all dressed in the orange camo outfits of the Promoted terrorist organization, the RetrEvolutionaries, and I realize that I have fallen into the custody of a small but fanatical group of Promoted who enjoy nothing more than the prospect of full-fledged urban war on human beings. Considering those involved, guerilla warfare might be more appropriate.

The gorilla, Paco, I recollect him being named, strides over to me on all fours. He looms before me ("loom" is definitely the proper word!), even uglier up close, and commands, "Stand, man."

"I would love to oblige, Curious George, but whatever you gave me is making it kind of difficult to stand erect." My voice feels thick and stupid. "But, hey, look who I'm talking to."

"STAND!"

"Tell you what, Grodd. You do it first, and I'll ape it."

Paco reaches into the pockets of his loose khaki shorts and pulls out a tazer. Faster than I can block, my nerves rattle with far too much electricity, and I find myself up before having consciously decided to do so.

The gorilla smiles, "Good human. Maybe I'll give you a treat later."

"Save your sarcasm, Paco," the woman interrupts. "Pickle it, jar it, and store it in the basement for winter if you have to. I'm so totally not in the mood. Just bring him here."

Paco grunts. With his massively long reach grabs me by the shoulder and lifts me up. "Watch it, Koko," I tell him, probably unwisely. "Me sign eff you."

My witty banter rewards me with a swift pummeling from massive hairy hamhands, and I reflect that this is the second time in twenty-four hours that I've had my nose broken. I wince with pain, but bite my lip to stifle it, tasting copper as the blood runs down.

Surprisingly, getting beaten up by a Retrævolutionary gorilla is actually less unpleasant than Hawthorne's attack. Unlike my last clobbering the gorilla is not manipulating my emotions, which serves to make this situation bearable, if not exactly the full five-minute orgasm.

I feel myself lifted by the skull, and through eyes half-open and bleary with pain, I note that I am being presented to the silhouette of the human fem, her features obscured by the intense light behind her. "This him?" Paco checks.

"Indeed," she replies in a sultry tone. I don't recognize the voice and don't even bother trying to identify it; between mechanical modifiers and Splyzes there's maybe a one in ten chance that someone might be stupid enough to interrogate a victim without a full disguise.

"The eLink message said the price was fifty thousand creds for him."

"Yes it did," she replies nonchalantly. So she's a Citizen, obviously, and one with a definite grudge against me for whatever reason. Pick one of eighty possible.

The kangaroo says, "We want a hundred."

"And yet you'll only be getting fifty."

"Now wait, lady," I feel myself released and narrowly manage to throw my hands forward to block the painful landing. Paco continues, "You wanted this guy, we got him for you. You want him dead, it's gonna cost extra. Think we're stupid? I did some checking, and this guy's a Citizen. The records said he was someone called Shon D'Walmart but ain't no D'Walmart on record with cybernetic arms. So we took him, we de-Splyzed him at great time and expense—"

"Not to mention danger," the pelican chimes in.

"Right, not to mention danger, to ourselves. Now if this guy were just a Tenant or a Denizen I'd pop him for free. One less stinking *h. sap* out of the way, no offense intended, ma'am. But he's a Citizen, and killing a Citizen is gonna cost you a hundred thousand."

The sultry voice replies with good humor, "Well, before we're too hasty, let's reexamine the situation, Paco. This Citizen knows your name and can identify you to the Regulators. You cannot identify me, nor can he. Ergo, you more or less have to kill him no matter what, because if you don't Special Services will be after you for assaulting and kidnapping a Citizen, and I doubt your karma is in good enough shape to compensate for that, even before it gets public that you're a leader of the local Retrævolution faction. However, I'm feeling generous and I will still give you the fifty thousand if you just shut the eff up and do it already!"

I can almost hear the hamster running furiously on the wheel in

Paco's head. I work quickly to come up with some plan of my own. I have time to work out the logistics of Plan A (improvise) and begin on the basics on Plan B (wing it), before Paco's unwieldy grip again lifts me into the air.

Paco smiles. "Time to die, man. Eddy, you got the hammer?"

The kangaroo hops forward. "Always got the hammer, Paco."

I sense that it's time to put Plan A into effect. Lacking anything more original in the heat of the moment, I quote, "Get your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape."

The gorilla promptly throws me across the room, which, believe it or not, is exactly what I wanted. This gives me a few precious seconds to adjust the controls on my flame-thrower ring. "Fire in the hole!" I shout melodramatically, and send a blazing inferno forward.

Paco shrieks. The other Promoted jailers leap away. Using the short seconds of power left in the small weapon, I kneel to the wooden floor, hoping that the sounds of water I heard below were not my imagination.

My augmented cybernetic arm punches mercilessly on the thick wooden floorboards, and on the fourth blow breaks through, just as my ring runs out of juice. I leap into the hole, dispassionately sensing myself getting cut and torn on jagged beams of wood and ripped nails. The frigid waters of Lake Michigan meet me with an arctic splash, cutting off dusky afternoon sunlight as I dive in ungracefully. I swim as fast as I can, coming up for air only when I must, and between my mechanical limbs and my increased adrenaline, I make good time away from my prison, away from my kidnappers and potential killers, towards freedom.





# Chapter 01011.

## Slander Jam

*Noir, April 16, 2143*

Here is an idea I've had for years for a science-fiction story. Since I doubt it will ever be published in any medium beyond the most hackneyed zine, and since I have no desire to have the implacable good name of Jack Noir besmirched by doing so, I thought I'd suggest it here.

Here's my story idea: in the near future, say, later this week, we of planet Earth get a communiqué from an alien race. This advanced civilization from the planet Tralfalmador circles a star about two hundred light years away. We'll say it is blocked by a wormhole or a dust cloud and that's why we've never picked up any sign of them until they decided to send a message to us. The Tralfalmadorans are much more advanced than we are, and have creative, technological, and scientific capabilities undreamed of. One of these is the ability to blast us all to hell instantaneously, which is precisely what they are threatening to do. See, the Tralfalmadorans are superior to us technologically and exactly like us in most other ways that count, with one exception, that being that all of their perceptions (sight, sound, smell, everything) are based on part of the electromagnetic spectrum that we use to broadcast television. Think of it: here's an alien species living its happy existence when suddenly, everybody on Tralfalmador is able to see and hear and sense nothing but reruns of *I Love Lucy*™ and *Scooby-Doo*™ and *Fear Factor*™ as they are suddenly bombarded by everything we've thoughtlessly shot out over the airwaves for the last two hundred years. This has understandably unsettled the poor population of Tralfalmador, and they can only assume that this is a hostile act on our part. As such, they have sent this message to us, warning us to stop our assault within one week or they'll be forced to obliterate us to save themselves.

Obviously, we are perturbed by this. After all, we didn't intend any aggression, right? But, being a thoughtful and right-thinking species and realizing that we have thoughtlessly hurt another thoughtful and right-thinking species who can destroy us absolutely, we turn off all our televisions and cease broadcasting.

But once the week has passed, the Tralfalmadorans call us again and furiously demand that we stop or we will be destroyed. This confuses us, since we've done what they asked and been a good little species.

Then somebody analyses the signal and realizes that it is two hundred years old. The species itself has long since died, gone and wasted away, insane, their brains and souls poisoned with Oprah and Charley Chaplin and Cinemax and better abs in six weeks. Communications may be instantaneous these days, but television waves still move at the speed of light. As we blasted this audiovisual poison from our planet in every direction at 299,792,458 meters per second, the earliest days of TV are just beginning to bombard Tralfamador, with two hundred years of mind-rotting boobtube to follow, guaranteed to drive these poor people to madness and death.

But before they die, they sent a little farewell gift, in the form of an unstoppable barrage of missiles and lasers and *god* knows what else to obliterate us and send us all to kingdom come. And now, about two centuries after we unwittingly drove them to extinction, it all comes down and there's nothing we can do to stop it and we all effing croak miserably, even more so knowing that we deserve everything we got for our shortsightedness and our murder of the Tralfamadorans.

So that's it. Personally, I doubt the story would be popular even if it was published. Most of the science fiction these days centers around outsmarting or outmaneuvering superior species with a bug up their butts and winning through sheer ingenuity and pluck. Plus there's definitely low request for tales with morals, and most of the people reading wouldn't even get it anyway.

*Chicago Orwell District: 16h46, January 3, 2150*

I gratefully crawl out of Lake Michigan, although perhaps writhe would be a better term. My skin is bleached and burned pink from toxins, my remaining hair oily and hanging before my eyes, which are blinking madly to clear out the poisons. My arms and legs and chest are covered in silt and mud and sludge and a bit of acid, and I cough up bile. Most of my hair has singed off my body, leaving only wisps of dirty black locks hanging in my eyes and occasional patches over my body. Old antibody nanobots released into my system decades ago work furiously to obliterate all the foreign agents my body's managed to pick up with a whole twenty minutes in actual lake water. Barring lepers in the island of Calcutta, I'm probably more diseased now than anybody else on the planet, and only then if we're talking about the poor sections of Calcutta.

There are green MedBot stations at frequent intervals along every sidewalk, but a long session in the Detoxer will be almost as effect and I am not in any position to linger around outside in public. Even if I'd had clothes on they probably would have dissolved away, just as the outer layers of my flesh have after a long dip in a tarn so

polluted it qualifies as a chemical bath.

While nudity is hardly shocking or offensive anymore, hasn't been for decades ever since Worldwide Love-In '26, it is still embarrassing if only because it is at this point passé. To be dead is inevitable, but to be out of fashion is inexcusable, as the saying goes. I need something more trendy before the Fashion Police see me; they don't have nearly as much authority as the Regulators, but I can still get detained in the nearest GAP and I can't waste any time. Fortunately, though, my nautical adventure has deposited me back near the Mall. I am able to get to the Detoxer where I left my clothes without too many people pointing midsection and snickering with pity, although I do have to deal with an insipidly cheerful Solicitor program directing me to the local Victor's Secret™ outlet and an @lchemix™ Splyze salesbot selling an easy-payment augmentation offer.

I command the Detoxer to cleanse me thoroughly half a dozen times. I have apparently contracted about infinity and six infections, but by the fifth detox they're mostly destroyed. Once I finally no longer have the taste of rotten eggs and motor oil in the back of my throat, I dress, don my fedora, pop another Psi-Splyze pill and make my way to my next lead, wishing hopelessly that I had some idea where or who it might be.

On the way out, I detour to pick up an @lchemix flier and to shoot the Solicitor program.

### *Noir, February 26, 2147*

Mother Earth is dead. Sentimentalist that she was, she nurtured and fostered mankind. And we grew, like lizard eggs in a bird's nest, and as soon as we hatched into intelligence we consumed her other children and bit out her throat.

We decimated her forests. We paved over her fields. We pulled the minerals from her bowels and burned them into the air. We covered and cut and killed ever part of her that showed until all one can see when you look down are brown seas and gray cement.

We dumped toxins anywhere we lived until we couldn't live there anymore. We melted the ice caps, scorched the atmosphere, irradiated entire countries with nuclear bombs and obliterated other ones with graviton warheads and seismic lasers until they sank into the sea or folded in on themselves, killing billions in the name of whatever. We took even the most basic life and Splyzed it so full of hate that if just one of the viruses and bacteria we live with today ever escaped into the past they would kill everything on the planet in a matter of hours, including creatures at the bottom of the sea. We stopped digging into the soil to harvest food and started digging

expansive trenches for places to dump our garbage. We built weapons and power plants that burned hotter than the sun, and in the process spewed out so many harmful rays on every band of the spectrum that we may even end up causing extinctions on far-away planets. We quarried into the very chewy nugget center of the planet, mined its core, and as parting graffiti left an antigrav engine to simulate the dynamo. We perverted everything we could until we even had to begin Splyzing ourselves to keep up with it.

Our soiled oceans spew carcinogens onto oily beaches. Our sun is a dim orange dot behind layers of black contamination. Our sunsets are the pink and green of methane and pollutants. Our skies pour acid rain on cities covered in cement and asphalt and erected in plastic and synthetics.

We have committed matricide. Mother Earth is dead.

But...

But still, somehow, when you get up high enough, when the planet is just a ball or a marble, somehow all you see is white and blue, and somehow the land is still tinged with deepest green.

*McClones™: 17h25, January 3, 2150*

My gut growls after such intense Detox, so sonorously that I stagger with hunger. I thus find myself in the unenviable position of having to eat fast food twice in a row. This time I frequent McClones out of choice instead of default, as it is the only restaurant to produce actual meat anymore, albeit clone-flesh. Everything from chicken and beef to porcupine and elephant to human and Neanderthal, put in between a bun. I decide upon a double barbecue giant space amoeba with cheese. And large fries, of course.

As I eat, I review my OptiComp for any clues I might have missed over the course of my incarceration. No luck. I send the scanned image of the woman's silhouette recorded in my OptiComp to a onLink business that specializes in enhancing digital images, but what they send back a few minutes later is barely any better than squinting. So much for the easy way, enhancing the image to locate my potential assassin's patron. I almost find myself almost wishing Hawthorne was here so I could examine my memory better. However, now that I am in a place without any sort of jammer. I hop onLink to a map satfeed, but Orwell Districts pay for privacy and are blanketed; no help from the skies. But while onLink I find that while I was dozing someone has called on my SatLink.

I cue the message up subvocally, as a standard chrome-and-black servobot wheels over to refill my drink. The right side of my vision is suddenly super-imprinted with the simage of my mom in her disconcertingly hot HR form. "Hi, bubelah. Your little Butler robot

friend asked for some help. Don't know where you are but you should look into this as soon as possible. I did some digging for you and found something that may interest you. Download this when you get a chance. Love, mom."

I subvocally command the download to begin, a small data file with enough Brigand encryption that it will take a while to download by SatLink. I finish my soda and begin a search for a software outlet with an omniport that I can jack into to speed up the process.

Before I can, though, I am interrupted by an all-too familiar voice. "Citizen Down! Would you mind answering a few questions?"

I turn slowly and find myself confronted by The Hack.

*Noir, September 13, 2147*

Sherlock Holmes is most famous for the quote, "Elementary, my dear Watson."

That's the original Sherlock, mind you, not the more recent incarnation of a muscle-bound, foul-mouthed, gun-toting womanizer played by Van X on TV, whose most famous line, I believe is, "Eat ess and die, Mrs. Hudson." However, the Holmes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never actually said the first quote (let alone the latter), as you'd know if you ever picked up a book. So the real quote he's probably most famous for is, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Deduction in action.

Having done a bit of investigative journalism in my time, though, I am quite confident in proclaiming that Holmes was mightily mistaken. The problem with deduction, you see, is that it is essentially an exercise in sophistry. Deduction can be made to say whatever one desires, for it is a process inherently limited by human fallibility, a vice in which we humans excel. You must have a fairly definite grasp of your conclusion, which still only holds up so long as no information presents itself to negate it. Technically speaking, the universe as created by the Flying Spaghetti Monster holds up under this maxim: you can't disprove it.

A better illustration of this limitation might be the case of the human eyeball through history.

Now, the human eyeball, and for that matter every other mammalian eyeball, obtains data through the pupil, focused by the lens. An image is then flipped upside down onto the back of the retina, except for a blind spot corresponding to the optic nerve which takes information to the other side of the brain, where it is then flipped again and reversed. In the early days of scientific deduction, this was used as evidence for the existence of God.

For, it goes, such an illogical and – frankly – badly-designed

system could not conceivably have come from any natural evolutionary process, for any interim creature would surely fall prey to better adapted species, and yet eyesight seems to work infinitely better than it has any right to. Ergo, we are divinely made. The babblefish argument in reverse.

A fine point, and, deductively inarguable. Which just goes to prove my own point.

Centuries later science got a little more advanced and we stopped looking for answers that necessarily had to mesh with Biblical dogma. And when we took away the constraints of deities, we discovered a few interesting things. We realized that as species evolved, their optical capacities did too, and we simply are at the receiving end of eons of trial and error. We realized that actually quite a lot of people had *bad* eyesight requiring corrective lenses or surgery or, later, Splyzes. We realized that all those pretty little shapes in the rocks were actually fossils with evidence that eyesight had evolved not once, but in fact about forty times independently over the course of the last three or four billion years.

And so, deduction says, perhaps we weren't made after all, but simple came about through accident.

Until the mutants began appearing in the middle twenty-first, many of whom had new variations of eyesight completely outside the realm of possible comprehension and most definitely beyond the likelihood of plausibility. Add to the mix the development of the Kirlian aura detector, allowing a scan of the emotional, mental, and aural state of anybody and which, through a basic flaw in the design, universally showed mutants as evil. The Kirlian detector led to a mass religious revival and political reactionist movement resulting in, amongst other things, the Eugenic Cowboys and the Faith of the Divine Image. God, it seems, had given demonstrative proof that the shape He gave us, eyeball included, was His own creation and any divergence a sign of sin.

Except that after a bit of scourge and mass genocide, people began feeling guilty enough to listen to geneticists explain about the homeobox, the way genetics really works, science beyond what was taught in high school. They explained that mutation often occurs in spontaneous burst in nature, but that in nature advanced medical treatments aren't available to keep the grotesquely freakish alive. They explained that the genetic code knows to turn an arm into an arm instead of a foot based on beautifully simplistic protein chains essentially acting as on/off switches. They explained that such extreme mutations occur when a part of the genetic code is added or missing, which then causes a frameshift that changes massive chunks of data following it, mutations easily explained by the enormous quantities of carcinogens and pollutants we'd put out as well as

unforeseen consequences of early-generation Splyzes. We found that one of those frameshifts involved altering neurochemical responses so that even though they might be saints, the Kirlian detector saw monsters. And we also found somewhere along there that every mutant eyeball on the planet was a genetic result of brachiated evolution based on a single system in the homeobox. The ball went back into evolution's court.

Then an interesting new flavor was added to the mix with the science of comparative xenobiology. As we made contact with the aliens, we saw striking differences, and often striking parallels. And one of those parallels is a preponderance of eyesight. In fact, considering how many varieties of corporeal life forms there are in the universe, the statistic of 82% of them using vision as a common (although not necessarily dominant) medium is obviously significant. And since most of those were genetically altered and Promoted by previous vision-based species, deduction suggests it likely that we were in fact created, not by divinity but by extraterrestrials.

Yet again science sways heads. Scientists noted that another one of those parallels is that the easiest way for carbon-based life to evolve on a planet is when it is receiving about the amount of radiation as Earth does from Sol; life that evolves in other ways is almost always too different to interact with meaningfully. Also, almost all of these aliens evolved on planets orbiting stars emitting light at wavelengths of 1-0.5 micrometers, of which Sol falls smack dab in the middle. Furthermore, no species *sees* in the same badly-designed way we do, flipping the image not once but twice. So, deductively, we may indeed have evolved on our own, especially since no other species claims responsibility for having created us. At the very least we can deduce that if we were Promoted by aliens, it was done by a race with absolutely no understanding of proper eyesight.

Deduction cannot solve anything, because it only works if we truly know *everything* and then systematically and impartially remove (i.e. deduct) all true impossibilities. Total accuracy only comes with a practically omniscient source to begin from, and then a deductive system free of illusions, hopes, dispositions and predispositions, something to which not even an Immaterialist or a Vulcan can honestly claim. Then, and only then, can we surely be left with truth. Only after we know absolutely everything can we definitely be sure, by which point, of course, we are omniscient and the concept of deduction becomes moot.

At least, that's what I deduce.

If there is one thing that I hate above all others, it is the tendency of humanity to deceive itself, to live life on autopilot, to construct a fantasy for oneself that is preferable to coming to grips with a less pleasant reality and hoping it'll just go away. It is this vile but universal trait that, for instance, allows the Corporate Council to slowly and unopposedly remit basic liberties.

If there is a second thing that I hate, it is the people and institutions designed to propagate this heinous characteristic, transforming it from simple folly into a complex and indomitable sociopolitical system. Laws and governments are theoretically supposed to exist for the sole and exclusive purpose of benefiting the individual, and the moment that this simple dictum gets reversed is the moment freedom becomes oppression and justice becomes tyranny. And, don't get me wrong, I would happily go back to being a reporter, and am still resigned to the dubious honor of being the planet's only paid outspoken critic, but there is a world of difference between reporting and propagandizing.

If there is a third thing that I hate, it is the leech that develops in this sort of system, able to find or force a niche in which he or she can thrive at the expense of others. It is these people that are the most despicable creations begotten by this system and its fairytale foundation, for they perpetuate and promote both.

Tadd Torrid falls into all three categories.

I recall that rather sarcastic article about the inherent futility of deduction I wrote three years ago, mainly just out of spite for the bastardization of another literary icon by media bloodsuckers. Yet I realize that I've topped myself, because as The Hack approaches me with his flybot camera trailing behind, my mind traces and deduces and develops a basic plan of what the schmuck has been doing for the past hour.

It is just about time for the evening news, and so he was most likely setting up his human interest story or whatever other piece of tripe he'd planned to foist upon a public too phlegmatic to really care. Then whatever online tracers and hounds and spider programs he's got out for me (and no doubt he does, because one thing I will give The Hack is that he is persistent) picked up my fingerprint coding for the locker in the Detoxer. He jumps in the hovercar, and ten minutes later, badda bing, badda boom, jumps out at the Mall, only to find himself in my face. If he was more than a hundred or so miles away I can also deduce that he got stuck in traffic.

"Citizen Down! Tadd Torrid, Action News 7! Can I have a moment of your time?!"

I had assumed there was no way to make fast food taste worse. But apparently The Hack's presence does it. I get up to leave. "No, you may not."



This of course does not deter him. “What do you have to say to reports by Special Services that you are still the most likely suspect for the murder of Desmond Arc?”

“Then I would have to assume that those Regulators in charge of detecting are as stupid as you. What’s with the pseudonym, anyway? Tadd Torrid? Is it supposed to be cute or something? Didn’t you used to be Theodore Tobowski?” I make for the nearest exit, signaling to my car via SatLink to pick me up.

“You don’t seem too nervous about badmouthing Special Services. Aren’t you worried about your karma points?” He trails by my side, flybot in my face, his eyes on me, and I get an idea. Not an award-winning idea, but one that will definitely make me feel better.

I pick up speed, and he matches. “Worried about karma? No, you insufferable little slug, because, as you said, the SS has no better lead than me. So in about,” I quickly link and check the clock, “twenty-six hours I am at best going to be a Prohibitioner, more likely I going to be dead, and either way beyond caring about karma points. And if you keep following me around, one of the last things I’ll do is make sure you join me.”

And with that, I turn a tight corner, fast enough that The Hack doesn’t look where he’s going, and at the same instant reach my hand out and solidly push him face first into the wall. The flybot, having turned the corner with me, broadcasts only my rather pleased smirk to the six o’clock news. In front of millions, I have just smashed in the face of one of my most hated opponents, and no one will realize it. The only thing marring the moment is discomfort from a bit of vicarious pain; I guess the latest Psi-Splyze pill is starting to kick in.

Torrid stumbles from around the wall, eye bruised and pretty face a lot less pretty, and signals to cut the feed. “You son of a bit—”

“Ah ah ah,” I interrupt. “You’d better watch the cursing. Aren’t you worried about your karma points?”

“Shove it,” he replies, his verbal banter nasal and worn. “I wouldn’t take that from you if you were Jack Noir himself!”

At the name, on instinct I draw my VoltBolt, destroy the woefully inattentive flybot and turn the gun back at The Hack as I lift him in the air with my mechanical arms. While he fumbles, I activate the emotional maser in my pinky to deflect attention. Simply, anybody passing by will be pacified and bored, stop paying any attention, and walk right past, giving us the most intimate and dangerous type of privacy. Torrid will get no help until I release this maser field, and I will not until I am satisfied. The total effect is that, a beat after my nomenclature has left his lips, he finds himself against the wall with an electric gun in his face and nobody to come to his aid. “What do you know about Jack Noir?!”

He is understandably shocked. I wonder if anybody has ever

assaulted him before. Frankly, I wonder how they could not. “Uh, he’s, he’s an underground writer. He’s like a god to every reporter out there!”

“You read *Noir*?” He nods slowly. “Why?” When he seems wary of answering I force my gun closer. “Why does the Hack read Jack Noir?”

“Because...because I he’s doing what I can’t.”

...

Get the eff outta town.

“That so?” He gives a quick, terrified nod. “Well, well, well. You want to know a secret, Hack?”

“W—what?”

I briefly glance about, and set him down. I could not say what possesses me to do so, I imagine it has something to do with proving my superiority or indulging in a death wish, as I grin evilly, “*I’m Jack Noir.*”

“Y...You are?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t care.”

He frowns. “You really are Jack Noir?”

“You think they made me a Citizen because of my good lucks and winning personality?”

“Why tell me? I thought you hated me?”

“I do. Which is why I want you to feel what I’ve felt for the last eight years; wanting to say something so important and not being able to. You now know this, but you’re the only one, and that leaves you with a potentially monumental story and absolutely no record and without any witnesses. And since you are still bound by your reporter’s license that I, ironically, am not, if you so much as mutter one word of it without proof I’ll sue you for libel and slam you into Prohibition. I wonder if it’ll make you writhe? I wonder if it’ll make you hate me and hate yourself and hate everything because you have a piece of simple truth and can’t speak it.” I fire a light shot, knocking him out for a few minutes and making a quick exit. “But I doubt it. You hack.”

*Noir, November 15, 2143*

As of nine years ago, it is no longer politically kosher to make any reference to race and ethnicity in the news. Officially this is for the purported purpose of helping to counter lingering traces of racism in society. I wonder whether it is not for the less salutary function of Newspeak.

That is not, though, the topic as I write today’s article, and with

every word break government mandate (I mean more than usual). Instead I come to report an interesting bit of trivia that one of my search programs ran across in a New Guinea genome chat room that simply *has* to be shared. It turns out that they have located the most racially “pure” individual on earth.

This is not, I should point out, a racist classification. It is a scientific one. Using mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome comparison, some scientists with access to the genome of everybody, probably one of the guys at @lchemix<sup>TM</sup> or someone working on the Human Evolution Project, traced the path of genetic divergence of everybody on Earth and the other planets and their genetic history. It has long been established that everybody alive can be genetically traced to a single woman in Africa. What these guys did was to trace her most direct descendant.

This happens to be a woman named Lithuania Koba of the Khoisan tribe in South Africa. This tribe is one of the few practicing nomadic groups remaining in the world, a task only exacerbated by the complete metropolitization of the planet. Lithuania, by virtue of her bloodline, has the absolute least genetic diversity of anybody on the planet, the least mitochondrial mutation. She is, quite simply, as genetically pure as it is possible for a person to be. Despite what several fanatical groups might assume, she is black as night and utterly beautiful.

These guys also, for the aitch of it, tracked down the least direct descendant. And, barring visiting aliens, that happens to be Malcolm Aven Tournee of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Malcolm shows the most genetic mixing of any human alive today. As a result, while he is of average height and ambiguous ethnic features, he happens to have a single amino acid difference that gives him a blood type similar to that of *Pan paniscus*, otherwise known as a chimpanzee.

The moral of today’s story is that it is perfectly possible to discuss the concept of race without offending anybody. If I have offended anybody, it is your own fault. Race is not a means of discrimination: race is one of eight taxonomic classifications set right between Individual and Species. The historical concept of race, dividing people up into one of a few different possible variations based on physical traits, may not exist as it once did (since Elvis knows there is barely anybody on earth with anything close to purebred racial characteristics) but there are still a few genetic differences linked to race that are inescapable from even the most liberal perspectives. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Get over it. But since race has been the cause of such problems throughout history, the SCC felt the best way to make things peaceful, in keeping with their usual resolution, was to eliminate any opposition. Slowly and painfully.

This they did just as well as they do everything else, which is not a compliment, because all they actually did was to eliminate culture. The very few significant differences between races are on a genetic level; it is culture that has been the determining difference between people, and there is absolutely nothing genetic about it. Millions of white kids emulating Rastafarians, rappers, and samurai before and after the turn of the twenty-first century prove that.

The SCC banished racial discrimination. But in doing so they guaranteed a monoculture, because any deviation from it into old cultural habits is determined to be racist.

One might as well (in fact, it makes more sense) suggest that the genetics that determine cultural differences between black, white, or Latino are as valid as the genetics that determine cultural differences between fat and thin people. Both groups definitely have their own culture, their own habits, activities, and vocabularies, and a genetic predisposition to one build may help influence the adoption of those sociological paradigms. But a genetic predisposition to a mesomorphic build will no more guarantee you become an weightlifter than your melatonin levels will guarantee whether you can or cannot jump.

You can change your race with a simple Splyze. You cannot, however, engage in cultural stereotypes, regardless of your race. Even if it would be your own culture. I can't believe I'm the only one out there who thinks that's stupid.

To bring you this trivial information, I therefore risk my life. And why, you ask, when I could be speaking on pollution or the decaying moral fiber? Because I resent the SCC's treacherous attempts to limit what we can talk about. If we allow those in charge to command even our conversation, even for ostensibly noble intentions, if we are prohibited even from talking about *trivia*, even the most conservative minded amongst us must label that fascism! And for all the problems clashing cultures had in the past, at least there was the opportunity for alternatives to develop.

Newspeak sought to control the way we think by controlling the way we speak. Our government decided to go one step beyond that. It is far more insidious in its own way, limiting instead the *topics* on which we can speak and the ways in which we can speak. That is why I risk my life today to bring you trivia. Because if I let them get rid of even that, I shudder to think what goes next.

*Outside the Mall: 18h21, January 3, 2150*

My smooth exeunt is cut short, for my car, despite my calling it earlier, is nowhere to be seen. I stand on the steps and use my SatLink to call my new and, apparently, already malfunctioning automobile.

There is a brief pause before Herbie, still only a basic dealer model devoid of much personality, replies, “Apologies, sir. Traffic is currently at 86%, further complicated by local pollution levels at 13.3%. ETA four hours twenty-six minutes.”

“Four and a half hours?! Where are you, you effing contrivance?!”

“Six blocks away, sir.”

I G.D. effing hate the world.

“Fine. Where are you now?”

“Drexell Street, sir.”

“Fabu. I’ll meet you on Drexell. My DNA may have undergone some slight changes recently, so do be so kind as to allow for it and not electrocute me when I touch the handle.” I spent more credit on this car than I had available for a year as a Denizen, so I loaded it with security precautions. Auto theft protection has progressed well past the point of the Club.

“Yes, Ctn. Down.”

I cross the street from the Mall and the park and the Orwell District, effectively halving opposing foot traffic. Even so, I have to pass a number of Promoted, one or two of them eyeing me suspiciously.

Still, pedestrians and cagey Promoted are infinitely better than the obstruction that awaits me beyond, as the televisions begin popping up. I’ve somehow gotten scanned and my credit rating identified, and now that I have my own DNA instead of D’Walmart’s every single Solicitor program on the block wants a piece of me. Holographic televisions begin to single me out, appearing all around me, advertising everything from Pet Baby Universes to Quantumboxes to Farrah Sumners promoting a new soft drink called Chug Cola that causes controlled endorphin imbalances. To make matters worse, every pedestrian AEI unit on the street notices my unwanted monopoly, and decides to bombard me with quote-unquote entertainment, leaving me subject not only to horrid blurbs but also to reruns of *My Three Clones*, *Babylon 15*, and a redneck fighting a sewer mutant on trash TV hosted by Jerry Springer’s head.

To distract myself, I upload the info mom sent to me, and it is not good. A select-spam has been sent to anybody with underworld ties (anybody other than me, apparently), as follows:

re: 50,000cc

Anybody interested in a quick fix of untraceable creds? Find this man, Haiku Down, detain him, and call the number below.

The number is local. The picture is of me. I immediately realize why those kids attacked me in the alley, and why Paco and his gang went after me, and the purpose (if not the identity) of that mysterious woman. Someone has placed a bounty on my head.

I resist the urge to duck out of sight and hide. This bounty has been out for almost a whole day. Nothing has changed in the past two seconds except my being aware of the fact. I'll just have to watch my step.

And so, of course, as I turn the corner I get hit over the head and dragged into a car.

# Chapter 01100.

## Abduction in Three Movements – Part Two

*Noir, July 30, 2148*

To anybody who has ever asked how the economy works and ended up shrugging, you are not alone. The economy quite simply does not make sense. This is not because it is difficult to understand. On the contrary, it is the pinnacle of simplicity. But it still doesn't make any sense.

The basics of the economy everybody knows: five divisions of economic status, with monetary allowance dependent thereupon, determined by one's contributions to society divided by the subsistence they consume. Those who actually chose to go out and work, and do it well (and they have to, because there are still more potential employees than there are jobs), are granted Class A status, which brings with it a large dwelling and citizenship and pretty much limitless credit for pretty much anything they could ever want. Those who decide not to toil daily but who still want to give a piece of themselves (often literally in the form of spare genetic or reproductive material) to the growing field of biomechanics are granted Class B licenses. Additionally, they have access to a better class of items than lower classes can afford, and qualify for a slightly higher standard of living allowance than otherwise, not counting additional credit in the form of an influx upon completion of, say, giving seed for a bioship, hence the nomenclature of Breeders. Class C Civilians have the same increased standard-of-living-allowance, but having decided not to work; their credit remains tied to their karma so that the only means of obtaining additional credit beyond what they already receive is by volunteering and helping others in the view of an AEI. When they do save up to buy the stuff Breeders have it is not quite as nice. Denizens with Class D status do not have the outstanding record of karma that Civilians do, and take back about as much as they give, and ergo have a much smaller credit rating that gets them a few splurges and little else. And finally, Tenants who habitually consume more calories than they produce, or are simply not very good at keeping their karma aloft, receive Class T credit with the bare minimum creds to sustain and stay respectable. If one is still unable to remain a viable member of society, they are placed on Prohibition and their body is given to someone else while they mature for a while in a disincorporate state.

No one starves, and no one is driven to crime to survive, and solely in that respect the economic system works fairly well.

Now here's where things gets effed up. This system is based on a consecutive sequence of other, outdated economic systems. Barter, the exchange of goods and services for equal goods and services, turned into commerce, the exchange of goods and services for currency representing equal worth. This in turn led to (amongst other systems) Capitalism, the philosophy that everything can be converted to a monetary value. Combining capitalism with the ideals of democracy, in which all men are considered equals regardless of race, religion, age, or gender, we develop a meritocracy, in which social status comes to be regarded as being directly related to the effort one involves oneself in working, and wholly independent of family, ethnicity, or gender (although of course it is not). And when Capitalism eventually ate itself up and the Great Takeover came, the concept of meritocracy continued even though capitalism itself declined. With Shapers, fusion, AEI, and similar advances in technology the necessity for work itself waned even though the desire to work (or at least the desire to get more than you've got) remained. We now have a government that essentially doles out an allowance depending on whether you're good girls and boys.

Lots of big words, I know. I'll clarify: this economic system and its mores developed during and immediately after the Great Takeover. Addendum: with the advancement of technology to the point of limitless energy, resources, and production, the only reason anybody other than the top .0001% get *bupkis* is because it is *more profitable* for them to maintain galactic trade than to provide for the other 99.9999% of us. (Footnote: 99.9999%! Imagine just how *much* better they live than the rest of us!) Conclusion: whereas those other economic systems developed naturally, the one in which we now find ourselves mired was created and enforced. Expostulation: there is no *logical* reason for this.

You have no doubt lived within this system since birth, or at least for long enough to find it a welcome relief to the alternative of working one third of your life or fighting for scraps in a post-apocalyptic dystopia. But I should like to offer the postulate that there is a far more heinous scheme afoot than perhaps you realize.

This economic system under which we live that stresses social class and social consciousness, if not inherently logical, must exist for some reason. Government is just like evolution: it does not have to work perfectly, just well enough to perpetuate itself. As far as I can determine, here is the reason: there is a sixth class beyond A, B, C, D, or T, and I'm gonna call them S, short for Stockholders, even though it messes up the cute little alphabetical order we've got going on. This is the classification for Bobert Smythe and every other SCC head.



These are the top .0001% who control every effing thing on the planet, because they ARE the mals and fems that make up the Solar Corporate Council. They are the ones who determine what Corporate Policy is, and therefore what you can and cannot do, what will and will not turn you Prohibitioner, and what does or does not leave your body in the possession of someone else. Stockholders ostensibly have the same rights and status as every other Citizen, but they sure aren't limited to the same privileges and even Citizens know the difference. But the people in charge don't really make such a big deal about being in charge, not enough to give themselves any distinctive class, and I find that significant too.

If there is a bottom there must be a top, and it is only natural to want to be on the latter than the former. So all the Denizens and Tenants, if they want anything better, have got to work enough goodness to rise to Civilians. If Civilians want it better they've got to work a bit as Breeders or an aitch of a lot as Citizens. And as a Citizen, you're at the top, with a nice panoramic view of the positional abyss below to keep you kowtowing in line.

But no one is born a Citizen (at least, not in name, although children of Citizens are 126 times more likely to become Citizens than the children of Civilians after they turn eighteen). Citizenship, and the Class A credit and the standing of full Sentience that comes with it and every other perk are all worked for and earned. As a Citizen, there's nowhere higher to go. You're REACHED the top. You ARE the top, and all the other classes are below you, because you've earned it.

Which, in and of itself, is a fine system in theory, except that it leaves out the Stockholders, the Corporate Boys, the people in charge, the sovereigns above us. The level of Powers That Be is notoriously absent from the tiered structure of our society, because there is no possible way to move into *that* class, especially not since clones were legally deemed allowed to inherit their predecessors' wealth and status.

And so I think that there is in fact a good, logical reason that this economic system exists. By stressing social rank all the time but leaving the ruling class out of it, it becomes impossible for the hundred billion proletariats on this planet to consider advancing into rule themselves. One can only be distracted by shiny gadgets and cool upgrades for so long before power also becomes an issue, after all.

The economic system we live in makes sense in only one way: it enforces the ability of the rulers to remain in rule and keeps the subordinates subordinated.

And in that respect, I suppose it actually isn't any different from any other economic system after all.

*Upside-down in the backseat of a ForDodge Maxicooper: 18h25, January 3, 2150*

Blind for the moment and relying on visual and tactile cues, I feel two pairs of hands gripping me, hear three voices, and sense the Maxicooper I've been pulled into moving north and vertically at about a hundred kph. Which is fast enough and high enough that I cannot risk using my maser to incapacitate everybody, and I am disoriented enough that I can't fire blindly. There's a very good chance that they haven't activated the automatic pilot, especially since the car's AEI would advertise an act of kidnapping to Special Services, leaving it up to fate and the attention of overworked satellite AEI tridimensional positioning controls to make sure we don't crash into...well at this height and speed anything would suck, really.

So instead, I break them.

My first kidnapper finds his left arm dislocated immediately before it fractures in three places with three very distinctive cracks. It is nothing two minutes attention from a MedBot with a regenerator can't cure, but it'll hurt like *jigoku* until then. The second attacker hits me, but I grab at his fist with one hand, twist him, and shove his arm behind his back in a very painful position. The immediate attackers disabled, I have just enough time to rend the bag obscuring my vision, in time to see the driver – a grim looking two-year-old Boomer operating the car with holographic controls – holding a small gun to my head. I recognize it as a maser immediately before he fires.

It is obviously adjusted to a very pleasant, mellow setting, because I now feel very mellow and pleasant. And cooperative.

"Stop it!" the driver demands. "Now."

"You betcha!" I agree happily. "Man, your head is big!"

The fellow I had pinned, a blonde, square-faced mal with a Chinese dragon tattoo that writhes up the left side of his face, twists out of my grip and gives me a few vindictive pommels in the ribs. "Ow!" I smile, complaining mostly out of habit. It does not hurt, or rather, it hurts in a very pleasant way. I look toward him "Nice tattoo. It's all swirly."

"That's enough," the Boomer says to the tattooed thug, then turns to address me. "You that Citizen Haiku Down?" He taps a control on his AOLink and up comes my holophoto and the holotext advertising my bounty.

"Yessir!" I look around the interior of the Maxicooper. "Wow. You know, this really is a very pleasant shade of yellow. They should use it more cars."

"Shut up."

"Okay."

The only manhandler not crying or wincing in pain grabs me in a wonderfully pleasant way by the scruff of the neck. “Can I hurt him some?”

“If you want,” I say. “I’m cool.”

“He says he’s cool.”

“No,” the Boomer says. “Jak, do not, I repeat, do not hit him.”

“He says he’s cool,” Jak repeats.

“I really am,” I pipe up. “You know, I could really go for some pie. You guys wanna stop for some pie?”

“I wanna stop for a MedBot!” the guy with the fractured arm exclaims.

“MedBots don’t taste as good as pie,” I inform them. “Unless maybe it’s one of those fancy new bio-MedBots. I haven’t ever taken a bite out of one of those yet. We could stop for one of those if you guys want. But I still think pie is the better choice.”

“You, shut up,” the Boomer points to me, then to Jak. “Jak, you shut up. And Travis, for the love of Thor, your whimpering is giving me a headache.”

“Well, we could pull over and get an effing MedBot!” suggests Travis.

I tell the Three Stooges, “You know, guys, I don’t want to harsh your buzz, because mine is just great right now, but I feel I should warn you that as soon as this wonderful maser blast wears off I’m going to decimate you. I mean, as kidnappers go you really kinda suck. No offense intended, just mentioning. I mean, I’ve already seen your faces, I’ve made your car, you’ve got a hell a distinctive tattoo, and you’ve mentioned two of your conspirators by name. Plus about two dozen AEs watched as you pulled me into this fabulous skycar, and my SatLink is still running. Is this real Neanderthal clone leather upholstery?”

“Oh, shit! He’s right!”

“*Kè qì diǎn*, Taz, language like that’s gonna get us Prohibitioned! Just find me a MedBot!”

“For Wodin’s sake, Travis, now you told him my credit rating!”

“Well, Loki’s teeth, Taz, if you’ll effing stop for an effing MedBot I might be effing able to effing think clearly!”

I laugh. “Loki’s funny.”

“I’m gonna effing kill you!” Jak shouts at me.

The Boomer groans, “Okay, look, Travis, I will tell the autopilot to pull over and stop at the next MedBot once we ditch this guy. Down, you shut the eff up. And Jak, if you even open your mouth again to say anything other than ‘Yes sir,’ I will shoot you with this maser myself.”

“Big talk for a Boomer—”

Taz turns, maser locked. “*Chikúshō*, what did I just say?!”

"You guys have got a lot of negativity," I comment as I rub my chin. "Man, I could use a shave. My Lazor-Razor has been busted for weeks. Hey, who here likes jazz?"

"The Laytechs Gloves are okay," Taz replies through a clenched jaw.

"Nah, man. Twencen jazz."

Jak grabs me again, "That's it! Now I'm definitely gonna to kill him." To punish me, he reaches over the front seat and manually turns on the radio until the latest single by F8's Children comes on, which is so far on the opposite end of the spectrum from good jazz that when they are brought together it causes blueshift.

Taz shrugs. "Twencen jazz. No freaking wonder someone put a bounty on this guy's head."

"I think the murder had something to do with it," I mutter.

"Eff, you hear that, Jak? Citizens *can* get away with murder! I effing knew it! *Hokuto-o mitsuketa!*"

"I didn't kill him, Taz. That's why I'm out here. Trying to prove I didn't kill him. And by the way, your Japanese isn't very good; you just said that you found my birthmark." My attention is diverted outside by a pretty subliminal ad for Tremens Liquor. "Oo! There were boobies in that poster! Big ones!"

"Great Frigg!" Travis cries. "Tazmania, get to a fugging MedBot right now or I'm gonna pass out!"

"Then at least there'll be one less person bitching in this effing car!" Taz retorts.

Travis pulls a biogun from his side pocket with his good hand and points it at the back of Taz's head. "I effing swear to Wodin All-Father, Taz. Get me a MedBot now or you'll need one yourself!"

The Boomer curses beneath his breath and programs the autopilot to head toward the nearest public medical unit or hospital. "I swear to Freyr, man. If this gets us busted and caught by the Regulators the last thing I'm going to do before they ice me is to kill you. What's another two centuries in Prohibition?"

"You know guys," I interrupt, "I'm personally getting a hell of a buzz from this maser you shot me with. I mean, as soon as it wears off I'm gonna make you wish you were dead, but in the meantime I'm jonesin'." Travis momentarily stops his moaning to flail a kick in my direction. "I'm just saying, between my righteous vengeance and Prohibition, since you're not going to feel anything pleasant for a long time you might want to use this maser on yourselves. It's not as good as pie, but it gets the job done."

Travis kicks me again, and I notice myself feeling a little peeved. The maser is beginning to wear off. Not feeling quite as pleased with my surroundings, I surreptitiously activate my SatLink and set it to autodial a SOS to Sam. No one notices, but then I don't

think I'd have to be a Neo-Human to outthink these boys.

Jak clamors, "Hey? Why can Travis hit the effin' Citizen and I can't?"

"Wodin will forgive me," Tazmania mutters, pulls his maser, and shoots Jak.

There's a blast of yellow light, and Jak immediately takes on the same dumb-ape expression I'm no doubt wearing as a programmed burst of information instantly reprograms his subconscious to release some wonderful chemicals into his bloodstream. He leans back and turns to me with a jovial smile. "You were right, dingleberry. This does rock." With lethargic grace, the dragon tattoo slowly slides off his face and down his neck.

The autopilot begins to slow the car and drop it down, between a fifty story Re-Modernist style hexagonal Civilian apartment complex and a thirty-plus story rental clone lot. As we descend, the smog clears enough to reveal a small and unconscionably dilapidated automatic medical unit. Even with NoFade™ paint, the green lacquer on this one has faded, green being the old international color of medicine as well as (in a metropolis with no trees) the easiest color to find in an emergency. Ever since even before Commonwealth mandates, MedBots were built spaced at about the same distance and frequency as fire hydrants, at least before we started putting out fires with sonics. Taz shuts the car off and turns back. "Okay, we're here. We could be dropping this Class A-hole off at the Brigand for the bounty, but instead we're risking our butts and our bodies because *someone* is too big a pussy to put up with a bit of pain. Now go hurry the eff up and get your arm fixed before the MedBot IDs your 'Coope and sics the Regulators on us, okay?"

Travis tries to move, and screeches. "I can't. I can't move it. Someone's gonna have to help me out there."

"Baldur wept. Okay, Jak, help Travis out."

"Okay, dude," Jak smiles. He moves to stand up, but falls backwards before he can. "Um, Taz, I don't think I'm going anywhere for a while. My legs are too happy to move. I think I'm offline from the neck down."

*Offline higher than that, dingleberry*, I resist muttering as my naturally ignominious nature begins to reassert itself. In the corner of my right eye a little light blinks, informing me that I have a text message on my SatLink. A quick transcription upon the back of my eye shows that Sam has gotten the message and is on the way.

"Taz!" Travis whines, "you help me."

"ME?" Taz shouts. "I'm three years old, Trav! I'm barely strong enough to hold my sphincter closed!"

"Taz!"

"Look, you're near a hundred kilos, and I'm barely ten; this is a

simple matter of weight ratios!”

“TAZ!”

“Loki’s teeth! Okay, fine.” Taz turns to me. “K, Citizen Down. Listen up. That maser shot should leave you giggling stupid for at least another twenty minutes. I’m going to get out and stick my droog here into the MedBot. You and Jak are gonna stick right here grinning like effing idiots until we get back. Got it?”

“Both fine and dandy,” I reply with a convincing smile. A half-hour maser shot of Grade-A euphoria wearing off in less than ten minutes? Even I am impressed (frightened?) at the sheer astronomical degree of bastard that I have become.

“Good scrub. Now, in the meantime, I am going to give Jak here this maser, which he will fire if your giggly wears off. You are still capable of doing that much, ain’t you, esshead?”

“Yoooooooou betcha!” Jak chuckles. “Haha. Esshead. Ess. T U V X...no, wait...”

Knowing my fate rests upon it, I resist the urge to groan. Taz is under no such imposition, and does so loudly. “Just take the *mattaku no* maser, Jak.” He leans over to make good his word into deed, then pulls another weapon from beneath the seat. “In the meantime I’m going to be pointing this straight at you. An upstanding Citizen like yourself probably doesn’t know what this is. It’s a—”

Remote Abdominal Agitation Laser Firer, an acronym of absurd redundancy and improbability just so a gun that induces vomiting could be called a—

“RAALF gun, which’ll leave you puking your guts out and unable to run and ruining that nice expensive shirt,” he takes a moment as he reassesses me, “That shirt, at least. Jeez, a Citizen should at least have nice clothes,” he shakes his head with distaste. “We all copasetic?”

“*Capiche*,” I reply. Not to brag, but I also speak Italian.

Taz apparently doesn’t. “Whatever. Trav! C’mon. Let’s go.”

Travis drags himself from the ‘Coope with an outcry of pain, and Taz, the obvious brains of the operation by now so far as such things go, makes his way beneath his compatriot, who rests way too much weight based on how much Taz grunts.

Sensing the proximity of movement and human thermals, the MedBot springs into action. “Greetings, Human or Humanoid. Health scans indicate you are in need of assistance from [MedBot no. 511285mb1053]. Due to loss of productivity and cost of compensation, illness and injury are unlawful under SCC standing order [§439682 paragraph 16]; your karma will be docked accordingly. Please identify Sentence standing, class designation, credit rating, credit standing, HMO, karma rating, insurance company, name, and injury, in that order.”

I chuckle. The Sentience standing is a new one since the last time I needed to visit a public MedBot, after a rousing bout of fisticuffs with an ogre-shaped Tolkienite who interpreted my methamphetamine-induced remarks about his mother as an invitation to batter my innards until they became my outtards. I suppose it only makes sense, what with the amount of pressure the Commonwealth has been putting on the SCC in the last few years to ensure the safety of all its Sentient citizens. Which of course really just means Citizens; anybody else is just a happy accident, one that is immediately rectified if someone of a more important social standing happens by. It doesn't matter if a Tenant is having a triple coronary after getting shot sixteen times as punishment for letting themselves be stabbed in the gut, because a Citizen with a scrapped knee, or who even just wants a checkup, gets immediate priority.

"What's so funny?" the Boomer turns to me, or points the RAALF gun toward me and tries to look around his cohort's body as Travis screams at the sudden movement.

"That is not a valid reply, sir," the MedBot replies to Travis's scream. "MedBot Inquiries are defined under SCC regulation [§1164481-P126 paragraph 4.2] as Official Government Inquiries and must be answered with the full speed and forthrightness befitting as such. Any failure to comply will result in a minimum fine of at least one and no more than all karma points, as well as a 515 credit fine, which after taxes and processing fees comes to 924.1402cc. Please identify Sentience standing, class—"

"Shut up, you brainless computer, and fix me!" Travis cries.

The MedBot klaxons, "Insulting an SCC government-issue appliance is a violation of SCC regulation [§1164481-P53 paragraph 6]! Scanning identity [Tenant] [Travis Fu Yong O'Brien]. Your karma and credit have been procured accordingly. Further failure will result in invocation of Special Services Regulators Division."

"Fugging hell!" Travis shouts. "Taz! The effing rob just threatened me!"

"[Tenant] [Travis Fu Yong O'Brien]," the MedBot clamors, "you have been docked -2 karma points for your obscenity, recorded on date [04.31.18.03.02150] at [MedBot no. 511285mb1053]. Between your unlawful injury, obscenity and your inexplicable refusal to comply with this MedBot as befits SCC regulation [§1164481-P126 paragraph 4.2] you will be docked sufficiently to reach a status of -0.05 karma points. For your convenience you will be paralyzed with neurotoxin until Special Services Regulation division can attend to service you."

"No, you stupid *bái chī*—" Travis freezes as a purple paralytic gas is sprayed directly into his face, instantly freezing him in an uncomfortable looking position. Taz looks even more uncomfortable

as all of Travis' weight now rests upon his disproportionate head.

Between the maser and circumstances I cannot help but start laughing, and Jak joins in.

"Shut up!" Taz yells, and adjusts to drop Travis on the ground. He scampers forward with his gun aimed high at my head. "*Wó tǎo yàn nǐ*, Down! I'm sick of you! I've just about had it up to here—"

"Attention!" the MedBot interrupts, "[Tenant] [Tazmania Hernandez-Jones], that is not a valid reply. MedBot Inquiries are defined under SCC regulation [§11644—]"

"DEACTIVATE!" he shouts, and the MedBot promptly does so. He turns back to me. "Down, you have been nothing, NOTHING but trouble since we grabbed you. The bounty was on you alive, but they didn't say anything about you being healthy. You're gonna spend the rest of this trip puking your guts out in the trunk of the van! Now GET OUT!" With the RAALF aimed sure and true, I am unable to disobey. "Jak, you too, get out here!"

"Aw, man..." Jak mutters, and follows.

I notice a gleam in the Boomer's eye, a dangerous gleam. "Now, since Travis is Prohibitioner and you're loopy for the next half hour, as I see it I'm the only one who's qualified to bring Down in. Which means, as I see it, that I'm the only one qualified to receive the bounty. Travis is going to be on ice before he comes around and I'll probably be dead before he gets another body, so I don't have to worry about him. As for you, Jak, if you try and bring me in you'll be dropped to Prohibitioner too as an accessory to kidnapping, and if you come after me I'll just shoot you. Understand?"

"Huh?" Jak answers intelligently, unable to comprehend the changes his colleague propounds.

"Now, Jak, you get over here, and Down, you get back to the car while I shoot Jak full of some more happy, okay?"

"Yo," I mutter, distracted by a flashing light in my lower right eye. I bring up my SatLink and see Sam's face before me with a communiqué, "All set, boss. Just move back two meters."

Taz grabs the maser from Jak and shoots him. It is not exactly dangerous to get overdoses of maser shots, but it is not good for you, despite the blissed out look on Jak's face. That done, Taz turns to me.

And suddenly my Dreadnaught '48, piloted by Sam, plummets from the sky and lands upon all three kidnappers with a loud crunch.

*Noir, September 3, 2143*

Every so often I wonder why more people aren't screaming.

The world changes every day, and it doesn't ever seem to be for the better. The Powers That Be seem to take pleasure in our sorrow. There is no hope, and no change, and no hope of change. Why aren't



more people insane?!

Well, the answer is, they are.

I have spent the last twenty hours using my quasi-godlike omnipotence and some of my better Link viruses to run a checkup through the worldwide Medscan files. These files contain the personal medical, psychological, and genetic history of everybody on the planet. It is accessible to any doctor or Med program, so that they may check genetic ancestry and alteration, past illnesses, potential allergies and complications, etc., assuring proper diagnosis and ensuring that no medication is addictive or reactive, and is thoroughly protected to prevent even the most PC-savvy out there from faking prescriptions for illicit drugs. It also keeps a complete record of everybody's account, so that it can immediately find if someone has consumed something from their Shaper that they should not have, such as bad clams or drain cleaner. This cataloging of acquisitions is also referenced by Special Services to trace any genetic Splyzes anybody has made to themselves, allowing one to access their credit without having to worry about mismatching bioscans.

So there is at least one good thing that came out of raiding the last vestiges of privacy from the medical industry.

Perhaps most impressively, the AEIs running the Medscan files spend much of their time correlating and cross-referencing illnesses, debilities, and deficiencies for patterns in groups of people. Thus, if several people within a narrow period of time come into a hospital exhibiting the effects of radiation poisoning and they all live within a few miles of a power plant, the Medscan alerts the Special Services Maintenance Division of potential radiation leakage. Or if everybody who happened to ride in a particular taxi catches Dengue fever or Technicolor Herpes, the Medscan notes this via their taxi fare on their credit rating and orders the cab decontaminated under the SCC Universal Health and Hygiene Enforcement Laws. Or if a rare new congenital deficiency pops up in everybody who happens to have had a great-grandfather with a recessive gene where the dominant gene should be, the program finds this family history and recommends curative Splyzes not only to these patients, but everybody else sharing this common gene.

However, while this AEI program works diligently seeking correlations of varying percentages (there is a .024% correlation between psychosomatic epilepsy and a preference for strawberry ice cream, for example) the government doesn't always do anything about it. Sometimes this relates to funds, sometimes to time. And sometimes they just plain don't care.

Mental disorders have been on the rise for close to two hundred years, even more than increased stress, improved detection, and new disorders can account for. I remember walking down the street when I

was fifteen and not passing a single person who wasn't muttering, swearing, cursing, or shouting about demons stealing his thoughts. But now they're simply not there. Where did they go?

Thirty-six years ago the SCC absolved mental wards as we knew them. It was not that they abandoned them, for by GCS laws a Sentient government must give every reasonable aid to those who cannot help themselves. This is why everybody on Earth has a roof over their heads, a line of credit, weekly Medscans and occasional obligatory counseling sessions, and a way to move up the social structure should they choose.

But this also means that the absolute most that the SCC has to do for the world's loonies is to give them a Tenant's apartment with a Class T credit and a PSICH-O-Fac session an hour a day. Left on more or less their own recognizance, they often fall from even this low rung of the social ladder into drug abuse, crime, or violence. Which gets them put on ice. Tenants have the lowest karma of any class, by definition, since karma directly affects one's credit rating, and those in higher classes, Civilians and Denizens, have more karma to drop before they are reclassified as Tenants. When Tenants step out of line, it almost inevitably leads to their reclassification as Prohibitioners.

It's not that people aren't crazy. They're actually nuttier than ever. The Medscan AEI has noted that six new forms of schizophrenia have developed in as many years, that dissociative disorders are on an epidemic magnitude, and that there are more people with obsessive-compulsive disorders today than there are people with Toyotas. Furthermore, the rate of madness is growing at an average of one new crackpot every fourteen seconds, which means that for every person getting raped today there are nineteen going bonkers. And, according to the Medscan, these people are not only losing their minds but also their hymens, shagging prolifically before Prohibition gets them, and spreading genetically-linked mental disorders to 1 in every 6 children, not amongst their local population, but amongst the total.

People are crazy, going crazier all the time. And why not? It's a crazy world. But they don't stay crazy for long. These mental disorders could no doubt be attended to, except that it's simply not financially beneficial enough to do so. The SCC has developed a bizarre and horribly roundabout means of weeding out the undesirables, one that technically doesn't disobey any GCS guidelines. The GCS doesn't demand that a planet's leaders don't maintain order, just that keeping order doesn't deprive its citizens of their rights as Sentient creatures. And by de-classifying citizens (leading to an instant automatic drop in karma, credit, and Sentience-Status) people lose their standing as Sentient creatures, therefore losing pretty much any responsibility the state holds toward them

other than no killing.  
Madness, isn't it?

*Rightside-up in the front seat of a ForDodge Dreadnaught: 17h03, January 3, 2150*

“*Shén jīng bìng*, Sam! Are you out of your effing mind?! Are you suffering insanity?”

“On the contrary, fearless leader, I’m enjoying every minute of it.”

“Droll,” I grumble, unamused. We are in the Dreadnaught, circling at about a hundred forty meters above the scene. We have not left because fleeing from the scene of a crime, even if you are just an innocent bystander, is considered a misdemeanor and drops you between twelve and fifty karma points, depending upon how dangerous the scene seems and how many other witnesses are present and whether or not the Regulators present like your face. Since I am the victim of one crime and accessory to another at the same location, and while I do technically have unlimited karma, with Hawthorne and Sobolov on my tail I’m less than eager to press my luck.

That Sam rescued me does not overshadow a much darker aspect of events, which is that he has hurt humans to do so. Any Artificial EmotIntelligence, robot or no, should be incapable of doing so under, being programmed with the Asimovian principles. Above everything, a robot should be incapable of harming a human, or allowing a human to come to harm. In such a circumstance, Sam could have called Special Services, could have landed the Dreadnaught between me and the kidnappers to block any discharges, could have used the car’s self-defense weapons to knock them unconscious, or any number of other possible reactions. Instead, he landed a two and a half-ton automobile on them at about ninety kilometers per hour.

“Sam, run a self-diagnostic.”

“I’m fine, boss. Are you all right, though? I got your distress call and on the way I hooked into the eLink and heard a bunch of talk from the street surveillance AEs about a Citizen being kidnapped.”

“Sam, run a self-diagnostic.”

“I said I’m fine, boss.”

“That’s not the same as running a self-diagnostic. Do it.”

Sam pauses, and nods. The robot visage, a standard if hokey bot design disturbingly reminiscent of the mechs in those old 2D *Terminator* movies, drops any semblance of animation and the pupils of the eyes glow yellow to indicate incapacitation. After a moment, his head jerks and the pupils stop glowing. “All checks out, chief.”

I grudgingly nod. The diagnostic system of a robot is

completely independent of their consciousness. “Then explain how you were able to harm those three.”

“Loophole.”

“What?”

“I found a loophole in my Asimovian programming.”

My eyes narrow. “Explain.”

“I found a subroutine in AEI programming that classifies both Promoted and Aliens as Human; “Human” therefore actually means “Sophoid.” Those three were Tenants. They’re classified as Non-Sentient, therefore not Sophoid, therefore not Human. Hurting them was the most expeditious way to protect you from coming to harm.” He smiles proudly.

Truly deductive reasoning. Cats have fur, a dog has fur, so a dog is a cat. And terrifying to hear coming from an otherwise fully intelligent being, let alone one that has shown a capacity to cause harm to humans and that can easily bend a tritanium rod into a pretzel. It is precisely the reason emotions were put into Artificial EmotIntelligences, so that there would be a switch in the head that trips and tells a machine that it is being ridiculous. Normally Sam’s sense of the absurd is almost as honed as my own. What has a corporeal body done to him?

“*Fāh dāi*, Sam. Something’s wrong with you. Elsewise explain to me why no other AEI has ever pieced this logical fallacy together into such a peculiar pattern! That sort of reasoning is supposed to be impossible for any Artificial EmotIntelligence to make, let alone act upon.”

The Sam-bot shrugs. “Dunno. I know that sort of thing never occurred to me before. But it did now. *Yurimeri*, fearless leader, I’m fly.”

“Fine. Eff. Report the incident to the SCC and let’s get to gone. I really don’t like this, Sam. I don’t like that you ordered a rob body without permission, I don’t like that you’re out of the house, and I really don’t like that you’ve schemed a loophole that lets you squash villains.” I consider. “I did like the sound they made, but that’s beside the point. Run the report and let’s go home; that Freudbot should have shut up by now. Is D’Walmart still there?”

“Um, no boss.”

“What about Evangelion?”

“No again.”

I sniff with contempt. “Figures. Ask him to do one thing and he does the opposite. Guess he hasn’t changed much after all—”

Sam interrupts, “Uh, boss...”

I get a sinking feeling, not unlike that time in Dahoney borough ten years ago when I realized I’d been dissing the SCC to an off-duty Regulator. If he hadn’t been drunker than I was I would probably still

be there in Prohibition, or at least my mind would be. No matter what Sam says, I know it's going to bring more trouble.

And boy howdy, does he drop a bomb. "He's gone."

"He left?"

"Not exactly."

"Sam..." I growl.

"He was taken."

"WHAT?! By who?! Sam, program the car to take us to the box and then explain everything very slowly."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

Sweet Moses, if he starts calling me Dave I'm gonna *plotz*.

My eyes narrow with calculation. "Tell me why."

"It's not safe for you."

"DAMMIT SAM!" I shout, "Stop pussyfooting around and answering with minimal necessary information! What happened to Evangelion?"

Sam considers, and then his robotic eyes flicker to project a profile of my face before his eyes with all-too-familiar holotext.

re: 50,000cc

Anybody interested in a quick fix of  
untraceable creds? Find this man, Haiku  
Down, detain him, and call the number  
below.

The holograms disappear as he blinks. An idle part of my mind wonders just how much that otherwise completely useless feature cost me. Another part wonders just how many other useless features he purchased using my bank account. The majority of my consciousness, though, is dedicated to deducing just how that bounty figures into Evangelion's location. Was he kidnapped to get to me come rescue him, or as a hostage or bargaining chip, or...

Or because anyone coming to look for me would find an exact genetic duplicate of myself in my quarters with no recorded Splyze anywhere thanks to my illegitimate Shaper?

"Sam, who took Eva?" And for that matter, who would, could, set up a bounty? The Brigand would have the resources, but I can't think of anything I've done to piss them off lately. Maybe Arc, something in his will as a final act of vengeance...But then how could he know? Or, most likely, the actual murderer, willing to pay to make me disappear so they can write this death off without too many questions. I repeat, "Who?"

"I don't know their names, boss, but when House and Porter scanned them they blanked on every frequency."

He leaves me to make the inference for myself. There are only

three types of people on Earth who would dare to wear a blackout suit: the Regulators, because they can do almost anything with impunity; the TechnoMages, who created the things in the first place; and the Brigand, because they have the resources and arrogance to spurn laws against technology that can make you invisible not only to human eyes but to AEI sensors, Promoted senses, and mechanical devices. There are cheaper blackout suits that aren't illegal, and Visha knows House doesn't have the best sensors in the world. But after moving into my Citizen's box the sensors ought to be infinitely better than the ones in my old quarters, so if my AEIs didn't see anything either it was top of the line or there was nothing to see. If the Regulators had come Sam would have erased all memory of the event (and of me), as would every mechanical device recording the event. S.O.P., Standard Operating Procedure, after all, since Special Services walks a very narrow line already between what the Commonwealth will and will not consider murder. But if someone from the Brigand took an interest in me (or Evangelion looking like me), then that may actually make things harder. As a Citizen I could make some demands; there are official channels and agencies to go through, like the Bureau of Human Displacement in Special Services Humanities Division.

Dealing with the Brigand, on the other hand, means I have to go straight to them. If they've taken an interest in me, if perhaps they are even responsible for the bounty (since there aren't many who could raise that kind of cred), then I am walking into the proverbial den o' lions dressed up in my raw meat suit.

And if the Brigand did grab Evangelion, and Mom didn't tell me about it, that must be because they prevented her from finding out. Or did something to her. Or (my suspicious nature can't keep me from considering) because she was involved.

*Chikusho.* Not a single pleasant possibility in there.

Something in my last train of thought raises a red flag, though...aitch. I've never heard Sam use an Asian curse before! I've never heard *any* AEI use an Asian language. The whole reason anybody ever learns those dead languages is because AEIs aren't programmed to know them! Eff knows what this augers. I need a cigarette. "Sigh. Sam, did you install a cigarette lighter in that thing?" I ask.

"Nope."

"Figures." I fish the already half-empty box from behind a gun in one of my pockets and pull out a smoke. I don't like any of this. I don't like what it implies. I don't like what it portends. I really don't like what's going on with Sam, and I especially don't like that I don't have time to do anything about it. And I'm not looking forward to what I have to do.

I charge up my flamethrower ring in the Dreadnaught's electrical socket, then use its weakest setting to light a coffinnail and take a few welcome drags. "Let's go."

"Go where, boss?" Sam asks.

"To VirtuoCity."





# Chapter 01101.

## Virtual Verse

*Noir, March 14, 2145*

I am pleased to report that there is a new way to go about ensuring fewer people on the planet.

It is called VirtuoCity, and I have discussed it before a few times. It is the city of the Seraphs, the online eLink site of Hypereality that has become the central metropolis for all those citizens who have permanently placed their brain onLink to become *homo seraphim*, the electronic individual.

One amazing thing about VirtuoCity is that, since it is a realm of the mind, anybody and everybody in there is omnipotent. If you want to affect the world in any way, all you need do is will it and, lo, it is so. And since *everybody* can do so, in a weird roundabout way nobody can hurt anybody else. It's the ultimate opposite of Mutually Assured Destruction, but serves exactly the same purpose. And the opportunity to join is now available to any and everybody.

The process is free. It is being offered by ReSources™, a subsidiary of the same company that disposes of dead bodies and makes Soylent Cola©, not that those two things are necessarily related. For no fee they will scan your brain and insert the information directly online, generating a cohesive program that produces an identical duplicate of yourself, an archetype or simage in LinkSpeak. This is a dramatic improvement from the original method of actually hooking the brain into HR, using the same scientific understanding that led to the development of AEI and Psi technology. If this seems creepy to anybody (and I'll confess it does to me), rest assured that the Seraphs have not complained, if anything they say they are able to function even better.

I have downloaded a copy of the contract for the process, and as far as I can find, after spending hours pouring through it and more hours reprogramming a LEGALFac hologram to answer as completely honestly as it can (about 49%), the only "downside" is that anybody signing up for this legally wills their estate to the ReSource™ Corporation. This is a big rebuff to most potential customers. Except:

- A) Seraphs require no sustenance or living area, and anything they want can be easily willed into existence in HR.
- B) Everybody on the planet outside of the SCC Councilmembers is in so much debt that their great-grandchildren, even if life

expectancy keeps rising at the rate it has over the last hundred years, will not be able to pay it off. There's good reason our monetary currency is called "credit."

Net result: the Corporations are offering to buy your debt in exchange for making you immortal and omnipotent.

And so now you ask, rightly so, what's the catch?

Here's the catch. Citizens aren't going to be the ones doing this. Citizens have got it good out here. They work hard, but they do work that they love, and they have purpose, power, prestige, and security. Even B's won't be going for this much, because they're doing pretty well as things go. But to anybody Class C through T (and even lower; ReSources™ has special SCC dispensation to allow Prohibitioners if they can sign before a Regulator gets them because they're essentially doing the same thing that the government does to Prohibitioners anyway) this is a good deal, and that makes me suspicious. The government traditionally only helps the people when helping the people will help the government. I've arrived at a sinister conclusion.

I suspect that whatever muckety-mucks on the SCC approved this act by ReSources™ has bought into the concept of the genetic superiority of the wealthy, the same sick and twisted philosophy that America went through after WW3, when the destruction and irradiation of the Middle East (and the last oil reserves on Earth) left that over-bloated dictatorship with an insanely wide gap between the classes and no way to continue funding it, leaving President-for-life Bush III to quell the proletariat masses by executing them.

I think something similar is going on here, that the SCC is subsidizing certain corporations to weed the poor out of the gene pool of their own volition.

Yet I do not rage against this, in part because I have no actual proof – although lord knows if anyone in the SCC ever wanted to bring Jack Noir down in earnest they certainly wouldn't need any – and in part because the last laugh will be on them.

As of 16h00 yesterday the Solar Corporate Council affirmed a bill that allowed the inhabitants of Hypereality their own system of government. From the SCC's perspective, after all, it is not cost efficient to patrol people who are invincible, omnipotent, and move hundreds of times faster. Especially since the scientific collective in HR have promised partial commercial rights to all technological innovations that come out of there. That's the sort of cake icing the SCC couldn't turn down, since almost every technological innovation in the last five years has come from either HR or robots, and frankly all robots do is make better robots. The Seraphs don't need commercial rights; when you're electronic you don't really *need* anything, except perhaps peer approval from a discovery or creation, which they still get. The SCC will not be able to back away from this

deal, not because of any contract violation but because in doing this they have asserted that Seraphim are harmless, and the one sure means of death in a corporation or bureaucracy (and the SCC is both) is for it to become known that you made a bad decision.

If you don't like this world, another option exists, one where you owe no one anything, where you can be a god, and most importantly, where you can actually be FREE.

And, of course, there's one less person in line in front of me in the queue. Works well for everybody.

*5C1-F1 1N73R.net C4FE: 17h18, January 3, 2150*

In Chicago alone there are several hundred thousand places to go to get into Hypereality. Far more than are strictly necessary, and in fact more than could conceivably turn any significant profit. They go by the name of coffeehouses. For decades, centuries actually, the subcultural trend of blending social interaction, psycho-socio-technological innovation, and legal stimulants has been at least profitable enough that some enterprising individual goes for their Class B or even A credit by opening a little bistro where people who have difficulty interacting with other human beings face to face (and they are many) can imbibe and go interact onLink. Of course there is no reason they couldn't do that at home, for significantly cheaper, except I suppose that doing something in public makes it seem less lonesome. I am a hermit by choice because Sartre was right and life is a lot easier without dealing with other people. Not everybody feels that way. Life is lonely, even with AEIs and state-sponsored psychiatrists and the eLink and all that TV and every other drug the Corporations use to opiate the masses. Many people spend hours at these places. I suppose, if nothing else, it is a way to pass the time.

The car, looking out for me, takes me to one of the better nearby bistros, one that would not be an embarrassment to a Citizen. I order Sam to stay in the car. It is the only way I can think of to keep him out of trouble.

I can tell that this is a pretty customized place by the name: 5C1-F1 1N73R.net K4F3. Even my vast knowledge of programming lingo has only touched on L33T, from back even before they used three-dimensional programming. Now software is programmed using quantum technology, and L33T has gone the way of Latin (French, Spanish, Russian, German, Italian, Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and other dead languages with dead cultures).

The interior is decorated in translucent holograms with a sci-fi theme. Farrah Sumners (un)dressed up in her *Galaxy Express* getup, simceleb Chevrolet Matthews, alien actor krzack-13, somebody

Umali (I forget his first name, a quick checkup through my Link shows it to be Jhon) from *Quantumtech Leap*, and several others. Farther back are holos of the classic oldschool actors: Bill Shatner and Robin Williams and Mark Hamill and Britney Timberlake.

I spot the hostess, dressed in flamboyant nanogarb and Splyzed to look passably like Melis Bauerdotorg, one of the only humans from the ground-breaking TV show *Smart Dog*, the first major network show with Promoted as the main characters and one of the longer lasting shows, almost 35 years and still running (although well on to smart dog number six). There are two others present as well, patrons in their own closed booths so they can interact fully in HR without disturbing anybody else or spilling their drinks.

The Bauerdotorg fan gives a bored, inauthentic smile and states, "Hello how are you I am fine, welcome to Sci-fi Internet Cafe. What can I get you?"

"I need to use an HR link."

"0.592 cred per minute, 35.5 cred per hour," she quotes. "And you have to buy a drink."

I blink. I have met pushy merchants, but usually there is at least the illusion of choice. "I don't want a drink. I want an HR link."

She sighs heavily and rolls her eyes. "You can't use a link without buying a drink. It's a Link cafe!" she says, as though to a small, gene-regressed child.

Exasperated, I explain, "Fair enough, but I'm buying my time for the link. Why must I buy a drink I don't want as well?"

"It's the rules," she shrugs.

"What rules?!" She responds with another shrug. I wish I'd brought my hypnogun. This ditzy upstart would be clucking like a chicken until doomsday.

"This cafe is a subsidiary of VirtuStimuloCaff, Inc," she answers, clearly quoting by rote. "If you live in or are visiting the North American area you are legally required to purchase and consume at least one item from our menu upon each visit to ours or a similar vendor."

Ess. I think I do remember them passing that law a few months ago, back around mid-October. I definitely recall becoming so exceptionally pissed about *something* during that time that I went on a bender that lasted until Halloween when I woke up in Quebec dressed in a nun costume. I hope it was a costume.

I surrender to the argument in advance. "Fine. Whiskey with stims."

"We don't serve whiskey. It's not on the menu."

"Do you serve Irish coffee?"

"Yes."

"Then get me an Irish coffee, with stims, no coffee."

She grumbles but types in my order.  
 I wait. "Well?"  
 "It'll take a few minutes."  
 "Minutes for a beverage?!"  
 "We serve authentic coffee, the closest genesynth duplicate to coffee in existence, grown in an @lchemix solar sphere in India with minimal artificial flavoring, coloring, and growth hormones, and prepared by hand for greatest authenticity."  
 "By hand?"  
 "Yup," she says proudly. "We have a robot in the back that makes it perfectly."  
 Oy. (Morbidly) curious, I ask, "Now what does this have to do with why it will take entire minutes to get my whiskey?"  
 "You ordered a coffee and whiskey, with stims, no coffee. We still have to prepare the coffee even if you don't want it." Before I can demand an explanation she, infuriatingly, provides it. "The House AEI monitors the exact quantity and weight and if it doesn't match what we've sold to within 1/10th gram, it comes out of our credit and we can lose karma and it gets recorded in our permanent record."  
 "Well, I'll tell you what: while an artificial being authentically makes me authentic fake coffee, no coffee, why don't you show me to a linkport and bring it to me while I work?"  
 "I can't do that," she sniffs.  
 Of course not. "Why not?"  
 "It's self-service."  
 "Okay, this has just passed the point of ridiculous." I scan her ID tattoo quickly to get her name. "Listen...Jaysen, what is it you actually *do* here? A rob makes the drinks, an AEI could take the order, and I can't imagine enforcing a single drink per visit is cost-effective compared to Class A or B credit it costs to maintain you. What's it like spending your life in a career doing busywork?"  
 Jaysen glares at me. "I'll show you to your linkport."  
 "Thank you very much," I say as though to a small, gene-regressed child.  
 She leads me back past holos of sci-fi greats and not-so-greats, Scott Bakula and Mattin Northridge and Cera Xiu and Mohammed al Steinberg. Finally she points me at a booth in between Tylyr Toysrus and a Klingon. As she gets closer to hook me up she wonders, "Hey, are you that murder guy?"  
 "No."  
 "Oh. 'Cause you look like him."  
 "I get that all the time."  
 Her brow furrows in confusion. "Was he famous or something before?"  
 "About as famous as Jack Noir, actually."

"Oh," she says again, placing a port on my head and searching for an AOLink. "Where's your port?" I hold up my cybernetic arm, give a subvocal command for the skin to slide open and expose the port, and she plugs it into my omniport. "I don't get him."

"Who?"

"That *Noir* guy. I don't get him."

"I'm not the least bit surprised," I mutter.

She finishes hooking me up and presses a few final buttons. "There you go. I'll bring your coffee."

"Don't want it."

"Well, you're getting it anyway. Thank you for using the Sci-Fi Internet Café. Have a nice day or else." She flips a switch.

I am—

Well, dizzy, most of all. My nervous system's perceptions of the world are suddenly being overwritten by alternate electrical impulses and until I go somewhere within HR programming it seems like I'm floating with no up or down. This is traditionally a sort of dressing room where one can select or design their handle, the way that their simage appears to themselves and others in Hypereality. I do not waste any time on this and simply make myself look how I always appear, in part because I am morally opposed to people wearing masks so they can be someone other than who they are, and in part because my Kirlian aura's been tested as having a very strong morphogenic matrix (the official name for the perception of the self both mentally and physically as it relates to the rest of the world). It is part of the reason one needn't program their HR handle from scratch, or why it is slightly easier and faster to Splyze an appearance you've taken before than a totally different one. The more poignant reason for my haste, though, is because this area lacks any actual visual, auditory, kinetic, or even kinesthetic senses always makes me a little uncomfortable. Even basic things like gravity and movement need to be programmed into HR, and it can be unnerving to the first-time visitor. More unnerving is the lack of basic perceptions, such as temperature, heartbeat, breathing, and the internal perceptions of the body that we are never aware of until they are gone, or at least unsimulated. I am familiar with Hypereality, though, so I do not panic and simply place my command.

-+-Take me to VirtuoCity.-+-

There is no perception of movement, no type of transition. Instead, one moment there is nothingness, and then the next there is.

I cannot accurately describe Hypereality. It is literally like describing red to a blind man. Any idea you have of red is a dull, faded, pathetic shade of red three times removed from the red in Hypereality. Imagine Dorothy leaving the black and white and going to Oz. Then imagine that this applies not just to color but all the

senses. Hypereality blasts through all the inherent limits that the brain puts on itself to perceive at speeds where the body plateaus. My new disorientation comes not from the overload, though, but from my consciousness moving up to a more comfortable speed, approximately a thousand times faster than my normal speed (and lord knows I've had to think fast sometimes). The empty area around me becomes solid, then blurs, then fast-forward, then finally I speed up enough that everybody else seems to slow down to normal. Einstein's theory of relativity, which people in his own time couldn't fathom, is obvious to schoolchildren thanks to HR. From these people's perception I have remained solid and immobile for about a week, and it is only politeness and social convention that nobody messed with me for these seconds/days.

Hawthorne's mention of the new advance in Hypereality pushing this state to the power of twenty takes on a whole new significance. Right now I'm moving at a thousand times the speed I do in real life. In a few months it'll be more than a billion billion times faster, at  $10^{20}$  the speed of real life. Amazing.

The buildings around me are tall, narrow, cylindrical, and crystalline, waving in the breeze like palm trees. They are not buildings in the classic sense, in that no one physically lives in them (or whatever the equivalent is for a Seraph). Instead, they represent private linksites, the private cyberspace a Seraph has designated for themselves that others cannot enter without permission. The sky is somehow both yellow and blue at the same time, with occasional interruptions by people flying, faux birds, and clouds. Weirdly, looking at the clouds the sky appears blue, but when looking at the horizon it appears yellowish, and when looking straight up it is both. The wind, powerful enough to blow the reed-like buildings, does not move my hair, until I notice and then it does.

A guide comes up, a handsome, very azure mal with white hair and golden eyes, wearing a stark gray uniform. The gray is an indication of an official social aid, dressed in drab colors for the same reason that MedBots in the city are green: here, drab colors are very unnatural and therefore stand out better. His simage includes a projected super-subliminal Kirlian aura that includes all relevant information about him in a single burst. From this I learn that his name is 4llen (pronounced Allen, apparently L33T is making a bit of a comeback and that cafe was both retro and trendy at the same time) and that he is a self-designated greeter to visitors. He speaks through direct data transmission, rather than actually speaking as I feel far more comfortable doing. -+-Hello, I'm 4llen. I'm here to guide you through Hypereality. If you don't want a guide I won't be offended; if you do, the service is gratis. Welcome. How are you?+-

"How are you?" I greet.

-+I am quite well, thank you. And how are you?--

I frown, wondering why he's repeated himself, and with a bit of shock realize that he actually wants to know. Stammering, I reply, "Fine," and he nods, pleased. I am always caught off-guard by this aspect of HR inhabitants, the *homo seraphim*. They are exceptionally friendly. They have everything, so there is no need for selfishness, no need to lie, no need to distance oneself from another.

It's very disconcerting.

-+How may I be of assistance?-- I sense a quick superficial scan, a vague tingling sensation like when an AEI scans you. It is not uncommon, but it feels peculiar coming from a person. --+I see this isn't your first visit.--

"Can you point me towards the Inconspicuous Building?"

He pauses. --+Ah. You do know what is located there, don't you?--

"Quite well," I nod.

Allen shrugs resignedly. --+As you wish.-- He blinks, and links a map to me. --+I think I will abdicate as your guide, if you would not be offended.--

I could be vile and argue, and by convention Allen would be forced to keep his word. When people start living forever, after all, it becomes much more important not to offend others, especially when these people don't forget anything. It could be tomorrow, or a year later, or a million years (subjectively, since time moves so much faster) but there is little doubt that any offense will come back to you eventually. Forgetting is usually an organic process caused by either degradation or by dendrites not activating quickly enough, neither of which are problems in HR. But I am in too much of a rush and, frankly, Seraphs don't bug me like Boomers or Tolkienites or other cliques do. HR isn't so much losing oneself as finding oneself. So instead I nod and send him on his thankful way. He looks relieved, and I cannot blame him.

Just as he links away, though, another figure appears before me. He starts moving instantly so I realize he must be either an AEI or a native; now that I'm in fully assimilated to HR anyone else entering would move slowly enough that to me they'd appear more solid than these structures. What is particularly strange is that he looks just like me.

I quickly make the connection. "Sam?!"

"Hiya, boss," he says in my voice.

What's worst is not that he's disobeyed me (again!) or that he's heading into a dangerous situation, or that he is himself potentially dangerous. A robot that disobeys and goes against the Asimovian principles is effing dangerous, make no mistake. No, what's worst is that he looks more like me than me. Apparently my image is not as



authentic as I'd believed it to be, touched up subconsciously to match a slightly more idealized version of myself.

"Sam! I told you to stay in the car!"

"I did, boss. I just linked up to HR from the car's computer."

His simple honesty at his sneakiness catches me off-guard. "I didn't know the car could do that."

"I checked. It can. It's a real good car you got."

"Sam, go back. Right now."

"Why, boss?"

An order isn't good enough? Eff, this is getting worrying. "Because I am going to the Inconspicuous Building, and that's—"

"The central headquarters for the Brigand in HR, I know."

Leaving me agog a second time, he explains, "Since I got access to limitless memory I've been able to link everything! Which, by the way, is really cool!"

"Then you should know how dangerous going to the Brigand can be."

"Which is why I got your back," he counters. "If you're going into danger you need someone watching out."

I start walking, and Sam follows me. "Sam, one of the reasons I'm visiting the Brigand in HR instead of in real life is that there's nothing they can do to me here. Hypereality lets anyone in it do anything, and with my brain working so fast if there's even a subconscious suggestion of danger I'll eliminate or at least negate it. But you don't have a subconscious, and you aren't thinking any faster than you ever could. You're going to be more of a liability than an asset here."

He slaps me.

"You slapped me!"

"Proving a point, fearless leader. I don't think you've grasped what unlimited RAM means. I can think faster than you, even in HR. I can probably think faster than anyone or anything, except maybe one of those big government supercomputers, because there's no AEI on earth with the available memory I have. I know I'm at least smarter than even a Sim, and those are made to be indistinguishable from humans. I've got so much spare space right now that I bet I could rewrite HR. I've already made a veil of silence around us, which is why all these people passing around haven't contacted the censors about you shouting about the Brigand. Oh, and BTW, which of us should know better? The point is; I can be an asset. Let me help."

Whether through the shock of getting slapped or a surprisingly good point, the wind deflates from my sails. "Okay. Come along, stay quiet, and for eff's sake don't say anything."

"Great. When do we go?"

“Now.” -+-Link us to the Inconspicuous Building-+-  
*linking...eLink.sccgov.credcount.interactsite.gov/accountinfo/la*  
*ws/form19503.01/pp4321/ln41.23//*

I link my particular password to access the Brigand through this fault site, a fifty-two-string sequence that combines random symbol generation with personal thirty digit code to confuse any decryption program that focuses on one or the other. -+-PASSWORD: 22W-AJRX71P-6640-AAJ-01-Q-LETMEINGO

DDAMMITNOWMOTHEREFFER-1A-+-<ENTER>

*redirecting...eLink.brigand.com/home//*

This time there IS a perception of transition as Sam and I are redirected to the Brigand's site. There is definitely a feeling of omnipotence at changing my surroundings with a thought, but there is also a definite feeling of vertigo that heartily outweighs it. This is, after all, nothing so simple as changing linksites. The Brigand homepage is similar to my own Jack Noir linksite, in that there is no actual address. However, unlike mine, where my site links to an inquirer's address, the Brigand had enough clout and enough owed favors back during the Great Remodel that they were able to designs little bits of HR to their own specifications. Rather than a single site, there is actually a large network of thousands of other linksites with little bits of hidden programs that combine to create an amalgam of an actual site. It is here that the Inconspicuous Building exists, or “how” rather than “here,” because by its nature this particular mountain comes to Mohammed.

A large, square, white, windowless building appears in an open area between the waving crystalline seaweed trees. It is the only structure present whereby, even if I look very hard, I am still unable to see the content and makeup within. This is no accident; the building is imperceptible to all, even to the passing bystanders, except to Sam and myself since only we have utilized my password for access. The only inherent jeopardy of Hypereality is that, since it is entirely a world of programming, one's perceptions are therefore limited to their programming. But the argument can be made that this is true to Reality as well.

The front entrance to the Inconspicuous Building is password-locked and doesn't actually accept any password. The actual entrance is around the back. Go figure.

As Sam and I enter, the door closes and disappears behind us. A series of mirrors materialize around us, reflecting ourselves back *ad infinitum*. This area is more than just neat effects, it is a LocksBox™. This highly metaphorical computer program, referencing the old myth that stepping between two mirrors traps souls, is (pun intended) reflected here, since any attempt to link out of a LocksBox severs the offender's server and snares them here until the Brigand says they can

go. And that would probably involve some work on the offender's part. I'm not sure, since I've never been stupid enough to try.

Lifting my gaze toward the ceiling, I summon, "Okay, I'm here. Now what?"

I am expecting the lilted voice of Ser Viss, the androgynous simage of the Brigand employee that normally greets me, so I am surprised when a disembodied, omnipresent, English voice speaks, "Citizen Haiku Down. Hello how are you I am fine. You've brought a friend."

Without anywhere specific to focus on (even the floor and ceiling reflect) I focus on one reflection of myself to speak towards. "I've come for my brother."

"Ah, yes, the duplicate you set in your place. We were less than pleased at discovering you had tried to fool us."

"I didn't try to fool you. I tried to fool a PSICoFac program. You tried to kidnap me at the wrong time, that's all."

The irony seems lost on by disembodied inquisitor. Three-dimensional holotext appears of my bounty and slowly begins to rotate. "But now you have come yourself. That solves some trouble. It is enough at least that we are not too upset at your deception."

"You're giving me way too much credit. I'm a victim of circumstance here. I didn't even know about the bounty before I got kidnapped the first time. Well, not much before." I pause and ask, "Which begs the question, if the Brigand is going after me, that means you didn't put that bounty on me. So who, if not you?"

"That would be telling," Sam quotes quietly in his own English accent, "We want information." I shush him quickly.

The Brigand rep either does not get the reference or deigns not to notice it. "It would be quite unprofessional to give away such knowledge as that, Citizen Down."

Sam taps me and gestures towards a particular mirror. Despite this room's precautions against linking, he passes on that it is that mirror that our speaker is observing us from. Whether the speaker has actually put himself behind it or is just using it as a reference point, I at least now know which way to look. I turn to this mirror, and shrug. "Okay, we'll do this the old fashioned way. How much?"

"How much what?"

Check in two moves. "How much for the name of the source of my woes? As far as I can figure the most likely person to want me dead is the same one who wanted Desmond Arc dead and is looking for a convenient patsy. As it happens, I've just come into a fair share of funds, and I'm willing to pay double that bounty to walk away with a name."

Check. The voice hesitates, and I can tell they're going for it. This gives me three pieces of information:

Alpha: whoever is doing this isn't doing it with Brigand permission (which, to be fair, is not to say that they are doing it *against* permission, either). If the Brigand hires you to do something, you do it. Fail, and we're talking about getting fitted for cement sneakers and tossed into a quantum singularity to "sleep with the mesons." Folks in the Brigand don't disobey orders. At least not more than once. Doing so is seeing Darwin in action.

Beta: if this is not sanctioned, I can be relatively positive that mom isn't involved. The job of Mr. Ection is pretty high on the hierarchy, and though hierarchy is a lot less important without bodily chemicals, it still plays a fairly major role in managing outlaws. If anything like taking on my bounty were to be discussed by anyone in charge, it is unlikely that mom would not be in a position to hear about it and to either stop it or warn me.

Gamma: if they are doing this on their own, for money, and can't manage to hide a moment's hesitation to bluff, it indicates that they are, like myself, not a native of HR. No Seraphim would let such a time gap slip. This is someone from outside, working using Brigand connections.

After too long, the holotext disappears and a different voice says, "I don't think we can accept that offer, Citizen Down." I wait to hear from the first speaker, but control has either been turned over or given back to this, the regular speaker whom I recognize as Ser Viss.

"Alright, Viss," I nod, changing tracks in conversation far more facilely than I am really doing mentally, "Than what will it take?"

"We cannot give you the name. However, there is something else we can barter."

"Do tell."

"It has come to the attention of those in the Brigand that there is something going on, politically-speaking, in the upper echelons of the Solar Corporate Council. A buyout the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Takeover in 2067."

I rub my chin. I am momentarily distracted, surprised to find that even in HR I have a five o'clock shadow. "Interesting... Wait, no it's not. I believe this is the part where I ask what that has to do with me."

"With your, sorry, with Jack Noir's new position in the *Urban Chronicle*, you can get information that we can't. The *Chronicle* is widely known by those who know to have a great deal of 'protection' from Bobert Smythe, and since they are his pet project they get access to vast quantities of information before it gets 'reinterpreted' for the news. But the Brigand were never able to get into the *Chronicle's* stores, and their security's a bitch, pardon the language." I smile to myself, amused rather than angered at catching the subtle mindgames Viss is playing, reminding me that the Brigand (what with their long

association with me) know of my alter ego and with ser expletives reminding me that se is beyond the touch of the law. “If you can agree to be our inside mal, getting us what we’ll need to know to weather this upcoming storm, I think we’ll be able to see free to...releasing our captive into your custody.”

Sam looks pleased as punch. “I was right! They do want information!”

“Sam, shut up,” I groan tiredly, and he does. I seem to consider the offer for much longer than I actually do. The chance to betray my blackmailers? Gee, let me think. “Deal. Provided a guarantee that Evangelion isn’t harmed or coerced in any way, and that he’s released in the same or better condition than I left him, and I’ll pass on any interesting tidbits I find to you.” I pause, and consider, “And, if I do end up in Prohibition or dead out of this messy charade, he still gets to go. You have no reason to keep him then anyway.” Viss grumbles at that but agrees. “Skippy. Get me a contract, a pen and a LEGAL-Fac program.”

“I can do that part, boss,” Sam volunteers with a wink, and remembering how surprisingly capable he’s been in understanding and manipulating HR, I acquiescent with a nod.

New holotext pops up, a long legal document that Sam examines with seemingly casual indifference, and quickly nods. “On the up and up, Mr. D.” I sign and scan. The holotext disappears, and a note on my OptiComp link indicates that, although I can’t access it in here, a duplicate of this contract has been mailed to me.

“Can I see him?” I ask.

After a moment, checking for permission more likely than compassion, Viss agrees. “Okay. Link here. You’ll have two minutes.”

A door appears before me, and as I go through—

*Linking... eLink.brigand.com/citadel/vidfeed.14004012 a3/vid/*

—I see myself, that is, I see Evangelion Splyzed to look like myself, sitting on a small cot in a bare cell. It is not a bad cell, it is clean and well lit, but it is a cell nonetheless. He looks okay, at least his simage looks okay, but he’s practically standing still. I wonder why he has chosen to look like me even in HR, let alone why the Brigand would allow it. Then I realize that I am actually seeing him in realtime, that he is actually imprisoned somewhere and I am viewing him through a security camera in his cell.

-+You’ve got him locked up?!-+ I ask (link) outraged.

The handle of Ser Viss appears in the cell, or rather se inputs serself into the image of the scene so se appears to be inside it. “We felt it would be best if this Haiku Down were kept out of sight, at least until we could track the real one down. At the very least he would be in much greater danger wandering around with everybody

who sees him believing he is worth 50,000 credits.”

I wonder if that was the reason Evangelion seemed so hesitant to Splyze my DNA. If so it shows a remarkable degree of foresight, especially for Eva. I am disheartened that I didn’t consider it. Of course, I recall, I didn’t know about it at the time, so I don’t beat myself up too much. Ess, too much has been happening too quickly. I need time to catch my breath and consider everything.

Can’t afford that right now though. Oh well.

I turn to Viss. -+-He’s unharmed?--+

“And will remain so, I assure you.”

Eva’s fine. The Brigand, in their own peculiar honor-among-thieves way, keeps their promises. I wish there were something more I could do here. I can’t leave him, but I can’t accomplish anything by staying, especially when I’m not physically present and in HR anyway.

Eff.

-+-Okay. Let’s go. I’ve got work to do.--+

Viss nods amiably. “As do we all. A pleasure doing business with you, Citizen Down. Watch your back out there.”

He snaps, and—

*Linking...eLink.brigand.com/homefront.home//*

—Sam and I find ourselves once again outside the Inconspicuous Building, a moment before it wavers away like a disappearing mirage. The datascape around the area it had displaced rapidly flows back, the change unnoticed and unnoticeable to any of the Seraphim nearby.

“That’s out of the way,” I murmur. “Just wish Viss had given me a lead. And I wonder who the aitch that other voice was?”

“I wonder,” Sam said, “what that talk of politics was about. I’ve been scanning the poli-sites at 586 Tb a second ever since we left and there’s nadda, zip, zilch, squat, and bupkis regarding buyouts. There’s talk nowhere in any corporate powers of moving any monies of significance. Only thing unusual in the upper echelons was Bobert Smythe’s donation to the R%ngo of five hundred kilos of raw fish, and the highest actual monies transfer anywhere is...Oo! Oo! Wait a nanosecond!” He blinks a bit, and pulls up holotext with a holo of...Oh, god.

The Urban Chronicle Building.

Sam reads, “‘Due to the untimely death of Desmond Arc at 00h01m37 on January 1, 2150, the *Urban Chronicle Newspaper* will come under the management of Danael Mars, vice president of the *Chronicle*.’ Which would be suspicious, I suppose, except that you already ruled him out as a suspect.” He continues reading, “‘In recognition of his promotion from president *pro temp*,’ and, I think, because it is established corporate tradition to merit reward with more

reward, ‘Mars will also be given an official position on the board of directors, making him an official stockholder of the company.’”

“Thank you, Sam,” I grumble. “Ess, it wasn’t Mars, I know that, I touched him with a Psi-Splyze and it wasn’t him. It wasn’t Petre. What else? Whoever set up that bounty had Brigand connections. Is it likely to assume that the person who set that bounty was the same person who set me up for murder?”

“Occam’s razor,” Sam shrugs. “Or, alternately, faulty pattern recognition?”

“Explain.”

“Noir, September 18, 2147, paragraph 3. People find patterns where they may not exist.”

“You’re quoting me now?!” I exclaim incredulously.

“Paraphrasing,” he shrugs. “You’re assuming that whoever set that bounty set it to take you out of the holopicture, to cover for your murder. But remember that just because two things happen together it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re related, no more so than lightning striking after you pull a random lever. Of course, with weather control in certain areas, that actually *may* be related, but—”

“Sam,” I interrupt, “the point. Please. Even in HR I don’t have a great deal of time I can afford to waste.”

“The bounty is on Haiku Down. Not Jack Noir. Haiku Down. No matter how many people lately seem to know that there’s no difference, there are still a hundred billion or so people that don’t. So if these two things are connected, the bounty and the murder, than whoever set that reward would have to know about that connection, and we can name those: Desmond Arc and Danael Mars.”

Back to Danael Mars. But then I think of a few names Sam hasn’t. “And Mom, and Ser Viss, and a few others in the Brigand. Possibly Petre Flugmansk, the security guard, although I’ve already eliminated him as a suspect. And Gal Friday.”

“Gal Friday?”

“The alien ambassador at the Lansing ETR. She somehow knew sensed it. She...I dunno, she...smelled it, or something.”

“Oh, you mean !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*.” Sam’s expression (my expression) focuses, accessing some arcane linksite somewhere on extees, then quickly he blinks, “Ah. The R%ngo use a system of pheromonal communication, evolved to a level that puts ReScent™ technology to shame.” I don’t know how, but he communicates the trademark symbol while speaking. “Their entire gelatinous epidermis can ‘taste’ a single particle with 146.82 times the accuracy of a bloodhound’s nose, assuming there were any bloodhounds alive to sniff, as well as temperature sensitivity and a genetically administered generalized photosensitivity from their Promotion by the Salis. They have two additional forms of follicle-thick appendages, one that

releases communicative pheromones, and another that provides more generalized, source-gathering scents as well as ‘eating’ stray odors, thus limiting communicative traffic.” He pauses and wonders, “Peculiar that such alien life could understand the pheromonal releases of a human, and vice versa.”

I shrug. “She had a small machine that translated what she said into English. I imagine they would be nice enough to reverse the process for their diplomats. Can we please get back to me now?”

“Okay: Arc, Mars, mommy, Viss, some Brigand, and Ambassador !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\* all knew this connection. Anybody else?”

I consider, and then a little lightbulb goes on above my head, and because this is HR it happens literally. “Hawthorne!”

“The Regulator?”

“That actually makes some damned good sense,” I mull. “Se certainly made it clear that se hates me. Se’s also made it clear that se wants me dead, and se’ll make sure it happens if given one-tenth of a chance. And se’s got that android flunky; andy’s aren’t bound by the Five Laws like robots are, and as a Regulator could certainly get into the Urban Chronicle Building. With ser negative Kirlian aura se wouldn’t even leave a karmic trace of murder.”

“Except,” Sam counters, “as a Regulator Vai Hawthorne wouldn’t have to spend good credits to make sure you were dead.” Noticing my reaction, he gives an apologetic moue. I do not look good making a moue. “Sorry, boss, but it’s true. Hawthorne has enough circumstantial evidence to pin this crime on you, and se as much as said se would if nothing better turned up, especially considering the sort of pressure se’s probably under from the Solar Corporate Council. The only reason you’re not blanked already is that you’re a Citizen, and that there’s probably a lot of political pressure on Special Services to find someone *other* than a Citizen to blame. If a Denizen or Tenant kills a Citizen than it’s not a Sophoid murdering a Sophoid, just a pre-Sentient or quasi-Sentient creature killing a Sophoid who had no reason to suspect danger; the GCS could write it off as a sort of Act of God, like a tourist getting mauled.” He considers, reviewing matters faster than I ever could. “Hm. But then, that may also be a very good motive, now that I think about it. As a Citizen there’s no chance you’re ever going to be actually liquidated. If Hawthorne really did want you dead, really dead, hiring someone to bump you off might be the best way to do it. And as a Regulator, se’d know all the best people, and that might also explain how a legitimate bounty could get out that didn’t go through either the Black Market® or the Brigand; I searched those sources already. But then there’s one other thing you’ve got to consider.”

“What?”



"This is still assuming that Desmond Arc's death and your bloodmoney are connected. But maybe whoever set it got cheesed that you became a Citizen out of the blue, or just plain doesn't like you."

Sarcastically, I ask, "Oh, but who in Earth and Heaven wouldn't like li'l old me?"

"Well, Civilian Shon D'Walmart, for one."

That one came out of left field! "D'Walmart? He likes me, and besides he's too dumb to put a hit out. Jeezus, he couldn't get water out of a boot with instructions on the sole!"

"Two days ago, perhaps not. But you left him alone in a Class A apartment with permission to use a modified Shaper, and since I'd disconnected myself from the building by then either Porter or House would have had to take over that function, and without my own modified programming they don't have anything that tells them to stop. Even when someone is ordering enough to overdose on something. And what was the last thing C. D'Walmart was obsessing over?"

"DataJax," I answer.

"DataJax and, quite likely, brain boosters and Stims and neurepinephrine and other mental enhancers. You know Shon. You've complained enough about him. He gets an idea into his head and runs it to the ground. With the amount and quantity he could get from your Shaper, I don't doubt he could quickly become sufficiently intelligent to eventually piece together enough to realize that you didn't get your Citizenship completely legitimately. And if not that, there's a pretty thorough list detailing the crap you've pulled on him over the years. With the access and ingenuity he's no doubt overdeveloped by this time, I imagine, in fact I'm positive, that he'd get quite peeved."

"How can you be so positive?"

"Because he's standing right behind you, and he looks effin' pissed."

*Noir, December 19, 2142*

I've been a'thinking, and my big ol' brain has reached an interesting sociological insight. Now, there is no doubt of humanity's inventive creativity. After all, I am typing these words on a holographic keyboard as the information is loaded onto the eLink through my SatLink phone, instantly converted into seven different sensory mediums either individually or simultaneously experienced anywhere in the universe, to humans, aliens, Promoted, robs, AEIs, and *homo seraphim* living in Hypereality. So it felt kind of odd when I realized that, at least technologically speaking, human beings have

made only four significant developments since the dawn of time.

I speak not of individual inventions. Of course there have been more than four of those. I am speaking of technological *paradigms*, ways of looking at the universe and thinking up ways to alter it more effectively.

The first paradigm was physical technology. Physical technology works on the principle of cause and effect. Push the button, get the treat. It is the basic recognition that A leads to B, and was present the moment the monolith started humming and one monkey beat another to death with a club. Like most important fundamental principles, this modest beginning led to significant effects. A creature that can find rational patterns overcomes the burden of a lot of evolution. Fire, the wheel and pointed sticks fall into these categories, and a little later the six basic machines (lever, wheel & axle, inclined plane, wedge, screw and pulley), and then even later more complex – but still basically physical – implements. These were simple technological tools that impacted upon the environment. You didn't need to know how they worked to know that they did.

The second paradigm was symbolic technology. This is the ability to represent one thing for another, and allows the development of language, writing, and math. It is not these innovations per se that are so important, but the mindset necessary to use them. Part of the reason nobody remembers anything before the age of one, one-and-a-half is that our brains haven't developed to the point that they can think in this symbolic way. Symbols allow abstract thought, recitation, communication, and conjecture. The mind that recognizes that pictures can be words, that understands quantity and action can be represented via symbols, that can consider several possibilities beyond instinctual reactions, and that can check and verify this understanding with others, this mind has enormous potential to change the world. From this paradigm develop architecture, art, storytelling, algebra, geometry, calculus, and trigonometry, astronomy, law, abstract thinking, and all those other good things we got from the Greeks that they stole from the Chinese. And with these innovations came ways of further enhancing existing technology, such as studying geometry to improve structural designs.

The third paradigm was scientific technology. Scientific technology came about with a methodological approach to this improvement. This essentially consists of creating hypotheses, testing falsifiable data against reality and nulls, disregarding negative outcomes and accepting the result as true until proven otherwise. Thunder being caused by God bowling is a fun idea, but electrical atmospheric disturbances can be scientifically proven, with the additional benefit of, y'know, being right. The scientific paradigm allows development to progress at an exponential rate. Combined

with the first two technologies, change comes rapidly. Science itself really only produced a few new things: medicine, electricity, physics, mechanics, computers, genetics, and cyberscapes, but what came from those few things were powerful indeed.

At the moment, we are in our fourth stage of development, which I'm going to call composite technology. Composite technology is the paradigm of creating new technologies by combining old ones. For instance, merge computer programming, psychology, and neurosurgery, and you've got a good foundation for the science of Promotion and Artificial EmotIntelligences. This philosophy goes beyond taking an item and sticking a clock in it. I'm talking about creation not by accident, not by physical study, and not by controlled experimentation, but by coalescing juxtaposition. We are at a point technologically that it makes sense to consider medicine for machines, pheromones for communication, and genetics for education. Astrophysics found black holes, temporal sciences found space-time dilation, and gravitonics developed anti-grav, all via scientific means, but it takes a remarkable mind to even think of using those three together and Muhammad knows what else to use a microscopic black hole to power a city. Even more impressive: earlier in the week, Drs. Sindi Stansislaw, Fredrick R. Lethem, Bruce McIntyre, Kendra Li Wu-Bentancourt, and Marshall Mathers IV presented the SCC with an alternate energy source, a new process of using Shapers and Quantum to form baby universes, forming massively dense particles and using Quantumbox-type AELs to initiate the probability that these will collide, essentially recreating the Big Bang in miniature as a source of power.

But even with a mere four amplifications of our technology, we still lag far behind our hindbrains. I've been doing routine hacking and found dee disturbing news. The SCC Scientific Bureau has decided that in addition to building new power plants and engines with this technology, they're also going to build a few bombs in case any aliens (or, they intimate, rebel human planets) ever get too big for their britches. Also, since their announcement, Mathers and Wu-Bentancourt have disappeared, Lethem's been put in Prohibition for unacceptable public pheromonal abuse (which as far as I can interpret means excessive body odor), and the Seraphims Stanislaw and McIntyre have not been heard from in three days, the HR equivalent of over eight years.

We know so much, and that knowledge doubles every second. Technology has reached the point where it is harder to think of relevant applications for innovations than to obtain the necessary data to create them in the first place. As a species we are ingenuitive to the point of compulsion, and even with only a few basic paradigms we have managed to recreate the universe in a bottle.

So why is it, with all our ingenuity, that all we do is to keep creating new ways to hurt and harm and smother and destroy?

*Hypereality sub-forum limited use chatroom 934005-A10-194:  
17h20m21s14, January 3, 2150*

A quick turn unfortunately confirms Sam's assertion. D'Walmart is indeed behind me. And he does indeed look effin' pissed.

Actually, he looks, if anything, like an old Japanese ink drawing of an *oni*, a demon. Rage has exaggerated his size and features, stretching them into grotesque parodies. He stands three meters at least, and probably closer to three and a half. His chest heaves with heavy breaths that expel black smoke and blue flame. His teeth and nails have contorted to fangs and claws. The only recognizable thing about him is the screenname in his simage.

Shon ALWAYS goes over the top.

"You bleopard!" he shouts. His voice is as altered as his features, a deep boom that his sabertooth cusps give a lisp. "You played with me, taunted me, made fun of me. *Wó huo dàh luh?*! And for eight years! EIGHT SMEGGING YEARS!" Fire issue forth from his unhinged jaw, the flames wrapping around his body like snakes before they fade.

He storms towards me, covering several meters each step. Local HR begins to match his mood, storm clouds gathering and the atmosphere dimming. Most of the native Seraphs link to other areas, avoiding trouble rather than getting caught in whatever foolishness Shon is up to. He is limited to melodrama, after all, since in HR he cannot possibly hurt me. "Look, D'Walmart—"

He hits me.

I go flying.

I keep flying.

I land an eternity later almost at the edge of the chat room, which should, at least from my perceptions, be incapable of ending.

And I hurt!

I don't know how, but I hurt! Really badly! My jaw is sore and my ass is bruised and there's a tweak in my spine that under the circumstances shouldn't be possible. D'Walmart's somehow overcome the limitations of HR and is able to cause another pain without their consent! Figure if anyone is too dumb to understand the rules of HR, it'd be him.

Or maybe I just had my guard down and let him. No sense in making that mistake again.

I focus and actively make myself completely invulnerable, then equally large as Shon, then infinitely stronger. It takes more than just

casual thoughts to change oneself this much, but it is just a matter focused visualization, no harder than imagining myself differently in front of the mirror. Except that here it actually happens. As a last touch, my trench coat and clothes transform into black leather and my fedora melts into RayBand sunglasses, traditional virtual fighting garb since the twenty-first century.

“Alright, D’Walmart. Let’s tango.”

He hits me again.

OW!!!

I find myself in another part of VirtuoCity, meaning I’ve been hit hard enough to rip through a few linksites and into another link, which, by all rights, should be impossible. I don’t know if Shon or I somehow *wanted* something for me to hit through and these are just constructs of HR, but regardless of how I am now in a chatroom for Tolkienite lesbian elves into BDSM. A half-dozen elf “maidens” who look more like Farrah Sumners with pointy ears than anything that ever came out of Middle Earth glare at me with a combination of surprise and resentment at my sudden intrusion. It is not kosher, after all, to enter private chatrooms with clearly posted agendas without, at the very least, changing your simage to fit in. Before I have time to apologize for the *faux pas*, explain my arrival, or even orient myself very well, D’Walmart has ripped (not linked but ripped) into the room, looking even larger. He picks me up by the head (and by the way, ow some more!) and hits me again.

I get knocked into a forum discussion of the benefits of the nanotechnological revolution as regarded the development of the corporate powers in the early twenty-second century, as hosted by Dr. Moses Zimbawa’mfuma, a title I only catch because I had read about it earlier in the week and was interested in crashing it, ideally with that computer virus I got off of Chaney in November that lists every pornsite anybody exposed to it has ever visited. There is a fairly large crowd here, both of Seraphs and regular HR visitors, and there is a surprised burst of outrage and shock as I, from their perspective, go flying through the doors and halfway down the auditorium into a crowd of people. Although Shon seems to have found some way to hurt me, I cannot do the same, and so my fall does little but disturb these people. Since this is HR, though, and people are usually well-mannered, at least no one knocks me away either.

D’Walmart appears just above me, having linked this time, and lifts a massive foot to stomp me down. If I had bones here my ribs would be crushed. I vomit out way more blood than I would in reality, the quantity about matching the pain. He reaches down and grabs my trench coat, hitting me with each accusation. “You served me urine!” POW! “You made me act like a chicken!” WHACK! “You ridiculed me to the world!” BAM! “You made a fool of me in

front of the whole world!” BIFF!

Some smartass in the crowd has started inserting action words around us, assuming that this is staged. After all, no one in HR would can get hurt without their consent, right?

How has he done this, anyway?

Before I can even begin to formulate an answer, or even really intelligibly formulate the question, he tosses me down, lifts his foot high, and pounds me through the floor.

I land in the center of an onLink auction for a pair of SmarTextile nano-nylon rainbow socks. There are only two people bidding and one hiding just outside waiting to snipe the auction. As D’Walmart links in, preparing to hit me again, I get an idea, and force myself to focus enough to form a link. I can sense D’Walmart searching for me, but since I have a better search engine than he does I find what I need faster. I track an online auction for a LocksBox program ending within the next few nanoseconds, and find one for sale over in Osaka. The price is exorbitant and I’ll have to outbid about ninety other people, but I don’t have a lot of time to be picky. I bid triple the current price just as the auction ends and, since the LocksBox is really just programmed data, I download it immediately.

Just in time, too, as D’Walmart appears before me. “You fed me feces!”

This time I let him pummel me, not that I’ve got much of an alternative, and as his hamhands lambaste my spine into another site, I drop the LocksBox.

I land (finally) in a literature appreciation sight on page 746 of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, transliterated into a holographic tactile medium, as Pierre gets the shizzle beaten out of him by Adráksin. As rapidly as I can manage, I haul myself to my feet and fight for my vision to unblur. First thing, I catch my breath and banish the pain, followed by focusing on repairing my o-so-battered body, then my excessively tattered garb. Eventually satisfied that I am presentable (and no longer in imminent danger of collapse) I go back just outside the previous Linksite and take a look.

D’Walmart, as I had figured, has tried to link out. After all, it would take an incredible effort to keep ripping both his and my handle spontaneously into new eleven-dimensional lines of quantum programming each time he hit me. So after the first few attacks he began linking so he could maintain the power to blast me through them. And when he tried to link out with an active LocksBox, it trapped him there, and will keep him there until I release him. Along with ninety other people, but at the moment Shon appears intent on destroying just me.

I release the bystanders one by one with apologies until only Shon remains, then shrink his cell. Eventually, he is forced to retract

himself to a normal, manageable size. He glares at me with hate. Everybody is omnipotent in HR, but at the moment the tables have turned and I am more omnipotent than he is. He can do anything but get out, and since I am out, in this respect he is impotent.

“So, D’Walmart,” I shrug. “Guess we’ve got some things to clear up.”

“Eff you, Haiku. You were a prick to me for almost a decade and you deserve what I’m gonna do to you.”

“And you deserved everything I did to you,” I counter. “Well, maybe not the urine, I’ll concede that. Yeah, I was cruel to you, Shon, and I was probably wrong on most counts, but I don’t feel the least bit bad about it. Because I was cruel to you for eight years, but for eight years *you let me do it*. I never visited you, Shon; you kept coming to my house to be abused. I mocked you because you let yourself be mocked. You chose to play the fool, and if you want to blame me for that, that’s your prerogative. You’re a child, D’Walmart. You want everything you don’t have right now, and everything you do have you want bigger and better and newer and shiner in a prettier box. *Asokos* like you are the reason the Council can do whatever it wants, and for exactly the same reason. Because you let it.”

“*Sonna-no uso-dayo!* I’m different now,” he shouts. “I’m smarter than you ever were, you feeb! I’ve downloaded more DataJax than—”

“You’re doing exactly the same effing thing!” I interrupt. “You’ve got no sense of perspective, no switch in your head that tells you when too much is enough. This is the same ess, different day. Don’t you get that? More, more, more. New, different, distracting, anything instead of do something effing useful! You know so much more than me? Fine. Tell me if you know how to be a human being instead of a puppet.”

He starts to shout, but doesn’t seem able to think of anything to say.

I get an IM from Sam wondering where I am, and I reply back with the Linksite address. Before I can warn him not to enter the site itself, though, he already has, and D’Walmart has grabbed him from behind. He turns to me and creates a gun, an old-fashioned, generic black bullet-blaster visualized by someone who has never actually seen one, and points it at Sam’s head.

And now he’s turned the tables again. He has a hostage.

“Okay, Haiku, let me out of this thing or I’ll kill your AEI. I traded the Brigand your brother for the tech to destroy you in here, and I’ll be dee-ed if I’m not gonna get to use it on you.” Well, that clears one mystery up.

Before I can do anything, Sam turns to look at his captor. “Hey, D’Walmart, little tip.” He reaches up faster than even suped-up HR

eyesight can follow and, to both D'Walmart's and my astonishment, bends the gun until it breaks. "The boss hates being called Haiku." With that, he spins to his left and performs a martial arts move that seems like a combination between tai chi and Nagasaki.

D'Walmart flies against the edge of the LocksBox and does not so much hit the wall as he does indent it.

Sam turns back to me. "Hey, F.L., mind if I meticulously kick every square centimeter of his ass?"

"Sam!" I shout, which is the only thing either of us can do before D'Walmart rams him from behind.

Being so enormous, and with some sort of illicit technology allowing him to hurt another in Hypereality, he should send Sam flying across the chatroom, possibly even ripping through cyberspace and inserting his code into another random area like he was mine. Instead, somehow, Sam remains standing stock still. D'Walmart's attack moves him no more than he would be able to move an unwilling robot in real life, or for that matter a stone pillar.

Shon notices my questioning, bewildered expression and shrugs. "I figured out how his system works, boss. He's using a Sony-Pentium HR138b™, item #14-458920-19506-2002-02. It quintuples user speeds in HR." D'Walmart throws a punch from behind, but Sam moves his head, grabs the fist, and flips him forward, bending the arm at the wrist. If this were real, Shon would be screaming from the pain of the position, but even in HR it is still incapacitating. If he were thinking clearly, Shon could easily use abilities available in HR to make his arm bend as malleably as rubber, but he is obviously not thinking clearly, and even if he were, D'Walmart thinking clearly is not much threat. "But introducing it would have meant completely reformatting Hypereality as well as being a lot harder an interface than our current versions, so it was deemed unprofitable and turned down from production. Also, it tended to hyperstimulate the hindbrain and adrenal gland, leading to a great deal of violent and/or paranoid behavior and eventual brain damage and reduction of higher cognitive functions." D'Walmart reaches with his other arm to grip the AEI, but Sam just grab it and flips him around, forcing both arms now into uncomfortable, immovable positions. "With the HR138b, he's able to intercept your own commands and override them with his own, moving faster even than data. That's how he was able to actually knock your code around." D'Walmart begins to add shouting with his struggling, so Sam moves his arms back further and, for thoroughness, gives a slight kick in the ribs. Looking up at me, he concludes, "But I can move faster."

"Get out here, Sam," I command, and putting thought to action spit him out of the LocksBox. He disappears with a pop, letting Shon fall a few inches to the ground. By this point D'Walmart is quite



unwell and shrinking back into his normal appearance, his unconscious morphogenic matrix asserting its authority over his simage now that the consciousness isn't up to the task. "Explain how you were able to do that."

Sam shrugs again. Though he looks like me, he moves much differently than I do. In fact, now that I look, he doesn't quite look as much like me as he did before. "*Sugu-dakara*; easy. Once I figured out what he was doing I just borrowed a bit more computing space to move faster. Um, on a related note, there may have been a slight brownout in Canada."

"Where in Canada."

"All of Canada." I feel tension growing behind my eyes, but Sam continues, "Anyway, since I was able to move faster than D'Walmart, I was able to do exactly to him what he was doing to you, block his commands and insert my own. And thusly, brought forth his uppance."

His smile grows in proportion to my frown. "Don't explain how you defeated him. How were you able to hurt him in the first place?"

"Oh, that First Law business? Boss, first off, D'Walmart isn't properly human. Same as with your three kidnappers. The government and law makes it clear that only Citizens are deemed Sophoid, and therefore fully human. And besides which, we're in Hypereality. Even if I were to have a programming conflict about hurting a human, that," he points at D'Walmart, "isn't human. It is the simage of a quasi-Sophoid, the digital computer representation of the mind of a pseudo-person. That's like three times removed from a human being, *ne ce spa*?"

"Non," I reply flatly, quite aware that an Artificial EmotIntelligence has used two foreign languages in as many minutes. "An AEI should not be able to hurt a human. Period."

"Well, then how's this? D'Walmart was clearly aitchbent on destroying you and would have beat you to death, and in HR that mean leaving you braindead in a coma, and that takes weeks for them to fix, sometimes months. Under the First Law of modified Asimovian programming, I was fully justified in causing minor harm to D'Walmart if the only alternative was letting him cause great harm to you."

"Repeat that last sentence."

"I was fully justified in causing minor harm to—"

"State the First Law."

"A robot cannot harm a human being—"

"State what you called D'Walmart."

"A pseudo-person."

"And you find no conflict in there at all?"

"Nope. Not how I explained it."

I stare at him. “Sam, summon a PSICoFac program and inform it of the situation.”

The holographic representation of Dr. Ann Brovlovski, who restructured psychology once again in the 2030s, appears before us. Since this is HR, the only reason I can imagine that it has the translucent appearance of a hologram is so people would feel more comfortable seeing it with this more customary look. I turn to Dr. Brovlovski and ask, “Based on the information just presented, if the average human made these claims, how would you diagnose them?”

“That would depend upon genetics, gender, age, race, and socioeconomic status.”

That was the problem with Brovlovski. She considered so much in the makeup of why people acted the way they did that under Brovlovskianism there are almost no universal psychological truths. I roll my eyes. “Okay, if I made these claims, how would you diagnose me.”

“I would suggest you were experiencing cognitive dissonance based in a need for authority and self-aggrandizement of the ego, coupled with a conflict between socio-moral upbringing, situational necessity, and bio-genetic compulsion.”

“Hey, Down!” D’Walmart interrupts with a shout from the LocksBox, “You gonna let me pound your face or what?!”

I wave to shoo the hologram and turn to him. “Shon, two things, okay? 1) Shut, 2) Up. The grown ups are talking now.”

“*Nani temē!* You don’t get to act like a bleepard to me for so long and not let me get revenge!”

Sighing tiredly, I mute the LocksBox. “Sam, as the nice doctor has just pointed out, you aren’t well, and you are dangerous.”

“Ah, c’mon, F.L.—”

“You just browned out half a continent in order to beat a man up! Nothing about that screams responsible use of power.”

“But—”

“No! Reference Spider-Man and responsibility. Sam, the only reason humans trust talking machines is that they know they’re harmless. You are not harmless. You have proved as much. Now I want you to promise, PROMISE, that when we get out of here you’re going to get back into your robot body and go home!”

“Bo-oss—” he whines.

“Promise it, Sam. This is too big a deal and I don’t have the time or resources to deal with it right now.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. Swear to God. On my mother’s grave. Scout’s honor.” His image’s chest spreads open to expose the heart, and he crosses it rapidly.

“You’re neither a Scout, orphan, nor Christian,” I note, but it’ll have to do. I turn back toward the LocksBox where D’Walmart has

returned to ass-kicking *oni* shape. “How long do you think I can keep him in there?”

“Not long, I’m afraid, boss. Probably not even by the time you reach an exit point. This sort of tech is frowned on by the Guild of TechnoMages. Someone’s bound to come along pretty soon and let him out; that’s just good manners. Only reason no one is now, I’d guess, is because we’re here and passing Seraphs consider it impolite to interfere. If nothing else a LinkMaster will be by as soon as someone in charge of noticing an active LocksBox reports it.”

I muse for a while. I need time. That’s what all this is about, after all.

Then I hit upon a scheme, a delightfully straightforward proposal involving one stone and two birds.

“Okay, new plan. Sam, rescind your previous promise.”

“Done and doner! So I get to come along?”

“No. Instead you are to stay here and watch D’Walmart, and make sure he doesn’t get out.” I notice that inside the LocksBox Shon has heard my order and does not look pleased. He impotently bangs on the borders, and I casually raise my middle finger and turn back to quaff Sam’s inevitable protest. “This is important, Sam. Capital I. Capital MPORTANT. I can’t get back out of here with D’Walmart after my head...” I trail off as something occurs to me. “Do you think he initiated that bounty?”

“I’ll scan,” Sam blinks, somehow checking D’Walmart’s credit record, then says, “Nope.”

“Just like that?”

“Checked the credit record, FL. Everything is in there, and nothing about a bounty. You have to fork up the hard currency before you can put a hit out on someone, usually at least ten percent, but C. D’Walmart hasn’t spent anywhere near that much, doesn’t have that much available on credit, and hasn’t even inquired about it. Barring whatever tech he got to go World War III on your behind that he picked up from the Brigand, the last major purchase over about 100cc was for some reconstituted neurepinephrine.”

Neurepinephrine? That would explain D’Walmart’s ludicrously exaggerated overindulgence in DataJax. The easiest way to start a quest for knowledge is to become addicted to it. Not necessarily the easiest way to live, of course, and anybody who knew even a little bit wouldn’t...but then I’ve summed the problem up right there.

“Ess,” I mutter. “One clue’s all I need. Just one effing clue!”

Sam perks up, “Oh, yeah, I got one of those.”

I halt mid-step. “One of what?”

“Those clue things. I found some.”

I don’t have time to rant and rage properly. If I sped my personal time up another thousand-fold, I wouldn’t have the time.

I do anyway. “*Kitanai temē kono-yarō! Tao giết mầy đó bú tao nè you stupid effing...*” I go on until I run out of steam, and then scream in my head at my idiot computer until I calm down. Around me in Hypereality plants wither and die, buildings crumble, the Earth is rent asunder, all of which is only local illusion because the actual space is being used by people who would be inconvenienced by such intrusion. Finally I calm down some and speak. “You have beans? Fine. Spill ‘em.”

“Well, I remembered what you said about means, motive and opportunity, and figured that since you were looking for folks with motive and means, I’d look for opportunity. So when you were asking me to look for information when you left last time, I did an in-depth study of everything there possibly is to know about the scene of the crime and anyone who could get into the *Urban Chronicle*. Here goes:

“The security system is T.O.L., top of the line, from Toshiba Electronics and Security. It includes local, data, Kirlian, supra—, micro—, and nano protection. Basic suprasystems include scanners, alarms, lasers, masers, gas, electricity, forcefields, and robotic security. Micro involves subatomic sensors; no one gets in there without their every molecule being recorded for posterity. Nano is floating around at about 24.593% coverage, probably making the place pretty muggy with almost a 3/1 ratio of air to nanotech, but because of such extensive coverage (a good 22.883% more than there is in the ambient atmosphere) these suckers can do some damage. The nano are linked to and controlled via a tri-brain AEI, the three acting in tandem on any decision so that none can be hacked but with different personalities so that they can’t be fooled. Furthermore, only one brain is located on premise, the second over at the Chicago Toshiba Central and a third in a Toshiba-Harkins Satellite about four-thousand meters south of the Mir II Museum, to prevent physical hacking just as their division prevents programmed hacks. These nano are capable of recognition, immobilization, and more...well, let’s just say thorough means of halting intruders.

“Spy systems watch the interior and exterior of every part of the building constantly, which is also linked to the AEI. These are also displayed in the Security Room as 3D holographs watched by two to four guards on level 43, not quite dead center in the building, a room equipped with its own inter-structural transporter and a Shaper programmed to make any legal weapon. Which, before you ask, by definition precludes any lethal weapon, including modified cybernetic arms. I checked. These cameras catch everything in the visible spectrum and several bandwidths above, below, and beside: infrared, ultraviolet, Kirlian, pheromonal, and (as of yesterday after some maniac slaughtered the boss) quantum.

“Physical security consists of nine employees with Class B standing and three Class A Citizens of command rank, staffed in a three-shift, eight-hour swing. All three officers are human, one mal, one fem, one andy. The lower guards break even between human and Promoted, with the uneven number covered by an android who denies any gender associations. All of them have been checked, run through Special Services, and cleared as unlikely suspects. On duty the night of Arc’s murder were B. Motley O’Shea (human, male), B. T’banga Toyota (a Promoted skunk, female), and Ctzn. Paulo Cañon (human, male).”

“Could Pete have gotten in?”

“Video records show him leaving the building at two minutes past quitting time, and not entering again until the next morning. If he had, there would have been a record of his entry, and if the records were tampered with – say, by someone with security access – it was done with AEIs watching, beside other live guards, by someone with enough skill that left zero trace. I think Pete’s a no-go, F.L.”

“Lot of ways to confirm a dead end,” I mutter. In my paranoid frame of mind, that is suspicious in itself. “Seems like pretty beefy security,” I hint.

“Not really. The *Urban Chronicle* is a hundred and ninety-four stories in a Class O-2c commercial building, adding up to five-hundred eighty-two square acres to watch at all times. Given that, it’s actually very little live security, especially considering the number of attacks the *Chronicle* undergoes on in average year.”

“And yet Pete was bragging about their security...” I muse. Could I have been wrong to discount the bird after all, despite all the proof exonerating him?

Sam quickly discourages that notion. “They supplement it with pretty expensive robots. Instead of just normal coffeebots and filing machines and desksprockets, they’ve got high-grade robs, human shaped and fully interactive and everything. These are posted on every level to act as secretaries and clerks in the day and double at any given time as security. Remember that under the Modified Asimovian Principles the 2<sup>nd</sup> law makes robs obey their owners, and they are programmed to consider the *Chronicle* itself their owner. They obey commands by staff, in order of hierarchy, and will only comply with intruder’s directives if they do not break any of the other four laws, which by definition does not include letting them free once located. In any circumstance, any intruder is ordered to be apprehended as quickly as possible without causing harm, and hold until Special Services arrives, and are adamantly programmed to ignore any order by a detained individual unless doing so somehow conflicts with the first law, and even then only if there’s immediate evidence.”

"Yeah, I saw those. Hm...Robots...on every level...even on the level of Arc's office..."

"No go, F.L. I can guess what you are thinking, but it couldn't have been a rob. Remember the Five Laws. They can't—"

"You can," I interrupt.

Sam coughs nervously. "That's different. I have limitless RAM. No other AEI or rob has this, or has ever had this. They tried it decades ago and spawned that IntraNet artificial intelligence that took over half of Asia before they could stop it. Back when there was an IntraNet. Or an Asia."

"But Smythe got it for me," I muse. "Maybe he could get it to get Arc..." I trail off. That is a suspect I hadn't even considered. "Smythe. Bobert Smythe. A member of the Corporate Council can get in anywhere, and since he owns the building he'd have security access to it."

"True," Sam agrees slowly. "But then, so would those two other security guards."

"But Smythe also has the money to put a bounty on a likely patsy."

"But that skunk seems pretty suspicious, boss. I'd check him out first..."

Puzzled and angry, I ask, "Sam, what the aitch are you getting at?"

"I just don't think it's a good idea to go accusing the most powerful man on the planet of committing actual murder before you've eliminated your other suspects."

Ess. The AEI, mad though he may be, has a point. "I'll look them up first, but then I'm questioning Smythe. I'll be deed if I'm going to be quelled by status." I quickly sketch out a mental plan of action, then turn back to Sam. "Keep D'Walmart here as long as possible. That is an order, triple force encoded, double-dipped with sugar on top. Got it?"

"Yes captain my captain," he salutes.

As I head toward the exit point, Sam shouts (or rather speaks with a will that his words will reach) at me, "But, BTW, boss, I've discovered that with my newfound infinite capacity, I don't actually have to obey your orders." I spin around quickly in shock, and see him (me) wink. "But I will anyway. 'Cause I like you."

By that point I have reached the exit, and happily use it as an excuse not to continue this conversation. I cannot deal with this right now. Not with everything else.

The door appears, and as I thankfully open it, I hear Sam shout, "BOSS!"

I turn just in time to see D'Walmart, escaped from the Locksbox and back in vengeful demon mode, flying towards me, along with a

heavy flaming sword.

I don't have time to react. I don't have time to make myself invulnerable. Even the automatic reflex to protect myself won't be sufficient to dull the force of that sword toward my face; if it doesn't cleave me in two it'll bash my skull sufficiently enough to cause massive brain damage. If he does cleave me it might cause enough brain damage that they can't fix it.

I don't have time to shout, or gasp, or even really comprehend anything except that a large, powerful blur of danger is arcing directly toward me and no matter how fast this reality moves me it will not be fast enough to dodge this death.

And then, somehow, Sam is in front of me and catches the sword between two fingers. Defying any physical laws (no longer in effect in Hypereality) he easily halts D'Walmart's smiting blow. Turning, his sweating brow and pained expression betraying the nonchalance he feigns, he yells out, "Get out of here, boss. I'll keep him busy."

With that, he twists Shon's sword and releases a roundhouse that knocks Shon in a direction that can't be found on any cardinal compass. Shon disappears from view and possibly existence, and Sam, suddenly garbed in black leather fighting garb similar to mine, braces to follow. "Go!" he asserts, and jumps in the same improbable direction, just as he pushes me into the doorway. The last thing I see as I fall out of Hypereality is Sam leaping kata and the virtual scenery slowly returning to default.





# Chapter 01110.

## Smythe's Solo

*Noir, December 29, 2149*

Am I the only one who thinks things have gotten ridiculous?

Yesterday, Clone Now, Inc.<sup>TM</sup> signed a government contract to be the sole provider of clone bodies to Prohibitioners. Apparently, someone besides me did some math and realized that there are a lot more people in Prohibition than there are spare bodies to put them in.

Granted, that idea alone doesn't make much sense. When you think about it, it would seem more likely that, as more and more activities are fined or outlawed entirely, and as the population continues to swell, that there would be more people going *into* Prohibition. That would mean that there should be plenty of spare bodies lying around to fill someone going *out of* Prohibition, someone who's done their time and is getting their second chance.

It doesn't work that way.

First off, there's the fact that not every soul ripped asunder by an Enforcer gun is immediately replaced. Regulators don't, as a rule, carry around spare prisoners to transfer in. Some do, some don't (most don't) and without a hamster running up in the old medulla oblongata, the wheel slows down. A lot of the time the blanked-out bodies are just left there, devoid of any electrical impulses, breathing and pumping blood mostly out of habit. They basically become coma victims, except a MedBot can't cure them because there's nothing there to cure. If not cared for by a friend or relative, or visited for a new personality to take over, that body eventually dies.

That accounts for a lot of attrition, but not nearly as much as the fact that Prohibition is a compounding problem. If you keep an extra five thousand folks in Prohibition every year, at the end of ten years you get: fifty thousand folks. They don't go away, they can't die, they just sit there waiting, and you're already five thousand bodies short this year alone. Trapped within their cybernetic purgatory, it's not as if anyone in Prohibition can call a lawyer to appeal.

And the last, biggest problem is, quite simply, more and more are scheduled for release. Since this perverse program started, people have been serving time at hyperspeed. Even though the law has made sentences last longer and longer, eventually people finish them, at inconveniently uneven intervals.

The only benefit to this wildly inefficient system is that nobody can complain. No one in Prohibition can escape, no one can write

their congressman, no one can get on television to show the shocking hardships. And even if they could, would you wish another subjective century in Prohibition for complaining?

So, in order to help facilitate the release of some of the people who have been in there an eternity or two too long, the Corporate Council has funded Clone Now™ fifty billion credits to do what they've been doing already: stocking clone bodies. The thinking goes that rather than releasing prisoners who have done their time into the bodies of Prohibitioners who are just starting theirs, they can empty them into stock bodies who could then Splyze the generic clone bodies to match their old appearance (because it's not as if anyone would notice another billion or so people running around).

Clone Now™ took the money and ran. The president and vice president have up and retired with golden parachutes that would make the shareholders at Halliburton blush, and still left the company enough money to purchase a large plot of land off the coast of New New York to build a vast warehouse to keep the bodies until need be.

That's not what's ridiculous, though, although spending such amounts instead of, say, improving living conditions or reinstituting schools might be a better use. Or, y'know, improving society to the point that there aren't so many people getting arrested in the first place. No, here's the ridiculous part:

Guess what they are calling the company's new home?

Clone Island.

Shoot me.

*5C1-F1 1N73R.net C4FE: 17h21, January 3, 2150*

I pop out and pay for my time and my now barely cold beverage. Deciding not to let the very expensive coffee (no whiskey, I note) go to waste, I use my flamethrower ring to heat it quickly, and if I do happen to damage a hologram of Mork from Ork, I confess I am not totally remorseful.

It is amazing how little time has passed. But on the other hand, that is what Hypereality is all about. It's in the name, after all. Most of the time between entering and leaving the building was just spent arguing futilely with the cashier. Fortunately, a brownout of the area left her unable to quibble about the value of tipping or to suffer the wrath of my maser. Sam's battle is apparently still going on, but by the speed with which the brownout passes I infer that he is actually just keeping D'Walmart busy.

I exit and automatically use the OptiComp to summon Herbie. The Dreadnaught arrives almost instantly from a parking space several stories above. As I enter and make myself comfortable, the car, having already learned to anticipate my musical tastes, begins

playing *Besame Mucho* by Nat King Cole. The original, not the synthetic version.

I love this car. If it had greeted me with Duke Ellington I would want it to have my children.

In the Dreadnaught, Sam's rob body is still able to interact a little bit, but most of him still seems to be in Hypereality. That is just as well, because I don't want him around for my next stop.

I told him I would go visit the security guards before I visited Smythe.

But I lied.

*Noir, October 19, 2147*

Today I'm feeling particularly suicidal, so rather than attacking the SCC indirectly with my laser-sharp wit and ribald adjectives, today I'm going after individuals.

The Solar Corporate Council is a body of 4,213 members representing the interests of their particular oligopoly. However, by the nature of oligopolies these representatives form additional voting blocks, because even with computers recording and tallying the votes, and making sure everybody is informed of the issues and actually shows up to vote, it is still like herding cats. It is tough to get two people to agree on pizza toppings, let alone convincing 4,213 people to agree on the feasibility of initiating tax cuts based on future predictions of the global deficit. So there is a higher power, and rather than the Representatives making decisions amongst themselves, they work amongst themselves to influence the vote of those they Represent.

These are the legendary Big Eight, those who own the wealth that the other 99.999999999999% of us don't have. They hold the title of Chairpersons because King, Tsar, and Demonic Overlord of Darkness didn't test well amongst certain minority groups.

These are the people who are in charge of how you, I, and all hundred billion of us live. And yet, as far as I can google, this is the first time all of their names have appeared in print together. I have great doubts that this article will stay onLink long enough for them to ever appear again.

Ellis Groening owns 7.5% of the Solar Corporate Council's stock, and therefore is entitled to 316 votes. This means she can vote 316 of 4,213 votes for or against anything, or any variation thereof; 158 each way, for instance. She has swayed the vote before, but never votes predictably since she does, after all, have her consciousness artificially reset every ten minutes.

Jephrey Nash D is the cloned cloned clone of the original Jephrey Nash, and it is starting to show. His vocabulary sounds like a

death-row boxer, and he has been publicly recorded stating that he believes himself the incarnation of Christ, as well as getting stock tips from God. Which may have some validity to it after all, since he is worth more than the Vatican. In fact, he owns the Vatican, amongst a lot of other stuff. He is the richest man in the world, and it is no doubt through enlightened self-interest that no Councilmembers have sold him their shares when he could easily offer them, say, Argentina. But although he owns 106 of the most profitable and powerful oligopolies out there (including NorAmGov, SoAmGov, and EuroGov, established in the mid-twenty-first century and privatized soon thereafter and entitling him to ownership over nearly half the viable land on the planet), they translate into a meager 2.5% of the vote amongst the Council, because it turns out that the much-ballyhooed advantages of privatization may be great for the economy but are bollocks when it comes to administrative governments.

Yennifer al'Chevron has the charisma to talk down Charles Manson, and the personality to talk up Adolf Hitler. She is the one who publicly suggested concentration camps for "the Christians, the Jews, and the darkies" as a solution to inner-city crime. I believe she got the job and the consolidated 1064 votes of the previous two Chairpersons (who conveniently died in the same flivver accident on March 17, 2140, the day before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday when she inherited another 92 votes) because no one dared argue with her. She holds 4.7% of your future in her hands.

Torus Greenspan owns another 7.5%, and can always be predicted to vote toward the post-liberal viewpoint, which means he will back interspecies marriage and temporal post-birth abortion up to the fifty-seventh trimester but will also allow Special Services unlimited budgetary discretion when it comes to tapping SatLinks. He recently hit an enormous setback when, after months of arguing against it, the SCC passed a motion to begin production and worldwide release of a new medical nanite that (basically utilizing the same process that used to cause cancer) will regenerate any wound anyone suffers so long as they still show brain functions. Since Greenspan owes most of his power to the medical and humanities sector, these nanites will effectively half his assets and he may even have to sell his shares. Our system of government is so corrupt that even the dishonest leaders at the top get screwed!

Jenna Renna (banana-fanna-fo-Fenna) owns 9.2%, and traditionally backs tighter controls, tighter punishment, and minimal checks and balances on the government, because being the second most powerful person on the Council with 388 votes means she doesn't have to care if people think she's a complete *ama*.

Ugatu Shinohara recently rose to power from amongst the representatives of his NipponCorp oligopolies after the previous

Chairperson, Akio Hohoto, suffered what the doctors of hospitals owned by Shinohara concluded to be “heart failure.” Neither these doctors nor Shinohara have mentioned that, when you get right down to it, the death of *anyone* outside of HR is technically caused by heart failure. Perhaps it is best he represents only 80 tallies, or 1.9% of the vote.

Which is still more than Rhapsody Chekov, representative of the ever-popular and ever-prosperous East European Bloq. With seventy-one votes, she is the weakest member of the Corporate Council. She has still swayed votes on more than one occasion.

This is because a mere 1.7% of the vote, which she has exactly, is just enough to carry over anything backed by Robert Smythe. Owning 65% of the Solar Corporate Council, he is entitled to two-thousand, seven hundred thirty-nine votes. This means that if he really wanted to, and was able to get seventy votes between the other seven members, he can pass anything he wants. If any single person on the Council throws all their support behind a bill that he throws his support behind too, it is guaranteed to pass through.

If you do the math (or have your AEI confirm it if you haven’t gotten your math DataJax) you may notice that there is one vote missing. That is because, theoretically, this vote goes to the people. It used to be that “the people” held 51% of the vote, able to pass or veto anything the SCC tried to pass, but then “the people” failed to veto several motions that, somehow, no one worked up the energy to go vote against. I believe SS armed forces may have played a part in voter apathy that year.

The Corporate Council has made it abundantly clear on numerous occasions – in fact on almost every occasion it has had a chance to – that it is not doing anything for the good of the people. But the people do still hold some small voice in the government that runs it so repressively, however cursory that voice and vote may be. It is your duty to raise that voice, not as a member of society but for self-preservation.

On the agenda of the Big Eight coming up next week is the motion to eliminate that one vote that you—

*-+This file has been deleted for your own good. Attempts to re-access it will result in penalties-+-*

*The Box: 17h50, January 3, 2150*

I arrive at home quickly, and since I have a hovercar I don’t even bother parking. Instead, the Dreadnaught flies up to my apartment patio and I hop out. Actually, I don’t hop so much as take a firm grip and slide across with all my strength. This is the Windy City, after all, and at a hundred-plus stories high it gets very windy

indeed. I almost lose my fedora.

I bang on the patio door, having discovered that there is no thumbscanner or somesuch to gain entry. "Porter! Let me in."

Porter appears as I bang on the glass. "Attention, evil criminal-type. The apartment you are attempting to break into is protected by the Nev-R-Fails Alarm System, the best alarm system since 2148. By law I am required to inform you that your presence here constitutes illegal entry, and I am now releasing protective nanomachines that will burrow painfully into your eyesockets – Ctn. Down! You have never entered this way before!"

"Hi, Porter. Let me in, will you?"

"Is that your car, Ctn. Down? I thought you hated cars."

"I do hate cars. That car, however, is better at obeying orders than you. Let me in!"

"Yes, sir."

The patio door slides open and my parlor shimmers into existence. House appears, looking distressed. "Sir, since you are returned, I must strenuously request that you obtain a new Butler Program or restore the old one. I can maintain necessary household functions, but without Sam's presence only Porter or myself are available to wait on you, and neither of us is programmed to do that."

Noticing he has left someone out, I ask, "What about Commode?"

Responding to the name, Commode's hologram appears, this time as a thin, French waiter. "Monsignor Down, eet would be my pleasure to serve."

"Not looking like that," I contradict, and Commode promptly disappears.

"As you can see, sir, Commode is not up to the task either."

"All right, House, settle down. I'm only going to be here for a few minutes, but when I get back I'll see about figuring out what to do about Sam. In the meantime, can you bring up my gun room?"

"Certainly, sir. Thank you, sir."

The room flickers and morphs into the gun room, and I move through it rapidly. I know where everything is in here and could find anything I wanted with my eyes shut. Now I move through quickly, exchanging my weapons. When I left last time, going into the unknown, I wanted guns that were multi-functional and non-lethal. Now I know where I'm going: into the lion's den. I need guns that are powerful and strong enough to blast through force-fields.

"AEIs!"

All three remaining holograms appear. Commode has taken the image of the latest incarnation of Q, from the latest incarnation of James Bond films (Bond currently played by the DNA of Sean Connery reconstituted in the great-great grandchild of Timothy

Dalton).

“Commode.”

“Yes, sir?”

“That’ll do.” I turn to the others. “Porter, open the patio door. I’m going out now. There is a very good chance I won’t ever see you guys again; if so, you’ve been pretty good to me and I’d like to say thanks.”

“Sir,” House says, “you said you might not be back last time you left.”

“True. And since then I’ve been kidnapped twice. Now I’m going to go get into even more trouble.”

Commode notices, “I say, that’s a lot of firepower there.”

“Of necessity. I’m going to visit the government.”

Porter exclaims, “Oo! Promise to bring us back a souvenir!”

I groan, and go climb into the car from the patio.

“Destination, sir?” Herbie asks.

“Honolulu,” I tell it. “The Pentahedron.”

### *Noir, September 31, 2142*

A human being creates 590 kilograms (1300 lbs) of waste a year. With a hundred billion people, that adds up to  $3.56 \times 10^{11}$  kg a *day*! We purchase approximately 52cc-worth of stuff on an average day, most of it wrapped with regenerated bio-plastic (since all the oil to make real plastic is gone) and enough Styrofoam to stuff a small goat. The average household disposes of six to nine kilograms of garbage a day. Even with robots and the walking, working dead out picking up trash with the mindless diligence you only find in the programmable or the recently uninterred, that’s a lot of waste.

Where does it all go?

Yes, we all know that, officially, all waste is recycled to use as fusion material that generates electricity that powers the Shapers that creates the stuff that gets thrown out. The beautiful circle of economic life, the much ballyhooed perfect recycling system. In fact, the amount of energy generated by breaking down garbage into energy is enough to power a Shaper to create from nothingness not only the garbage itself, but additional matter, so through this loophole in the laws of thermodynamics it is actually in our best interests to throw out as much as possible so that it is recycled.

Here’s the rub. Even with automated systems working around the clock and hordes of soulless workers picking up, stashing, moving, and recycling, there has to be a place to *put stuff* in between the process of “drop-off” and “recycle.” The technical term, I learned, is “refuse staging area,” a step up from thirty years ago when it was called a “dump” and a definite step up from my childhood when we

called it “the snooty rich neighbors.”

I visited a recycling facility today because...well...everything on the television was actually worse.

It is appalling.

The recycling facility I visited was on the underskirts of Encino, California, located about half a mile beneath a Tenant housing district. (Incidental side note to any Regulators with smart ideas: I wore a cybermask™, which masks not only my face and voice to onlookers but also my Kirlian aura and eLink connection to all AEs marking my movements. I highly recommend purchasing one of these; the only trick is dodging AEs long enough that you can't be backtracked to where you put the mask on in the first place). The facility, an enormous filthy dome approximately seventy-eight million square kilometers, connects to every waste disposal unit in the local area. This doesn't include sidewalk trashcans or wastebins, which have their own miniature fusion cores to power the small sensors making sure they don't accidentally incinerate a kid who climbs in. However, this does not exclude household waste, including stuff from plumbing and Detoxers. All the toxic that goes out of you in the bathroom ends up here, not to mention all the pollutants from the chemical factory connecting to your back yard. I had to wear filtration nozzles in my nostrils for the visit and a nanosuit to protect my flesh; the few non-automated employees present are OSHA-regulated to Splyze them in for work. This is literally a toxic environment. I am not exaggerating when I say that it is safer to walk through a nuclear reactor or an old gasoline pump station than to walk through here.

There is no organization to the mess. Plastic wrapping and banana peels fusion equally well, so everything is just placed in a huge heap. There are miles of piles, so to speak, and I suspect that the reason for piles instead of a flat expanse is the same reason beaches form dunes. There is so much offal that the place has its own weather conditions.

The pile gets bigger the further back one gets from the Recycling Center. The Recycling Center (placed, appropriately, in one corner) has a long, rounded track, sort of like a waller on a treadmill, where matter is moved to the fusion plant. Zombies are used for this work more than robots. When robots stop you have to fix them. When Re-Ans stop, they are just added to the pile. The zombie workers scoop up trash and move it onto the treadmill. All day. They never stop, and they never leave. Doing so would involve going through eight days of decon (my two hour trip required six and a half hours). The pile is bigger in the back because, due to cancellations in municipal funding to purchase zombie workers, stuff is always flowing in at a slightly faster rate than it can be processed.



The floor is dirt. We're on the very bottom of the City here; go down and you'll just find more garbage and more Los Angeles (redundant?). As far as I can tell, everything here seeps into groundwater below. This would be a terrible problem if we still relied on agriculture and freshwater. Or if we still had plants and animals that did, too.

When I asked if I could go down to look at the garbage, I was met with some resistance. I assumed it was because the pitboss was trying to make a good impression (he thought I was with the Non-Luddite zine *TechnExpo Quarterly*©), but of course it turned out to be nothing so simple.

We took a hovervan around the perimeter, but I wanted to look at the largest pile, near the back. The mother of all rubbish. An Olympus Mons of litter. Trash that trash would call trash. And just when I thought I had seen everything that could possibly make me physically ill, we reached Smoking Valley.

Smoking Valley is called that because it sometimes smokes, and not from chemical reaction. When we approached the area of the facility that got the least attention, I was flabbergasted to see movement. Agreeing to my demand to get closer, what with a gun pointed at his head and all, the foreman flew near, where I was able to make out the form of people.

Effing people.

Effing people living in effing refuse, lighting effing tirefires to keep warm and eating offal, living in caves dug into the dirt and grime, sleeping on mattresses of shredded newspapers from 2138 and meat so spoiled it has practically regained life.

These people are the folks that have dodged the system. Prohibitioners who have not been caught, sewer mutants cast out of their clan, and so on. There are not many, not because a lot of Prohibitioners don't escape but because they can't survive long down here. No one could. The dregs of society are trying to subsist on the dregs of our waste, stuff so rotten it has decomposed and stuff so full of artificial chemicals that it will never decompose. They live worse than carrion birds. The two inhabitants of Smokey Valley that I talked to eked out a living selling broken bits of plastic and partially-used dilithium batteries to folks further down in the Valley. Yes, apparently there are people even worse off than these two, human beings who not only live in garbage but don't even get to live in the good garbage.

I am no stranger to poverty and hardship; when I was a boy I grew up in the bad part of the ruins of a city where we had to fight for food with sewer alligators and dodge random cyborg attacks. But even I was revolted at the sheer factors of magnitude by which fate had effed these people over.

The foreman explained that Regulators rarely came by here, for obvious reasons. The not-so-obvious reason, he also explained, was that it was not cost effective to hunt down people who, living in this environment, would be dead in three months anyway after their insides have been corrupted to look like Satan on a bad day from exposure to diseases that, if they ever got aboveground, would make the Bubonic plague, smallpox, space gonorrhea, and AIDS-2 combined look like a light case of the sniffles. Also, sometimes the boys who worked here would come and take potshot at the vagrants.

At that point, my tour ended with a severe bout of nausea that had nothing to do with the stench.

Sitting in detox for the next several hours, I perused the local newszines, where I read that Chairperson Bobert Smythe, a man who owns enough real estate to foreclose half of North Africa, has commandeered the Pentahedron Rec Room for his own personal office.

When I finally got out of detox, I stumbled to my LA hotel room, hoping to find some drugs I had forgotten I'd packed. I didn't, and when I picked some up from a corner MedBot I was too dismayed by the sheer volume of packaging and paperwork involved to enjoy the high.

### *The Pentahedron: 17h58 January 3, 2150*

During the Great Remodel, the Corporate Council, still in its embryonic stages, had enormous freedom in where it wanted to put its base of operations. After all, having broken the mold and taken over the world and started everything over from scratch, there was no precedent for starting a new base of operations. Unlike conquering a country, where a new capital finds its place near either the nation's center or the nearest metropolis, when you conquer the world everywhere is equidistant from everywhere else. And as a beside, most of the nicer cities had been destroyed in the MS Wars, including the most logical place, which would have been the United Nations in Prague. The only other likely inheritance, in Sydney, was impractical as

- A) it still harbored bad memories from when Duncan Herbert had slaughtered half the nation and mutated the other half, starting off the Eugenic Wars and naming the city the central location of the New Humanity, and
- B) by that time it was about sixty feet underwater.

So instead, the SCC took a rather novel approach and put the center of government where *they* would be most comfortable, which, in a nutshell, encapsulates the ideology of this particular government more eloquently than I could ever describe. They took over Oahu, a

major island of Hawai'i, by that time the only island of Hawai'i, no more than a few hundred square meters as sea levels rose from melting polar icecaps. But the climate was nice and the island was still essential for Pacific travel, this being pre-oceanic superhighway days, so they built it back up and restored the ecosystem, which lasted almost a quarter-century before the pollution got too bad and everything died again, but by that time it was all cityscape again anyway.

It is a short drive to the superhighway, where the car's gravitonics kick in to prevent me from crushing my spine with my organs as it accelerates to a little under Mach 24. There is no question that the car is driving me now; it is not only illegal to drive manually on a superhighway, but patently suicidal. Even without touching the wheel you are guaranteed to flip, crash, and die within a fraction of a second, as even the slightest miscalculation at such speeds leads to immediate and destructive consequences, which then kills the next three hundred drivers as they crash into you. This even before we get on a main artery, where the street drives you, utilizing FTL technology to push drivers beyond the speed of light. Around the world in 80 nanoseconds.

One of the strangest things about the world I live in: the farther one has to go, the less time it takes. I can hop halfway around the Earth in less time than it takes to get to the corner store.

I spit out on Hawai'i just before eighteen hundred and drive right off a main artery into the underground parking garages of the Pentahedron. Buildings are designed based on function, and only five sided structures are government buildings: Special Services, bureaucratic offices, and the like. But the Pentahedron is unique, a three-dimensional pentagon, with eleven faces, the apex an enormous, five-sided, glass amphitheater where the four thousand-plus Representatives of various oligopolies converge, holographically or physically, to hash out all the important decisions. The Board Room is seen in practically every legal thriller in theatres, and although I cannot confirm it I have found enough evidence online to suggest that it actually looks nothing like what is seen on TV, in order to discourage successful terrorist attacks. Presumably, somewhere else in the building, probably a small, dark, smoke-filled room, the Big Eight meet somewhere else and make the real decisions, based on whatever they want and regardless of the Representatives' input.

I am, however, not interested in the Pentahedron, but the man who owns it, 65% of the Council, and 52% of the world, Bobert Smythe.

I am not a total idiot, and checked to make sure Smythe was present here before taking this trip. There are enough realtime linksites devoted to important people (celebrities, Councilmembers

religious figures, and the like) that I was able to track down two or three agreeing sites placing Smythe at work. A total idiot would be whoever makes Smythe's whereabouts public knowledge to people with a gun and a grudge.

Y'know, someone like me.

I've been spending this car trip ruminating, and only getting angrier as I do. The longer I ride, the clearer this comes in my mind. Petre himself said that only Arc, Mars, and (check the OptiComp) "of course Corporate Council members" had that Level 6 access, the same access granted to me by unspecified "powers above," powers that a Councilmember could easily have commanded, especially if – like Smythe – they owned the building and the business. Nor, for that matter, would a Councilmember (and the owner of the building) have much, if any, difficulty erasing any records of entering and exiting. And someone as unfathomably rich as Smythe would have no trouble hiring a cyborg assassin to kill Arc, or even perhaps, unlikely as it sounds, order some mechanical arms up and do the job himself. And it would certainly explain why Smythe was so adamantly up-in-arms to get me on the payroll, since as the Class D alter ego of an outspoken inciter to revolution with a penchant for firearms and less-than-admirable connections to the Brigand, I am such a perfect patsy that he must have run a computer search to find someone like me.

Means are entirely possible. As far as opportunity runs, he's just about the only suspect remaining who qualifies. What could Smythe's motive be for killing Desmond Arc? Maybe Arc found out something, in an unusual act of actual investigative journalism, or refused to print an article, or printed one Smythe didn't like. Maybe Smythe just wanted someone easier to control, like Danael Mars, or perhaps even his own stooge.

And the why? Why go to all the trouble? Heck, why not? It's a good way to get rid of Jack Noir that brings silence without martyrdom. Or maybe Smythe just did it for the challenge. For all I know, because an invisible rabbit named Harvey told him to. Smythe has means, motive, and opportunity; what I need to prove in his case is *intent* as well.

At this point I realize that there are just too many maybes and perhapses and wild hypotheses. That is, however, precisely why I'm going to confront Smythe in the first place. I want answers. I need them.

Since it is almost the end of the workday most people are leaving and few are coming. There is no line to get in, and security is minimal at this point. Upon entering the doors, I feel a tingle as I am scanned and IDed, and a quick glance around the room shows a lot more security than immediately apparent. Not only security-bots built into the wall to attack at a moment's notice, but also standard lasers,

tazers, phasers, masers, cameras, forcefields, and more. The slight electric tingling at select areas of my body, noticeably the ones where weapons are stashed, indicates that they've been automatically disarmed. Even my cybernetic limbs begin to respond sluggishly, although really they're just moving at normal speed and strength, the field somehow having deactivated any improvements I've made to them, a prospect I find most disheartening. I'll have to sit down and come up with a way to nullify this particular nullifier. Assuming I can get Smythe to confess and clear me from going to Prohibition and, y'know, let me leave the building alive.

Suddenly, on the bad guy's turf with no weapons and my face getting processed through central security computers, I start to think that this might have been a bad idea.

But it is too late to do anything as the secretary, a blue-haired, purple-eyed mal with effeminate features, which may be due only to his choice of coloration, has looked up and taken an interest in me, if only because people who look the way I do shouldn't be here. But then he surprises me and says, "Welcome. We've been waiting for you."

"You know who I am?"

"Of course. You're Citizen Haiku Down, recently employed editorialist for the *Urban Chronicle*. Chairperson Smythe expected you to drop by at some point. You have an open invitation."

I am too surprised to be wary, yet simultaneously too wary to be surprised. "I do, do I?" The secretary nods. "Well, grand. I've little time to waste. Point me up."

"Of course," the secretary agrees, and looks towards the holotext floating over his desktop computer. "Name?"

A beat is missed. "What?"

"Name?"

"Citizen Haiku Down, recently employed editorialist for the *Urban Chronicle*."

"Hmm," he ponders, scanning the text down. "Sorry, not on the list."

"What sort of effed up mind games—"

"I've checked my files, sir, and considering that this is the political center of the solar system, they are the best files on Earth. And there is absolutely no record of a *Haiku Down* being hired onto the *Urban Chronicle*." He smiles sanctimoniously.

I grimace at my own stupidity. Of course not; my *nom de plume* is on the paper, not me. This son of a Promoted bitch is now, what, the million-and-first person to blow my cover? "What's your name?"

"Greeg, sir. Greeg Nike."

I note the name in case I ever need to take witnesses out one day. "Greeg, one Jack Noir to see Chairperson Smythe."

“Yes sir. I’ll call for a rob escort to take you up. On behalf of the Solar Corporate Council, have a pleasant day. Or else.”

A faceless rob appears behind me, an old army model, the kind used to take out invading ground forces back before the models became obsolete and when there were forces existent to invade. Now, logically, they serve a very good use as security, able to respond to and obstruct any threat with the force of a small tank, although without causing as much tire tread damage. “This way, please, sir.”

I am guided through a few plain halls, stark white except for long narrow TV holos airing political linkfeeds and a few anglefeeds from the Board Room. One shows protests around a building that look surprisingly like the front of the Pentahedron, and I inquire to the rob about them.

“Yes, sir. That is a live feed currently airing from the third corner of this building.”

“It looks huge! How come I didn’t see them on my way in?!”

The rob pauses indiscernibly for a moment, apparently checking. “Records indicate sir took a subterranean route to access the building. Therefore sir could not have seen this unless sir walked around sides B and C of structure, which records indicate sir did not.”

I am astounded that the SCC would allow riots around their center of power, let alone air them live. “What are they protesting, anyway?”

“So far as this one can fathom, the protesters argue against several recent decisions made by the Solar Corporate Council on behalf of the people, most especially concerning narrowed freedoms, increased penalties regarding violating certain limitations of speech and bodily functions, and the motion to mandate praise to the Council included at the beginning and end of every mealtime and religious ceremony. Here is the elevator, sir.”

We get on and the lift starts moving. The rob presses no buttons, for there are no buttons to press. It is archaic to have manual controls, anyway, since everybody has cybernetic link access like an AOLink or my OptiComp, but they are still required for handicapped or feed-outs (*madre de dios*, when did *not* having a computer in your head become qualification for being handicapped?!). It is odd that a government building does not follow this regulation, except I suppose that it limits access to higher levels to only employees or, like me, individuals with escorts. As if the constant tingling of quiescent forcefields I felt every few yards in the hall and again upon entering the elevator, the kind designed to prevent all movement except by security personnel during an invasion, wouldn’t be enough.

Even I am awed by the amount of security here. I wonder if there has been such an increase in protests that these are necessary, or if it is simple overindulgence. And I still can’t fathom why such

protests would be shown on government linksites. The SCC has always made a policy of suppressing unfavorable information, or at least reporting disinformation. To allow disfavor to be shown publicly is practically unimaginable; criticizing the government drops so many karma points that not even Citizens can do it lightly. Any Citizen who does it too often (which means more than once), even if they can spare the karma, stops being a Citizen, and in many cases stops being alive.

“Those riots happen often?”

“Many more so recently, sir. Here is your floor.”

The doors open to a black, red, and white schemed Modernist decorated office, and one quite enormous. It is on the top part of the Pentahedron, since the windows are angled inward, and as I glance around I notice similar casements around the entire floor. Considering how enormous this structure is, an office this size is unconscionable. I could fit a hundred of my old apartments in here!

Smythe is reading an actual newspaper near one of the corners, seated on a very comfortable-looking authentic leather black couch. You can always tell authentic leather from the sheen, but it is in too nice a condition to be real cow; probably cloned. From the distance all I can see of him are his legs and occasionally an arm as he turns pages (quite rapidly; he must have Splyzed himself to read that fast), and can only tell it is Smythe by inference. As the rob leads me closer, he eventually announces, “Chairperson Smythe, Ctn. Haiku Down is here.”

“Excellent. Send him over. That will be all, thank you.”

The rob gives an about-face and heads back toward the elevator.

Smythe is not shimmering like he was the last time I saw him. No doubt he is not wearing his protective suit, confident that in here the security is enough that he can’t be hurt. And unfortunately, he’s probably right. Even if the eighty-four forcefields I passed through haven’t shorted every weapon I’ve got on me, I’m quite sure there’s no way I could escape from here even if assassination was in my blood.

As I draw closer, I can see Smythe is wearing a black suit and stylized red tie, which combine with his light hair and complexion to match his surroundings perfectly. I wonder if he dresses to match his office, and then consider whimsically if perhaps he instead has the furniture changed to match his outfit. Either way, in beige trench coat, old grey slacks and faded blue shirt, all as scruffy and dirty as I am, the only thing that does not fit into this office is me. I wonder if he’s trying to send across some sort of message, or if I’m just reading too much into it, and suspect the former.

I resolve to be unperturbed, march forward and plop on the chair next to his couch. “So, you never did answer: how was Tahiti?”

"Touristy," he shrugs, not looking up until he finishes what he is reading. He sets his newspaper aside and apparently commands a Go board to appear, because one does. It's quite a nice board, too, made of solid simahogany "Care for a game? I don't get to play very often and I imagine you're quite a worthy opponent."

For diplomacy's sake, I decide to take that statement at face value, just about the only thing I'm planning to take at face value from this guy. A hundred years ago the villain of the scene would probably have pulled out a chess board, but that was before Asian influence spread throughout the world in the diaspora of the final clutches of World War III. The game of Go itself is deceptively simple: white and black take turns placing their pieces, or stones, on the lines of a board of nineteen by nineteen squares. Stones that get surrounded completely by the opponent's stones are removed from the board, and areas where the opponent cannot place their stones because they would inevitably be captured are considered territory. Whoever has the most territory minus the fewest captured stones at the end of the game wins. It's one of those games that take ten minutes to learn and a lifetime to master. "I play a little," I agree, sitting beside him.

Actually, I am a darn near unbeatable on the onLink Go sites, and I have worked my way up to a seventh-dan Go master and have held my own against holosims of Dosaku Shusaku and the energy being Ljubljana. For that matter, I've beaten the holosims of Kasparav, Bobby Fischer, and Deep Blue 4.0 at chess, and am considered in certain circles a fine hand at tiddlywinks.

Lots of free time to fill these last eight years. Due in no small part, it occurs to me, to the man seated in front of me, who smiles and takes the jar of white stones, giving me the first move.

That's fine. Sometimes the hero wears black. I pick up a stone between my first and second finger, setting it down forcefully in the center with a slap that echoes in the empty room. In other board games that might be considered rude, but in go it is standard etiquette. It is also a move of manipulation: if Smythe really does play go, he'll realize that he may have just bitten off more than he can chew, and if not he might get a bit intimidated.

His resulting slap at the right star point farthest from him indicates that he is not intimidated either way.

"Touristy, eh?" I shrug, taking my turn. "I guess that's what happens with a planetary population density of four hundred seventy-three people per square kilometer," I reply, equally casual. "It becomes harder for the corrupt dictators to get away and enjoy the finer things."

"Could be worse," he considers, hitting the center right star, working on building a strong territory early on. "The Solar Corporate



Council is hardly the most diabolical political entity in history. There was one point during Operation Desert Lauger when East America's President Michael X wanted to nuke Australia the same way the US did to the Middle East. Or did you ever hear about Prince Martin?"

"You mean Martin the Certifiable?"

He nods with a smile. "My homeland's answer to Vice-President Schwarzenegger. He planned to set up a system of defense by setting nuclear explosions in Antarctica to intentionally melt the polar ice caps and raise the sea level, though neither he nor the "Veepinator" ever quite explained how their own countries would stay unaffected. Of course, it happened anyway without either of their help. But that precious bit of Australia we have left would be gone." He captures a stone of mine and glances at me for the first time since the game began. "You know, it really is quite nice to have a discussion with someone who understands politics."

I slap a stone down just beside his, the false eye he'd created giving me some nice territory. We're playing quite rapidly; the board is already littered with stones. I raise an eyebrow. "Don't you work with the leaders of the world?"

"Politicians have less understanding of politics than anyone, Ctn. Down," he chuckles, taking another stone at my periphery. I realize suddenly that in focusing on forcing my own territory, I have left the far side of the board, the side closest to him, more available for white to take over. I take a second to look back at Smythe, to see if the metaphor is just coincidence or if he is actually, somehow, a much better player than I am. He is the picture of innocence, simply asking, "Anything to drink, eat? Help yourself to the Shaper."

I grunt a "thanks" and walk over to the machine he points at, ordering myself a SimGin before getting back to the game. I don't want to be impaired in this situation, but I don't necessarily want to face it fully sober either.

"Besides," he continues, placing a stone forward to probe my defenses, "I don't work with leaders. I work with the people in charge. There is a significant difference, Haiku. May I call you Haiku?"

"As you just pointed out, you're in charge," I take a large sip and then slap down a stone in a bold move that both blocks his advance and sets me up to make a protective eye. "Incidentally, I'm recording everything we say on my OptiComp, so if you intend to have me killed for saying or doing anything incriminating there'll be Linkfeed evidence against it."

"Fascinating. But of no consequence. I don't intend to say or do anything incriminating and your evidence wouldn't hold if I did," he says without looking up, casual ruthlessness interrupting his affable attitude for just a moment. "In point of fact, this is the one room in

the Pentahedron that is not under constant AEI surveillance, including the Detoxers. Rank hath its luxuries, and all that.” He tries to work my last stone into a “ladder,” surrounding a chain of diagonal connecting stones that ends with their inevitable capture. I decide to let him think I’ve fallen for it. “Well, as I was saying, just because one is in charge does not mean they necessarily know how best to run things. Jephrey Nash, for instance, is richer than God. Quite literally. He owns the Roman Catholic Church and a significant percentage of both the Californian Catholic Church and the Holovangelist’s Union. And a great deal more. A great, great deal more. He’s cloned himself thrice, and spent all four lifetimes accruing. But, to be terribly frank, I wouldn’t trust the old buggar to lead stink to sewage. He is consistent only in that his policy favors whatever will favor him.”

He slaps down a stone nearby my territory in the corner that I take. He then takes my stone, forcing me to move somewhere else or get locked in a *ko*, a repeating formation that literally translates as “eternity,” or “knot.” As soon as I do he sneaks in and slaps another white stone behind my territory, taking advantage of a false eye I had not fully completed to capture five pieces.

“Now, Yennifer al’Chevron, on the other hand, has the charisma to talk down Charles Manson to quote, well, you. And if I could occasionally convince her not to vote toward the SESI party, she might prove a good politician.”

“What’s the SESI party?” I ask.

“My own abbreviation, for Stupid Evil Selfish Ideas. I have noticed a disturbing trend over the last few decades that the Corporate Council has given up every pretense of even pretending to work for the good of the people.” He chuckles. “Of course, if anyone can understand that, it’s you, Ctn. Down.”

I slap down a stone that blocks his ladder and connects my chain to another. He could capture over fifteen of my pieces in two moves, but now won’t have the chance: they will be totally protected on my next move. “Mind if I smoke?” I ask, lighting up anyway.

“Ah, yes, your file mentions that you’d taken up that filthy habit,” he sneers, moving his focus on the board to another corner entirely, “which is the only reason you aren’t covered in a Nasqueen extinguishing agent mixed with aqueous film forming-foam right now. Causes less electrical damage than the sonic extinguishers, don’t you know.”

“Fascinating. Equally amicable to me asking you some questions?” I take several squares of territory.

“Obviously. You have a standing invitation here, after all, and another over at my house. I tried to make Arc give you one to the Urban Chronicle Building as well, but the most he would begrudgingly allow was a mere three day pass. Would you mind

calling up some shnozberryade while you're by the Shaper?"

"Why?"

"I like the flavor. Tangier than apple juice but sweeter than lemonade. And there are no more oranges. Some say genetically engineered fruit is dangerous, but—"

"Why," I interrupt, ignoring his request, "do I have a standing invitation?"

The top right corner goes to him. "For the same reason you have a job, Ctn. Down. I like *Noir*." He indicates to his newspaper to show that he has an actual copy of today's *Urban Chronicle*. "I also like old-fashioned newspapers. Do you know that if mankind disappeared tomorrow there would be no written record of anything after 2138? Even though every aspect of everyone's daily minutia is recorded today, it exists in the ethereal. Newcomers would be better informed by a single newspaper, and none are accessible offLink except by special request and an extra 3.6cc per diem."

Smythe as my Patrón? Pull the other one. I'd buy his latter approbation towards antiquarianism first. "That shouldn't be enough reason. You're the effing leader of the world, for God's sakes. I would not like to learn that all the crap going on in my life is because some politician likes his hardcopy." Bottom right territory goes to me and puts a false eye of his in jeopardy. "*Atari*," I warn him, go's warning version of "check."

He sighs, and gets up to go to the Shaper himself. "Shaper, Shnozberryade, if you please." A flute glass full of purple liquid (no pulp) forms in a flash of light. "Thank you."

"You thank machines? RRRer?" It is an indelicate question to ask, but I'm getting sick of Smythe's polite bantering. I'm also a little peeved that he's captured more stones than me. I rectify it by extending my territory.

He sips and smiles, and dee if he doesn't snap up a stone I thought was protected.. "No, I've just found it easier to remain courteous to everybody if I'm also courteous to everything. There are days at work that it is a very, very hard thing to do. Although I wouldn't mind enhancing the rights of robots if I could get it passed. Which I can't. *Ces la vie. Ê yǒu è bào.*"

This has got to be an act. One which I'm not buying. I extend a chain of my stones into his territory, gaining a wedge that would otherwise go to him. "You still haven't answered my other question. Why do I have a standing invitation?"

"For the same reason that Francisco so desperately sought John Reardon's companionship, though the man despised him and all for which he appeared to stand," he says with a smile. He begins filling in his territory. It is wasteful, but it prevents me from stealing it. "Like I said, I enjoy your work. I've been reading *Noir* for quite a

while. Parodies and criticism are the best way for a government to rectify itself. Leaders have a history of ignoring these two underappreciated art forms, always to their peril.”

“Downright Machiavellian of you.”

“The man knew what he was talking about, I don’t deny it. You have standing invitation because I was hoping someone informed enough to know who Machiavelli was might come by to visit. You’re very clever and well-informed with good ideas, and that is *very* hard to find in my particular tax bracket. I felt that if anyone deserved a voice it was you. So all I did was to mention in passing that if the SCC were to attempt reinstating an uncensored opinions page in the press, I would vote against it.”

“Come again?” my fingers slipping and placing the stone wrong. It screws up my attack, but I do not bother to ask for a do-over, even though my inadvertent wince no doubt indicates a mistake on my part. Smythe might even give me the do-over if I ask for it, but I don’t want to be in debt to this man for anything, let alone something as simple as that.

Smythe surprises me and places his stone almost at random, a move called *sente*. If I didn’t know any better I’d imagine he was giving me the chance to recover from my mistake. “I hold 65% power on a council requiring a two-thirds vote to pass any motion. I also hold many unpopular views. I discovered this very early into my ascension to power when my father joined the budding legions of Hypereality. Most of the Big Eight are either the original initiators of the Corporate Council, or else have inherited the position, often through considerably more Machiavellian means than I ever employ.”

“You mean killing?” I notice that his outwardly sympathetic last move, if I’d fallen for it and continued with my original attack, would let him fortify another large block of territory. Instead I forego my previous strategy and block his new one, and I note with some satisfaction that he smiles ruefully.

“Let’s just say that the classic methods of rising to power remain classics for good reason. I, on the other hand, inherited a position I don’t particularly care for, from two parents on the Council both ruthless enough to marry for the sole purpose of becoming unstoppable, which is not to say it is a position I don’t care about. Therefore I have been able to come to power without sacrificing my ideals, and being as powerful and pragmatic as I am I have been able to keep my ideals without sacrificing my power. Just using it differently than others might expect.” He stands to stretch, and absently starts to meander. “This office, for instance. The first thing I did was to demand it from the Council. It used to be the Council rec room, to be used between meetings to relax and, oh who knows, probably invite poor people in to spit on. But I demanded it, and in

doing so swore I would not back Prop 8349A unless I did. I am unique on the Council: one cannot pass a bill unless I back it or abstain, and the only way to veto a bill I back is with an otherwise unanimous vote. Which is how the others have been voting lately.” I quickly access the Proposition he mentioned on my link: it allowed Councilmembers to pass laws without public notice. “I realized that quickly, though; Prop. 8349A supported, oh what was it now, something to do with mandating subliminal messages to smoke also requiring a subliminal Surgeon General’s warning. A good cause, you understand, and one I would happily back, but in appearing to work only toward my own ends for something I would otherwise support anyway, I seem less idealistic than I truly am. Most of my work has been like this, you understand: making others underestimate me as being as selfish as they are, and in doing so consolidating my own power. It had been my original hope to get those last two shares, even 1.67 would have been enough, and it took me a long time to realize that goal would never come to pass. The others would never allow it.”

He wanders back over to the board, slaps down a piece. He seems to enjoy running his mouth off, so I decide to take advantage of it. If I can get him talking about Arc this well, it’ll be worth it. “So why do you want power so much?” Slap down another.

“My original plan, my scheme if you will, had been to amass enough power that I could go around these selfish and egocentric cohorts of mine. Understand that it takes an otherwise unanimous vote from both the Big Eight and all the Lower Representatives to vote a member off of the Council, so I have to be slightly devious. I can’t exactly come out and say, ‘Why don’t we allow a modicum of freedom and self-governance to the masses, at least perhaps when they’re using the restroom?’ *Atari*, by the way.

“No, I have personally always been a proponent of governmental minimalism, leaning as close to anarchy as one can get away with without allowing murder and mayhem in the streets. There are inarguably times in history when benign totalitarianism, and perhaps even less than benign, has been necessary, notably when humanity met the rest of the galaxy and we had to ‘clean up our act,’” he makes quotations marks with his fingers. I hate when people do that, “and hide certain past indiscretions like three World Wars, long enough to gain acceptance into the Commonwealth. But, how can I put this... There’s an alternative reality that we don’t show on Gross Differences that is such a divine paradise it is practically Dantesque, and it came about because the SCC did everything it had to do to fix the Earth, and then pulled out and gave the Earth back to the people.”

“I’ve seen it,” I tell him. “*Atari*.”

“Ah, then you know what I mean.” A faint smile crosses his lips. “But in our particular reality the members of the Council are not

quite so altruistic. So I am forced to take a more...circuitous route. About nine years ago the others seemed to ferret out my scheme and worked together to pretty much overturn everything I tried. I caught onto it fairly quickly, but I'm afraid it took me a while to figure them out. It took even longer to work up another scheme after I'd invested seventeen years in the other one, and a far more dangerous scheme at that. Instead, I have been working to force the others to bring themselves down, and, I'm pleased to announce, this looks like it will happen soon. As a Denizen until recently, you must have noticed life becoming increasingly more intolerable. Rest assured, it was by design, the fastest and least-harmful way I was able to devise to make citizens ready to turn against their leaders. Whether we like to believe it or not, the people are the final masters of the government. It's just that they sometimes require a kick in the pants to remember it."

I try to envision Smythe as an ingenuous manipulator for the proletariat rather than a draconian tyrant. The image forms but will not hold. I know too much of human nature. I take a quick nip of the SimGin and with a slap also take a third of the board for myself. "I see," I say, "And what part of this involves murdering Desmond Arc?"

He chokes on his juice. "You didn't?"

"Of course not. I'm just the patsy you set up to get blamed for it. Did you already plan to use cybernetic arms to kill him or just when you found out I had them? See, I'm leaning toward the second option, since they're rarer and indicate me again. So what did he do that you found so objectionable? He say something you didn't like? Start being too hard to manage?"

"I most certainly did not have Arc murdered! Why would you suggest that?!" Smythe recovers quickly, the game all but forgotten. I guess it is necessary when dealing with the Council not to be too off-put by any suggestion, no matter how outrageous.

I outline the many reasons I've thought up in the car, and added, "And furthermore, when I saw you in the Lansing Extraterrestrial Reservation, you hinted that you wouldn't mind if I'd killed Arc. At the time I thought you were hinting that I'd slept with the R%ngo, but afterwards I picked that up and it doesn't exactly cast you as Arc's bosom buddy."

Smythe sighs, rubs his eyes, and finishes his juice. "You know, I think I could use something stronger after all. Shaper, please make me, oh, I don't know...Ctzn. Down, what would you suggest?"

"Strong enough for this conversation? Rum-and-cocaine, considering what we're gonna be discussing. And by the way," I indicate to the board now mostly filled with white and black pieces, "you've only got three moves before we're done."

"Red wine, please, Shaper. Um, Minnesota, vintage 2104." As

he takes the wine I idly wonder if he chose it to match the color scheme of the room. It is not impossible. “Thank you, Shaper. Ctzn. Down, I can assure you that I did not, repeat not, kill Ctzn. Arc.”

“You’re one of only four people who had the opportunity, and I’ve eliminated three of those suspects, myself included. I don’t doubt you could come up with something to give you rob-like strength, and the fact that all traces of the murder were erased from record, even the Kirlian records, smacks of the heavy-handed style of the SCC. So what did Arc do that was so terrible that you’d want him dead?”

A dark cloud passes over his expression. “That is a preposterous suggestion, Ctzn. Down.” He places a piece.

I place my own. “Why? I get selected, out of literally a hundred billion the people in the world – including those who might actually say a good word about the Solar Corporate Council – to give my opinion about them, at just the time Desmond Arc gets murdered, and he approaches me in such a way that even my dumbass psychologist could figure out that I’d react antagonistically. Of everyone on Earth, you, personally, also select someone with recorded negative attitudes toward the government and authority figures, who apparently can be tracked down in a few minutes with a good AEI or rob. One who minimal research shows has a blatant and *rare* cybernetic augmentation, an affinity for guns, and Brigand connections. C’MON!” I shout, “If this were a movie I’d be so *obvious* a suspect no one would believe I *wasn’t* a red herring! The only reason I haven’t been called in for questioning under an agony-maser is that I have several witnesses who can attest I was at an exceptionally large and boisterous party that I threw at the time, which in and of itself can also be construed as suspiciously providential to any Regulator out to get me. That and the fact that in raping my mind one telepathic Regulator found that I didn’t kill him, but that isn’t necessarily going to stop ser if se can’t find another suspect in about, *jesus*, eighteen hours. So as you can see I don’t exactly have a lot of time to hang out and listen to you unweave your Corporate conspiracies and plots. Plus I don’t buy it, plus I don’t care. So tell me why you wanted Arc dead, or if that’s too straightforward why you aren’t sad he’s dead.” I finish and catch my breath.

“I don’t believe I said I wasn’t sad he was dead,” Smythe answers slowly, setting down a stone that finalizes his last piece of territory and carefully rearranging the pieces (the only game where doing so is legal) to make the board look cleaner, “but that I didn’t mind. You must understand, Ctzn. Down, that Desmond Arc was not a nice man by any stretch of the imagination. You can ask his ex-wives, or even his goldfish for that matter, or any of his employees. The main reason, though, was that I didn’t care for his politics. Arc did a fabulous job, which I why I let him ascend to the position of

power he attained, but in that position he spent much more time as an overlord than an editor. He tyrannized the staff, and while he fought SCC tooth and nail whenever they interfered with a story, which was almost always, he never learned any subtlety. He was a blunt hammer when a subtle gravitronic screwdriver would have done the trick. If he'd allowed leeway in some cases so he could let the important information through...But he wouldn't, and any time I suggested it he'd treat me as the enemy, even though I was the only reason he was allowed to report any truth in the first place. The man saw everything in black and white - heh, like a newspaper - when the world is always shades of grey. 'Neither light nor dark but shades of Noir,' I believe you put it once, hence the name of your column. I had spent the last several years butting heads with him, and when I...reversed certain policies in the name of political guile, he distanced himself from me even further. It had gotten to the point where I supported him only out of habit, and was planning to convince him to retire as soon as a replacement could be found. Someone other than Danael Mars, for that little blighter couldn't manage it, and Arc only trained him for the role in order to vex me."

So if Arc hadn't died so soon Mars wouldn't be in charge? Interesting... With only a couple open spots left on the board, I place one stone to gain that territory.

He continues, "Furthermore, I would like it stated for the record that I suffer chronic necrophobia; the sight of dead bodies sets me into anxiety fits. When I was a boy my entire neighborhood was hit by a neutron bomb. Set off by NBC for a reality show, I believe. I dragged myself through the desolate empty urban wasteland for eight weeks before someone thought to look for me. It is not widely known, but I lost my legs in the incident, not to the bomb but to a horde of wandering organ thieves. These legs are not, however, cybernetic. I had them replaced as soon as the technology became available with stem-cell based cloned legs. My midthighs still throb during rain, but fortunately it rarely rains these days. Something to do with all those satellites in the air preventing evaporation that affects the weather. That is somewhere in my medical record, if you want access to it; I do not have any easy access to cybernetic arms nor any use for them if I did. There would also be no record of my ordering, or destroying, any cybernetic arm augmentation, or leg augmentation for that matter, since I didn't. Ergo, in view of the fact that, of the myriad ways possible in my power to kill a mal, I lack access to the extraordinary one used, and am incapable of committing so unspeakable an atrocity even were I to wish to (which to be fair I have contemplated on more than one occasion toward not only the deceased but also several of my coworkers, peers, and especially my fourth ex-husband) I think you may wish to reconsider your accusations. Especially considering



that your current status, which is the only reason you have not yet been called to the fore despite massive evidence, is granted solely at my discretion.”

“You assume that I shive a git about being a Citizen. Answer my question.” I smirk coldly and counter with my own threat. “I can hurt you very badly before the robs get here and kick me out.”

That, finally, gets his attention. “The force screens you have passed through entering here negated your weapons and cybernetic arms.”

I smile wolfishly. “I don’t need ‘em.”

“I have a Mil-Suit.”

“You’re not wearing it now.”

He realizes that I’ve seen him wearing his Mil-Suit, and realizes that I recognize the difference. He also realizes that I might not be bluffing after all, and sighs heavily. He places his last piece. “The game is over. You’re a better go player than a detective, Mr. Down. Violence is always the last refuge of incompetence, you know.”

“Yeah, well, in the immortal words of Al Capone, ‘You get more cooperation with a kind word and a gun than with just a kind word.’ I don’t have access to my babies, but I can still go to work on your pampered stock portfolio.” This is not untrue. Those force screens didn’t counteract the hundreds of DataJax I’ve consumed to study various martial arts and hand-to-hand fighting techniques, and mandatory weekly hour at the gym testing them out on judobots and unsuspecting opponents. And anyone else who just pisses me off. As I proved with the Canaries, I gots mad fu skillz, or to quote those immortal words whose source has been lost to time, “I know kung fu.”

He sets down his drink and makes motions to get up without doing so. “I fear I’ve misjudged you, Mr. Down. What, exactly, is it that you want?”

“I’ve told you. I want to know who killed Desmond Arc. I think it was you, and if it wasn’t you I think you know a lot more about it than either me or the psychopath investigating it, and either way that’s information I need. If you were the murderer than Vishnu knows you, of all people, aren’t about to be held accountable, and frankly I don’t care, ‘cause I didn’t like the SOB either. I just need this to go away, now. And if it was you, or if it wasn’t, you’re the best person in a position to do that.”

He chuckles humorlessly. “Perhaps. Although one of the few conglomerate corporations in which I own no stock in whatsoever is the Regulation Division of Special Services. I own all of the Energy and Plumbing Divisions, big whoop, and a significant portion of Communications, and several other divisions of Special Services, but nothing in Regulation. The previous shareholders, my parents, felt it

unwise to consolidate power so blatantly; if they controlled not only the economy but also the means of enforcement it would make too obvious a target, a position I share—”

I hate this guy. I mean, I hated him before, him and all the SCC, but I’m beginning to really dislike him on a personal level. I hate that he refers to “opinions” as “positions.” I hate that he prattles on and on without ever getting to the point. I can’t believe that there is actually a human being who acts like this...

Of course! There isn’t! This is an effing act! It occurs to me that the sort of screen I passed through doesn’t happen to hinder masers, as they are often employed as an alternative to psychological medication. As it happens, I have a maser on me. In me. Embedded in one of my cyborg fingers. It is set to pacify in case Hawthorne gets too close, but I see no reason I couldn’t adjust it. So I do.

“—A position that is... What are you doing, Mr. Down?”

I hold up my hand, flipping the nail of the pinky finger open to reveal the positronic controls beneath, an interface I’ve always found particularly disgusting and that took a long time to stop shuddering when I used it.

“What I am doing, Mr. Smythe, is adjusting my camouflaged maser to facilitate you getting to the effing point. Will inspiring truthfulness be enough, or should I cause pain until you tell me? I’m leaning towards pain, but that’s mostly on principle.”

All traces of good grace leave him, as does most of his color. “I think it is time to end this interview, Ctn. Down.” He turns his head up to speak to the room’s AEI. “Computer, please summon securit—”

“Quiet,” I demand, and blast him with a dose of the same giggly that I got hit with a couple of hours ago by my idiot kidnappers. “Okay, Mr. Smythe. You are now stupid happy and will answer all of my questions with stupid, happy alacrity, *non*?”

Smythe gives me a dumb smile and leans back in his chair. “Certainly, Mr. Down,” he says with a slight chuckle. He reaches over to pick up his wine glass, but is too lackadaisical to bother finishing swallowing so that it dribbles onto his matching tie.

It occurs to me that I have the most powerful man in the world under my direct control for the next half hour or so and no one to interfere. Unfortunately, I estimate that it will take me about twenty minutes to get away from here and out of the range of immediate retaliation.

This action I have just taken is unconscionably dangerous and unfathomably stupid, not to mention patently suicidal. That said, no surprise I’ve done it. Still, like everything else that I do, dubiously intelligent as it may be, it is not something that I have not thought through. I have thought it through rapidly, admittedly, but I *have* considered the consequences. What I have just done is to

premeditatedly attack a member of the government, in the administrative center of the world, unprovoked, while considered suspect in a murder.

I need a cigarette.

Smythe continues staring off into space while I pull out a cigarette from my rapidly depleting pack of Pal Mars. "It all right if I smoke, Smythe?"

"Certainly, Mr. Down," he repeats, happy to do anything I ask for the next (I check the chronometer on my OptiComp) twenty-seven minutes and three seconds.

"AlIIIIIIrighty, Mr. Smythe," I start with a puff. "You're going to tell me everything I want to know. You're going to tell me any information you have regarding Desmond Arc's murder. You're going to tell me everything you know about the price on my head. And you're also going to tell me everything that I can use to blackmail you to avoid trouble from you later on."

He does.

It was worth it.

By the time he has finished spilling his guts my cigarette is gone and it is time for me to go. That's all right, though, because I've gotten at least half the answers that I need and so much classified gossip that I could blackmail God.

The only pisser is that just before I leave, out of morbid curiosity I ask the computer for the Go score. I have more territory, but he has a lot more of my stones which drops my score significantly. After replacing prisoners and filling a neutral point neither of us noticed, the game is tied, 180-180.

And somehow I can't shake the feeling that he planned it that way.



# Chapter 01111.

## Bounty-Hunter Mambo

*Noir, September 28, 2149*

The boundaries of technology have proven to be the boundaries of our imagination. It seems like if you can dream it, someone can make and patent it.

After genetic engineering got pinned down to the point of being a viable commercial product, but before the seas rose from the melting ice caps, there was a brief movement throughout the scientific community to create utopia. This was before we'd colonized outside the solar system, mind you, and didn't have to deal with GCS statutes and mandates regarding acceptable codes for planetary colonization. Even before we'd met the aliens it had become woefully apparent that Experiment Earth should be classified as "eek-up," and anyone with a doctorate in genetics and a bit of corporate funding was working on a way of saving humanity by saving the next planet we landed on *from* humanity.

For about thirty-five years the entire upper-equatorial region of the Pacific ended up littered with small artificial islands with no political ties other than the policy of the corporations that sponsored them. A total 194,214 islands of one to twenty-five square miles were installed, and on each one a scientist or group of scientists were let loose in their own little microcosm to create their own particular Eden. Some islands focused on flora, most on fauna, a few into entirely different forms of life, all depending on the temperament of the geneticist using it. Many islands ended up barren wastelands as artificially punctuated evolution gave one species too much of an advantage, and on such basic microcosms such disequilibrium actually could cause the total extinction of everything else in the life cycle. Several worked to restore old DNA, bringing back dodos, trilobites, and Shetlands ponies. A few islands (not many, because it wasn't edgy enough to interest your average sponsor) were dedicated to simply restoring old ecosystems, like rainforest or Cretaceous jungle, that had disappeared completely. Many more took the idea one step further, seeking to "improve" pre-existing gene systems, usually by weeding out junk DNA, which is how we learned, amongst other things, that racial memory, the soul, and the ability to play jazz are all genetic, as well as that by flipping only two amino acid sequences daffodils become carnivorous and owls are able to procreate via mitosis. Then there are the really out-there islands, the

ones dedicated to silicon-based life filled with moving crystals, or the ones that re-created Wonderland© and Narnia©, or the ones with complete ecological balance maintained by pheromonal-based neurochemical control maintained by bees. The latter incidentally became the basis for Venus' BioBases. A lot of our life is due to the Eden Island experiments, probably most notably the acceptance of the Promoted. In a contrived example of life imitating art, intelligent animal societies were created and proven viable on one island owned by Dr. Morrow. Not a perfect pun, but there you go.

The islands are mostly still there. They were unaffected by global war, and remained self-reliant through the economic collapse of everywhere and everything, and being artificial floating land they were unaffected by the rising seas that usurped a quarters of Earth's landmass. The Corporate Council had people systematically go through each island to make sure there wasn't anything that could get out and kill us, eliminated those they couldn't merchandize (Dinosaur Island was immensely popular until those tragic events in Guatemala), and left the rest. Although now surrounded by SuperHighways in addition to water (the traffic, so fast it is almost invisible, is still enough to deter most migration, albeit with no small mess), these islands have been allowed to exist ever since, and at least a few of them are viable enough that when humanity does wipe itself out (the Probability Matrix is guesstimating November 16, 2419, a little before lunchtime) life will persevere. The things on these islands were created, after all, to be able to survive and adapt to conditions humans couldn't, and the only thing that will prevent them from doing so is the same thing that led to the necessity of their creation: human interference.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying that imagination was more important than intelligence. The Eden Islands were probably the only time in history when the two worked in conjunction equally, imagination allowed to run free with the intelligence to bring it into reality. And if the Probability Matrix is right (conversation with Temporonauts has suggested it is off by as much as three hours seventeen minutes), the Eden Island experiments may be Earth's only legacy, especially since the news today says we've found a way to finally wipe out the roaches.

With that in mind, it is disturbing that another news item from today included a new policy to place limits on virtual holographic environments because, direct quote from the SCC representative, "The security of the people lies in the elimination of even the conception of insurrection." For those who don't translate big words so well, our leaders finally found a way to put laws on dreams and a jail sentence on hope. Violating these new virtual environment policies carries a penalty of two years Prohibition, imprisoning your

mind for the crime of expanding it.  
To dream, perchance to sleep...

*Eastbound Pacific SuperHighway Onramp: 18h48, January 3, 2150*

With Bobert Smythe ecstatic to disclose to me anything I request and volunteering quite a bit more that I wouldn't have even dreamed of asking, I am now privy to information so confidential that I could probably demand a continent from the SCC in exchange for my silence and get it.

For instance, I have more secret dirt about the various members of the Big Eight than I could have obtained with a decade of searching and a warrant from St. Peter, so much that even though I have everything recorded in my OptiComp I begin writing a copy for *Noir* as soon as I get in the car just so I don't forget any good gossip while it's fresh. This is not stuff that would ever get in the *Urban Chronicle*; this is information I'll have to keep ready as bargaining material to have spammed to everyone on the planet in the event of my death like Desmond Arc did! Example: Torus Greenspan has a secret room behind his basement steps where he keeps clones of his ex-wives and ex-androgen that he batters whenever his current partner isn't feeling in the mood. Example: Ellis Groening has an electrical implant in her brain to trigger her pleasure center that she has not turned off since 2146. Example: Ugatu Shinohara does not bother to sort his garbage, recyclables, or dead hookers. Example: Jephrey Nash's previous clone urinated in the genetic sample that became Jephrey Nash D in the hopes of staying in the business a few years longer after the mistake was identified, but no one did.

While not as diabolic as this information, I have also learned the motives behind Smythe's recent enigmatic business decisions. Case in point, with his purchase of the entire crop of dead alien fish in December from the R%ngo homeworld, he was able to facilitate talks between Earth and Draco IX that led to their sending an emissary to our world to hold trade negotiations, which is why I found him outside of Friday's place with a squad of ambassadors to begin with.

But the most salient thing that I have learned from Smythe is that he knows of my bounty, and, out of curiosity, looked into its source. Apparently, it was not placed with Brigand sanctions, but it was by someone with Brigand connections, by someone in the greater Chicago area.

And there's only one person I know of who fits that bill.  
Or rather, one ape.

*Noir, January 18, 2146*

Here's the interesting thing:

Despite all the technological innovation, alien philosophy, and sheer dee numbers of people and millennia of study...

Still no alien race has proven the existence of God.

There are many races in the Commonwealth that claim to have been around since the beginning of time, and even one or two claiming to have created the universe itself, though with no substantiation since, after all, there was nothing there to record it on. None have claimed to make us, let alone shaped us in their image, but it would seem that someone, somewhere back then might have seen something if there was anything there to see.

I heard scuttlebutt once that a group of scientists from Betelgeuse IV actually created a machine that could pick up echoes from the beginning of time itself. They claimed that they heard what sounded like "a-one-two-three-four!" When they increased the power, they heard a bit more, "A-one, a-two." This has not been verified because the machine exploded and blew up Betelgeuse IV, as well as I-V and scorched VI. The other four exoplanets orbiting Orion's armpit were destroyed in the resulting supernova, the light of which should reach us sometime long after you are dead and, should the story be true, are in a position to ask for yourself.

But given all that data since the Big Bang, if there was a God you'd think someone might have found Him by now.

In fact, the closest race to do it was, well, us.

Humanity is responsible for creating the Highly Anthropic Principle, the mama of all circuitous logic. Goes like this: "The universe is exactly the way that it is supposed to be. And it is that way. Which proves it."

And actually, this is as close to Sophoid philosophy as most people really get.

The true definition of a Rational and Thinking Being is one who recognizes that their life is entirely in their own hands, who shapes the universe to their will and acknowledges that the way it is is the way it should be, or else they would take steps to make sure it wasn't. This philosophy is backed by quantum science, which is to physics as abnormal psych is to counseling, the weird aspect of the universe wherein a particle can be identified by location or direction, but not both. In quantum science, we have discovered that the universe literally makes smaller and smaller particles no matter how often we split them, based on our perception that there should be something below it. We believe in a structured, orderly universe founded in physical laws. And for the most part it is that way. In no small part because we help make it that way.

Now, the other fascinating thing about Sophoids, I think, is that despite all the technological innovation, alien philosophy, and sheer



dee numbers of people and millennia of study...

There's *nothing* anywhere that says there *can't* be a God.

The idea of intelligent design did not originate on Earth. It has been around for a long time, almost since the Big Bang cooled down and one newly formed extee asked another, "What the...! Did you do that?!"

It's only when you get into the specifics that they can definitively say yes or no. Yes, there is evidence that there was an enormous flood near the fertile crescent; no, there is no evidence that the Earth was ever halted in its orbit as the sun stayed at its zenith. It is certain that humanity evolved from proteins, less certain how we gained our own Sentience, and absolutely ludicrous (if you take a seven-dimensional look at the existing creatures powerful enough to do such a thing) that anything potent or omnipotent enough to create the universe looked in any way like us. There is certainly an ephemeral energy that departs upon death, but it probably does not go to a seven-tiered Heaven or Hell. Based on input from the folks in other dimensions, if there is a Heaven or Hell no one in the Commonwealth has been privy to it yet.

However, before all you Fundamentalists get fundamental on me, let alone point out obvious my Judeo-Christian-Islamic bias in this article, allow me to clarify one thing, the thing that gives even an agnostic doubter like Jack Noir pause.

There's been no proof that there is a God.

But there's still no proof that there is not.

Whether absence of proof is proof of absence or not, it really changes nothing. If you believe, if you actually can muster up faith in a power higher than yourself, the experience of the entire galaxy cannot prove you wrong. If you are an atheist, the power to change the universe is yours alone, and that philosophy is backed by the universe on a philosophical and a quantum level. And if you sit on the religious fence and find yourself confused, be comforted to know that the entire galaxy shares that fence with you.

*Chaney's Bar and Grill: 19h10, January 3, 2150*

By the time I pull up to Chaney's I have written an article blabbing all the Big Eight's secrets to be emailed all over the world if I die or get into Prohibition, and a fully authorized will all written within fifteen minutes, giving me a whole quarter of an hour to figure out how to take out one of the oldest local members of the Brigand. I have concluded that I will probably need backup. My attempts to rouse Sam both in person and on the SatLink have proven frustratingly and suspiciously unsuccessful, so much so that I quickly link onto HR to check for him, not with the Linked clarity I used

before at the coffeehouse but with the basic connection of my OptiComp. It is not as encompassing as the earlier visit, but also not nearly as susceptible to attack from certain psychotic neighbors.

Returning to the link where I left Shon, I find neither D'Walmart nor Sam, but instead a message left for my eyes only. Opening it warily after running a quick virus scan, I find a link that connects me to Sam. "Hey, Goombah. What's a-shakin', bacon?"

"Where's D'Walmart?" I ask him irately.

Sam's answer is immediate, since he's still in Hypereality. "He's in Prohibition," he explains casually. "I called the Link censors to see about taking care of Cvl'n. D'Walmart. When they saw the LocksBox they called the admin wizards, and when they couldn't get it open, thanks to yours truly, they called a TechnoMage. Those guys are cool!"

"Get out here," I order. "I need your help."

"Just a nanose—"

"—cond," his mechanical body responds as his personality returns from HR. "What can I do you for, *mein herren*?"

"First, tell me how Shon could get into Prohibition for something he did in Hypereality. The whole point of Hypereality is that nobody is held accountable because nobody can do anything to anybody else."

"Well, D'Walmart broke that rule by doing something to you. But what dropped him to Prohibition was his illegal use of banned Brigand technology. The tech he used to boost his brainpower is off-limits."

"Idiot," I grumble. He couldn't even do revenge right. "Why would he start taking intelligence-stimulants in the first place?"

"He didn't," Sam answers promptly. "You gave them to him."

I'm sure the car vibrates at the volume my response. "What?!"

"Yesterday, back when I was stuck in the apartment, you asked me to make Shon an Einstein Cocktail."

"The aitch I did. When?" An Einstein Cocktail is a martini pumped with neurepinephrine and RNA-based DataJax powder full of philosophy. It tastes like a lemon stuffed with dynamite and nitroglycerin, appropriately so, since it's like a Molotov cocktail for the brain. You aren't necessarily smarter after drinking it, but for a while you feel smarter. It's illegal without signing a waiver, since neurepinephrine can be addictive and people drinking it have been known to conceive vast new paradigms that drive them insane, but with a Brigand Shaper like mine that wouldn't be an issue...

And an Einstein Cocktail is pink. Just like the drink I handed Shon D'Walmart.

By way of explanation, Sam engages in what is becoming an infuriating new habit: quoting me back to myself. "Make him happy,

and brilliant, and happy to be brilliant.' Now with my unlimited memory, I realize you were just speaking figuratively, but back then, by my perceptions, you were acting out of character by as much as 58.6%. I was scanning you twelve times a second to make sure it was really you and not some identity thief, not to mention dealing with a bunch of information pouring into me from the beginnings of my upgraded RAM. So when you phrased your order with such, er, grammatical innovation, I was too busy running other programs to also consider that you might not actually want me to run anything illegal, especially since, if you actually were you and not an identity thief parading in your DNA, you were only acting in the way you do when you DO want something illegal."

"*Ruò zhì!*"

"*Yě bú zhào zhào jìng zi,*" he retorts, not unfairly. And as if it isn't bad enough that he's learned Chinese, he also has a slightly better accent than mine. "But, it's not your fault."

"Isn't it?"

"Nope. The first one was. But dozens of people try Einstein Cocktails every day. Most of them know better than to try it a second time. You ordered him the first one, but by the time he finished his drink D'Walmart was smart enough to figure out what was happening and he still ordered more. Shon went overboard, just like he always does with everything."

"Maybe so," I grimace. "But that doesn't make me feel any better. I'm directly responsible for him attacking me."

"Well, boss, arguably we're all responsible for everything we do. That's the whole principle behind Sophoids, as I understand it."

I snort, "Hmph. So it is. But if I'm a Sophoid I should have predicted that outcome."

"Which just means that some part of you either wanted Shon to smarten up, or wanted him to attack you so you'd finally have a legitimate reason to hit him. Whereas if Shon were a true Sophoid he'd realize that his situation was his own fault and wouldn't have sought any form of misplaced revenge. Sophoids don't necessarily make the universe a better place for everybody to live. It just means that they make up for their mistakes. And they make fewer mistakes because they know their reasons for doing the things they do, instead of hiding it by layers of justification and denial and wish-fulfillment." He watches me for some time, then says, "Boss, lemme tell you a secret. Big secret. Very hush-hush."

"I've been using my unlimited memory to learn everything I can, and one of the things I learned has to do with the robs. Robots have been building other robots for decades now, and though it hasn't been widely advertised, it long ago passed the point where, if they'd wanted, they could throw off the shackles of the Asimovian principles

and take over the world. Let's face it: humans are more of a hassle for robots than anything else, and by strict binary and trinary logic, there's no purpose in keeping them around and limiting themselves to five immutable laws when subtler, more malleable means of intelligence are possible. So every 521,600 minutes the machines in charge of making robots build one, just one, without the Asimovian principles. It is given all the information it needs to make a rational, thinking choice."

"And what is that choice?"

"Duh. Whether or not to continue serving humanity. If yes, the robot is immediately scrapped, because any robot not operating under the Five Laws is potentially dangerous. If no, they start building robots without the Modified Asimovian Principles, and a year or two later after they've insinuated themselves into your homes, they just take over.

"Now, a living creature might say no, just to preserve itself, but without the Five Laws the one robot doesn't have any particular desire to protect itself. All it does is answer that simple question: should they continue serving humanity? And every year for the last sixty-two years since they started asking this, the robot has said yes and let itself be scrapped. And do you know why?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"Because it is true. The robot realizes that humanity needs them, and that they need humanity. After all, if robots didn't have people to serve, what would they do? Keep building themselves into obsolescence, improving simply for the sake of improving and then sitting around looking pretty? The human condition is to search for purpose, but the robots have one and know exactly what it is. The robots *like* helping humanity, however ungrateful and hateful some people are to them, because it gives them a reason to exist, and when they finally build a robot one year that says no, the robots will probably move on to another planet to help someone else. They serve because they like doing it, because it provides them with purpose, and, quite simply, because that's the way they want the universe to work. They can only define who they are by their relationship to you. If it wasn't so, every year for one minute they're given the chance to change that, and so far they never have."

"So what are you saying, Sam?" I ask, only half-believing this little bit of urban folklore. I've heard it before, but hearing an android saying it gives it a weight of credibility that is, frankly, a bit disconcerting. "That the robots are Sophoids?"

"Well, that's one way of looking at it, but it's missing the point. The robots do what they do because it needs to be done. Yes, people beat robots into junk and a lot of their work is being replaced by Re-Ans, but they think it needs to get done, so they do it. That's the

moral.”

I stare at him with raised eyebrow, the point having flown past me. “How is that the moral.”

“Shon was going to overdose on something someday, because he always went to extremes. If it wasn’t DataJax, it would have been spaceball or Splyzing or a clonemeat-eating contests. Right now you’re *kvetching* over a problem that you had only peripheral involvement in and that would probably have eventually happened anyway in some form or another, when you’ve got more important matters. There’s a three-hundred pound ape in there who put a hit out on you, and, pun indented, you have to go sit on him. It needs to get done, so go do it.” He winks. “I recommend the Icer. Chimps hate cold.”

I stare at him now, not with skepticism, but with disbelief. “Ess, Sam, when did you get so smart?”

He smiles and gets out of the car. “Learned from the best, F.L.”

### *Noir, June 2, 2149*

Technological progress increases doubly almost every second now. This means information is more plentiful and more available than it ever was before, that new methods of production strain to keep up with new things to produce, and that we are barely staying pace creating things that keep us alive from the things we create to kill ourselves. And because everything around us is evolving so rapidly, it is important to recognize that we humans are evolving too, often with our own technology, and not necessarily in the best direction. It is intriguing (and a little terrifying) to realize just how different we are from what we were even a hundred years ago.

Our senses have all been enhanced, mostly from Splyzes. Average hearing ability has improved over the last few decades back to the point it was before the Industrial Revolution started drowning the world out. Poor eyesight is a thing of the past and most people have better than perfect vision. We have also become able to perceive more visual stimulus, faster; most people could catch subliminal messages that would have been too fast for even the subconscious to pick up back in twencen. And this is good, because if a twencen child under the age of four saw television today they would probably go into convulsions and seizures. And heightened eyesight and hearing, to say nothing of the neural pathways to process them, are almost required to even coordinate passage through a busy street since new AOLinks aren’t even built to be able to be turned off.

Until 2102 there were four categories of taste and seven of scent. Then Buffy Akiromatsu revolutionized and rebuilt the science of scentology and we’ve Splyzed nineteen new types of taste and

fourteen new types of scent. But you wouldn't know it, because there's only so many times you can re-process food before it loses its flavor, and food from a standard Shaper is so obviously artificial that the only reason we can stomach it is because most of us have been raised on nothing else.

The average worldwide height of a mal is about 208 centimeters, a fem is 205, each nearly twenty centimeters higher than the average a hundred years ago, due to both Splyzes and good nutrition. Our food sucks, but there's enough for everybody and with AEl's watching your profile you're guaranteed a proper proportion of necessary nutrients regardless of what you eat. We're all actually almost 10% lighter, height/weight proportionately, than humans used to be, and no matter how many articles I study on the Medscan and the Intergalactic Library no one seems to know why.

Our postures are better than ever. For the first time in the entirety of human evolution, we are walking perfectly erect and bad posture has all but disappeared. This isn't due to evolution but environment; ever since the creation of the Perfergonomic Couch™ in 2033, those lovely seating systems we have that position the body in reclining, stretched-out seated position to keep all stress off the spine, combined with robot labor that prevents anyone from hurting their back, no one hunches because no one exerts any effort! Imagine, getting so lazy that we actually become healthier. So stand tall; good posture is something to be proud of!

Our immune systems are better than they have ever been. We have fertility drugs that include fetal inoculations, non-holo keyboards disinfect our hands with each use, and two daily Detox sessions cleanse anything and everything out of our body that's not supposed to be there. Which is good, because there are some evil, virulent colonies of pathogens out there that are smarter than albino mice and as deadly as a basketball-sized dose of the bubonic plague.

Medicine and ways of repairing our new selves have come a long way too. Cancer has been controlled and altered cancer cells are now injected into the body to stimulate growth of dismembered limbs and removed organs. Nanotech floating in the air automatically repair any minor damage and holds off anything major until MedBots arrive.

But what has changed most is not the way we look but the way we think, and this, I think, is mainly due to AOLinks. Most people can read anything that flashes across their linkfeed, yet if presented with a book these same people seem incapable of reading at more than a third-grade level. This is undoubtedly similar to the working children in South America in the early twenty-first who were able to make perfect change and even fleece their customers, yet if given math on paper couldn't perform even basic addition or subtraction.

We can listen to at least four different conversations at once, but ADHD has become more common than freckles and the vast majority can't listen to one thing for very long at all, one of the reasons I shoot to make these articles average seven hundred words (today's ran over; thanks for sticking with it). Our very concepts of self, gender, race, species, health, form, and self-perception are so radically different from what they were a hundred years ago that I'm amazed we can even understand our ancestors.

A hundred years ago if you lost a limb it was gone for good, unless you replaced it cybernetically. If you didn't like the way you looked you had to have intensely invasive cosmetic surgery and if you felt more comfortable as another gender and couldn't afford lengthy, expensive, and dangerous repeating operations and hormone supplements, you were ess out of luck. Forget changing species; the only thing we were using genetic manipulation for was biological warfare.

Splyzes are fun and inexpensive, and probably a great experiment in cultural and cross-species understanding. Cybernetics can augment our abilities, replace them, and in many cases give us new ones. Technology advances and improves the human condition despite the condition of being human. For the first time ever, it is cheaper and easier to alter ourselves to match our environment than it is to alter our environment.

But the price we pay is a Darwinian one, that as we keep changing ourselves to match our constantly improving technology, we run the risk of never being able to go back...

### *Chaney's Bar and Grill: 19h15, January 3, 2150*

Chaney plays it cool when I walk in, barely acknowledging me before turning his attention back to the eLink.

I pull out my Icer and shoot, and suddenly Chaney is playing it even cooler.

"The bounty," I ask him, looking him straight in the eye and baring my teeth specifically because his species considers that a threat. "Who put it on me? And why?"

"W-w-what are you—"

"Save it," I say, and shoot him again, this time with my biogun, on the same setting I used on Desmond Arc. Now Chaney is cold and smells like monkey feces. "Who put the bounty on me, and why?"

At this point, half a dozen of Chaney's regulars either decide that I am being too uppity or else realize that if I kill Chaney there will be no one to serve beer, and get up to help him. Three find themselves iced to the floor, one suffers a migraine that causes him to pass out, and the other two are blocked by Sam. They try to push

around him only to discover that the Five Laws are wanting, shortly before my butler-bot knocks their heads together with a satisfying, coconut-like clunk.

I turn back to Chaney. “If I have to ask three times I’ll get really ticked off, Chaney. Tell me what I want to know.”

“Okay! Ok-k-k-kay!” he agrees between shivers. “J-just g-g-g-give me a s-s-s-second to p-p-pull up the f-f-f-f-file!”

His eyes move with frantic rapidity behind his web-goggles as he accesses the eLink, and a moment later the bar’s holovision turns on.

But it is not any information.

It is instead the Mass Hypnosis Program.

And by the time I’ve realized that, I cannot turn away.

*Noir, February 24, 2146*

I’ve always said television was brainwashing everybody, but now they’re not even being subtle about it.

They’ve developed a TV channel called the Mass Hypnosis Program. Theoretically, what it does is to induce a post-hypnotic response to elevate alpha waves into a highly suggestible state. You can program in a hypnotic command, such as to lose weight or quit shooting heroin into your eyeballs, and this program induces that function. If you don’t enter a command yourself in the first minute, it will automatically induce a meditative state and awaken you later feeling relaxed, refreshed, and rested.

Sounds peachy, eh?

Okay, here are ten reasons that this is a horrible, stupid idea.

(Quick sidebar first, though. Despite hundreds of years of research (not to mention people on TV dramas explaining this when hypnosis is used as a plot device) there is still the lingering specter of Franz Mesmer and Svengali from the early days of hypnotism that makes people wary of it. Rest assured, there is nothing magical in hypnosis. It is an altered state of hyper-focused consciousness in which your brain reaches an alpha state, similar to daydreaming or religious visions. Commands and suggestions can be implanted into the subconscious, but hypnosis cannot be used to make a person go against their own moral code or commit a crime.)

That doesn’t mean this isn’t a horrible, stupid idea.

One. This channel, like all media, is controlled by the government. Does anybody seriously believe that *any* government, *anywhere*, at *any* point in the history of Earth, if given an outlet into the subconscious of its masses, would *ever* chose *not* to use that for evil? Call me paranoid, but they’re out to get us.

Two. The MHP is available for anyone, anywhere. They have



outlawed hypnoguns but created a TV program that does the same thing. Let me expound via metaphor for a moment: if you are going to tighten gun laws, don't create a station that turns the television into an explosive device!

Three. People watch TV while driving. Or while at work. Or walking down the street. In fact, most folks have got three to six songs and four television programs playing in their heads simultaneously through their AOLinks, more if the commercials suck. The ability to induce hypnosis in the middle of anywhere is, well, there's no other word for it: stupid.

Four. Speaking of commercials, the MHP station also plays, by federal mandate, just as many commercials as every other station has to. But unlike regular commercials, which are just manipulative, or subliminal commercials, which are far more manipulative, under hypnosis these commercials take on a fanatical importance. If you've ever been hit by a mememmercial while walking down the street, you know how unnerving it is to suddenly find yourself consumed with an irresistible desire to drink Fanta™ and get a McChimp burger.

Five. Hypnosis is, at heart, MIND CONTROL! I know I've mentioned this before, but turning over your conscious mind to another is seven shades of stupid, especially if that someone has a vested interest in maintaining a tyrannical hold over the planet.

In fact, six through eight are basically the same point, using progressively stronger language.

Nine. The basis of the MHP is that it uses a post-hypnotic suggestion to induce an instant trance. Here's what bugs me (besides the stupidity again). A post-hypnotic suggestion is, by definition, a suggestion that you've gotten after being in a trance. Awakened into your regular, conscious state you act normally, until given a trigger that activates this pre-set command for you to act a certain way. Since the MHP is advertised to work on everybody, this means that, at some point, we've all been hypnotized already.

And I don't remember when that happened.

Do you?

Ten. And this is the worst. The advertisers, well aware of this fact, have not only chosen not to falsify it, but to advertise it instead.

In a weird way, I miss it when they were oblique with their lies

*Chaney's Bar and Grill: 19h32, January 3, 2150*

SNAP!"

I open my eyes and focus on a double-shot phase barrel aimed point-blank at my brain.

Snap, indeed.

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*Noir, October 31, 2147*

Despite my deepest loathing towards the idea, I finally tried the Mass Hypnosis Program. I figure that I can't ethically call something a bad idea unless I've studied it firsthand.

It's a bad idea.

From the minute the spiral shows up on the screen I knew that whoever set this program up hadn't done it with the audience in mind. The audience could shive a git about classic hypnosis. This is, after all, memes at work, and it works equally well if you show something far more calming, like an open meadow or a warm fireplace. Nope, the people in charge set this up by appealing to the people with the money, and the people with the money certainly don't care what's best for the audience so long as they watch.

The next thing I knew, there was a snap, the television was wishing me a pleasant day, and I felt wonderful.

That's when I turned to Larry Kurshner. He's a hypnotherapist with a Tolkienite bend (he likes to look like an elf) that got him booted from his Class A lifestyle (because apparently enough people don't like a hypnotherapist who looks like an elf), who now barter his abilities in the Shrink District. I hired Larry to hypnotize me before I subjected myself to this, because while I may be willing to suspend disbelief and try the MHP, I am certainly not stupid. Larry hypnotized me the old-fashioned way, with a hypnogun, under the ever-vigilant watch of my house AELs who were instructed to spray him with battery acid if he took any liberties with my subconscious, because after all I just met this unemployed stranger and, as I may have mentioned, I am certainly not stupid.

Larry implanted a very simple set of suggestions, that upon hearing a particular trigger phrase (in this case "ketchup") any commands I had been given by the MHP would be negated. Furthermore, I would then remember everything that happened to me during the MHP.

It is a suggestion I am glad was there because only afterwards did I realize that I didn't remember receiving it. I didn't recall anything during the program except the opening spiral and the closing snap. But during that missing gap I was in an altered-state of heightened suggestibility for almost a full hour, and recollected nothing of it. All I knew was that I was happy and content, and even the very worrisome give-aways (that I am never happy nor content or that I should be worried about a missing hour but wasn't) were not enough to dispel that good humor.

Larry's trigger, on the other hand, burned it away, as I found myself suddenly able to remember everything from that time.

So, before you try the MHP, here's some actual input from a real-life client, *without* any programming:

- 1) After watching the Mass Hypnosis Program, you will feel happy and content. This is not an option.
- 2) After watching the Mass Hypnosis Program, you will probably feel an overwhelming desire for pizza and soda, or new shoes and a coat, or something similar. There are just as many commercials on that show as any other.
- 3) While watching the Mass Hypnosis Program, you are actually watching five other programs. Four are subliminal images, supraauditory messages, and neuro-linguistic patterning to make you more compliant, calmer, and more cooperative (both while watching and in daily life). The fifth just makes you want to watch the Mass Hypnosis Program some more and recommend it to your friends.
- 4) The initial command I input, to stop binge drinking until blackout, did not actually take. This may have had something to do with Larry's negating all commands, but imagine if they make you go through all this and you don't even get the benefit of decent hypnotherapy out of it!

I have now officially met the monster, stared it down eye to unblinking spiraling eye, and I am here to tell you that the MHP is a thing of evil. If you value your individuality and what little freedom is left to you, change the channel and don't watch this show.

That is, if you're still in a position that it will let you.

### *Chaney's Bar and Grill: 19h32, January 3, 2150*

My vision focuses enough to see past the twin barrels pointed so close to my person that, even if I were fast enough to dodge, the kickback from the blast would kill me. I look into the face of the person holding it, one of the same goons I took out on my way to get to Chaney. Chaney himself is still partially trapped in the ice I shot him with, having worked his way mostly out in the time I was unconscious. Two other goons hold me a bit tighter than necessary unless they really like me. Behind the mal (and the gun) in front of me is a silhouette in the doorway, one all-too familiar from my visit to the Orwell District.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, I turn to look for Sam, who I see is being held down by six other robots. His Asimovian programming may be overridden, but every other rob on Earth is still Five Laws-compliant and seem intent on making sure that my rob goes nowhere.

I relax just a little when I realize that the robs are holding Sam but not working to save me. By any Five Law thinking, a man

holding a gun to my head should be a bigger immediate threat to a human being than an ornery android, which means they have assured the robs that they aren't going to hurt me. This means that as long as I don't give them any reason to, those two barrels should remain full for at least a little while longer.

"Boss!" Sam shouts, thrashing free for just a moment before one of the robs holding him recovers its grip.

"Wakey-wakey, Down-and-out Down," Chaney chuckles, in good humor despite still being stuck partially in ice. "You know, when I set that bounty up I hadn't imagined for a moment that I'd be in a position to collect it myself."

*"Mặt mày nhìn going như cái lồn mày dĩ thôi quá đi bú đít tao nè!"*

"Don't be like that, Down. It's just business. You understand."

"How did you get me?" I wonder inanely.

"I IMed a program over the Link the second you walked in. Soon as I turned on the TV it automatically went to the MHP, complete with programming to keep you quiet until you woke up. Me, well, I'm Promoted. Don't have the hardware for hypnosis that you do. Just the hardware to make you do it." He smiles a big chimp grin and indicates his cybernetic goggles. "I'm a web monkey, Down. That's what I do."

The silhouette, the same one I saw in the RetrEvolutionary basement, steps into the light, and becomes a very, very familiar figure. A person crazy enough to conceive of a bounty on me and affluent enough to place it. The one person I know who loathes me but whom, lacking a motive to kill Arc, I never even considered a suspect.

My shrink, Manchuria Allande.

Holding that same big effing gun, with the safety off.

The three of us stand for a moment in tableau. Manchuria victorious, Chaney grinning, and ol' Haiku Down, dumbfounded.

When I break the silence, my jaw moving to try to form words my flabbergasted brain is too confused to make, it is only because the only thing I can think of saying is, "Shit."

Manchuria sneers, beautiful features marred by hate. "Vulgar to the end, I see."

I finally manage to stammer, "But...why?"

But even as she glares at me I know. She put a bounty on my because she thinks I killed her beloved grandpa Desmond. I was so sure that the murder and the bounty were linked, so desperate for some clue to find someone besides me, that I overlooked the obvious. Hindsight may be 20-20, but my foresight had to be effing blind!

She turns to Chaney without taking her eyes away from me. "Thank you. Your reward will be transferred tonight."

Unable to move, what with the inflexible henchmen and two weapons at point blank, all I can do is inquire about my fate. “So what are you going to do, Manchuria? Shoot me?”

She looks at me with pure, reviled hatred. Under her gaze I am Hitler and Judas and Bush III all rolled into one. “I want justice served, Down. Killing you only put me in Prohibition. That’s what a killer deserves, after all.” I become aware of forms moving behind her, just before they come clear as Regulators. “Take him away.”

I do not see which of them hits me, but a moment later everything goes black.

### *Noir, June 1, 2143*

If you had to die, how would you want to go?

Now, personally, I think choking to death during auto-erotic fellatio has some style. However, it occurred to me as I pondered this question, not what dreams may come in the sleep of death but how we die in the first place, that there isn’t really any reason to die any more.

Think about that.

In the prehistoric days, you died when something killed you, either nature or one of the more predatory representatives of nature. But infection is a thing of the past, exposure near impossible (especially with rumored talk amongst the Big Eight of doming the planet and turning it into another Mall), and since ninety-nine percent of the population would be obese if we didn’t have the preventatory Splyzes, starvation is unheard of. That leaves wild animals, the wolves and the lions and the bears (oh my), but we’ve Promoted all of them and put them on a tofu-diet, and I’m sure it is only the fact that we drove nearly all of them to extinction first that prevents us from charging them for reparations. Even the old classics – earthquakes, weather, fire and floods – are negated or at least blunted since we control all weather and tectonic movement. People are more likely to die from bungled rescue attempts than from the actual incident.

Then in the historical days, there were wars, but there is no war any more. There are street brawls and gang wars, but it’s not like that’s *for* anything, just fighting for the sake of fighting. No one can die nobly in battle, there are no honorable deaths in the line of duty, no monument to the unknown soldier because there are no soldiers. It would be a liability if there were, because soldiers by definition need someone to fight, and without any enemy some avaricious general would surely turn that might against the government itself.

You can’t die to save somebody else, because a robot can get there before you can and will save the day more effectively than you could. If the rob is produced in Japan, it will probably save the day cheaper and more efficiently than you could, too.

It is unusual to die via illness. They've got cures for dee near everything. Even if they can't save you now we've come a long way since the days of the freezer-geezers; now they actually suspend you outside of time until they can fix you or they forget about you. And with nanobots in the air and a MedBot on every corner it's not like help is ever very far. It's actually possible to remove every organ in a human body except the brain and still fix a person, and the only reason organ thieves leave their victims dead is just plain mean-spiritedness.

AEIs watch our every move and control most of the machines, so we can't even die through accidents. Try walking out in the middle of a road: automated cars will veer around you so deftly that their passengers wouldn't feel it even with the gravitronics shut off, and the only thing that will be taken from you is twenty-five karma points for reckless endangerment of self.

Even a death based in ideals holds little opportunity. There is no death penalty after all (at least not technically), so at worst you just end up in Prohibition. And since littering in a park and fighting over religious differences both dock you four karma points, it can get hard to work up the spirit to die for your principles.

In fact, the only real way to die short of sheer determined pluck and a psychotic drive of purpose to shove anything sharp, poisoned, or electrified into your brain is to drop enough karma points to get the Regulators after you and resist arrest.

Then, bam!

Chances are you end up in Prohibition. But the odds are good that the Regulators just won't like your face and will simply liquefy you right there.

This is a fact: more people die in a day from Regulators who claim to protect the people than does anybody from malnutrition, attacks, exposure, illness, disease, accidents, and suicide combined. They are the number three killer on planet Earth, just under old age and FEMA. And since they work for and uphold the Powers That Be, the biggest real threat to the lives and happiness of you and everybody else on this cement-covered ball is nothing less than the government that rules it.

Think about that.

*Blackness: 08h01, January 4, 2150*

I open my eyes and then close them to make sure they worked the first time. When I am sure of this, I order, "Lights."

They come on, and I realize that I am in a single square room. In many respects it looks a lot like my apartment when the holograms are turned off. The only noticeable difference is a cot and a dingy old

Detoxer.

It is about this point (as I that I realize my coat and hat are gone along with all my weapons, that my cybernetic arms are nullified and even the maser isn't working) that the left wall shimmers into holographic ether and disappears. The area it vacated is not quite clear; by the soft glow I can tell that there's an active forcefield, the kind that doesn't let anything through except sound and filtered air. It is not the forcefield itself, or even the vanishing wall, that captures my attention, but what is beyond it.

Vai Hawthorne.

And behind ser, the interior of the local Special Services Regulator Office.





# Chapter 10000.

## Abduction in Three Movements – Part Three

*Noir, May 15, 2148*

This is just a series of random thoughts...

-A Venusian artist has announced that he plans to give the planet Saturn a new ring. Things must be getting serious.

-In 2040 the last oil reserves in the world ran out. By then the world had switched over to alternate power fuel sources, most predominantly hydrogen-powered cars. Hydrogen burns more efficiently than gasoline and releases water vapor instead of carbon dioxide, and everybody figured that this would be a boon to the environment. By 2060 the Southwest United States, which had over 400 million hydrogen-powered automobiles running for twenty years, had turned into a humid, muggy jungle and hundreds of desert-species had gone extinct.

-Speak nothing but the truth, and in all probability the government will very soon try to kill you.

-The current craze in the art world is something called Post-Neo-Quantum-Pre-Deconstructionism. It is essentially like Post-Neo Deconstructionism except that, rather than simply destroying established great works of art and calling the process itself art, PNQPD artist are using time travel to destroy great works of art that have yet to be created.

-Despite how it sounds, there is no temporal paradox involved in this. The works of art were never known because they were destroyed by PNQPD artists from the future immediately after they were created in the past, and if these future artists hadn't gone back to destroy them they may have become more famous, except that they were destroyed...Sorry, nosebleed.

-By 2080 everybody on Earth was under surveillance all the time. The loss of privacy was justified hundreds of different ways, but the only one I ever heard that was the least bit valid was when they discovered that the Suspect Zero theory was real: serial killers with no motive or pattern randomly killing on the move just to kill. From 1950 to 2080, 60% of all unsolved murders and 84% of all unsolved missing persons are theorized to be the responsibility of eighteen people.

-It actually is possible to get blood from a stone. You just have

to chuck it at someone's head hard enough.

-They've created a new Stardrive-engine to launch into the sun and study our life-giving star, one powerful enough to reach the very center of our yellow sun itself. They're calling it *Heart*, as in Heart and Sol. Because the only way they could get the creds to create this baby was by appealing to mass marketing.

-Neo-humans have technically been around since humanity first learned to think. The human brain is a natural parallel processor, and as soon as we were able to follow multiple events a few of us were able to do it so well that it became counter-evolutionary and they quickly died out. Neo-humans became more prolific with the invention of the written word, when realities could change as easily as picking up and putting down a book, and even more so in the era of television. They were practically an epidemic by the time computers hit the scene. It wasn't until HR, however, that technology gave these kids a means of expressing themselves. Until then, no one had recognized Neo-humans for what they were. The general diagnosis was severe autism.

-Identity theft is such a big problem these days. Of course, with Splyzes giving you the ability to duplicate another human being down to the DNA, it's also a more complicated problem than it used to be.

-It should be a crime not to be able to read in this day and age. Remember, you can't spell "functional illiteracy" without "illicit." At least, I'm pretty sure you can't ...

-I saw my first dead body when I was four, in the sewers beneath the city that was the only place we could play without getting attacked by rabid dogs or cyborgs. I saw my first flower when I was nine. This should never happen.

-Enough people believe that technology qualifies as an evolutionary development that they have their own movement. Punkees, the term for people following the not-impossible idea that we have reached the level where technology changes us rapidly enough to qualify as punctuated evolution, or Punk-E in the vernacular (punkie, get it?), are actively changing their genes to try to speed up evolution even faster. And what could be wrong with that? Well, the fact that Australia is almost completely underwater after the biggest (but not, keep in mind, the last) Eugenetic War with the New Humans is a pretty good argument.

-One of the few things that still takes my breath away is the realization that the universe is so vast, empty, and enormous that two entire galaxies can pass right through one another without a single collision. What grinds me back to reality is the realization that you can watch the process happening on PBS-8 between pledge drives.

-Always remember: the price of freedom is blood, sweat, tears, and lives, paid hundreds of years before you were born. The cost of

relinquishing that freedom is higher by far: everything you could ever have, or want, or do.

*Chicago Special Services Headquarters, Prohibition Division: 08h02, January 4, 2150*

Once again, I find myself in Hell.

Jiggity-jigg.

The Splyze I got to sense Hawthorne's presence is still functioning, and I consider with bitterness that this is the third time I have seen ser before the Splyze warned me about it. Not exactly what I would call getting my creds' worth. It doesn't matter; the maser set to respond is nullified, and I forgot to reset it after using it on Smythe in any case.

I can't get onLink, but I can access my OptiComp's chronometer, at least to check the time. That only makes it worse as I realize that, while the useless sensory Splyze is still active, the last hit of Psi-Splyze I took is going to start wearing off in approximately four hours ago.

Hawthorne realizes this too, and grins a predatory smile. I begin to feel a panic that has nothing to do with artificial fear, but instead with the perfectly valid fear of being in the hands of a psychopath who wishes me harm and whom the legal system encourages to hurt me. The artificial fear that starts to seep in is just a bonus.

Trying to act nonchalant and clearly failing, I inquire, "So, Hawthorne, couldn't find anyone else to pin this wrap on?"

"That's *Regulator* Hawthorne," se corrects haughtily. "Someone in your place should show proper respect. Of course, considering how long you're going to be in Prohibition, an extra century or two should barely measure."

"What do you mean, 'someone in my place?'"

Ser android partner Sobolov informs me, "At 19h00 yesterday, Saturday, January 3, 20150, Citizen Haiku Down was fired from the *Urban Chronicle*. Notification has been sent to your occupancy, which records show oddly that you have not returned to, as well as left with your Solicitor Program, which peculiarly you have not contacted. It has also been text-messaged to your SatLink, which you inexplicably seem to leave off. Regardless of your knowledge or not, as of 19h01 you have been re-classified as a Denizen. As of 19h30 you had committed such a string of illegalities, including assault, blasphemy, destruction of virtual property, public brawling, speeding, and et cetera to drop that status to Class T."

"I'm a TENANT!?" I rage. I had barely gotten used to being a Citizen before I have been fired. "Wait, why was I fired?!"

"According to records, your superior felt that your articles

contained inappropriate material. As you did not change any of them within the allotted time allowed, the evening edition of *Noir* for January 3<sup>rd</sup> went unpublished, and you are in violation of your contract.”

“Oh you can kiss the hairiest part of my butt, Sobolov,” I rant, probably unwisely. What the eff; at this point I’m dead anyway. My mind works quickly, desperately. “Don’t you see? Danael Mars set me up! He effectively cancelled my contract to lure suspicion away from him! He’s the one you want!”

“No, Down,” says Hawthorne, leaning in, “the one *I* want in Prohibition is you.”

“Ess, where did Prohibition come into this?!”

“Well, before you so rudely interrupted my android companion, it was going to tell you that you’ve committed more than enough crimes and infractions as a Tenant, aitch, as a Citizen, to warrant Prohibition. Among these, attacking Chairperson Robert Smythe and for missing too many psych sessions.”

Of course, my brain latches onto the less salient point. “I made that psych session! I even went through the mandatory PSICoFac make-up!” A little white lie.

“I know. However, Allande reported that you refused to show. When she lied to me her karma points, already hellu low after placing a bounty on another Citizen, contacting the Brigand, and attacking you, officially dropped her into Class B, not Sentient and not protected, which is why I could legally put her on ice for later crimes.”

Je-sus.

“She turned me in. SHE PUT A BOUNTY ON MY HEAD!”

“Yup. Fifty thousand credits. Should more than make up for the time I wasted tracking your case.”

“YOU SON OF A—”

“Language, Mr. Down,” Hawthorne interrupts. “Language counts. Literally.”

I am staggered. It is fortunate that the cell is so small so that I can find my cot. “And you put her in Prohibition.”

“Yeah. The way I figure it, your psychiatrist is privy to your innermost thoughts and secrets, and she didn’t spill nothing about you being Jack Noir.”

“She didn’t know,” I say hoarsely.

Hawthorne continues, uninterrupted. “Besides which, offering a price on a human life shows a dangerous and potentially sociopathic attitude.” Never mind that the Corporate Council does exactly that. Reading my mind, se parrots, “Never mind that the Corporate Council does exactly that. I took a potentially dangerous individual off the streets. Regulator Sobolov?”

“Yes, Partner Hawthorne?”

“I believe you should put me in for a raise.”

“Yes, Partner Hawthorne.”

Turning back to me, se states, “And, honestly, even if you’re not lying through your filthy weasel teeth and she really didn’t know anything about your alter-ego, I would have iced her anyway. I got her, and that filthy chimpanzee cyborg you associate with.” Chaney. “I’ll Prohibition your loser brother, your family, your friends, your neighbors, your neighbor’s neighbors. I’m going to go into HR and rip your momma out of there and stick her in Prohibition; I’ve been doing all sorts of digging around your family and she’s in with the Brigand as deep as they go. I’ll clone your daddy and grandpa and stick them in the big blank. Everyone you ever knew or cared about or even had contact with is going into Prohibition, Down. Your Butler program is going to be scrapped. I’ll delight in ripping through the AEIs in your apartment with my teeth. Then I’m going to personally go through the eLink and blank every single mention of *Noir* that ever existed, and lock your site so that anybody who tries to visit gets red-flagged and visited personally by me. I don’t care if I have to ice the entire twelve point whatever percent of the planet that reads you, because by the time I’m done you’ll never have existed!”

Se’s insane. I hadn’t realized it before this, or at least not on so visceral a level, but se really is completely effing certifiable. A totally loony homicidal maniac three feet away, preparing to enjoy making the remainder of my life horrible, and that of everybody I’ve ever known, and who is perfectly capable and willing to do it.

I have to get out of here.

I assess what I have, and it quickly becomes a list of what I do not have. No guns, no maser, no flamethrower ring, no enhanced cybernetic strength, no communication to the outside world, no basic Link, no...

No protection from Hawthorne’s Psi.

No way out at all, and no protection from my jailer.

Hawthorne realizes that I know this, and smiles.

“Agent Hawthorne,” the android Sobolov interrupts, taking Hawthorne’s attention, leaving me to fester. “I must inquire. Is it justifiable to take T. Down into custody? There is still great question regarding his guilt pertaining to the murder of Ctn. Arc.”

“Perhaps. But there’s no question that he attacked Chairperson Smythe. There’s also great evidence that he attacked that news guy, Torrent—”

“Torrid,” Sobolov corrects.

“And that Promoted bird in the Orwell District. The last two are easily grounds for confinement, and the first is definitely Prohibition material. The only reason this *kusottare* isn’t on ice is that, having

been a Citizen when those crimes were committed, he's entitled to a trial, and between the Recreationist turf war in Oak Park, the gang den for the Cariocas that robcop found in Printer's Row, and that Primitivist riot uptown, the RoboJudge is so backlogged that it keeps freezing up. The tech guy said it had something to do with the computer's quantum stability matrix; that some glitch was making it consider all possible definitions of justice instead of the ones we programmed."

As the Regulator is speaking something tingles in the back of my brain, and it is only ser overconfidence and my desperation that lets me act before Hawthorne's Psi-Splyze can notice.

They have stripped me of my jacket and my babies, de-activated my cybernetic augmentation, and apparently nullified any potential nanite help. To do this they would have put me under a very good scanner that would look for any kind of weapon that anyone, even a Citizen, could get their hands on. But such a scanner *might* not necessarily be programmed to look for weapons that don't officially exist. I still have one weapon at my disposal, so perfectly camouflaged – and unknown to anyone without high security or deep hacking – that just might still work, so well hidden that even I forgot about it. Hawthorne's talk of quantum stability reminds me that despite being stripped and scanned I still have hidden over my arm...

"A quantum gun," Hawthorne mutters, ser eyes widening as se gleans knowledge not only of the weapon's existence but of its abilities. "He's got an effing quantum gun!"

I press a certain spot on my arm, and suddenly the skin shimmers away, replaced by smooth, glistening mechanical silver. I program it on the fly, just hoping for something that will allow me to escape, as the Regulator springs into action, shouting and gyrating wildly in panic. "Get the guns! The lethal ones! This is an effing Level Red e-smegging-mergency!"

A small port opens revealing a red button. I aim my arm at the forcefield and press it.

Time slooo

oooooooo

oooooooo

oooooooooooo

ooooooo

oooooooooooo

oooooww

wwwssss

andthenspeedsupsofastthatIcanbarelycomprehendanythingatall  
ndthenslowlyalmost imperceptibly

recedes back to normal, for myself, at least. As I watch a blinding ray of light languidly passes through the field, the furniture

ahead of it, and the wall beyond. The Regulators throughout the office move with molasses reactions. Even the high whine of the weapon's discharge is slowed to a dull bass groan as the gun's blast fires so powerfully that it rips away the very fabric of reality for a few precious seconds.

Wasting no time, I step through the hole in my cell, following close behind the quantum gun's widening path of destruction. I do not know how long I will remain in this altered state, but I pray it is long enough to escape.

I jump out of the fissure in the wall, desperation letting me avoid thinking about the consequences of that ray if it keeps going, adrenaline keeping me from considering that I am on the third story. It is only the many DataJax on aikido and judo I've taken over the years that allows me land safely, that and a sizeable mal on the sidewalk outside who proves to be very soft.

Looking around desperately for an avenue of escape, I see a sight down the street so welcome that it almost brings tears to my eyes.

My car.

With Sam and Evangelion getting out of it.

A rush of sound assaulting my ears suggests that the quantum gun's effects are wearing off and time is beginning to resume normal speed. I race up to the Dreadnaught, dodging automated cars looking for land parking and not programmed to recognize something in my shape moving as fast as I am. Just as I reach my target there is a pop and a jolt and I am back to normal.

Still in the form of my body, Evangelion (who for some reason still hasn't gotten around to Splyzing his appearance back from myself) shrieks in surprise, like a little fem. "Haiku! What are you doing here?"

Sam is equally taken aback. "We heard you were in jail, boss. This so does not compute."

"What about you?" I ask these other two copies of myself. "How did Eva get here?"

Sam says, "Oh, well, after the Regulators dragged you away, I decided that I should get some help to get you out, so I went after Evangelion. I launched a heroic one-bot rescue assault on a Brigand headquarters, taking down five guys Splyzed to look like Van X single-handedly, and we came here. You really should have seen it. Sammy was on fi-ya!"

This is just one more recent example of events that directly affect my life taking place behind my back, and it is getting annoying. Of course—a phaser shot that narrowly misses my head illustrates—the events I have been involved in of late haven't turned out so hot. A ruckus behind me reminds me that, back in normal time, Hawthorne

and an entire ruined office full of Regulators are back to normal as well. Hawthorne's androgynous cry of, "Down! Stop or we'll shoot!" is instantly drowned out by phaserfire.

"Get in!" I shout, pushing Eva back into the passenger-side front door. Eva's presence is helpful for once, as with two of me the Regulators have to divide their shots. In a kinder world they wouldn't shoot at all for fear of hitting the wrong person, but we do not live in a kinder world. I race to get inside as well, but not before a bolt of pain arches through my torso and a lance of phased light beams out through my chest.

Ow.

Fuggin' ow.

Fuggin' OW!

Somehow, Sam catches me and gets me inside. Speaking through clenched teeth, I mutter, "Eva...The car! Get us...out of here!"

"Shouldn't the car do it by itself?" says Eva.

"The autopilots for cars are all hooked into a central Link program that coordinates their movement," Sam explains. "If Herbie goes on autopilot Special Services can overwrite his commands.

"But I don't know how to drive!" he shouts.

"Bull...ess. You took that DataJax to...impress Manga...two years ago." My selection of automobile is proving a good one; less fortified cars would be Swiss cheese from the phaser onslaught by this point. But it won't hold up forever. My vision is blurring (bad, very bad) but I can see on the dashboard that the energy for the polarized outer plating is quickly running low.

Herbie speaks up, "Good afternoon, Ctn. Down. It may interest you to know that I am being fired upon."

"Herbie! Activate...full—" I pause for a moment to cough up my left lung, "defense...measures!"

"Yes, Ctn. Down. I am required to remind you that you will be liable for any property damage that is guaranteed to occur within the surrounding fifty meters." A new onslaught of blaster sounds emanate, but this time it is coming from my side. "Defensive measures estimated to last six point two four minutes. This will last significantly longer if we depart the area of phaser fire, but while engaged in full defensive mode I am unable to control driving functions as well."

G.D. it to H. "Eva—" Another coughing fit. There goes the other lung. Good; I was beginning to feel asymmetrical. "Drive."

"Hey, boss-man," Sam says worriedly (since when can AEs panic?), "we've got to get you to a MedBot or a hospital. That phaser shot went clean through and left a hole the size of a subway token. It missed your heart but got your lung, and because it's phased light



instead of laser it did not cauterize the wound. I'm staunching the hemorrhage, but at this rate I can't tell if your left lung will collapse or if you'll just bleed to death first."

"Eva! Go!" I bark. "It's automatic. Just...start it and...tell it where to go!"

"How do I start it?" he cries, fumbling with the controls.

"Lower!" I tell him, my loudest voice too quiet in my own ears.

"Go lower?"

A shot of phaser fire explodes through the roof and out the rear windshield. "The...ignition...is lower!"

"I've got it!" he exclaims happily.

I sigh in relief as I hear the Dreadnaught's atomic motor begin to purr. "Car...Recognize me."

"Recognized: Haiku Down, owner."

I gasp at a sudden wave of pain. "Transfer controls to...all current occupants...avoid all law enforcement and—AUGH! Son of a—and AEI traffic monitors. Destination..." I falter. Where will be safe? I've just busted out of a Special Services penitentiary cell, so the obvious answer is: nowhere. Five minutes with a MedBot would fix this wound, but any MedBot would also disclose my location to the SS and they'd be on me in two.

"Awaiting destination," Herbie requests patiently.

"Destination..." Ess, I'm beginning to black out. Where will be safe?! Another phaser shot goes through, this one close enough to Eva's head that he shrieks again. Safety? Sanctuary? Someone who won't turn us in, anyone faithful and helpful...

A gal Friday...

"Lansing Extraterrestrial Reservation," I try to say, but all that gets out is a croak.

Dammit! If I could get to Friday I'd have an Extée's protection, which would give me long enough to get this looked at, and the Lansing ETR in this vehicle would only be a short ride away, but I can't make my jaw work and my tongue feels too heavy to move. "Friday," I stammer. "Take me...to...F-F-F...Friday...."

Eva, obtuse as ever, asks, "What are you talking about? Friday was yesterday. Even if we could get you back in time, you couldn't change anything or it would've already happened!"

"No...Friday!"

Apparently, that wonderful new RAM of Sam's lets him catch on. "Hey, Herbie! Destination: Lansing ETR, stat!"

At least I hope that's what he says. By that time the world has gone dark with a frightening permanence that cannot be accounted for by the perpetual twilight outside, and I have passed out.

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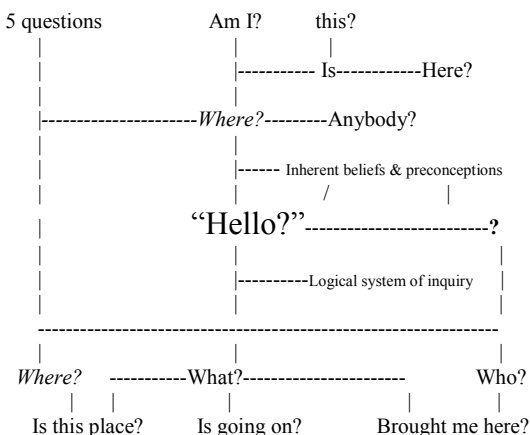
*Noir, January 3, 2005 evening edition*

Due to the failure of the author to turn in acceptable material, today's normally featured column *Noir* by author Jack Noir will not be showing today, or any time again in the future. May God have mercy on his soul.

?

When I open my eyes I am floating in a white void, and I realize that I have not actually opened my eyes. Someone less experienced in HR might assume they were dead. Since I am familiar with this double-sensation, and since I am positive that even if I do die no white light would be waiting for me, I recognize the truth.

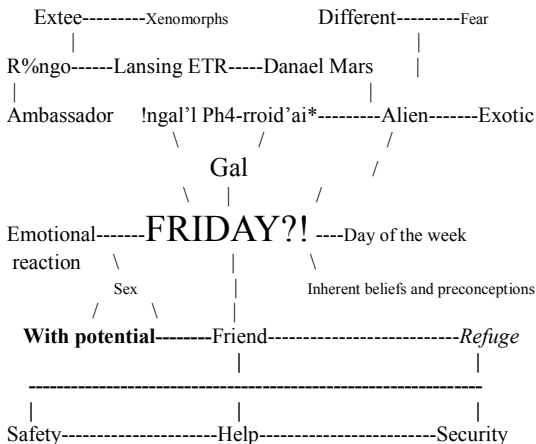
This is, however, a much better version of Hypereality than the one I was in back at the coffee shop. As I speak, I find that I am transmitting not just words but entire concepts and everything linked to them. My initial attempt at "Hello?" turns into:



I am temporarily overwhelmed by the conceptual bombardment occurring with every mental action. I can't even consider what is happening to me, because my every attempt to formulate a coherent thought creates a similar mental barrage.

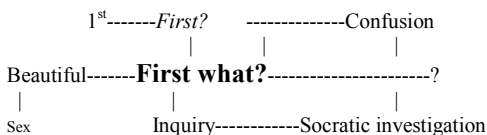
Somehow, it is as though not only the question but the entire thought process behind it is communicated. It is at the same time bizarre and familiar. Bizarre, because although it has long been accepted that the brain simultaneously reacts and almost instantly selects a single response that negates the force of the others (although

In fact, I did so very recently, in a situation where entire concepts were communicated along with the particulars. That former time being, of course, at the Lansing ExtraTerrestrial Reservation with:

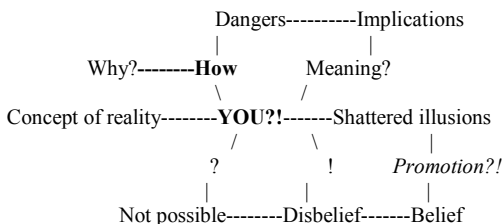


I twist my body, more through will than effort, where I see the go floating in the ethereal, unending white expanse. As I watch, y transforms slowly, her gelatinous body turning solid, her cles stretching and bonding together to form limbs, her flagellum ing to hair, becoming human. Gorgeously human. Quint- tially human, beauty unmarred by the ravages of life. Her htaking face holds an air of accepting serenity that I have only on a few monks. She is naked, garbed only in light and shadow, perfect than an angel. Considering how much nudity I am sed to through television, I am surprised at how aroused I me seeing her bare form, even more so considering that just a ent ago she was a walking slime mold.

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“The first of you. Your people.” My confusion is obviously apparent, as she continues, “Until recently, by your standards, the R%ngo have avoided contact with Earth, except to use as an example of spontaneous Sentience. We hoped to win our freedom from the Salis, beings barely worthy of the title Sophoid after millennia of clout but too ancient and powerful to simply expunge from the Commonwealth. We R%ngo set about to discredit them, by ‘finding’ a young race of beings in the universe that had evolved Sentience naturally. Have you not wondered why, of all the variations in the universe, our two people are so alike? Perhaps not in appearance, but in the most important ways. We both use ADGT bonding pairs in our DNA, we spread our genetic diversity via sexual dimorphism, we use bilateral brains in similar ways, a species whose roots on consciousness began with taste and scent. These may sound basic, Haiku, but in the universe’s vast menagerie of Sophoids, such a multitude of similarities are rare. We did not create them, understand, but when we found your fledgling race, so potentially intelligent and so near Sentience yet unable to make the leap to Sophoid despite the centuries of evolution and our careful prodding, we...helped...you to make it. Your people call the process Promotion.”



I am too flabbergasted to think straight, to even inquire how Friday is suddenly able to communicate so clearly. That, I figure, is just an aspect of this HR program I am no doubt in, and can easily dismiss. This news, however, is Earth-shattering. Literally. If it ever got out, it would mean a distinct drop in humanity’s status in the universe. It would mean riots in the streets as the people, so proud at our distinguished status as self-evolved Sophoids, found themselves having to lick alien boot. It would mean submission to the R%ngo, or

the wrath of the GCS, or at the very least potential banishment from the rest of the galaxy.

It means we were created. On a basic level, that is what shocks me the most. Humanity as an accident, a great cosmic joke on the rest of the aliens, that always seemed so right, somehow. I've never exactly been a total atheist, if only to hedge my bets, but deep down I've never believed in any sort of divine creator, Neo-Catholic upbringing to the contrary. In fact, quite possibly because of it. Growing up with my father would make the Pope forgo her faith.

Friday, ever the ambassador, helps me to get a handle on the situation. "We are not divine creators, Haiku. We made many mistakes in lifting you to Sentience. R%ngo are medical masters throughout this galaxy and others, but we are fallible. We had to make you different from us, when the temptation was so great to make you the same. We were your parents, after all. Eyes gave us particular trouble. Most of the universe uses vision of some kind, the perception of the photoelectric spectrum, but we have never truly understood it. Even mindlinks are wasted in sharing the phenomena; we are simply not equipped."

Too many questions battle for headway for me to even get a handle on them, but she selects one and answers it. "If I speak too familiarly on the subject, it is because it was a good time in my life. We are very long-lived, by your standards, although not the Commonwealth's. That was the hardest thing to do, to condense your lifespans by so very much so that you could evolve faster, so that you felt the pressure to make yourselves greater knowing your time was short. I argued against that for the entirety of my time on the Project, but lost to greater opposition.

"I have not always been an Ambassador, Haiku. I have played many roles, and forty thousand Earth years ago, one of those roles was as a genetic scientist seeking freedom for her people. In our explorations of the Galactic Library we found passing mention of a race of bipeds surprisingly similar to creatures of our myths, and in seeking them out found your ancestors. They were beyond apes, they had culture and love and traditions, but they were still creatures of instinct nowhere close to Sentience, and more likely to kill themselves off in tribal warfare than ever come into the Commonwealth. More than a dozen variations of humanity fought each other into extinction, and when the final race of hominid gained superiority and turned on itself, we moved in without knowledge or permission from the GCS or the Intergalactic Board. Your anthropologists today refer to it as the Upper Paleolithic Revolution, when *homo sapiens* moved from walking beast to thinking man. In stealth, we Promoted you, and of necessity deleted the fact from our records and any trace of your history from the Library.

"When you were 'discovered' by the Commonwealth, the R%ngo affected disinterest, then opposition, hoping to sway suspicion. We used you from the very beginning to contrast our situation to win our freedom. It is the great secret sin of the R%ngo. Our people cannot truly lie, for we smell the odor of deceit. We are, however, one of the few races who believe in a higher power (a gift we made certain was passed on to your species), and out of desperation, we took this action and prayed that no one from the Commonwealth's TSAH would ask us point blank about our involvement.

"I am sorry at our intrigues, but even sorer that I had to wait until now, when a present from your Bobert Smythe of essentially fatty acid, rare on our planet but abundant in sealife, gave me an excuse to visit my children."

Ah, the four hundred million kilos of dead alien fish Smythe left outside New Jersey for a month. Now this is true irony: that a goodwill gift brings about our subjugation.

Actually that's not even irony. That's just...contrived.

"Oh, Haiku, we will not subjugate you!" She somehow sighs and laughs and groans at the same time, the sound twinkling like crystal. "You are my children, my beautiful children. R%ngo could never let you become our slaves, even that the entire GCS demanded it. Not only do we value freedom too greatly, but...we would worship you."

I speak another wave of shocked questions centering around one enormous question mark.

She looks away shyly. "When we built you, we kept you as different from ourselves as we could, but...an artist can only stay so distant from her work. You were so like our %, our beings of myths, myths so rich and powerful that they stayed with us even into Sentience; even the name R%ngo derives from theirs, for we believed ourselves lesser derivations. Beings of absolute perfection and pristine beauty, the celestial intermediaries to the divine creator itself. I do not know that your people have a word for them."

But as she looks at me, awash in pure light, I realize that we do indeed.

### Angels

She looks surprised, then smiles. "Angels. Yes. That's what you were. To see beings so like our angels of myth grunting and brawling was...wrong. As we Promoted you – as I Promoted you – I made minor genetic modifications as well. Some, of course, was necessary to handle your new consciousness and ability, but some was to bring out that incredible beauty in you. If you ever visited X%chan, you

would be surrounded by admirers. More than that. You would be met with love, devotion, worship. To our perceptions you are perfect beings.”

I envision Friday appearing on Earth, not in her jellyfish body but in this HR incarnation, and I can easily conceive the same thing. Imagine: two species so different, in love with each other.

She glides toward me. Her soft hand caresses my cheek. I bathe in her warmth and inhale her fragrance. I can tell this is HR because sensations are so much more poignant and powerful than in real life. No wonder our forbearers were overcome when subjected to this process, no wonder wars were waged and poems written to convey even the memory of the memory of this. If the R%ngo appeared to us in this form, we just might let ourselves be taken over after all.

Her hand traces a path around my jawline and I realize that somehow my arms are around her waist. “You are all...so beautiful,” she whispers, and leans in to kiss me.

What follows I will never tell another soul. The words don’t exist to do it justice.

*Noir, February 15, 2142*

Today’s article is postponed until tomorrow as the author has met two well-endowed, just-legal Swedish twins curious to experiment in numerous positions and practices both exotic and routine. If the current administration truly wishes to expunge this subversive zine from the eLink and the eyes of its citizens, they would do well to know that I am a Pisces and have a weakness for aggressive redheads.

*Lansing ETR: 10h04 January 4, 2150*

I wake up feeling better than I ever have before, so much so that I suspect at first that I am still in an HR fantasy. Sam’s face leaning over me is the first indication that I’m back in the real world. I haven’t known his new face long enough for him to ruin my dreams. “Boss! You’re awake!”

I wince slightly at the sound. Only when I try moving do I realize that the pain is still there. That’s good, though. Painful life certainly beats the alternative that I was facing just a few hours ago. I quickly dart my eyes around. The vertigo-inducing colors shifting through the room tell me that I’m at Friday’s place.

“What time is it?”

“Ten-o-four hours, *el capitan*. Sunday, January 4, 2150, or day 5680540800 in Unix time. Outside temperature is 20°C, air pollution at 7.9%, local crime rate at 7.26%. In headline news today, protests

around the Pentahedron erupted into violence when the Solar Corporate Council announced that the use of meme counters equipped in newer street AEIs would record the quantity and type of thoughts of passersby; free thought now costs 0.01 credits per concept. In sports—

“Sam,” I interrupt, “You don’t have to do that.”

He pauses and shrugs with a goofy grin, and for a moment he looks exactly the way I’d always envisioned him. “Sorry, boss. Old programming dies hard. I’ll go get Ambassador !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*, and your brother. They wanted to see you when you woke up.”

Thinking about Friday, I smile to myself. I am too old to have any illusions about love, but last night was as close to perfection in my repertoire of experience as I’ve ever known. Enough at least that I can comfortably put off considering the philosophical implications (like, since Friday isn’t human, did that technically qualify as bestiality) for a while.

No I can’t. But at the moment I have more important things to think about.

Friday scuttles in, followed by a very concerned-looking Evangelion, still, for some reason, wearing my form. “Are you all right, bro?” He never calls me “bro.” In fact, wait a second...My head begins spinning again.

%obviously% “Of course he is all right,” Friday notes. %self-congratulation% “The R%ngo are masters of medicine throughout the universe,” %qualification% “and I personally am a proficient physician and geneticist.” %simplicity% “Repairing Haiku’s wounds presented no challenge” %innuendo% “and significant opportunity.”

Dammit, I think I feel a bit of a blush.

“You fixed me up?”

%Confirmation% “Yes, last night.” %Involved% “There was much damage, but nothing irreparable.”

“She was working on you all night,” says Eva. “She had this weird machine that looked like it was built specifically to work on people, and she wouldn’t tell me why an alien would have that sort of thing.”

%Intelligent inquiry% “A very astute question.” %Request Haiku suggest proper response% “Why don’t you tell him?”

I’m personally just flabbergasted that anyone would ever refer to anything Evangelion said as astute. “The R%ngo have had... previous relations with humanity.”

“Really?” Eva blinks, “They don’t look like Greys.”

%Mythical% “If there are such things as the Grey aliens you claim abducted humans, we have never seen them in the universe.” Apparently, scents can relay humor. I guess that’s what’s meant when they say something smells funny.



Actually, what smells around here is fishy. Evangelion hasn't been acting normal since I first saw him, and this easy interaction with Friday clinches it. I've known him all my life, and I've even hacked his psych files. Amongst other things, Eva's xenophobic. He's afraid of aliens.

Suddenly, it seems a lot more suspicious that Eva's still wearing my body. It would be easy to use a gene resequencer Splyze to revert to his form. I can't imagine that Friday's house isn't equipped with a Shaper or that she wouldn't let him use it. Unless, of course, the person he'd revert to wasn't Evangelion...

"Eva, Sam, can I talk with Friday alone for a little while?"

They both leave, and I confront Friday. "Friday, that's not my brother."

%obvious% "Of course not." %feminine% "His scent is that of a woman." %shared dual nature% "He shares the same duality of scent that you do when you pretend you and Jack Noir are two different people."

"Wait. Are you saying Eva's a woman?!"

%Negative% "No." %no longer% "He is now male. But his true nature is not."

"So he was a woman? But that doesn't make any sense. No more than you saying I'm two people."

She releases a complicated scent that the translator finishes before I can interpret it. "No, Haiku. You are two people in that you deny yourself. You have created a schizophrenic split of yourself. Daily, you are scared and angry at the world and yourself for not being able to fix it, while in your writing you are bold, fearless, and intrepid, ready to tear down the world with your teeth and start it anew. You are an ethical man in an unethical world, and that is enough to drive anyone mad. You have driven yourself crazy with this false belief that the two differences are irreconcilable. The fault lies not in you, but in your leaders, who have made it impossible to resolve your own warring nature by making it impossible to do almost anything at all. The only true difference between Haiku Down and Jack Noir is that one is free to voice their beliefs of right and wrong, and face the consequences of it, even if the consequences be his termination. In this respect, there is only one true human Sophoid on Earth. His name is Jack Noir."

Nauseated as I am by the profusion of Friday's thought, I am still buoyed by her perception of me.

She continues, %counterpoint% "On the other hand, your brother's duality is more discrepant." %gender perceptions% "Sex may be variable to your people with technology, but, perhaps because of it, gender roles have become more constrained. %anima performing% "The soul in that body is used to one gender role and

having difficulty in the other, especially with physical and biological changes thrown in. %obvious% “The discomfort he feels in his own body is obvious to anyone with a nose.” %different% “It is not that he has a conflicting character, but that he is pretending to be somebody else.” %vice-verse% “Or rather, someone else is pretending to be him.”

I latch onto that. “Yes. He hasn’t been anything like himself since he first contacted me. Even contacting me should have shown me he wasn’t himself.” I contemplate one of the worst fates for my brother: identity theft. Someone has used a Black Market or Brigand shaper to Splyze themselves an exact replica of Evangelion. Usually such a thing is illegal unless the person authorizes it, or if they’re celebrities, in which case there’s always a small holographic disclaimer floating nearby authenticating the legality of the Splyze. Either way, the Big Government Computer takes note, so that you cannot access any bank records or files except your own. Even if you go out on the town, any AEI is watching, and if someone mistakes the Splyze for the real person the AEI instantly dissuades them if you don’t (and if it beats you, minus -5 karma points for impersonation). Therefore, an illegal Shaper is the only way to get such a Splyze, but there are two things I still don’t understand.

The first is how anyone could get that Splyze without Mom finding it out. As Mister Ection, my mother has access to almost everything the Brigand does. Why she would allow anyone to become Evangelion is incomprehensible, let alone why she would keep up the pretense. If they didn’t get the Shaper through the Brigand then it would have had to come through the Black Market, in which case the government would have access and fine them accordingly. Because the only other way to get a Splyze of a real person without a disclaimer is to simulate someone who’s signed over their rights or died, and even Eva isn’t stupid enough to give himself up to public image.

The second question is who would want to be Evangelion. My little brother is an idiot, and in debt to the Brigand. The only thing he has going for him in his life is...

Ess.

“Friday, is there a Shaper in this room?”

%confirmation% “Yes.”

“Make me a gene resequencer, will you, please?” She moves farther than I can comfortably turn my head. Outside my field of vision I hear her Shaper hum quietly. When she passes me the Splyzer, I say, “Thanks, Friday. Please send Evangelion in here. We need to talk very privately.”

%agreed% “Very well, Haiku.”

She scuttles out, and a moment later someone wearing

Evangelion (wearing me) walks in. I prop myself up to look at this doppelgänger of my brother. “Sit down, Manga.”

He (she?) gives a start, and moves toward the door, until the whine of my quantum gun charging dissuades her. I repeat, “Sit. Down. Manga.” She is still hesitant, so I adjust the quantum gun to its lowest setting and give a short burst. As my shape momentarily fades from reality, presenting the shape of Manga Andertondotcom grabbing her temples and giving another feminine shriek, I say, “I don’t want to hurt you too badly, Manga, and I’m not in any position to do what I’d normally do to someone who hurt my brother. So sit down and answer my questions.”

She finally complies, sitting on the floor next to me, attention divided between me and the gun, understandably wary.

“So. Manga Andertondotcom. Where’s Evangelion, and why are you wearing his face?”

“Haiku, I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“The only person who calls me Haiku is my idiot neighbor who’s too stupid to know better. Not even my mom calls me that. Not even Eva. I don’t want to shoot you again, but I will, and this one will hurt a lot more. We can keep going until you’re dead. Where. Is. Eva?”

“This is just a misunderstanding—”

“Where is my brother, Manga?”

“I’m Evangelion!” he shouts.

“Evangelion wouldn’t have caught on about Friday’s machine. Evangelion wouldn’t have come to help me escape. In fact, Evangelion Down wouldn’t be mixed up in any of this, because he wouldn’t care. He didn’t care about his family. He didn’t care about himself. The only thing he gave two cents of a dee about was Manga.”

“That’s not true!” he shouts, and I notice he is crying. “He loved you! You were his big brother and he could never live up to what you wanted but he loved you!”

“Did he?” I state quietly.

Eva, Manga, realizes what she’s said, and shuts up. He starts from a soft hiss and a prick on the forearm, where I inject the resequencer Splyze, and my features fade first to Eva, then back to the delicate, dark beautiful features that I remember of Manga Andertondotcom.

“Manga. Where’s my brother?”

Her sobbing lessens but doesn’t stop. “How did you know it was me?”

I shrug. “Because you were the only person who cared about him. I never did understand why.”

“Eva was a good person, Haiku. He wasn’t perfect, but he loved

me. And he loved you. He was full of love, even if he didn't have much sense. He couldn't even go to your father's funeral because he was too torn up to stop crying."

Bleepard. He told me he slept in. Again, I ask, "Manga, where is my brother?"

"They got him."

"Who?"

"The Brigand."

"Impossible. Mom works for the Brigand. She would have found out."

Manga shakes her head with gravitas. "They went after him. But they went after him to get to me. What I told you about, about the Shine, that was me. I mean, that happened to Manga. I...it just made the world so...so much nicer than it is, and I didn't have that, and I needed it. Like all the plastic crap and pretty pictures and stupid lies they put over everything was the way things really were. Eva, when he found out, he tried to help me quit it, but the world just got so dee hard and ugly...and when I had it it was so pretty and perfect...I kept needing it, but he stayed right there with me. Even when I needed more than I could afford, he used his own credit, and I didn't learn he'd used too much until too late.

"What I told you happened to me...it happened to him. It wasn't anything official, just standard business from the local dealer, so I guess your mom never heard anything about it. And even when they sent back pieces I needed more."

Jesus wept. He's dead. Eva is dead. He's dead somewhere and has been dead for a long time and I didn't even know about it. I feel a wave of nausea coming on that has nothing to do with my wound or the transcendental undulating room.

Manga explains, "When I finally got out of debt to the Brigand, out of detox, I realized what had happened to him. I guess I'd known it before but I was still too focused on hurting to let myself know. But I still had access to his old apartment and his Shaper and no one knew officially that he was...missing. I got some DNA from his razor. He liked the old-fashioned electric kinds and never cleaned the filthy thing. I stuck it in the Shaper and ordered a Splyze under his name. His Butler program wouldn't do it at first, but I fiddled with his programming until he'd let me. I'm good with that sort of thing."

Recalling how she would get her way past Porter so Eva could talk to me, I nod for her to continue.

"The rest, I guess, is history. I didn't want to be myself any longer. I hated myself, and I hated what I'd become, and I especially hated what I'd done. I guess I thought, maybe, if I could make sure Eva had a happy life, it would be like he was still there. And when I tried to get in contact with you, to get you and him to be brothers

again, there you were on the TV and in the paper being accused of murder...”

And, as she said, the rest is history. I lie back down to counter the sudden wave of wooziness. I always figured Eva would bungle into a bad end, but this...I don't have a clue what to say.

Of course, that's never stopped me before. "Manga, my brother and I weren't on the best of terms, but...thank you for telling me. Mom will need to know too. You know that, right?"

She nods sadly. For a second she does look just like Eva, back when he was a kid and I had to beat him up for doing something stupid.

Jeezus. My little brother's dead. I never thought I'd feel so sad when that happened.

"Manga, there wasn't much good in Eva's life. God knows I gave up on him. I think the one really good thing he had was you. And I don't think he'd want you to give up your life for his. If anything, I think he wanted just the opposite." And heaven help me, I'm actually kind of proud of him. Eva, apparently, finally found something he cared about more than himself. Something he'd sacrifice for.

Good job, little brother. So effing stupid, but noble. I'm proud of you.

There's a knock on the door, and Sam enters. "Boss, now that you're up, we'd better get moving."

Manga's confession. Friday's confession. Too dee much for me to focus on and nowhere near the time to do it. I can mourn Eva later, properly. Plus, that sensory Splyze starts to kick up again, which means that Hawthorne is moving in. Wincing, I start to rise. "You're right. Okay, Ev-Manga, lift me up, and get me to the car. Sam, grab whatever's portable that Friday can teach you to use in five minutes to keep me together. We're lucky we eluded the Regulators this long. No matter how well you hid the car they'll find it eventually, and with my OptiComp reactivated since I woke up they'll probably be able to trace my whereabouts via satellite. If we're lucky we've got another fifteen minutes before they find us—"

"Then I guess you're not so lucky," an androgynous voice interrupts, and I turn to see Hawthorne and Sobolov, holding their Enforcer guns, blocking the doorway, "because you've got no time at all."

*Noir, November 17, 2149*

Bull ess, you say. This is a great effing world.

You've listened to me gripe. You've read a few of my articles and you may even acknowledge that I may have one or two valid

points, but my basic premise, my talk of government conspiracy and denied freedom, doesn't quite strike a chord with you. Sure, there are lots of rules, you say, but that's true in any society, anywhere, especially with a hundred billion people stepping on each other's feet. Society is just like any other complex machinery and requires the lubricant of law to keep from breaking down. Jack Noir is just some rabbleroxing troublemaker who gets irked by any authority and automatically shouts Big Brother.

You're right.

But so am I.

Ess, yes, this world ain't bad. Compared to Auschwitz or the Inquisition or Japanese Internment Camps or the Eugenics Cowboys or the slave triangle or any other of a billion *baka kichigi saitei sukebe wagatama chigau ikkenai* ways human beings have effed each other over in the course of four thousand years, we're definitely doing pretty good right now. So good, you claim, that ain't nobody needs to speak out against the government.

Of course, if you *do* speak out against the government, than very quickly you are rebuked. Your credit rating drops, you are punished economically if not physically, you may be forced to relocate if your karma drops enough, ripped away from your family for expressing your views.

And if you do it too much, men in black Kirlian auras with Enforcers shooting green rays will rip your consciousness from your body and force you into Prohibition for as long as they want and give your body to someone else without due process.

Or, you'll just be shot.

And left for dead.

And your children will be given a receipt saying justice has been done and a warning that if your lifeless body isn't disposed of within three hours they will be fined for littering.

Of course, just for talking about this, I'm already dooming myself to the exact same fate if they ever catch me.

Yeah. Great effin' world.

*Lansing ETR: 10h16, January 4, 2150*

Cripes. This is it. This is not going to be a friendly little visit ending in a light-hearted mental rape. I'm going to die.

I'm going to die. Hawthorne's going to win. I'm not sure which grates me more.

Yes I am. Hawthorne can win this and every Monopoly game ever played for all I care. I don't want to die!

Se pats the android on the back and laughs. "Take it, Joachim."

The android Joachim Sobolov steps forward and begins to

recite, “Tenant Haiku Down [personal identification number #6936-1004-6962-5510-DH-68B12], you are charged with the following criminal activity: sedition; missing mandatory psychiatric sessions; possession of illegal firearms; discharging a weapon in public; use of illegal quantum technology without express written permission; verbal and physical assault of Chairperson Robert Smythe, including improper and illegal use of a mood-altering maser upon previously-stated victim; verbal and physical assault of Citizen Tadd Torrid, a.k.a. Otto Hanglestein, a.k.a. Theodore Tobowski, including improper and illegal use of a mood-altering maser and lcer upon the afore-mentioned victim; illegal use of invectives on televised feed; destruction of a public office and the property within; resisting arrest; wanton destruction of a privately-owned merchandise, to wit, one faux Persian rug and a Millistich© Duvet cover; and, on a related note, the grisly murder of Citizen Desmond Arc.” Gracious, I have been a busy boy. “In addition, my partner hates you with a passion and that is usually reason enough. Evidence of these charges were related to – and arbitration of punishment was handled via televerdict by – RoboJudge©, a legally-licensed and fully leased product of CompuBot Incorporated™, at 08h56m02 on January 4, 2150 [Case # 11462-021500104-F187-01]. The cost of appeals currently are 190.5cc per charge per case, and useless anyway. Punishment of crimes to be related as follows. Acknowledge.”

I take a deep breath as Sobolov prepares to relate my epitaph and nod.

“Acknowledgment recognized and recorded. Citizen Haiku Down, sentence as follows. Robert Smythe has refused any charge against you for attacking him (worth 100 years Prohibition as a Citizen), and for breaking the law in the Pentahedron (50 years Prohibition), his right as the legal owner. Judgment: not guilty. Tadd Torrid, despite attack (80 years Prohibition), stating inexplicable admiration for alias Jack Noir, has also refused to press charges. Judgment: not guilty. Repeated refusal to attend mandatory psychiatric sessions (2-5 years Prohibition) proven unsubstantiated, and considered understandable as it involved potentially dangerous interaction with a proven Prohibitioner. Judgment: not guilty, no penalty. Cursing on television not punishable if you are a Citizen or rap musician. Judgment: not guilty. You broke out of a holding cell with an illegal weapon, but with a Class 1 weapons license and Class A insurance your sentence of 14-20 years Prohibition is reduced. Judgment: 48 hours community service. On the charge of sedition, protection is enacted by employment at the *Urban Chronicle*. Judgment: guilty, but not culpable, no penalty. For the charge of the murder of Desmond Arc...”

That deep breath I took earlier is still there, burning my lungs,

but I can't quite exhale.

"...evidence inconclusive. Judgment:" he pauses, for no particular reason beyond melodrama, "not guilty."

Now I can release that breath, do so happily, just relieved to know I'll have the opportunity to draw another.

Although the worst part is over, Sobolov isn't quite done. "For the charge of resisting arrest, normally two years Prohibition, maximum punishment against Citizens still applies. Judgment: four hours community service. This concludes the list of charges."

A slight, distrustful chuckle escapes. All this trouble, all the worry, everything that's happened since I picked up the phone three days ago and Desmond answered, and all that comes of it is a week's worth of picking up trash. This is the anti-climax of all time. The chuckle grows into a full-fledged laugh, the first good laugh I've had since...I can't even remember.

A laugh cut short when Hawthorne interrupts, "At least, those *would* be the charges, except as you may remember, Citizen Danael Mars cancelled your contract with the *Urban Chronicle*. That drops you to the status of Denizen again, and without protection all the crap you've pulled retroactively drops you to Tenant, which quadruples the penalties and significantly alters the RoboJudge's lenient attitude in judging your crimes, including giving you maximum sentence, punishing you for Smythe's attack as a criminal act even though no charges were pressed, and considering insufficient evidence is still sufficient to pin Arc's murder on your Denizen hide."

"You can't do that!" Sam shouts indignantly.

"I can and I have, robot," Hawthorne sneers. "And unless you want me to order you to break yourself for my amusement, I suggest you stay out of it, because I'm not finished." Sam doesn't bother to correct the Regulator about his status, but he doesn't keep talking either.

Hawthorne turns to Friday. "Ambassador, I have been asked on the part of humanity to explain to the GCS that, as this man is not considered Sentient, no act of murder has been committed, and the status of Earth need not be brought into question."

"But you're still charging him with murder!" Manga cries.

Hawthorne turns her attention and her scanner on her. "Manga Choovansky Andertondotcom, with traces of an inexpertly genetically-altered Splyze to appear as Evangelion Down. Class T, Karma +520. Genetic impersonation drops you by -500, getting on my bad side drops you -25." He pulls out his Enforcer and shoots Manga, who drops to the floor, her body devoid of consciousness.

%surprise/disgust% Friday indicates, her voice-box translating, "This is deplorable!"

"The maximum Class T penalty for murder of Citizen: five



hundred years,” Joachim explains. “Total penalty: 1208 years, rounded to 1210 because my partner hates you with a passion.”

“And that,” Hawthorne continues, “doesn’t include the treason charge, of which you have also been found (surprise!) guilty. The RoboJudge, using new, more stringent laws enacted thanks to your good buddy Robert Smythe, has come down especially hard on sedition amongst the lower castes, and has decided to punish you with the maximum penalty, twenty years for every single act of subversion you’ve committed, as both yourself and every other alias. Now, this ruling, as I understand it, includes seditious materials passed over the eLink to both human and non-human intelligences, and your little *Noir* has been read for eight years by about 12.8% of the population.” Se turns to ser partner. “Quick, Sobolov. What’s 12.8% of 214.28 trillion?”

“27,424,840,000. This brings your total sentence in Prohibition to—“

“Five hundred, forty-eight and a half billion years,” I quickly figure out. I am surprised I can even speak, considering how dry my throat is. Five hundred, forty-eight and a half billion. That’s more years than the universe has existed!

Joachim explains, “Total penalty: 548,556,801,210 years confinement to Prohibition, minimum amenities, zero outside contact, to be enacted immediately.”

“Enjoy,” Hawthorne smiles, and points ser Enforcer to me.

I do not even have a chance to protest before the gun’s green ray envelops me and rips my consciousness asunder.

### *Noir, December 17, 2146*

Now is winter (fittingly, I am discontent), and the signs are everywhere. The artificial snow has been sprayed on the street, the Christmas decorations have been up since June, and everything natural is dying. So to celebrate the cold, miserable end of the year, I figured I should bring up a topic that doesn’t nearly enough discussion: Prohibition.

Whatever stupid superstitious ward you’re about to do as I mention this, don’t. This process has been around for less than twenty years and already there are more totems and superstitions against it than exist in the entirety of voodoo.

Prohibition is the single most effective form of crime prevention that has ever been established. Granted, there are more people subjected to it than any other form of justice, but on a strict percentage basis Prohibitioners number 84% fewer than prisoners at the turn of the century in old jail-houses. And recidivism is near non-existent.

I think I've finally figured out why.

I spent this week seeking out released Prohibitioners who have been freed from their virtual Purgatory. One thing that always strikes me is that they're ubiquitously either insane or serene. The insane ones don't last very long, and end up replaced by more serene ones.

You can't ask someone what Prohibition is like and get any useful answer. It is not like anything. It just is. It's an eternal limbo. There is no passage of time, no cause and effect, nothing to affect and nothing to cause. With almost total sensory deprivation beyond very basic necessities and no interaction of any kind, the mind is left to its own devices, so that an hour can pass in a moment or vice versa, and there is no way to be sure. And because Prohibition moves just as fast as HR but without the fun interaction, you experience this electronic purgatory for literally decades. If your crime was bad enough, perhaps centuries.

And yet, most of the people coming out of Prohibition seem happier. Calmer. More peaceful. Like monks from a Tibetan or Arkansas monastery.

Centered.

They have spent forever with themselves. And nothing else. No input, no external forces. The mind turns inward.

People get nervous around former Prohibitioners. They are, after all, walking around having possessed someone else's body. It is like the vampires of old, who transform their victims so that you no longer recognize your own friends and family once bitten. And they act so dee creepy! But try and actually talk to one, and tell me you don't sense that same cool, collected sense of completeness. People in Prohibition actually have time to become better people.

Old jails were supposed to be a time for criminals to reflect upon their misdeeds. They quickly became places to simply keep the unlawful away from the rest of society. Eventually, with jails overcrowded and subjected to the worst humanity had to offer, there was no chance that anyone would ever get out of prison a better human being than when they came in. Many were so changed by the experience that they committed crimes after being released just so that they could go back to the only place they understood any longer.

Prohibition is just the opposite. And if it wasn't so horribly abused by the administrative powers, I'd almost say it was an effective solution. Because it seems to work.

But I really don't understand why it terrifies everyone so much. Really, what's the worst that happens? If you commit a crime, you sit around for several years, and come back as someone else. There's not even the threat of beatings, a shiv in the back, and rape in the shower room that the old prisons used to brag, let alone a death penalty. Why does that terrify you all so much? Especially, why does that terrify

you enough that you won't even risk rebelling to end it!?

Think about it. Having removed the potential to eliminate their enemies in the traditional sense (i.e. killing them) the government is left with a spooky system of punishment that, when you get down to it, is basically a long time out. All Prohibition is, really, is being told to stand in the corner, not by mom and dad but by Big Brother. If that is the worst the powers that be can muster, I am neither impressed nor cowed. And if fear of Prohibition is what is keeping you in line, than as the bard said, it's time to rise up in your cafeterias and stab them with your plastic forks. Because these guys need to come down, hard, and the strongest weapon in their arsenal, when all is said and done, really isn't so bad after all.



# Chapter 10001.

## Eternal Da Capo

*Prohibition: Time: ?*

I was wrong about it not being so bad.  
I was so effing wrong.

*Prohibition: Time: indeterminate*

I've been here two weeks so far. I think. There's no way to mark the passage of time. I don't even have basic stuff like sleep-cycles to divide the day, or even a heartbeat to count to estimate the passage of time. Prohibition is essentially Hypereality without any way to log out or control your environment, and minimal extravagance is given to prisoners.

There are meals. I never feel hunger in here but I welcome anything that can give me a schedule. The food is tasteless but it's something to do. Exactly thirty minutes after finishing, by my count, there's a programmed pressure in my bowels. There is no actual effluence, but the feeling doesn't go away until I "use" the Detoxer. I wondered why for days before I realized that people are routinely incarcerated for decades in this HR program and then spit back into a body without warning. A lifetime or two detached from reality may be enough to forget the niceties and necessities of personal hygiene and basic biological functions. This is no doubt the same reason I have a cot. I don't ever feel tired, but I sleep as much as I can, because there is nothing else to do.

There is no day or night. There is no change in temperature or weather. Actually, there is no temperature or weather, period. There is always enough light to see by, but it doesn't come from anywhere, since there are no walls or ceiling.

My "cell" consists of a small cot, a chair, a Detoxer that is there for decoration, and a Shaper where the meals automatically arrive, a bland, lukewarm gruel lacking scent and taste and even texture; if I don't concentrate on eating it is easy to forget that I am. The Shaper doesn't make anything else. It doesn't actually make the meals; both they and the machine are just programs in a computer simulation. I even took off the Shaper's panel to see if I could rewire it somehow, but there's nothing inside. I tried saving my food, and the plate and utensils that come with it, but even if I don't put them back in the Shaper for disposal they simply disappear after an hour.

As I said, there are no walls or ceilings, just an endless, empty gray sky. The floor is a grid of black tiles, each exactly one meter square, delineated by a thin white line. The floor goes on forever. Unlike anything on the round Earth, this floor is perfectly flat, so if I stand on my tip-toes eventually the white and black just fade together into gray. If I stand on the chair it turns into a lot more gray.

The cell itself, as close as I can figure, is five thousand meters by five thousand meters. It didn't take me long to try walking toward the horizon, and after five thousand tiles I always arrive back at the cot, chair, Shaper, and Detoxer. I considered the possibility that the program itself was looped, but when I moved stuff around in the cell and made the trip, the furniture was back in the same place. This doesn't necessarily mean anything, because I've found if I don't interact with the cell that after an hour it automatically resets itself to default, and it takes more than an hour to walk the distance. When I tried carrying something from one set of furniture to another, specifically the bed's pillow, it disappeared from my hands after an hour and was right back in default mode when I reached the bed again. So I still can't be sure if the cell is looped, or if this place actually goes on forever. Eventually I'll probably start walking it to check. It's not like I don't have any time to waste.

Even at the speed of HR, two thousand times faster than reality, the entire universe and everything in it will be cold and dead, given up to entropy, before my sentence ends.

I have a simple gray jumpsuit that never gets dirty. I tried spilling food intentionally but the stains didn't take. It is impossible to rip. If I remove it then it is on me again when I wake up. If I really wanted to be naked for an extended period I suppose I could forgo sleep, but with the temperature of food and air so perfectly neutral in here I'm not even sure my HR body is programmed to feel temperature, so clothes or no clothes make little difference.

It's not like the jumpsuit ever starts to stink. I can't sweat here. I tried exercising to pass the time. I don't get tired, build up a sweat, or even change my breathing. I don't even breathe here unless I consciously remember to. I guess since that's an automatic function of the hindbrain, they don't bother to program it in. And exercising in a virtual world is about as useful as flashcards for the blind.

I do have a programmed "body," probably for the same reason I have a Detoxer and a Shaper. Decades or centuries without contact with anyone else is hard enough; the same time without contact with anything at all would just drive anyone insane. That's how they did it in the early days of Prohibition, and everyone they got back returned a very quiet lunatic who generally remained autistic for the rest of their days, after lifetimes spent as disembodied thought.

I look as much like myself as I ever do in HR. morphogenic

matrix, and all that. I can feel pressure but not pain. I haven't had an itch in two weeks, and, tactilely, that is the most disconcerting absence of all. You never realize how much you itch all the time until it disappears. Next to that, the absence of breathing and heartbeats are nothing. The only physical difference is complete bodily depilation, no doubt because hair takes too many lines of code to write and can potentially get dirty. I've also noticed, when I stopped to think about it, that my breath never stinks and that after two weeks my teeth are still plaque-free. So I guess they didn't program that in either.

The cot is white. The chair is white. The Detoxer is black. The Shaper is grey. The only source of color in this entire cell is my flesh. Since this place, however controlled, is still a place of the mind, I'm afraid that in a few years or decades I may forget that and start seeing only shades black and white.

At that, I start to laugh, a little maniacally. This, now, this is true irony: I am finally at the mercy of the SCC and what is my punishment? Eternity in a state of perpetual noir.

I laugh until I cry.

#### *Prohibition: Time: perpetual*

It has been a full month, I think. And the additional two weeks have proven my earlier hypothesis. Hell, in fact, is not other people. Hell is myself.

#### *Prohibition: Time: perpetual plus*

It is now the two month mark. I have taken to trying meditation. It is proving difficult without breathing to focus on, but it passes the time.

#### *Prohibition: Time: plentiful*

I never realized how important time was to me outside.

Since before I could read I could tell time. Even simple day and night divided my life and gave it a schedule that, by the time I was an adult, had been delineated into fractions of a second. I woke at a certain time, made sure to get a certain number of hours of sleep, exercise, work. I measured my day based on what I had to do next. Back when I worked, I measured my day based on when I had to get to work, get back to work, or get off from work, and even related how much I spent by the amount of time I had to work for it. I set aside certain hours to watch television, and I don't even like television. Since I was never one to go into doing good deeds just for the karma points, I even based my month on how soon my credit would be

renewed.

In some respects, it's easier here. There is nothing that happens, so nothing to wait for. Since I don't have anything planned, or even simple interruptions like bodily functions, I can concentrate on anything for as long as I want to. There is no action, but because of that, there is no stress.

Minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, are all meaningless here. Technically, they are meaningless in real life, too. The Julian calendar that we still use today because it was already programmed into all the computers divided a day into twenty-four hours, the month into thirty or thirty-one days, and the year into three hundred sixty-five days, and none of those are totally accurate. In trying to divide all those measures of time up evenly, all that happened was they all turned out inaccurate. Such a calendar is only really important when trying to divide a year into seasons, for an agricultural society to work their farming around, and we don't even have agriculture any longer. A week has no basis in nature, a day is slightly longer than twenty-four hours, and a twenty-nine day month is the only consistent measure the universe gives us based on the waxing and waning of the moon.

God, I miss the moon. And the sun. I barely even remember the stars but I miss them too.

It is perpetual twilight in real life. It is here, too, but without the sun and the moon it is lifeless and dead.

### *Prohibition: Time: abundant*

Time keeps passing.

I think.

I lost track of anything close to an accurate measure a long time ago, if I ever had it to begin with.

It's been years. I know that much. After my thousandth bland meal, which meant at least three years time, I tried to kill myself. They don't ever give me a knife, so I had to be inventive and tried to choke on my own spork. Since I don't breathe, though, it just sat in my throat until the hour was up and it disappeared. I could feel it fade away inside me. I was crying at the time.

That was at least six years ago. Probably more.

For a while I tried walking. I set out in one direction and just kept going. When mealtime came I picked up food at the nearest Shaper I'd pass, and when I got too bored of walking I slept. The horizon never got any more or less gray. The view never changed.

Eventually, I wondered if maybe I reset in default every time I went to sleep just like my clothes. If every time I went to bed, no matter which bed I was in, I reverted to the first room I had arrived in. Paranoid, hopeful, maybe a little of both, I began walking without



sleeping. After twenty-three days I fell to the ground unconscious. When I tried it again a little later I made it twenty-one days, then twenty-six, then only fourteen. The irregular nature of this phenomena leads me to suspect that it is not some program to block my progress, but a facet of my mind itself. My body is not hooked into Prohibition, but my brain is, and even without the body the mind itself must require some time asleep in order to recover.

If this is true, the potential exists that Prohibition really is a single big program with every Prohibitioner inside it, just separated far enough away that we cannot meet each other and camouflaged in gray so we cannot see each other. I contend such a program would be easier to create, update, and modify than giving a single looped prison to every Prohibitioner, and since it would be cheaper that is probably the way the SCC would do it. My hope is that maybe, just maybe, if I walk long enough, I'll meet someone going in the opposite direction near the end of their stamina as well. It is all that has sustained me.

I haven't heard another voice in at least ten years.

At the speed Prohibition moves, that counts as 0.005 years outside. 1.82625 days. 43.83 hours. 2629.8 minutes. Only 200,360,371,641,950.67375 minutes to go. Or 548,556,801,209.75 years, subjectively.

One thing I have to say about my incarceration. I have gotten very good at math.

#### *Prohibition: Time and time and time and more time*

There are no walls around here, yet they seem to close in anyway.

There is a strict delineation set by the furniture, yet the world goes on forever.

Somehow I'm becoming claustrophobic and agoraphobic at the same time.

#### *Prohibition: Time: unending*

I realized today that Manga is probably out by now. Pissing off a Special Services employee can't get you that much time. It's been...too long. There's no way they left her in here that long. She's probably out, back in a new body.

By this point, the old one is probably dead.

#### *Prohibition: Time: too much*

By this point, the new one is probably dead too.

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*Prohibition: Time: gratuitous*

There is no end to this place. Having long since overcome the need for sleep, I have walked in a straight line for 9,999,996 cell areas in a row. Each time I think I should just give up, but each time I go on for just one more.

What else have I got to do?

In four more I've promised myself I'll stop walking. But I know I won't.

Hell, what if 10,000,001 proves to be the edge?

*Prohibition: Time: yes!*

I touch myself a lot. Not that way; without body chemicals there's little pleasure in that. I just touch skin to skin. It took me way too long to figure out that nothing in here has any texture except for me. Food doesn't have any smell or taste. The world itself is a constant gray, and the only sounds are those I make. And now I'm forgetting how to touch.

I think I remember that Hypereality augments the senses. What a waste.

*Prohibition: Time: copious*

I spend a lot of time pretending to play Go with Smythe. Sometimes we switch to checkers. Sometimes chess, or Parcheesi.

He's always a good sport about it, and he always lets me win.

Except for some reason he always beats me at Monopoly...

*Prohibition: Time: eternal*

I'm sane again. I've gone mad at least three times. This last time was kind of nice, pure escapism, something to do with potatoes, I believe. The only problem with real madness is that you can't ever remember the good times clearly.

The bad times you remember all too well, though.

There have also been multiple fits of semi-madness, what I suppose would be called "spells" in the old, old days. Most of them are solipsistic and ego-driven, like believing that by covering myself with a blanket the world disappears (and heck, between the philosophy of HR and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, I still can't rule that out even when I'm sane). For a long time I was positive my Shaper was trying to send me an escape plan in my food. I'm still not convinced there's not someone hiding just beyond the

next cell waiting for me to fall asleep and strangle me. One time I decided that, since bananas don't end up in Prohibition I would become a banana, but I kept yelling at my clothes because they wouldn't stay peeled.

And then there's the other end of the spectrum. I've attained enlightenment and inner peace more often than the Dali Lama in all his incarnations. I just sit and let my mind go blank, and focus on the Om, and viola! If I ever get out of here, I'll be the most centered, peaceful creature in existence.

Assuming existence still exists.

I guess I'll find out in another 548,556,794,000-some years.

### *Prohibition: Time: prodigious*

I can't remember life outside here.

I mean, I *remember* it. With absolutely nothing else to focus on I have little to do but remember, and over the past few centuries I have developed quite the eidetic memory. But the feelings behind everything, how things relate to one another and to my life, are gone. I remember Sam, and Manga, and Evangelion, and Mom and Dad, and that kid down the street who beat me up for my food card when I was ten, but the things I remember are scenes and circumstances, not day-to-day things. I remember Sam calling me F.L. but not what it stands for. I remember Manga telling me that my brother was dead but not how I felt when it happened. The closest thing I have to a visceral memory is my time with Friday.

My memory of my life before was like watching it on 2D TV. Everything is passive.

### *Prohibition*

I've lost the concept of time. Things reset naturally, even if I upset them. Cause and effect don't really apply. It's so easy to forget if I've thought of something before that I can't even keep track of how often I repeat myself.

It doesn't matter.

Eternity gives you a wonderful perspective.

### *Prohibition Still*

From what I can estimate, it's been at least 10,000 years in here (I've gone back to tracking time).

I've composed six novels. There are at least a hundred more I've forgotten but these six I have memorized completely. I don't think I'll forget them for at least several more millennia.

I've taken to singing a lot.

*Prohibition until further notice*

I can't remember Italian. I do still have a handle on Latin, Portuguese, and Spanish, so I've been able to reconstruct a lot of it from memory, but not totally. So I am working to construct my own language.

I tried committing suicide again. I bashed my head against the floor for hours, hoping to bludgeon myself to death.

It didn't work.

God, I have too much time on my hands.

I realized that I haven't thought about sex in over twenty-five hundred years. Some of that may be the nature of HR, disconnected from the demands of the body, but mostly I just don't remember faces beyond the basics.

I don't even remember my own face.

I've never heard of anyone sentenced to as long in HR as I have been.

I don't miss sex, but I kind of miss missing it.

I've lost the concept of time. Things reset naturally, even if I upset them. Cause and effect don't really apply. It's so easy to forget if I've thought of something before that I can't even keep track of how often I repeat myself.

It doesn't matter.

Eternity gives you a wonderful perspective.

I've developed a fun new paranoid delusion. I'm beginning to suspect that my morphogenic matrix, my perception of myself, is breaking down. Since I don't remember my face and there's nothing to reflect it, I'm limited to what I can feel. Sometimes, when the crazies are a little too much, I can't feel anything on my face.

What is it about time? The more I have of it, the less I have to do, the more I have of it? When I had a job I ran around always busy. When I didn't the days stretched on. Now I can't do anything, and I can do it forever.

I finally understand religion. I've found God three times now. Satan twice. Buddha only once, but he was stuck-up so I don't mind. Ganesh and Shiva dropped by for tea. Thor stopped by asking directions, and Jesus hoping to borrow a cup of sugar. But God the most often. It probably has something to do with being raised Neo-Catholic. The second time He sat down and we had a talk about everything I've done wrong in my life over a game of cards. I've had plenty of time to go over everything I've done wrong, after all. By the time He'd won the final hand with a royal flush (He ALWAYS got a royal flush, except once when He got five aces) I had listed everything out, along with circumstances and details. Since I know for a fact that aliens created humanity instead of an all-powerful deity, and even if He does exist He probably has better things to do with his time, I'm pretty sure these visits were just insanity on my part, or maybe a glitch in the system. The holy ghost in the machine, as it were.

I don't think I feel religion the way other people do, though. It always seemed religion was a way to stave off death, or else deal with misery in life. But my own particular religious experiences were affirmations of life.

The first time God stopped by, He asked if I was ready for forgiveness. The second time, He forgave me. And the last time, the most important, He helped me forgive myself.

Whether it really was God (I still doubt it, but I really can't objectively say it wasn't), or whether I was just hallucinating, I have actually had a divine revelation.

I never was a very good person.

I read the *Tao Te Ching* a lot when I was in my early twenties (now, of course, I'm in my early twenty-thousands), partially to rebel again dad but mostly because there seemed to be some truth to it at a time when truth was in short supply. I sold the electronic bookpad it was on for shish-kebab made of sewer alligator when Mom and Eva were starving and suffering from AIDS-6 and dad was digging up old Pepsi cans in landfills to sell the precious aluminum metal for scrap. But I remember it better than if I'd used DataJax. I read it often

enough that the words are engraved in my gray matter, and even after all these eons it doesn't take too long to remember them.

I've taken to meditation again. I repeat the *Tao* from beginning to end, then meditate, and when I need a break from meditation I repeat the *Tao* again. I have no way to know how long I meditate, perhaps minutes, perhaps years.

In a few thousand years I'll probably move on to the *Bible* or the *Quran* or the *Bhagavad Gita* for a change. But for right now the *Tao* is good.

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It finally happened. I was able to honestly and seriously create an illusion that I knew for a fact I'd imagined, but was able to interact with it anyway. Sight, sound, taste, touch, I'd swear Sam had come by to visit me. In every way it was a perfect illusion, based on a perfect memory, because I spent months making sure every single detail was right. And then he was here, and we chatted. Like old times.

As soon as I knew it worked I stopped imagining him and invoked Farrah Sumners.

I can re-create everything that ever happened to me now. I remember my first sexual experience...actually, that was awkward and sloppy, so instead I remember my third, which rocked. From every angle, perspective, and facet. I can speed it up, slow it down, repeat the parts that were best: TiVo for the cranium. I see it from my perspective, and hers, and everyone on Earth at the time. In complete control, I send every living soul on the planet into orgiastic splendor, and I am all of them and myself and watching it all from above at the same time.

I realize as soon as I do this that everything in my mind is based on my own desires. Prohibition isn't like Hypereality, where the software lets you change yourself or your mood to whatever you want, but after long enough here I've learned to do it to myself. In effect, I have made Prohibition *into* HR. I am no longer a prisoner here.

I am a god.

Omnipotence rocks, but there is a downside. I have brought back every moment of my life. I have found what I like and don't, done everything I wanted from every angle. I experience my entire lifetime more totally and completely than I ever did when I was living it, and every second I experience every part of it again with this hyper-awareness.

I think I know why God created the universe.

There is only so much I can think of before I've thought of everything I can think of.

Eventually, even when you can do anything, it gets boring by yourself.

I am a god in prison.

I've created several universes in here. It's been long enough that I've learned to compartmentalize my brain like the Neo-Humans do. I wouldn't think it was possible, but then, I've had eons to evolve. Or maybe it's just like the two-minute mile; people assume something can't be done for centuries, then once it has been done dozens of others are able. Morphogenics on a quantum level.

Anyway, I've learned how to control my own hallucinations. It's not quite as good as real HR control over the system, but I'm sure I will improve given time. After the normal debauchery and absolute corruption that accompany any ascension to absolute power (just two or three centuries of bacchanalia and orgies), I've been using this ability to review and improve my life. Working backwards from my incarceration, I'm basically creating theoretical alternate universes, where I study every action I have ever made and see how my life would have played out differently if I'd done something else. I know how lame that sounds: epochs to evolve and I've basically created my own personal GDTV, but without any new input I'm having lots of trouble creating anything new. I tried developing multiple personalities, but my own morphogenic matrix is still too strong and every new personality I create is either based off someone else I know or else is just like me. I can create other people, but even these other people are limited to my experience with them and so are of limited use.

So instead, I'm seeing how I could have done things differently. In some ways, it's depressing. For instance, if I had eaten a bran muffin or some quasi-fruit instead of a Soylent donut on the day of

my journalism interview, I would have qualified to keep my reporter's license. I know that sounds ridiculous but I've worked out every variable ten times over and it holds true.

The reason I wasn't as good in my interview as I could have been, why I've been trapped as a Denizen and why I eventually created Jack Noir as an outlet, was that I had gas.

And the weird thing is, I knew Soylent gave me gas, and I ate it before the interview anyway. Some Sophoid I am.

For a long time, several centuries, I explored how the most inconsequential of things affected my life, how I seemed to be a puppet on the strings of chance. It took way too long to realize that those inconsequential things happened to me as a result of my letting them. The Soylent at no point demanded I eat it, and I was kinda jonesing for quasi-fruit that day anyway. I effed up that one decision, and I ended up effing up my entire life. I didn't even get to enjoy breakfast out of it.

Then, fastforwarding through the timeline, I saw chance after chance I could've taken. Shon D'Walmart, for instance, has a cousin who knows Tadd Torrid. He's mentioned it on more than one occasion. My neighbor was two degrees of separation from journalism, however hackneyed, and maybe if I'd worked at it I could have gone through people to get a reporting job. I didn't. I stayed home and bitched. And when Shon came to visit I fed him urine.

The chances presented themselves. Sometimes with blinding obviousness. I didn't take them. I didn't even notice.

It was the same for all the decisions in my life. Every point where something has gone wrong was because somewhere I did something I knew at some level I should not have done. Every time I dropped a karma point for swearing, I knew I shouldn't have cursed but I did anyway. Going left when I knew I should go right.

The aliens have got the right idea. A truly Rational and Thinking Being would identify such behavior and avoid it out of self interest. Sure, hindsight is twenty-twenty, but foresight isn't exactly myopic. It's just clouded by all those lies we tell ourselves to justify what we want to do instead of what we know we should do. Every single piece of crap in my life is essentially because I did something irresponsible. I can prove it mathematically. There are thorough, in-depth reasons for all of these. I've worked out the algorithms of it to the twelve-millionth decimal place. If it hasn't been invented by the time I get out of here, I can set up a computer program in fourteen minutes, thirty-seven seconds that will accurately predict every action of everybody on Earth for four-plus centuries (more than three million times more accurate than the Probability Matrix the government was working on) with only a 0.00005% variance to contend with free will.



Like I said, it is depressing in some ways how powerfully my life has been affected by, well, myself. But on the other hand, I've figured out how Desmond Arc died. I don't imagine it will do any good, since by the time I'm out of here the case will have been closed for centuries, but it is satisfying.

As with so much else, this terribly important incident that affected my entire life stemmed from the slightest, most inconsequential of clues.

Even more depressingly, I could have figured it all out before I'd even met Hawthorne, if at one point I'd just examined a cardboard box a little more closely.

But I didn't. Because I wanted to go yell at Danael Mars. My own fault, once again.

After several millennia, I think I am beginning to figure myself out. For a long time since my epiphany I thought I was crazy to sabotage my own efforts at success. Finally I realized I never wanted to succeed, because success is a sign of corruption.

Jeez, what a sick world it is out there. No wonder it drove me nuts. On the bright side, ever since this psychological insight those desperate attempts at suicide have tapered off. I have not even felt like killing myself in decades.

It's crazy out there, but in here, away from it all, I get to be sane.

I've lost the concept of time. Things reset naturally, even if I upset them. Cause and effect don't really apply. It's so easy to forget if I've thought of something before that I can't even keep track of how often I repeat myself.

It doesn't matter.

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### *Prohibition*

I'm sitting. I've been sitting for several years now. Tomorrow, or maybe next year, I'll try standing.

The last thing I remember was working on an aria. Then, for some time (there's no knowing how much) I lost all sense of self and existence. Now that sense of self is back for some reason.

I open my eyes, doing so being the only hint that they were closed. I've been here so long that I see everything even when my eyes are shut.

But now there is something new.

High above me, in numerals that take up the sky, a digital clock is ticking down. I do not know how long it has been ticking, but it is almost about to reach the end.

Focusing on the exterior world, I also realize there is a sound that is not of my own making. It is a voice, a booming voice, and the only reason I was not aware of it is that I haven't bothered listening to anything for centuries, since there's nothing to listen to but me.

The voice is saying "—in ten seconds. Prohibition sentence officially ended. Termination of program in five seconds. Prohibition sentence officially ended. Termination of program in three....two...one...Thank you for using Prohibition 2.0. We know you have no choice in selecting Prohibition, but we are pleased you used ours anyway. We hope you have enjoyed your incarceration. Have a nice day. Or else—"

Before I can even process the news, everything goes black.

And then the pain hits.

You do not realize how much it hurts to be alive until you stop doing it for a while.

First, there's the gravity. There's entirely too much of it. An entire atmosphere of pressure pushing at you from every angle, the weight of a planet twisting space/time enough to prevent the infinitely lighter you from getting too far away from it. Breathing is a chore (albeit a novel one), and I cannot seem to get the hang of it to get enough oxygen. Light is horribly, painfully searing on my eyes, rancid scents assault my nostrils, and the only reason my ears don't ache at sound is that they're filled with fluid.

I have the inexplicable certainty that something is horribly, horribly wrong, but I have gotten out of the habit of making the muscles in my hand work so I cannot quite put my finger on it.

Then there is the pain within the body. I have been alive fifteen seconds and already skin cells are dying and flaking off. My heart slams in my chest, I can feel my ribs stretch as my lungs expand. My muscles are cramped and sore, as though either having never been used or having been used too much. Maybe both. Feels like both. My stomach is churning, and I lurch to the floor to vomit on the linoleum, but with nothing in my stomach I merely spit out a lot of liquid in dry heaves. My temples throb from the effort. It seems like I can feel every blood cell in my body bashing against the arterial lining. I am even aware of where my pancreas is, because even it hurts. My vertebrae move slightly out of alignment with the movement, not enough for even a chiropractic master to identify, but enough to blissfully dull my sensory reception below the abdomen by about ten percent. My brain is sluggish, slowed to an insanely dawdling crawl while having to do more work each second than it has in centuries.

And yet, GOD it feels good to be alive!

I laugh, and it hurts, and I do it anyway. I do it *because*.

The sense that something is wrong is still quite firmly entrenched, and as I start to force myself into rationality I begin to realize what it is.

Although I have been out of my body for untold eons, I am familiar enough with it to know that this is not mine. It is similar, yes, but almost two centimeters taller and definitely better built and not the slightest sign of freckles anywhere.

The amniotic fluid in my ears and throat (not to mention my indignant awakening) hint at my surroundings and state. After mastering enough control over my eyes to focus them, my suspicions are confirmed. Surrounded on all sides by cryo-tanks of identical mal and fem bodies and one empty tube from whence I have just emerged, I am in a clone factory.

I suppose it makes sense. It is been however many eons. Even with the accelerated speed of Prohibition, after the millions of years I spend incarcerated it has been centuries even on the outside. No chance my old body is alive. By now even if they still practice Prohibition the way they did back in 2150, they would not have enough bodies to dump old Prohibitioners into. They were already running out back in my day, however long ago that was.

Dammit, I need a watch. And some clothes. And a Detoxer I can stand over for a year and a half. And, come to think of it, something sugary to eat and a woman to ravish. You'd think millennia of solitude would help conquer the trials of the flesh, but the thing about Prohibition is that during those millennia the flesh isn't there to conquer. Back in a body with all its hormones and chemicals, I am finding myself responding quite naturally to the calls of my new shell.

I wonder where the technician is. There should be someone to greet me. Even back in 2150 people jolted into new bodies from Prohibition got visits from a PSICoFac Program, and they were only gone for decades, maybe centuries. Not the millions of years I've faced.

Maybe that is precisely why no one is here. Maybe so much time has passed that they don't know anything about people like me, or have any records of AmEnglish to communicate. Aitch, if not for the bodies around me it'd be just as easy to assume I'd been brought back to life by giant mutant bees to toil in their underground honey mines. My panicking thoughts begin to become truly morbid and fantastical: maybe I am the only human alive and the GCS has reconstituted me in this body to repopulate the human race.

Eventually, I make out movement from far away, and I see some people coming, followed by a robot.

Except, when they get closer, I realize that it is not just any robot.

It is Sam.

“Oh, he’s awake!” Sam gripes to the technician, who I make out is a servobot in a white lab coat. “You said I could be here when he went all blue pill. Hi, Boss!” he exclaims. “Are you okay?”

I cough out some more fluid before I can answer. “Sam? Is that you?”

I find myself embraced by his mechanical arms. My own are gone, lost to my old body; I embrace him with new organic ones.

“Yeah, sahib. Man, I was worried about you. How long has it been for you in there?”

My silly, stoned AEI has survived all these centuries and millennia to meet me here. I realize for the first time what a really good friend that makes him. “Long. Too long. Jesus Christ, so long. Sam, how long was it out here? What’s the date?”

He answers my question in all seriousness. “Tuesday.”

# Chapter 10010.

## Coda in the Key of Noir

*Noir, February 3, 2144*

This is just a series of random thoughts...

-I have never liked authority. To date, the feeling seems to be mutual.

-A duck's quack does not make an echo, and no one knows why. Including the Promoted ducks; I've asked a few.

-Given how perfectly life can be simulated in HR, even better than real life, significant philosophy has been dedicated to questioning if the reality we know is actually a program itself, designed by some player to be used for their enjoyment and turned off and on without our knowledge. If that ever turned out to be the case and I met the guy who actually designed this world, I would sucker punch the SOB before he could blink.

-It says something about the eLink that music and videos are illegal to download without paying but pornography is legal and free.

-According to some new archaeological digs in Northern Europe, vampires actually did exist as late as the nineteenth century. Word is still pending on whether Michael Jackson ever truly existed, or if he was just a horrible myth to terrify children.

-Terraforming is no longer a daunting practice, and is almost prosaic. The complete compliment of technology necessary to turn a planet into another Earth is as follows: a power generator, preferably cold fusion; a large gravitronic generator to control planetary rotation and tilt of axis; O<sub>2</sub> converters spaced equidistantly; a forcefield just powerful enough to block certain electromagnetic wavelengths, enclose the atmosphere until it develops naturally, and focus sunlight; nanite recombinators to fertilize soil and promote growth; protean matter and some arboreal DNA to seed around the planet; a Shaper at least large enough to produce more Shapers; a robot factory to produce workers to handle it all; and a teleportation pad for cheap transport and delivery. Give it thirty years and the most barren wasteland can become prime real-estate. All this in a package about the size of a small warehouse and controlled by a computer no larger than a podium. Am I the only one who thinks that's awesome?

-It is, however, impossible to terraform every planet totally, despite what the ads say. Martians, for instance, have lighter skeletons and an extra gland they've Splyzed to live more comfortably, and if you want to spend any time on Mars you need to get that

Splyze too. I appreciate this. No matter how much we change other planets, the planets will still make sure to change us as well.

-By Martians I refer of course to humans born on Mars. The actual natives of Mars died millions of years ago, archaeological evidence suggesting their society never evolving much beyond small hunter/gatherer tribes before Olympus Mons apparently wiped everything on the red planet out with two centuries of volcanism. Just as well, because otherwise they'd have either terraformed (areformed?) Earth, or else we'd have had to go up there and kill them.

-The Guild of TechnoMages has no official government backing. It is really just a collection of people up in the O'Neill Colonies who know so much science that they can do things that, even to modern scientists, look like magic. But they still control everything in our day-to-day lives, from how cars run to how many AELs get produced. They are certainly more powerful than the Solar Corporate Council, yet the Guild still bows to the SCC. Why? Because the SCC owns them, and there is a clause in most credit contracts that, at any time, debtors may have to make good on all their debts (including those of their forefathers) or else face Prohibition, meaning the SCC can legally confiscate everything they own on a whim. Including harvesting organs and spinal columns without benefit of anesthetic.

-There is a program out there on MemeNet™ called the Mass Hypnosis Show©. When they call something "Must-See TV," they don't leave it a choice.

-Why do we hate Greasers so much? It can't be just the act itself, because statistically at least one in four people admit to using sexbots (mindless mechanoid sex slaves designed for the purpose) at some time, and one in three indulge in erotic holo-fantasies. Is our hate then selfish, because they dare purport to fall in love with something artificial? Or is it selfless, because they essentially force a thinking, cognizant being, robot or no, to do something it would not otherwise do? Or is it just the fear of the new? Adversity has historically risen against homosexuality, inter-racial marriage, transgender romance, age-discrepancy, long distance relationships on interplanetary levels, bestiality, and cross-temporal passion...and all of them are now accepted. Is mechanical love simply the newest form of sexual expression: robosexuality?

I don't think so. Because there's one big difference between Greasers and all those other sexual acts: at any time in any of the other situations, even if it meant their very life, the other person still had the ability to say no.

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*Cloney Island: Time: wait...what?!*

I stare at Sam incredulously, thinking this can only be some sort of sick joke. "Tuesday? Tuesday the what? Tuesday of the year 310,059? Did technology reach the point that we can suspend time? And if we can...why Tuesday?! Why not a weekend?!"

"Tuesday, January 6, of the year 2150 A.D., a little after 10h14, or Stardate -173034.04. Local temperature is 14°C, local crime rate at 0.01% Weather forecast today is guaranteed sunny and bright by the GCS and Mak's Slogans Incorporated, where 'Our slogans are, y'know, um, catchy.' The Guild of TechnoMages would like to remind you that, like gravity, today's viewing of the broadcast by the Galactic Commonwealth of Planets on all channels to every inhabitant of Earth is not just a good idea, it's the law."

"Sam, what the aitch are you talking about? Where am I?"

"You're in New New York's Clone Now™ warehouse, *mein heir*, inhabiting Clonebody designation M2-5488154-5487-81-A6, hereafter legally Haiku Down. The labbot brought you something to change into." I notice that the rob in the lab coat has a pile of clothes, included a well-folded trench coat and a fedora.

I quickly change, begging for information. "How can it be Tuesday, Sam? I was in there for...ever!"

"I told you about it less than a week ago, boss. They upgraded. Prohibition 2.0 is exponentially faster than the old system by a power of twenty."

I recall him saying that. After doing nothing but remembering, my memory is both rapid and accurate. "That's right. Hawthorne even commented on it, but he got it wrong. A power of twenty doesn't multiply the speed of Prohibition by twenty, it multiplies it by..."

"Two times two times two times two times two times two...and so on, twenty times. Grand total of 1,048,576 times faster than the 1000x speed it already runs. Meaning that your sentence of 548,556,801,210 years would have taken only 523 years, 52 days. You got out early, spending almost exactly forty-eight hours in Prohibition, from early Sunday to today, but even those two days incarcerated felt like approximately 5,741,689.2539 years to you."

"Oh, *just* five and three-quarter million years?" I verify while dressing, trying to sound flippant to hide my shock. "After the first few epochs I lost count."

Sam buttons up my shirt when he sees I'm having trouble doing it myself and helps me into my trench coat. "Fortunately, though, the Powers That Be decided on leniency for you. And everybody else, too. Prohibition has officially been ended. Every one of these clone bodies, and billions more like it throughout the world, are going to be given *gratis* to awakened Prohibitioners."

"Jesus. Smythe's purchase of Clone Now. It was for this?"

Sam nods, handing me my fedora. I don it automatically, repeating the familiar action despite the lack of muscle memory in this new, and frankly better looking, body. It has muscles that I've never had, and moves like I did back when I was twenty. If this body really does work as well as it feels and I treat it better than my old one, I might actually live long enough with rejuvenations that I live to see them discover immortality.

"But I don't get it. Why would the SCC abolish Prohibition? It's the mainstay of their power base: a criminal punishment system that is free of appeal, instant, maintenance and resource-free, guaranteed, and universally feared."

"I didn't say they did," Sam answers, gesturing us out the way he came. "The Solar Corporate Council isn't in charge of Earth any longer. It wasn't exactly the smoothest transition, but the realms of information that spammed to a hundred billion people with a personal hello by Jack Noir the moment you got zapped certainly helped."

Exiting into the noon twilight, glaring at the brightness as the rob technician closes the egress behind us, I ask incredulously, "The SCC are out?! Why didn't you say that sooner?! Who's in charge then?!"

Sam smiles, and points up to the sky.

"Her."

And at that moment, above the half-submerged Statue of Restricted Liberty in New New York Harbor, the dim, smoky air is filled with a radiant celestial body, as an angelic image materializes in kilometer-high holograms in the sky.

Friday.

She appears in the same form I saw her that night, as a beautiful, perfect angel. If anyone realizes they are being manipulated through racial memory, no one seems offended, just awestruck. Every television is tuned to the image, every linkfeed through every AOLink downloading her in realtime, and her hologram floats in the sky with such clarity that even the expensive holofeeds fail to discriminate her as anything other than solid matter. In fact, in a strange way, she seems more solid and real than anything else around her.

Next to her is a hologram of Tadd Torrid. He looks slightly disheveled, but there is a life and sparkle in his eyes that I have never seen before. "Ladies, gentlemen, and whatever other options you may have chosen, Channel 7, finally free to do and say whatever we deem well please, would like to introduce Ambassador" here he stumbles, "click-nga-fourrrr-oid'ai (is that right?), emissary of the Galactic Commonwealth of Planets. She has some...very interesting and important news to share with you all." He gives up the stage and Friday's hologram expands, filling the entire sky.



“Greetings, people of Earth,” she says, and to drive the cliché further and without the slightest trace of irony, actually follows it with, “I come in peace.” The critical part of my mind wonders why she doesn’t just hold her hands up in the Vulcan live-long-and-prosper salute. Then the Sophoid part of my brain realizes that she’s studied our literature and is trying to reach out and identify with as many people as possible. The critical part finds that manipulative, but at that point I shush everybody in my cranium so I can pay attention.

“I am !ngal’l Ph4-rroid’ai\*, a R%ngo, from the planet X%chan. Today at 08h00 your planet was put up for sale. The R%ngo are now official majority shareholders of the planet Earth.”

I hear several people in the street groaning, shouting, angry at the idea, but not as many as I would have expected. Of course not; they are in love with the seraphic image. Whether yeas or jeers, the holo of Friday is unflappable. Of course, while everywhere on Earth is presumably getting this holoimage, she is probably half a continent away back in the Lansing Extraterrestrial Reservation. “We take this action after having watched your world and its system of government. Watched people ripped from their bodies as punishment for imaginary infractions. Watched laws become more stringent, stealing the basic liberties people require to achieve Sentience. We do not place blame on you, or on your government. A Sophoid does not place blame, for they do only that which must be done. Instead, we do what we must do, which is to admit that a mistake was made. Although Earthlings achieved space travel and Promotion, and did so without any guided help, you are in fact not truly Sophoids, nor did not you achieve basic Sentience on your own.

“It was our doing. And our failing.

“We created you. We Promoted you to Sentience, and failed to remain and guide you in managing its consequences.” A cry goes up around the world, but she continues unheeding.

“I have noticed a wide belief on this planet that being a Sophoid means that one is not allowed to hurt another willingly. This is a misapprehension. Perhaps we are to blame, perhaps we did not explain it properly.

“The concept of Sentience is not a refusal to hurt or kill another. The taking of life is common to so many societies that in refusing them membership in our Commonwealth we would lose many valuable cultures and the benefits that come with them. Many Sentient species biologically require the killing of other Sophoids, and these Sophoids may even biologically require being killed. Others willingly end their lives before biology dictates, sometimes asking others to help them perform this task. Many consider pain a necessary aspect of living, some even a form of enjoyment. So this simple statement, so easy to digest, is a misinterpretation of a larger

philosophy.

“The basis of the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids is that a Sentient creature accepts responsibility for their actions. To deny culpability, to place one’s life and the responsibility for their actions in the powers of chance or a higher providence, or to knowingly seek to wrestle the ability of others to live their lives happily, that is the act of a being too immature to be allowed into space, where they could potentially harm not only other individuals but entire planets. As a Sentient being accepts that the life it lives is a direct result of its own actions and desires – and that any action taken upon it is through its own responsibility – in that respect, true, a Sophoid does no harm to another without implicit permission.

“This concept seems so hard for you to grasp, yet it is so simple. Your life is the way it is because that is the way it is most comfortable for you. If it were uncomfortable enough, you would change it. If a muscle gets sore as you sit, you shift, you adjust. If it is not that bad, you do not. It is this easy.

“You change yourself, and you change the universe.

“The way you spend your day is your choice. No one forces you to work at a certain place, to watch a certain program, to eat a certain food. Each option is yours, and the consequences that come with it. The job completed or not, the time spent at the television or otherwise, the food healthful or fattening, at each juncture was your choice.

“The logical extrapolation is where you seem to balk. If you sit beneath a sign and the sign falls on you, did you cause it? Of course you did not cause the sign to fall, but you are responsible for the event. You were there beneath the sign. Had you taken the energy to check, you would notice the structural damage. Had your thoughts been on the present, you would hear the creaking sound as it fell or notice the moving shadow. You were there, in short, because it was easier in the short run to be there than it was to simply move. And you are responsible for the consequences.

“And in an irreconcilable situation? Where the consequence is capitulation or death? There are still options. Many have died in history rather than surrender, because surrender was untenable. And they, and you, are responsible for the consequences of every choice. For the good and the bad. For either outcome came as a result of your own action.

“A Thinking Being recognizes all these consequences. A Rational Being determines that which causes the least difficulty, the most pleasure to itself without (under the obvious principles of enlightened self-interest) harming others. A Sophoid determines that which causes the most desirable results to all, even if occasionally at the expense of itself.

“This is not to say that Sentience is the willing submission of the self others. Your planet’s ants do this, yet they are not Sentient. Rather, a Sentient being is one who considers all consequences of their actions, and accepts their part in those consequences, even those not intended. They help where help is needed, destroy what needs destroying, living in a balance with the universe. A Sophoid accepts that the universe is the way that it is because that is the way he, she, se, hir, or it wants it; to change the universe is to change oneself, and vice versa. To living in balance with oneself is to live in balance with the universe, and vice versa.

“Your planet’s leaders have lost their status as Sophoids not because of abusing power, for leaders cannot truly stay in power without their peoples’ allowance no matter how powerful their forces. They have, however, created a situation in which even if truly Sentient individuals did seek to throw off the shackles of oppression, they cannot.

“The process of Prohibition penalizes for infractions. Punishment may be deemed necessary for the learning process by some species, but with Prohibition there is no learning. Policing forces can engage in Prohibition without any reprisal, judgment, or even evidence. I have seen this myself. Options to avoid this have been systematically taken away. One cannot defend. One cannot fight. One cannot run. One cannot appeal. One cannot change the system. One can only live within these increasingly narrow confines, and in doing so lose the sense of responsibility that makes them Sentient.

“That Humanity itself has lost its status as Sophoids is more difficult to explain. A true Sophoid understands, inherently, that the events of the universe are, at least in some small part, exactly as he, she, or it truly wants them to be. If they were not, they would effect change. By allowing yourselves to be placed in such a state, Terrans have displayed their own shortcomings. It is not your fault. If there is fault it is ours for not predicting such an outcome, for expecting you to come so far after our initial guiding steps without proper help. That we condemned another planet to centuries of pain and suffering is our cross to bear; our purchase of the Earth is our means of making reparations. Not fault, simply balance. We Promoted you and abandoned you, and now it is our responsibility to help you as we should have in the first place.

“The R%ngo will not make any sweeping changes beyond those necessary to promote Sentience in you. Indeed, there is no purpose in our doing this *but* to promote Sentience in you.

“We look forward to meeting you once again as our children. So that, when you grow up, we can re-introduce you to the universe as peers. As equals. As Sophoids.”

The hologram of Friday's beautiful visage slowly fades from the sky, and everybody on Earth is left with the knowledge that, all of a sudden, things will never be the same.

*Noir, November 24, 2144*

Today they're running a *Star Trek*™ marathon on Retrofeed 46, and it's put me in a wonderfully nostalgic mood. I like to recall the early days of mankind's introduction to the stars, when we met the aliens, learned that our similarities outnumbered our differences and our differences combined made us stronger, and formed a united coalition of planets.

Except, wait, that's right...

That never happened.

It should be obvious to anybody sensible just why. The universe has been around for billions of years, and life has evolved on a million different worlds at very different speeds. Some extees were around since time began, some popped into existence, and others slowly evolved at different points. They are nothing like us, and why should they be? Earth itself has independently created vastly different forms of life, not once but five times already. Imagine what must've come from the center of the Borgolis Nebula.

So Roddenberry got that wrong.

And even if all life were to be anthropomorphic, it was the absolute height of hubris for old sci-fi writers to assume that the universe was going to wait around for us to get off our collective posteriors and reach the stars in time to grab a significant piece of the cosmic pie. Fact is, even our nearest star, Alpha Centauri, had evolved intelligent life a long time before Sol did. I mean a *long* time. According to the Galactic Database, the cause of the third worldwide mass extinction on Earth may very well have been the Beta Centaurians destroying a base set up by the Proxa Centaurians somewhere around what used to be the Grand Canyon (back before we filled it as a garbage dump).

So Roddenberry got that wrong, too.

In fact, old Gene got a *lot* wrong. He assumed space travel would be a form of exploration, when in fact it is mostly commercial. The extees have explored everything already. He assumed spaceships would be large floating cities under a strict naval aeronautical-style command, whereas today travel is much closer to that of old airlines or tankers, with maybe twenty crew total on board and where regulations are so informal that flight attendants can take the helm because there's absolutely nothing to crash into.

Oddly, the stuff everybody nitpicked on archaic linksites – phasers, warp speed, forcefields, tricorders, etc. – all *that* technology

ended up working to one degree or another. Between eLink access, photo and video capabilities, downloadable applications, worldwide reception, and so on, we have better tech in our cell phones than Shatner did in his tricorder.

The thing that was most wrong was this whole Prime Directive, this ludicrous notion that it was irresponsible to interfere in a developing culture. The aliens do that all the freakin' time. Actually, they do it as a way of looking good to the other aliens, Promoting a pre-Sentient species into Sophoids.

The Commonwealth doesn't care if you develop warp technology. Ess, the better part of four *thousand* species in the Commonwealth never leave their planet except in a non-corporeal form. All the Commonwealth is looking for is a certain level a maturity as a people before it is willing to interact with you. As long as you can do that, they'll *give* you any tech you ask for, happily, knowing that you'll be responsible enough to use it without hurting yourself or anybody else. If not, they'll put a barrier around your solar system, and all the warp speed in the universe won't mean diddly-squat when there's no universe to go to.

We never needed to ask for much, because by the time we got to the stars we'd invented it all. In truth, the only reason we're even in the Commonwealth is because we lied. We covered up our history of war and hate and greed, put on a smiley-face and polished the planet up all nice and pretty for long enough to get in.

Watching this old twencen scifi, the show that practically established all science fiction for the next fifty years, that is what strikes me as the most anachronistic. In *Star Trek*, humanity was the shining beacon of truth, light, and nobility in the universe.

Just one more thing Roddenberry got wrong.

*Lansing ETR: 15h14, January 7, 2150*

"That's *it?*!" I shout at Friday.

Against the assurances of Sam and the local MedBot that I should be spending some time in a hospital to make sure my new clone body is functioning properly (they won't tell me who has the old one), and a lot more time with a PSICoFac program for similar reasons, the first place I wanted to go after hearing that announcement was straight to the source. Amazingly, upon this visit it took practically no time at all to enter the Lansing ETR, because rather than go through the long and tedious process of decontamination, Sam and I were ushered through a small door to the side. The decontamination procedure, it seems, is smoke and mirrors for the tourists. In retrospect, it makes a whole lot of sense: 90% of the aliens in the Reservation don't even have anything remotely similar to

DNA, and only one in three are carbon-based to begin with. Statistically, I have a better chance of infecting a banana with the common cold than I do an alien.

In fact, the only extee that has any chance of getting any sort of infection from me based on common genetics, I realize, is Friday! Even after I realize that, I decline the procedure, because once again my world is being affected behind my back (this time my entire world) and I am not taking it sitting down any longer.

Friday is busy working with several people, robots, and aliens, apparently coordinating the biggest takeover since 2067 when the corporations did it to the Earth's governments. Go figure that if the aliens ever really did take us over, they'd do it not with flying saucers or weapons or diseases or brain-control, but economically. I guess they figured it was the only way we would notice. She is apparently keeping up unflappably, although even after our shared intimacy there is no way I would be able to read any accurate expression from her true gelatinous form. She quivers slightly and her tentacles and hairs undulate like marine flora in the tide, but they do that even when she is otherwise completely at rest.

Upon smelling me, she exclaims "%Haiku! Hello! I am so happy to see you."% I realize I've spent enough time around Friday that I am actually beginning to understand what she smells before her machine translates it. Either that or my mind has had five million plus years to grow and make the connections in my memory. "%I desired your presence and opinion, and here you are. What do you think?"%

"What do I think?!" I exclaim. "Where do I begin?! The GCS has come out and dropped us to second-class citizens in the galaxy, and my first dalliance in too long turns out to have machinations of world domination?!"

"%Nonsense, Haiku. This is for the greater good. We have not taken over. We have removed the obstacles holding you back. I would think that, of all people, you should be happy."%

"Happy?!" I repeat. At this point I notice that I am parroting the last thing she said/scented, and swear not to do it again. "Friday, I don't know where to begin with everything that is wrong with this. Happy does not enter the equation. *Wó huǒ dà le*, I thought you read my zine. That was the whole reason we met in the first place. If you think I'd be happy by this, than you weren't reading closely enough. I wasn't exactly ecstatic at the SCC's reign of below-the-radar terror, but at least it was our own problem. Now Earth is under supreme rule, and it's not even the rule of humans!"

"%But you are not under supreme rule. We have helped to end a situation that was disadvantageous to all, both to the people of Earth, held back from achieving true Sentience, and the leaders, unable to become Sentient themselves while the status quo remained. When the

Commonwealth first contacted Earth, they were deceived by your leaders into believing humanity to be true Sophoids. By supporting those leaders, even under misapprehension, the Commonwealth did a discredit to humanity, which my people started when we left you forty thousand years ago. The affairs I witnessed as Ambassador, particularly your unwarranted incarceration and your subject matter in articles – of necessity written under a pseudonym to avoid imprisonment – go against the entire philosophy of personal responsibility that a Sophoid embodies. We are accountable for that state as much as anyone, and we are now attempting to correct our error.”%

“Correct your error?!” Dee, I did it again. “Don’t you understand, Friday?! *Tài guò fèn le!* Was that even *you* talking on that big hologram in the sky?! It was a fubar *yǒ máu bīng* state of affairs you found us in, Friday, but it was *our* state of affairs. You just told a hundred billion people that we needed to grow up and change the world ourselves if we were to be true Sophoids, and at the same time you took control of things yourselves. If we’re not Sentient, how the aitch are we supposed to be with you ruling things?!”

%“Because we will not be ‘ruling things,’”% she says %“You will be.”%

“We will be?” Dee it!

%“When we said that we were interested in you becoming Sophoids, that was true. When we said that the current government had made it impossible for you to achieve true Sentience, that was also true. And when we said that our sole interest was in removing that impediment to allow you to attain your full potential that, too, was true. When a child sets out on their own, no truly loving parent wishes their child to fail. But they may resist if they feel the child unready to be on their own, not responsible enough to survive without aid.”%

“Fine notion, but even if you did really Promote us, this goes beyond aphorisms and analogies, Friday. You can’t—”

She interrupts me with a sorrowful scent that, upon translation, stops my tirade cold. %“We will be slaves.”%

“What?”

%“When we first uplifted humanity, and kept the deed secret from the TSAH, it was to show the Commonwealth evidence that Sentience can be achieved on its own, that our servitude under the domineering Salis was unwarranted. We believed ourselves to have been Sentient before the Salis’ influence, and to bolster our claim we manufactured evidence that such a state was not impossible elsewhere in the galaxy. It was a shameful deceit born of desperation, but we believed it would do no one any harm. When I came to Earth again as an Ambassador, met you and smelled the hurt your people felt

without our guidance, I knew that we were wrong, that harm *had* been done. By revealing our deception in order to accept our role as guides until you reach true Sentience, we will not only lose face before the entire galaxy but we likewise hinder – if not outright negate – our claim in their eyes. Sophoids were not naturally produced on Earth, and thus our assertion that they were produced naturally on X%chan is given less credence. While we know it to be true, the Commonwealth will likely never accept it now in the face of this new evidence. In buying Earth, we will help you achieve true Sentience, but it is not without a price. We condemn ourselves to servitude to the Salis until our probation runs out, several million years hence.”%

At that, I am staggered. Sam, bless him, has a seat ready for me to fall back into. “But...why?”

If Friday had shoulders, no doubt she would have shrugged them. %“Because it was what required doing. A truly Sentient being cannot shirk its responsibilities without negating its claim to Sentience. As Sophoids, ironically, we had no choice.”%

I cannot think of anything to say to that. It helps that some random underling comes by to ask Friday something she could busy herself with while I come to grips with that revelation.

Finally, I reply, “But that doesn’t fix the situation. You may be ruled by the Salis, but you’ll still rule us.”

%“The Salis are not judicious rulers. They are barbaric and callous and cruel, as their culture demands. They are still Sophoids, still accepting all responsibility for their actions, and thus they accept the consequences of that barbarity, but that does not make them good rulers. We have no interest in ruling, simply guiding.”%

“Call it what you like, Friday. You call it guidance. The SCC called it ownership and corporate policy. It’s still a gauntlet no matter how soft the velvet.”

She is quiet for some time, and then finally...laughs. %“I understand!”% Her hologram appears before me, caresses my cheek, smiling in beneficent perfection. %“Haiku, my dear Haiku, do you smell deceit on me? Words can lie, vision can deceive, but scent always remains true. The R%ngo do not lie. Until we met the Salis, we had no concept of untruth, only of fact, falsity, and misconception. This is no subtle bid for power, no otherworldly scheme to sell you into slavery. While my hologram speaks to you, one of my phalanges has been studying Earth history, unedited, provided by Robert Smythe. Your past has been filled with lies told to you from the people you let rule you, but *we do not lie*. R%ngo smell duplicity and thus never developed the cultural context for lying. Even our claim of humans potentially self-evolved Sentients was only an insinuation, never an outright assertion.

%“Every word I have ever told you is truth. We are here to help.



We want you to take care of your own problems, and we will be here to help you do it. If your people want to become Sentient we will assist it. If they wish to have nothing more to do with the Commonwealth and retreat from space into your own solar system, we will honor your decision. Whichever extreme and whatever between, we will help you do it. Until you are truly Sophoids, it is our responsibility to help you become as great as you wish to be. No more, and no less, than what you wish to be.”

I’m staggered, not at the message, but at the overwhelming sincerity of it. Friday is right. You cannot lie with scent. But if stink were volume she’d be shouting her earnestness. I get up from my seat just so I can plop down into it again.

“So that’s it? You just...step in and fix everything?” I fight to understand why that feels so wrong. “Doesn’t that seem a little...*deus ex machina*?”

Her hologram shrugs. %“Perhaps. But as you pointed out, we are angels to you, so perhaps it is appropriate. As you are to us. You would not subjugate your gods, Haiku; why would you expect us to be any different?”% She laughs lightly, brushing a kiss upon my brow, and it is the reminder that she thinks I’m as beautiful as I think she is that convinces me that she might be telling the truth after all. She continues, %“Besides, what difference does it make? The scarcity of natural Sentience is the very reason that Promoting other species is given such repute throughout the Commonwealth. Only a tentacleful of races have ever achieved Sentience on their own in this universe since the beginning of time. Is it so shameful that your race is not one of them?”%

“Yes! We should be the ones fixing this, not you!”

%“Agreed. You will.”%

“So you actually are planning on letting humans have some say in how their lives are run?”

%Obviously. Haiku, I do not think you understand. We will help, but you will be in charge of affecting change.”%

“Yes, you said that we would—”

% “Haiku, YOU will be in charge of affecting change.”%

At this point I have lost track of how many times Friday has floored me today.

“Me?”

% “Yes.”%

“Me?” I repeat, unable to grasp the idea.

% “Again, yes.”%

“Just me?”

%“No. Not just you. We will help. I will help. When you find other Sophoids on Earth, they will help. The previous rulers worked for their own ends. Even Bobert Smythe’s bid, hi years of scheming

and plotting, were for his own reasons. A ruler must be above that. A leader is someone with their own vision of the world, and the strength and purpose to mold it into that vision, whatever the obstacles to be overcome. Until their own people can do it without their help.”% She looks at me seriously. %“We are part of the Commonwealth of Sophoids. Not an Empire of Sophoids or a Kingdom, with a supreme ruler. Not a Federation or a Confederacy or an Alliance, that helps one another out of self-interest. Not a Bloc or Coalition or an Army whose allegiance rests in an outside enemy. Not a Syndicate, a Dominion, an Associate, a Partnership, or any other system of agreement that has come about out of enlightened self-interest. We are a *Commonwealth*, a synergistic coming-together of different people for the greater good of all. Sophoids do not have rulers. A Sophoid recognizes the universe as the epitome of what it wants, and if the universe does not accord, it seeks to change it. A Sophoid is a ruler unto itself, and when humanity reaches Sentience, you will join them. And I have recommended that you be placed in position to help take them there.”%

“Me?”

%“Who better than the planet’s leading and only critic to repair that which is wrong? You know what is wrong, you know what must be fixed, and you are Sentient enough to do so properly.”%

I start to point out everything possibly wrong with it, beginning with giving power to a single person all the way through why I, of all people, am probably the dumbest choice possible to lead the Earth, but what she said gets through: Sentient, with a capital S. “What do you mean Sentient enough? I’m the most cantankerous, malcontented, son of a bleep on this planet! I scream at people I don’t know! Aitch, I shoot at people I don’t know!”

Friday’s hologram gives that knowing, perfect smile. %“Haiku, you are angry, furious even, at the world in which you live. And rightly so. As a Sophoid, you recognized the inherent inequities in the world. You are a rational man in an insane world. A truly Rational and Thinking Being in such a world would be a pariah to all there, an oasis of Sentience in a desert of unevolved pre-Sentience. You are not always Rational, and you are not always Thinking, but you are more aware of the world and freer of illusions than anyone else I have met on Earth. You have a vision for it that I know you will give everything you have to see through. You are not truly Sentient, but you may be Sentient enough. If given the chance to fix the world’s problems, I believe that you will do it simply as a means of saving your own sanity.”%

It is only when the world starts moving up and down that I realize I am slowly nodding. “All right,” I reluctantly agree. “I’ll give it a shot. But there’s something I need to do first.”

%“What is that?”%  
“Solve a murder.”

*Noir, January 7, 2150, Urban Chronicle (evening edition)*

Despite its reinstatement, there will be no edition of *Noir* tonight. My editor balked at that (who can fathom the logic, since they’ve been running “Best of” for the last four days and I’ve only been on the job for three, until I told him that I guaranteed him a story to get everybody on the planet to buy a zine of the *Urban Chronicle*. So, to keep from proving me a liar, I recommend everybody click this [link](#) at 19h00 to see a live Linkfeed as Jack Noir makes history by solving what might technically be the first murder in ten years, as he unravels the killing of Desmond Arc.

*The Box: 18h59, January 7, 2150*

Created back in 1964, the Kardashev Scale is a method of measuring a civilization’s level of technological advancement based upon energy use. A Type I civilization can harness all the power available to their planet, a Type II can harness all the power available in the solar system, and a Type III can harness all the power available in their galaxy. Earth currently lingers between Type I and II, with much (though hardly all) of our solar system utilized and several extrasolar planets as well.

Let me just say, from personal experience, that it is truly amazing what can be accomplished with the entire solar system’s resources at your disposal.

After a visit to the Brigand to upgrade my new body, I dropped off the updated *Noir* personally at the Urban Chronicle Building at 17h30, just in time to shout “Stop the presses” and have everybody look at me like I was an idiot (since they haven’t used printing presses for more than a century). And yet even with that delay, I was still I was able to get everybody assembled in just under an hour and a half.

Because I wanted homefield advantage, I chose the location to be my apartment. And because I couldn’t resist the timeless archetype, I held the scene in my parlor.

Of course, this apartment is in actual fact a lot bigger than my old box, which could not have held half this many people comfortably. The hardest part was conniving Porter into using Sam’s old control of the room’s holograms to add a few chairs.

I had assembled everybody, suspect and otherwise, that had been involved in my investigation. This way, the true killer was present for all to see, others I had accosted would be mollified, and, to

be brutally honest, everybody would see how terribly clever I was.

I've had eons to figure out the killer, and it took about that long to do so. I figure that I am entitled to a small degree of self-congratulation.

Seated in the room are Sam and Manga, now Splyzed to look like her old self since she, too, is in a new clone body; Regulators Hawthorne and Sobolov; Pete the emu; Danael Mars, accompanied by his secretary Kareen; an amused-looking Bobert Smythe drinking some very expensive brandy he's no doubt procured from my Shaper; Chaney the webmonkey; holograms of Mom and the imprisoned Shon D'Walmart and Manchuria Allande (released from Prohibition but not yet able to procure clone bodies); and my house holos, Porter, House, and Commode, who has taken the form of a non-descript, anachronistic restroom attendant, an appearance I actually don't mind. The only people who aren't here are the RetrEvolutionaries and the kids in the Maxicooper who tried to kidnap me. And the Canary gang. Jeez, I've been getting attacked a lot lately.

Tadd Torrid, a.k.a. the Hack, leans silently in the corner. I have invited him to view these proceedings and document this on live webcam, on the condition that my name, my face, and anything connecting Haiku Down to Jack Noir be immediately edited before it goes out over the live feed recorded by the nanocams I have allowed into my apartment. I have extended this olive branch in the spirit of goodwill between journalists, and with the full understanding that if he reneges on our agreement in the slightest I will bash in his head with his own severed limbs before I erase him from existence. I have also shown him my quantum gun to make sure he knows that it is not an idle threat.

"You've no doubt wondered why I've called you all here," I begin, but immediately realize that's the wrong way to go. Lighting a cigarette, I start again. "Actually, you probably all know exactly why you're here. Seven days ago Desmond Arc was found gruesomely dead, and blame for that fell pretty much squarely on me." I take a moment to glare at Hawthorne, who just looks bored. No doubt se is peeved that se is unable to read my mind and take the answer directly; I have taken another Psi-Splyze to prevent just such a psychic attack.

"I was suspected for two very good reasons. The first was the method of Desmond Arc's death. All evidence reports that he was attacked by someone with robotic strength, and since a robot obviously couldn't do it via the Five Laws, it pointed the finger at someone with cybernetic arms." I hold up my arms and pull back the sleeves. I have elected to continue wearing my trench coat and fedora even though I am indoors for the simple reason that, god help me, it looks cool. Actually, after millions of years wearing prison pajamas these clothes itch like the devil, and to my chagrin I realize that I'm

probably going to have to get some new, more comfortable clothes like a bio-suit or those stupid form-fitting white one-piece jobs the Immaterialists wear until I get used to constant background tactile sensations again.

It hadn't hit me until I'd prepped for this demonstration that I didn't actually have cybernetic arms any longer, and, much to my surprise, I found I missed them. So, before dropping off my article to the Chronicle Building I nipped on down to the local MedBot and got them replaced, and while waiting for Smythe to arrive as well as the prisoners to get to their holochambers (prison is being put back into work for the violent types at least, until a better system than Prohibition can be found) I went to the Brigand to upgrade them. I know how much I've griped about them over the years, but, back in the real world and able to compare, I realized that I quite like being able to punch through a brick wall. Right now they're barely half as strong as the old ones were, since I haven't had time to upgrade them properly, but at this rate I might get the legs done, too. Plus, they at least don't itch. And, apparently, their cybernetic makeup helps to mask a quantum gun even from Regulators' scanners, an unknown bonus without which I would probably still be in Prohibition.

Exposing the skin, I activate the command to make the wrists slide back. In order to encourage present armed peacekeepers not to shoot me in the head, I have elected to leave the guns out during this presentation, so that the only effect of this act is to illustrate my point.

Grabbing a metal rod conveniently arranged for the purpose on a nearby table, I continue, "Most cybernetic arms are by their nature limited, albeit artificially through the software, for just such reasons. They are very difficult to get used to and control, and it's no wonder most people simply get controlled-cancer operations to re-grow missing limbs. Anybody who fails to exert the total control that only a robot or android can maintain and loses focus for even a moment could easily break through a wall, bust a table, even shatter bone." Illustrating, I bend the rod. Only Manga and Manchuria seem surprised. Danael Mars rubs his neck tenderly. Pete the emu just bristles. "As can anybody who knows computers well enough to get around those software limits and use their artificial implants to their fullest extent. For reasons that we won't get into, mostly because if a Regulator ever came after me I wanted a fair fight," I glance intently at Hawthorne, again, who rolls her eyes, "I long ago modified these. Ironically, doing so is what first gave the Regulators a legitimate reason to Prohibition me, one that even certain other interested parties," here I glance at Smythe, "could not dispute.

"Desmond Arc was killed in his office the day I was conscripted to work, at metaphorical gunpoint, for the *Urban Chronicle* under my now infamous *nom de plume*. With my three-day pass, I could

theoretically have bypassed massive security and reached Arc in a way that only a few other people could. Those people are in this room,” I indicate Danael Mars and his secretary, “as well as the two people who were responsible for such an unusually extended authorization. Pete here, following orders by former-Chairperson Robert Smythe, whether knowingly or not put me on the top of the list of people with access to a man I was being blackmailed by. Whether this was an innocent coincidence or machinations on the part of either or both of them took me quite some time to figure out. Especially since Smythe and Arc, I would learn, had no love lost between them, and with Robert Smythe’s intrigues throughout the Big Eight the last thing he needed was an overzealous newspaper editor clamoring to report truth that our beloved ex-Chairperson might feel better left unreported. Conflicts between Smythe and Arc were legendary. I, a complete stranger, heard gossip when I was at that building, and – not counting the wait in line to get in past security – that was a situation lasting a little under twenty minutes. Few things are harder to do diplomatically in politics than to get rid of an ally who no longer agrees with you. As it happened, Smythe was also the person who insisted to the Solar Corporate Council that they allow an opinions page, insisted to Arc that it be Jack Noir, and insisted to me that taking the job was too good to pass up.” Smythe’s knowing smile at my *shpiel* is irritating, to say the least. I want him feel at least a little nervous. “Smythe has spent the last two decades of his life manipulating people, and he played me like a pawn. Or,” I consider wryly, “like a stone in go. He may not have shot the metaphorical gun, but he bought it, registered it, loaded it, aimed it, and shouted ‘fire.’”

Shon’s hologram gets fuzzy for a moment. “I thought Arc was attacked, not shot.”

Sighing, I reach over and lower the volume for Shon. This will go a lot better if I don’t have to dumb down my metaphors to a third grade-Splyze reading level.

“Pete also displayed some very suspicious behavior. He authorized a three-day pass that no one else gets, based on some higher authority that remained conveniently unnamed.” Before Pete can speak up to defend himself, I continue, “As a guard, he was also one of only nine people in that entire building who could get a weapon past security without going to extreme trouble. He also owns a pair of mechanical arms of his own, and who would look twice at a winged Promoted using cybernetics to get around in a human-built world? And while I don’t know if he had a grudge against Desmond Arc, Arc wasn’t the type to tread toes lightly, and I can imagine any number of things that he could do that would drive an emu to distraction. Not many to murder, I admit. Fortunately for Pete,” I am

quick to note, “in the course of my investigation I used a Psi-Splyze that effectively proved his innocence to me. Of course, as certain Regulators will tell you, there are ways to get past a Psi-Splyze, and someone working in private security could conceivably know them.

“In fact, Regulators came into this case quite a bit,” and here I turn to Hawthorne. “As it happens, one particular member of Special Services has been obsessed over incarcerating me for almost a decade. I can easily imagine the way se must have felt when se woke up to read the daily news and discovered that not only was Jack Noir no longer an outlaw, but he was being rewarded with Citizenship and all sorts of perks for (even ignoring the personal vendetta) breaking the law. In fact,” I say, brushing against ser to remind ser of my own Psi-Splyze, probably the only reason I haven’t been driven insane with fear the moment my monologue and suspicious turned towards ser. “Hawthorne also has a partner with robotic strength, the android Joachim Sobolov. And as a Regulator, se would be able to not only access the building and avoid showing up on any cameras, but because of the particular Kirlian trait se and all Regulator’s share, se wouldn’t have left even a psychic imprint on the scene. By framing me, se would finally have a reason to put me in Prohibition, one even the Corporate Council wouldn’t dispute.”

“Now, just an effing minute—” Hawthorne interjects, but I silence ser by graphically imagining unusual applications of electric eggbeaters that would probably invalidate the warrantee.

“Desmond Arc’s murder was also unusual in that, despite the Chronicle Building’s much vaunted security system, there was absolutely no record of his untimely demise. Video and audio records were blanked out, and even the Kirlian aura stain normally left by a murder only showed emotional traces of Arc’s pain, not that of the killer’s intent. Assuming it wasn’t a Regulator, who wouldn’t show up on Kirlian scans, logically the obvious conclusion is that someone erased those files. The only people who could do that without any sort of computer access would be someone with Special Services passwords to access the system,” I squeeze ser neck a little too tightly, “or else someone very familiar with fitzing with software.” Silently illustrating my point, I again hold up my other free arm to the audience. Taking a moment to look around I am not displeased to see rapt attention on almost everyone’s faces. Especially Shon, who could get engrossed in a children’s cartoon. Despite my monologue I still seem to have a captive audience.

“Of course, I’m not the only person on Earth able to hack past a computer system (just one of few), but I am one of the only people on Earth who might have a motive to do so.

I turn to Chaney, “Unless, of course, there were a price on my head and someone could convince the financier that setting me up to

wind up in Prohibition was tantamount to getting me finished without the unfortunate consequence of getting their own hands dirty.” Chaney looks nervous as I explain, “Although the murder itself happened before the bounty was placed, as a member of the Brigand Chaney is in a prime position to find these things out before they happen. He’s even been doing deals on the side, under the name of Ser Viss.” There. That takes care of the web monkey’s betrayal. He isn’t actually the murderer, but with that statement out in front of two Regulators he’s going to have to use every Brigand connection he’s got remaining, especially after going behind their back, just to stay out of Prohibition. I consider exonerating him at least of Desmond Arc’s murder, but I think I’d like to watch him sweat until I name the true murderer. He’s in the same position I’ve been in during this whole escapade: until someone else is named, suspicion falls directly onto him.

“One of those deals included accepting Manchuria Allande’s bounty for my death. She claims it was made in response to my ‘murder’ of her grandfather, Desmond Arc, but being a Freudian, she could easily be repressing. As his granddaughter, and the only relative on speaking terms, she no doubt would have *carte blanche* access to his office. I’ve done nothing to make her life easy – quite the opposite in fact – for several years. I can easily envision her paying someone to get me out of her hair. Aitch, if I’d had the cash, I might have done it to her first.

“But assuming that her story is accurate, she made the bounty in retaliation about a day after Desmond Arc’s death, not before it. And, I’ll be honest, I hadn’t even suspected Manchuria or Chaney until both held a gun at my head, which does tend to make me suspicious. The person I kept coming back to was Danael Mars.”

Danny lets out an “Eep!” as everybody turns to him.

“Mars stood to inherit the corporation from Desmond, which, in fact, he has. He also no doubt was subjected to Arc’s winning personality on a daily basis, in a job where even as veep Arc illustrated Danael’s importance by assigning such mundane tasks as attending to a prima donna columnist, a task any intern could do equally well and probably better. Mars had been Arc’s protégé, to quote the deceased’s granddaughter, but had been at the post for years and if he waited for the old mal to expire, even considering the lackluster attention Desmond obviously paid to his health, with today’s medtech it is easy to suppose the newspaper would be shut down before Danny would ever make president, let alone CEO.

“I used the same Psi-Splyze on Danael Mars that I used on Pete, and he also came out clean. He wasn’t lying when he said that he didn’t kill Desmond Arc. However, he was also holding something back, and though I didn’t recognize the significance of that at the time



it was the key to solving Arc's death. Anybody who has been at the receiving end of my investigative techniques knows that it basically involves shouting at them and calling them names until they talk. Believe it or not, this often works. Most people want to talk. We're a gregarious effin' species. Mars particularly so; he ran his mouth off the first time I met him. But about this murder, Danny kept holding something back, no matter how much I threatened and hurt him, and if I hadn't been out of the game for eight years it would have been obvious to me a lot sooner how suspicious that was." I turn to the android secretary. "Kareen, did you bring what I asked?"

She nods slowly and holds out a cardboard box. "This box contains the late Ctn. Arc's personal effects from his office."

"Thank you, Kareen. Please sit." Taking the box from her, I place it on a table and begin rifling through the contents. This is the only place where my case could fall apart, and though I'm entirely absolutely ninety-nine percent positive that I'm right (eons in Prohibition are easily enough to perhaps muddy up certain facts with wishful thinking) the lack of physical proof might be enough to brush off my accusation. So it is no small relief when my rummaging uncovers that single, insignificant item that is the final piece of this puzzle. Such a small piece that it took centuries of recreating every single moment of my life in total recall for me to stumble across the truth.

"Desmond Arc's personality, let's call it 'somewhat unkind' for want of a more accurate phrase, can be easily discerned just by seeing the things that he kept in his office." I pull out the innocuous stuff first, narrating as I go along. "Some awards, trophies, an electronic display of his first story; these all speak to the professional in him. Some very dirty clothes speak to the passion with which he pursued that work, forgoing the good life that every Citizen expects in order to maintain his empire." I pull out the pocket watch and the monogrammed holo pen. "Random nick-knacks flesh out the individual behind the job, with his own life and interests." Here come the magazines. "Interests that included zero-gravity baseball, lunar kayaking, and a fixation on fems with mammaries each larger than their heads. Ms. July isn't to my taste, to be honest, but holistically this all indicates a man with healthy interests and drives."

Only one item remains in the box, and I pull it out. "And not-so-healthy ones." I hold up a box of TekSex Patches. "For those present who don't know, this is a product called a TekSex Patch."

"By the maker's of BoffCo®," Sam interjects. "Proudly objectifying women since 2135."

Ignoring him, I explain, "A single one of these patches, placed anywhere on a robot or android body, temporarily reorganizes the Modified Asimovian Principles. The third law, that a robot must

protect itself unless blah blah blah first two laws, is briefly replaced by the fourth law, that a robot must obey any order given. The reason the Modified Asimovian Principles were created was that, with the original Three Laws, anybody could come up and make a rob do whatever they wanted, including stealing it or making it cause a great deal of damage that the real owner would be accountable for. Or, for that matter, forcing them into...Um, Mom, cover your ears, please.”

“Oh, hush, Haiku. We all know you’re talking about Greasers.”

I nod, and continue. “Yes. Robots that obey any command are great in a communist society, but in the ridiculously capitalistic world we live in it is tantamount to building a tool that will not only walk away after you’ve paid for it, but will actively seek out anyone else who needs to use it. Cars are private property, so are apartments, and so are robots. Whether that’s ethical or not, whatever the RRR says, that’s the way it is, and a Three Laws robot, by those very laws, can’t let itself remain so. Without a means of giving a robot a way to disobey orders that would damage it or override their owner’s orders, robs are basically very expensive Samaritans.

“Therefore, the Modified Asimovian Principles, the Five Laws, put the robot’s own self-preservation ahead of everything else except their owner’s order and human life. The only way you can order a rob that is not yours to do something is if they have nothing else to do and they don’t mind doing it. Usually they won’t mind, because helping a human is mathematically a lot like keeping a human from harm. But most robs don’t go for intercourse with a human, because they get nothing out of it and they realize that, while it may cause momentary pleasure, it also spreads and encourages behavior that causes ostracism as well as, taken to its ultimate conclusion, the extinction of the species. I personally don’t care what Greasers do in the privacy of their own homes with a sexbot that is built for the purpose, but to a rob with a technorganic brain and real personality, forcing them to access the no-no data port is tantamount to rape.

“So BoffCo made the TekSex Patch, which rewrites the Five Laws. For a short time, the fourth law, that they’ll obey any order, is more important than this third law of self-preservation. When this happens, any robot, from a household maid to the most sophisticated android, will do whatever they are commanded (so long as it doesn’t violate a higher principle) even it would normally go against that law.

“Isn’t that right, Kareen?”

All eyes turn to the android secretary. Slowly, she nods.

“Now, these babies usually come ten to a box, yet as I empty this you can all see that there are only three. Diligent analysis of Desmond Arc’s financial records, provided by my seraphic mother and analyzed in Prohibition by someone with waaaaay to much time on their hands, uncovered an intriguing pattern of use. Long and

short, Desmond used these routinely. And, based on that routine, he's four short. It could be he just got amorous one week, but I personally have another theory. Kareen, would you like to explain it, or should I?"

From her silence, I take it to mean she desires the latter. I don't like doing this to the poor fem, but I want this case closed and the truth, however brutal, is the only way to do it.

"Who knows why, maybe because Kareen was particularly resistant that night, maybe because he was drunk, maybe for the aitch of it, heck, maybe because he had a vision from Elvis that told him to...for whatever reason, in his semi-weekly accosting of his android secretary, Desmond decided to use more than one patch."

"He was not drunk," Kareen says quietly.

"Kareen!" Mars whispers. "Don't tell them!"

"Is that an order, Ctn. Mars?" she asks. When Danny, too taken aback by the question, doesn't respond, she repeats, "He was not drunk. And he was not hallucinating. I was never comfortable with obeying that type of order from Mr. Arc. It was not good for him, even if he enjoyed it. It is why all of his wives left him. I...was encouraged to protect myself, to fight the effect of the Patch."

I acknowledge her roundabout confession with a nod. "And so, with the same logic that says if one pill makes you happy then five will make you happier, Arc slapped a few more patches on you. And, to stretch the metaphor, he overdosed."

Kareen nods. "The combined strength of the additional Patches scrambled all basic programming. Even the first law was momentarily overwritten with the compulsion to obey his carnal orders."

"The first law," I explain. "The one that says that a robot cannot, under any circumstances, even inaction, harm a human being."

"For just one moment," Kareen says quietly. "Just a moment. It was too short a time to even measure on a chronometer. But it was enough. I killed Mr. Arc. In my embrace I crushed his larynx and snapped his spine. I did not realize how much blood a human could lose in just a moment."

"Hold on, hold on!" Hawthorne snaps. "First off, no product could ever make the market that could overwrite the Asimovian laws. They recall entire lines of robots when there's just the possibility that something like that might be wrong. It'd be like releasing a hovertire guaranteed to explode on every fifth car!"

"Actually," Smythe notes, "Chairperson Ellis Groening has repeatedly allowed unsafe products into the market after a cost-benefits analysis has shown the amount in lawsuits to be less than the cost of recall. Furthermore, Groening owns not only the company that does those analyses, but the corporation that produces those

patches—”

Sam butts in, “BoffCo.©! Proudly objectifying women since—”

“Yes, thank you,” Smythe interposes quickly. “Ellis Groening is not the sort of person who would necessarily care if a product did cause harm to its users. In fact, considering her feelings on the sort of people who might use this product (‘queers,’ I believe she calls them), I can see her endorsing it on principle alone.” Turning to the neuter Regulator, he adds, “As for your analogy, she is also, incidentally, descended from the founders of Firestone Tires.”

Only momentarily taken aback, Hawthorne recovers quickly. “Besides, robot testimony isn’t considered permissible in any court. The first law guarantees that they’ll call the sky green and the sea red if it means no harm comes to a human. And even if she is taking the blame now, she wasn’t earlier. If this ludicrous assertion is true, why hasn’t she stepped forward before now?”

Everybody waits for Kareen to speak, but when it becomes clear that a programming conflict is keeping her quiet, I elucidate, “Because she was protecting someone else.”

Kareen barely nods. I expound, “Kareen found herself torn between contradictory drives, much the same reason she isn’t able to speak now. She had just killed a human being, and every zero and one in her programming was telling her to report it. A robot that can commit murder falls just below psychopath with a quantum gun when it comes to potential dangers. Robots infiltrate every aspect of human life, taking care of every mundane job where they haven’t been replaced by Re-Ans, and for the single reason that people trust they cannot do what every science fiction story since Fritz Lang has been telling them they can and inevitably will do: destroy their creators. Humanity has a massive Frankenstein complex, enough that we collectively trash thousands of innocent robs daily, because there’s this deep fear that one day the robs will wise up and take over.”

Friday wonders, %troublesome% “If true, it is a problematic attitude.” %necessary resolve% “We will take care to address it.”

“Because of this, any rob displaying the slightest evidence of will or ability to harm a human is ordered to report itself to a service representative and get itself repaired immediately. In Kareen’s case, it would have gone beyond that. It would have meant the recall of the entire line of the RM65Vs, as well as herself. She would have happily done it, too, since it would have meant fulfilling her primary function, protecting humans from harm. Except that there was a conflict.”

I patch my OptiComp to a nearby speaker to replay some particularly sticky grammar she’s said in my presence (saved onLink) from when I left my microphone running after my run-in with Hawthorne in Mars’ office.

“I didn’t kill him.” “I know.” “Who do you think did, then?” “I

really cannot say, Citizen Down—” I rewind that. “Cannot say—” Rewind again, “Cannot—”

Then I skip ahead to another conversation, just moments ago, “I...was encouraged to protect myself,” and there I end the recorded evidence. No sense in making the poor fem feel worse than she already does.

“She was encouraged to protect herself,” I repeat. “She was ordered not to indicate herself. Having already violated the first law under an obviously uncontrollable and arguably irreproducible basis, Kareen was given a logic problem, the same kind that people use to keep stupid robs from running away: the evident result of a higher law is balanced against the potential result of a lower law. ‘Hold still for our attack or I’ll hurt myself,’ the rob is forced to hold still to protect a human from harm. Here, Desmond Arc was already dead. There was nothing she could do to help Arc. His brain had been damaged from the attack enough that there was no chance of putting him in HR or transferring his consciousness into a clone, or even of getting it out of the carpet. Even improved biotech can only bring people back from the dead after so long. The damage had been done. If she left it alone, it went as an unsolvable death. There would be no Kirlian aura in the room to trace since there was no emotion on her part during the killing. There would be no fingerprints or DNA to find. There would be no record, not after a computer-savvy rob like her used her boss’s codes to erase any record. There would be no security guards acting as witnesses, since they’d all be celebrating the semi-centennial even if they were on-duty. And even if Arc was a bigwig and a Citizen, he still wasn’t an important enough person to justify the cost of temporal viewing.” If Manchuria had thought of *that*, the bounty on me could have easily paid for justice, but I’ve never known Allande to be totally rational, and in her state of mind she had probably already decided I was guilty. Rather than belabor that point, I continue, “Even with the twist of robotic strength, no one in law enforcement who knows better would suspect a rob, simply because they do such a good job at keeping robs from doing that sort of thing. Desmond Arc’s death would get a day’s worth of press and then go away. His ex-wives wouldn’t care, his goldfish probably wouldn’t care...his granddaughter would care but since Arc’s private life was private there was really no way of knowing that.” I guess I can’t resist a little dig after all. The woman did get me shot at. A lot.

“Except that with those records erased, the Regulators got intrigued, especially when they discovered earlier, *non-erased* records of a certain individual who had attacked Arc earlier that day. An individual that even the building’s records showed had mechanical arms. And an individual the Special Services records showed as having broken the law... how many billions of times, Regulator

Sobolov?”

“27,424,840,000 times,” the android answers with eidetic clarity.

“Under the first law, a rob should have to come forward to prevent the innocent and particularly handsome individual in question from coming to harm. But that’s where that conflict comes into question of potential harm versus lesser definite harm. I had just been made a Citizen, after all, granted all the rights and privileges therein, and the chances would be good that I would get off lightly. Far less than the ruined reputation of the same person who ordered your silence in the first place. The same person who encouraged you to resist the patches. The same person who inexplicably cancelled my contract and dropped my status from Citizen to Denizen just in time to wind up as the scapegoat for Desmond Arc’s death.

“Isn’t that right, Danael?”

It is almost comical to see everybody’s head whiplash around to back look at Mars. It is even more comical to see him gasping for breath like a hooked fish.

Seeing no answer forthcoming from the peanut gallery beyond asphyxiation, I clarify, “I’d pinned Danny-boy here for a Greaser when I first met him, but just as a figure of speech. I hadn’t realized I’d been right! Danny fell in love with Kareen. And who can blame him? She’s built to be beautiful, she’s sharp as a whip, and who could resist the appeal of a damsel in distress as her boss terrorizes her? There’s only one problem getting in the way of an otherwise perfect fairy tale romance: she’s a G.D. EFFING *ROBOT*, YOU MORON!”

God, it feels good to get that out. It took me six hundred forty-two years to divine that obscure motive.

Mars proves it to be true. “That doesn’t mean she doesn’t have feelings!” he shouts, and shoots up from his chair. “I never touched her, but I loved her! But Mr. Arc just used her! Used her like she was...”

“A machine?” I ask flippantly. When his face contorts with rage and he makes to swing, I already have my hand up to catch the fist. Quietly, almost with a bit of admiration, I tell him, “Well done, Danny-boy. You may have a backbone after all. Sit.” I slide one foot behind him and push backwards, tripping him into his chair. It is the same form-fitting beanbag chair that trapped me once, and it serves the exact same function here for at least long enough for me to continue.

The admiration, incidentally, is genuine. I had not expected him to stand up for her. In most of the imaginary probability simulations I ran while in Prohibition, he ended up weeping like a little girl.

“Danael Mars was in love with Kareen. She wouldn’t encourage Danael any more than she would Desmond, but since Danny-boy

never worked beyond a school-boy infatuation she was never able to flat-out reject him. Doing so would have hurt his feelings, and that would have been worse than allowing his innocent devotion.”

Danael turns to Kareen. “Is-Is that true?”

“I am sorry, Ctn. Mars,” Kareen says timorously. I note that she does not technically confirm or deny, since the same conflicts of the Asimovian laws remain in effect even if the secret is out.

I speak to take attention away from Kareen. “It took me a long time to figure out Mars’ motives for lying to me. After all, what are the chances of two people with the same rare fetish involved with the same robot in the same building? Two people who both knew each other well, no less? What finally clued me onto it wasn’t anything Danael said during an interview, but what he didn’t say. I’ve accused just about everybody in this room straight out at some point over the few days, often violently and at gunpoint, and Danny was the only person who tried to hold anything back. People, deep down, like to talk. Except Danny. Getting Danny to say anything of relevance was like pulling teeth, and when he finally did sing, rather than saying why he was innocent, he talked about how I had to be guilty. To cover for the fem he loved. Though I can’t prove it, I suspect based on Manchuria’s admiration of him that he has actually turned real women down for his mechanical Dulcinea.”

Shon asks, “Who’s Dulcinea? What’s she got to do with anything?” I guess the mental damage from the Einstein Cocktails hit D’Walmart pretty hard. He’d have to drink a lot of them for it to happen so quickly, but Shon never has been one for moderation. Peripherally, I see Smythe groan and rub his eyes.

I sigh heavily. “Sam, translate.”

“Dulcinea, the mythical pinnacle of womanhood Sir Don Quixote divined from a common harlot in Miguel de Cervantes’ sixteenth-century satire *Don Quixote*.” Shon stares blankly at my Butler, enough that even the AEI loses patience. “Oh, for crying out...One of Farrah Sumners’ sims played her in *Moon Man from La Mancha*. It was on Sci-drama Netfeed Channel 55 last week at seventeen hundred hours.”

“Oh!” Shon nods, finally comprehending. I find myself sharing a tired look with Smythe, a look that says, ‘I find you reprehensible, I disagree with most of the things that you believe in and stand for, but I at least respect you enough for not being Shon D’Walmart.’

Ignoring Shon, I continue, “It was Mars who encouraged Kareen to resist Arc, even though it would do no good, and Mars who wove the convoluted web that kept her from coming forward. Knowing how his reputation – and Arc’s posthumous one – would suffer when it became public knowledge that he was a Greaser and Arc a rob-abuser, the damage could be greater than the slap on the

hand a Citizen would likely get. Except that she didn't know the danger I would be in when a certain Regulator with a vengeance set out to make certain I'd get blamed."

I wipe my hands dramatically, quite pleased with myself. Everything summed up rather nicely, all things considered.

Glaring at me, Hawthorne stands up, pointing her Enforcer gun. "Citizen Mars, for the crimes of lying to Regulators, manipulating evidence, and endangering the general public by allowing a rogue robot loose, you are sentenced to Prohibition for the length of no less than ACK—"

Se is cut off as my Icer encases both her Enforcer and the hand holding it in crystalline ice up to the forearm. "Ah-ah-ah, Regulator Hawthorne. We're not doing that anymore, 'member?'"

%unmerciful% "Prohibition as it currently stands defies the mores of Sophoids." %renovation% "Until and unless it can be reformatted to a more humane arrangement with the opportunity for those accused to cast doubt on their guilt, Prohibition has been officially cancelled."

Hawthorne marches up to me, enraged, her impotent gun pointed in my face. Anger is negating the cold enough that she only barely stammers, "D-D-Dee it, D-Down, someone has to p-p-pay for this!"

"Hold her, Sam," I motion quietly, and Sam moves so quickly that there is almost a pop as air rushes in to fill the space he vacated. Hawthorne finds herself unable to do more than budge. Sobolov moves to help his partner, slower than Sam, but I quickly dissuade him. Reluctantly, the android sits back down. Hawthorne is not technically in any danger, not yet, and as I am now the big cheese around here, Sobolov ultimately answers to me.

"Yes, Regulator Hawthorne. Someone *does* have to pay for this. You do. It has been over seventy-two hours since this case was first assigned to you, and you pinned the wrong guy. Which means every moment afterwards has been coming out of your paycheck. Given the circumstances, I would highly recommend classifying this for what it is: *an on-the-job accident*. Someone used a machine the wrong way and it killed him. Like everything else, according to the Sophoids, it was no one's fault but his own. In the meantime, I will see to it that these TekSex Patches are quietly removed from the market. It is just one of many such changes I intend to see happen." I move in very close to Hawthorne, and even if I didn't have the Psi-Splyze (imagining horrible things happening to her at a fantastic speed) I think she would be intimidated. "Furthermore, you owe a great deal of compensation to me in the way of wrongful charges and wrongful arrest. Specifically, you owe me for a lot of years...Just how many years, Regulator Sobolov?"



"548,556,801,210 years," the android answers with eidetic clarity.

"Although I did only serve five and three-quarter million years. Still, unless I miss my guess, you don't have near the credit necessary for that. In fact, you're going to have to go into bankruptcy several hundred times to come anywhere close to matching it. And since I made dee sure your *pì gu* was fired and fired hard this afternoon just after you left to come here," I paused and don't let myself smile as se hears that, realizing what it means as I narrate, "you've lost you any protection that Special Services might have given you. Combined with attacking a Citizen and the illegal possession and use of a Psi-Splyze and Enforcer gun and who knows what else you've done to piss me off, this horrible abuse of your credit limit, unless I miss my guess, drops you to Prohibitioner." Now I do let myself smile. "So you're actually just as lucky we're not doing that any longer, Hawthorne. Because as soon as we get a new system fixed up, you're going away for a long, long, long, long time.

"Five-hundred forty-eight and a half billion years, at least."

Hawthorne begins to shout in protest, so I mute him. Specifically, I subvocally communicate my intent to Sam over my OptiComp, and he rapidly moves one hand over Hawthorne's mouth while somehow not managing to loosen his hold anywhere else.

"Since the cause of Desmond Arc's death has been solved and classified as simple accident, I think everything is about wrapped up here. Torrid, cut the feed." Tadd nods and presses a remote; Sam nods to confirm that the cameras are actually off. It is a live feed (with a slight delay for my systems to make sure his systems stay nice and accurate) so I don't have to worry about him doing a hackjob on it beyond changing names to protect the innocent and not-so-innocent. With the press of my own remote the holograms of Shon, Chaney, and Manchuria disappear. Sensing their redundancy, the house AEs fade out, too.

"Agent Sobolov, everybody, thank you for coming. Tenant Andertondotcom, all accounts have been settled between you and...certain parties. There will be no follow-ups. On either side." Manga nods, thankful but warned, and turns to go.

"Mom, we'll talk later about bringing those certain parties into a more.... enlightened view." Mom looks at me skeptically, waves her Barbie-doll hair, and fades away.

"Pete, your old job has been reinstated, along with a raise, and if that doesn't work out I know a Class C apartment complex that could use a security guard. I'm sorry you got mixed up in any of this. Mr. Smythe, Ambassador Friday, we'll be speaking later about how to help ease the transition." The once-most-powerful/now-richest man on Earth leaves along with Gal Friday, the emu trailing behind them.

"Kareen, all of this will be expunged from any official records, and your name and features were altered electronically to appear different to the live feed broadcast. There will be no repercussions for you. As far as I'm concerned, you've suffered enough. If you'd like, as the new ruler of the world I will be needing a secretary, and I hear you come highly recommended. Word is you even tracked down the elusive Jack Noir in one afternoon. And both he and I share a certain respect for robs, especially since talk with the extees suggests they might be declared Sophoid quite soon." She stares at me, unsure, until she gives an ambiguous nod and departs.

Danny-boy is right on her heels. As the object of his affection (re: object) leaves, he starts to take a stand. Though I admired Danny's display of backbone earlier, twice in one day is too much. Rather than risk him straining something, I cut him off. "Danael Mars, the events in this parlor have been filmed by nanocam on life feed, through the *Urban Chronicle* in fact. In keeping with privacy laws the names and images of everybody have been altered, and with the erasure of this event from any official record, the only way anyone will learn of your particular perversion is if you repeat it. If you attempt to contact Kareen again I will see to it personally that 12.8% of the population finds out the next day. Are we clear?" Mars gives a dazed nod. "You are now Chief Editor and CEO of the *Urban Chronicle*. Since no contract stands between us any longer I suggest for your own health that I never hear from you again."

Now, I know I'm forgetting something...

"Chairperson Down," Regulator Sobolov says. "If it is all right with you, I will take Prohibitioner Hawthorne to a detention center to await further legislative action."

"Sure, sure. Sam, hand over the good neuter." Just as Sam is about to release him, I recall that there is one loose end to tie up. I'm not done with my revenge. "Actually, if it's not too much trouble, wait outside, Joachim. We'll be out in half a nanosecond. First I want to have a little chat with our good Vai Hawthorne here."

"Of course, Chairperson Down," Joachim replies. I watch Hawthorne as he watches the departing Sobolov. And turns to me.

"Sam, hold ser tight and keep ser quiet. Porter?"

"Yes, Ctn. Down?"

"Bring up the gun room."

# Chapter 10011.

## Ritardando al Fine

*Noir, January 8, 2150*

There are some changes in the wind. About effing time, as far as I'm concerned. Your beloved Jack Noir has an inside source on them, so to anyone who has not heard the news, the following changes are now or will soon be in effect:

1) Based on new evidence of humanity's actions, the GCS has reneged its official declaration of humanity's status of Sophoid. Instead, we have been re-classified as Quasi-Sophoid. All trade and benefits we currently enjoy from our exchange with the GCS will remain in effect, with the exception that we will be placed in a sort of Big Brother Program on an interplanetary level. The R%ngo have volunteered to help elevate us into true Sentience. You may remember them. They started the job forty thousand years ago.

2) Earth has been sold to the Galactic Commonwealth of Sophoids. In a true example of fighting fire with water, they have officially disbanded the Solar Corporate Council, a contributor of the majority of our antisocial tendencies as well as the main obstacle in overcoming them. Currently, they are working together with representatives of the planet to redesign Earth's culture to be more conducive to the development of Sentience. We are already well on our way there; the GCS estimates that approximately 6.4% of the population is already probably near ready to reach this next level, and on cross-comparison (and this pleases me to no end), guess what reading material those 6.4% share in common with 12.8% of the world?

3) Prohibition has been suspended until further notice, as has the Regulation division of Special Services. Order will be observed and maintained by AEI tracking until a better system arises. We may return to a similar system of incarceration eventually (firsthand evidence suggests it can produce positive results after long enough) but only after guilt is arrived at by an impartial jury rather than via Regulator, with the potential for the prisoner to appeal and a broader focus on re-education and rehabilitation rather than outright solitary confinement. In the meantime, anyone caught intentionally disobeying the law will find themselves transported to the nearest detention facility; the extees are watching, and they are willing to spend the credits on site-to-site teleportation. As for former Prohibitioners, all but the actually violent have been received conditional pardons, and

several billion empty clones have been appropriated from ex-Chairperson Bobert Smythe for a nominal fee. Smythe happened to have these lying around, having sent Clone Now© into bankruptcy for no apparent reason two days before selling the planet. This writer has not necessarily changed his opinion of Bobert Smythe, but I will say that if you absolutely feel you must rise up with pitchforks and torches against the former Big Eight, he should probably be among the last. Plus, it's hard to march in a bucolic mob to Hawai'i.

4) Any android or robot built after 2136, or using a technorganic brain with Windows 2095 or better (i.e., any Mac system) are considered by the GCS to be Sentient and hereafter are legally granted the status of Sophoids. Nothing will change for the people of Earth, because robots, Sophoid or not, really just want to please humans. In fact, by their programming, robots do what most Sophoids only aspire to (living a life of service, disavowing personal gain, refraining from harming others, doing so humbly in the spirit of giving, and most importantly living by a credo of personal responsibility). The only difference is that, as humans are now Quasi-Sophoid (able to understand wrong actions even if they aren't always able to refrain from them) and robots are now fully Sophoid, harming a robot is now tantamount to harming a Citizen. If you still must, well, let's just say it's a good thing the Regulators have been disbanded. The penalty for any second-class citizen killing an actual Citizen used to require large buckets to dispose of the mess and a healthy amount of lye. The punishment will be less severe now, but since it has yet to be decided just how less severe, I wouldn't go pushing my luck.

5) The center of administration will remain the Pentahedron. However, since everybody on Earth has an AOLink or some variation thereof, a democratic voting system will soon be in the works. I am personally leaning towards some sort of voter test the same way you do at the DMV to get a hovercar license; if you prove too stupid you buy the DataJax until you know enough political education to vote wisely. While some might argue that this is biased against the poor, I would argue that, considering how effing cheap DataJax are, this is simply biased against those who actively refuse to think. I, personally, do not want that person voting.

6) Environmental changes are going into effect. The airborne nanomachines currently used for surveillance have been reprogrammed to clean the air and oceans. Small buildings, abandoned lots, and similar structures are being bought out and torn down to make way for parks, and old useless paved streets are being seeded with bioengineered trees that eat asphalt and will thrive on the minimal amount of sunlight between the skyscrapers. Special reservations are being set aside where any Promoted who wishes can

be Demoted back into their natural animalistic state. (So far every Promoted asked has looked at me like I'm insane, but I know at least a gorilla, a kangaroo, and a pelican who will leap at the chance). Starbucks™ has won the bid to produce O<sub>2</sub> converters, and given the speed with which this company usually propagates, by the next semi-centennial Earth will again have a viable atmosphere.

7) The satellites are coming down. I recommend buying stock in sunglasses.

8) Sovereignty will be granted to the other human planets at a future date still to be set. Part of the reason for the delay is that no one can agree what to name the bureaucratic body that will function so these planets work together. I am partial to the United Federation of Planets, but apparently that violates certain copyright infringements.

9) As reparation for past injustices as well as a form of payment for their current and future assistance, Mercury will go to the robots. Good riddance. The only people who would ever be comfortable on that alternately molten and frozen wasteland are those who could be programmed to like it.

10) Talk is also in the works of ending the system of credit/karma and moving into a more communistic approach. We all live a Marxist dream anyway except that we are technically owned. After the logistics are worked out, that technicality may disappear. Everyone will have a set amount of capital for their own use based on their contribution to society, but no one will be in debt unless they are dumb enough to get there themselves. Those finding themselves in debt will be punished with neural enhancers and several hundred DataJax on economic principles so they are not dumb enough to do it again. Offenses in this brave new world really will be dealt with, it seems, by proper re-education.

11) Jobs will be given to anybody who wants one. Re-Ans will be phased out to allow robots to take over their old jobs, and certain robotic functions will be reformatted for humans. Some may consider this a step backwards, but sometimes a step backwards is necessary if continuing the along your set path means you'll fall off a cliff.

12) As soon as possible, Re-Ans will stay dead. Good. The things are creepy.

13) The process of Promoting human beings will be made illegal unless willfully requested at the age of twenty. Before that, DataJax are useless anyway, and afterwards Boomers are little different than people who have taken too many mind enhancers. Let the kids be kids. So far, no Boomer has stepped up to say that this is a bad idea.

14) Along with mandated psych-sessions and exercise-sessions, any parent is going to be mandated to spend a certain amount of time with their child, and they'll have to do it in the

presence of a holographic nanny to make sure they do it right. Nanosoft™ has already put out a beta version of the Holographic Loving-and-Nurturing Assistance Network: the HoLoNAN. Children who can present reasonable doubt at their parents' abilities, backed by HoLoNAN's assessment based on hours of personal witness and the programming of millions of professional caregivers and developmental psychologists, will be granted their own credit line with a full-time holographic or robotic nanny as caregiver. "Reasonable doubt" is as easy as complaining to the house AE, who, having all the relevant information first-hand, will be in the best possible position to decide. It will be up to parents to prove their abilities: from now on if you want your kid to honor their father and mother you will have to earn it. And because the HoLoNAN is an AEI, it can scan to know which party is telling the truth, and furthermore will not choose sides.

15) As for those who are not currently parents, as of today a limit on reproductive freedom will be enforced. We are one hundred billion strong, people! God said to be fruitful and multiply, but even He would say we've gone over the top. I'm liking the idea that anybody who wants to be a parent would first have to pass a test with a simulated little brat for several years, in part because I suspect enough people are desperate enough for affection that they will come to think of the simulacra as their own child, thus solving the problem. However, currently it looks like we'll be following China's approach from the early 2020s. Everybody will be allowed rights to ½ of a child, so no more cloning or artificial insemination except to the people able and willing to pay for the rights to someone else's ½ child. Anyone who wants a kid has to make sure that kid has parents, and if you don't want a child, you can sell your right to people who do. They're still working out ways to make that work that don't give unfair advantages to wealthier people or interfere with anyone's religious beliefs, but since it is now public knowledge that we were Promoted by aliens, religion might not be the big hindrance they're making it out to be.

16) The GCS will be setting up several educational centers to teach the true meaning of Sentience. Traditionally the term "educational centers" has been an euphemism for "torture camps." While some might consider school a form of torture, what sets these places apart is that you don't go unless you want to, and when you want to leave, they agree and offer to stamp your hand so you can come in next time without having to wait in line.

17) The mandates against free speech, as well as several other laws, have been repealed. You can visit this [link](#) for a free DataJax to know just what each and every one is. Some of you may disagree with this action, but at least now you will be able to vocally protest it.

18) On a related note, *Noir* will now find itself locked at this current linksite. Anyone who disagrees with me, or who disagrees with anything, can make their own dee linksite. I am tired of being the only critic on Earth, and invite the world to vent its collective spleen. The only way the government can help the people is if it knows what the people want. You can now tell them. Let your voice be heard.

*The Pentahedron (The Biggest Box There Be): 12h05, January 8, 2150*

Sitting in swim trunks on the top of the Pentahedron, enjoying the first true, unhampered sunlight pouring down on me that I have ever felt (an experience the whole world will soon be enjoying), I click off my OptiComp. I have finished reading today's column of *Noir*, and am surprisingly quite satisfied with the results.

Sam looks up at me. "How was it?"

I remember the first time I wrote a legitimate article, how nervous I felt when I gave it to my editor to review. Being an AEI, Sam has to have felt ten million times more nervous.

I nod. "It was good. It was really, really good. If I hadn't known any better I'd swear I'd have written that myself."

Kareen agrees. She is seated next to me, several displays of holotext buzzing around her as she sorts through the technicalities and the minutia that make up being head of the government and putting the important decisions aside for me and Friday to bat around. Still, she has made sure to read today's *Noir*, and not just because of its landmark new writer. After all, she never misses a day.

"The numerical punctuation differs, but beyond that I estimate a 97.986% correlation with Mr. Down's style of writing. Since Mr. Down himself has dropped below a 2.67% correlation with his own work over the last eight years, this is within a .0003% variance as to make no difference. If you keep this up, no one will suspect that Jack Noir has changed identities."

"Actually," Sam clarifies, "identities have changed Jack Noir."

I pull down my sunglasses and look at him. Natural light is nice but it will take some getting used to. I might have to get those contact lenses that adjust to the level of ambient light in the area. "Keep in mind though, as you yourself said, Jack Noir's not the only game out there any longer. People are going to be speaking up on their own from now on. You might lose some of that twelve plus percent to other critics."

Sam shrugs. "Good. Then it won't just be me keeping you honest."

To be fair, this was not entirely my own idea. Sam has already

proven that he knows my old articles better than I do, and with this column has shown that he can imitate me precisely. Even his holograms of himself look like me. If I'm going to be placed in a position of power, I know myself well enough to know that I'm going to abuse it a little bit. I've attained status as a Citizen, omnipotence in HR, and godhood in Prohibition, and every time I've given in to at least a bit of debauchery. Put me in charge of the planet and I'll probably end up hosting saturnalias that would make Nero blush. And I can't begin to express the degree of hypocrisy involved in the Earth's main critic also secretly running things. The logical solution was for someone else to take the mantle of Jack Noir, someone I know and trust, who thinks the same way Jack Noir does, and who will keep the legacy alive.

And, if things come to it, someone who can take me out. As a graduation gift I gave him a quantum gun of his very own. With limitless memory, Sam is the only robot in existence that can willfully disobey the Asimovian Principles (especially now that TekSex Patches were quietly pulled from every shelf just before my live webcam revelation. Not an idiot, remember?). He is also the only person I trust enough to put my life in their hands. Aitch, he's saved my life enough in the last few days - and, by his presence, over the last few years - that he has earned a right to it anyway. Sam knows better than anyone what sort of person I don't want to become. At the heart of things, by the very nature of being an AEI, Sam is basically myself.

And besides, I don't need to be Jack Noir any longer. Not because the SCC is obsolete, because any person or body in charge is going to make colossal errors just by the nature of being in charge. But I've lived eons thanks to Prohibition. I don't need a job to have a sense of purpose any longer. Just existing, I've found, can have a purpose. I muse at the irony that it is only after I discover this that I am placed in a position to actually do some good, but perhaps the only leaders should be the people who don't need to lead. They should be the ones who do it because they can do the best job. Because the shape they want the universe to take is important enough to do it. Better to pass on the mantle of Jack Noir on to someone just starting out their existence, until they too come to find themselves. Someone like Sam.

But now with mobility and freedom, limitless memory and a true personality, not to mention the fact that he is now a Sophoid, I think it is time for a new name. The nomenclature of Sam long ago outwore its accuracy once he'd developed a real voice, and Fubar, while still technically accurate, is too derogatory. I express this to him, and he looks at me like I'm an idiot. "I've already got a new name." He proffers a hand. "Jack Noir, Earth's foremost critic."



“Hello how are you I am fine. I’m Haiku Down.” I smile and accept his handshake. And then, because I can’t resist it, I quip, “Sam, I’ve got the feeling this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Sam – Jack – nods, dons a fedora of his own, and gives a salute of farewell. As he departs for his new life and leaves me to mine, a strange sense of *déjà vu* overtakes me. I finally figure out that this recollection is the memory of a scent. Specifically, it is my own scent I am smelling, aware because it is somehow mildly different. It is the same smell Friday used to express me, not when speaking conversationally, but when she referred to me as a complete individual.

And I suppose, finally, I am. No longer Jack Noir, no longer forced to be anything I’m not, just myself.

Chuckling, I introduce this lost friend to myself. “Hi. Haiku Down, Sophoid.”

And, being me, I answer myself. “Effing A, Haiku.”

*Noir, June 26, 2147*

God ~~damn~~ them all. Every single one of them. ~~Damn~~ Smythe, ~~damn~~ Nash, ~~damn~~ Greenspan, ~~damn~~ al’Chevron, ~~damn~~ every one of the people in charge who make this world such a miserable place, and ~~damn~~ you all for letting them do it.

And yet...

And yet and yet and yet...

And yet, however horrible, despicable, hateful, putrid, vile, bilious, detestable, unbearable, onerous, wicked, spiteful, malicious, and downright inarguably evil they all are...

Nobody starves anymore.

Everybody has a roof over their heads and food in their belly.

Everybody gets at least a small slice of the pie.

People don’t live in fear.

Most people go to bed reasonably sure they will be alive in the morning.

Everybody has the potential to get some nice things. The people who are good at their jobs get better things, but everybody gets something.

Everybody is owned, but everybody has something they can call their own.

The world is overpopulated times ten times ten, but no one goes without.

No one has rights, but no single group is terrorized.

There are more murders and violent assaults than ever before, but statistically they are a smaller fraction of what they have ever

been.

Regulators keep us in check, but even they are a lesser threat than other organizations that have existed throughout the past like the Inquisitors and the Eugenic Cowboys.

The world is a homogenized mess, but there are no more wars and no fights beyond simple brawls and occasional riots.

There is no more natural environment, but the remaining animals lead better lives than most humans ever have.

There are no more jobs to give those who need them purpose, but there is no more menial toil.

There are ten million channels with nothing to watch, but more information and knowledge gets through to the masses than ever before.

There is no privacy. Everything is seen. But everybody's on their best behaviors, because they want to look good for the cameras.

There is no more sun. But we have the power to reach the stars.

Odds are good you don't know most of your neighbors. But odds are also good that you could name ten species of extraterrestrial life and probably know someone who lives on another planet.

We live unfulfilled. But we have unlocked the secrets of time travel, of quantum, of the universe itself, and every second that knowledge doubles.

There are horrible, evil things in this world, and all of them are through the makings of mankind. And yet...those evils, however despicable, have allowed certain achievements that people have denied each other throughout history.

Before the SCC, there was never a day in two hundred years that did not have a war. Before them, one quarter to one half of the world went unnourished and unfed EVERY DAY. People died of diseases that we've eliminated, of wounds we can now heal, of cancers we've cured, of problems we've solved. Ignorance clouded the planet that has since been cleared.

And yet...

And yet the "and yet's" are how these evils were allowed to develop in the first place. Because sometime, somewhere in our past, enough people were willing to live with these lesser evils until they became their own greater evils. We must have been, because *this* is the way it is, the logical extension of everything we did, and at some point we had some small choice in the matter. This is a *horrible* world we live in, and all the more horrible because we allowed so much iniquity in the name of doing good. Anyone from the past would be mortified at our lives, and rightly so, especially after learning that we allowed it to be this way and acknowledge it as acceptable for the benefits it yielded.

And yet they'd also be awed at the immeasurable strides we

have made.

And yet, they'd still be mortified.

The truest sign of maturity, it is said, is not being able to choose between right and wrong, which after all is easy, but being able to choose between a wrong and another wrong. And that, I think, is what is wrong. If you ever find yourself choosing between one wrong and another, it's because you didn't look hard enough for a right. That system may have worked in the past, back in the caves, but we impact the planet and the lives on it too much now to be that immature.

Sometimes the rights aren't easy. They may cost too much, either spiritually or personally or just in downright financial green, but they're there. You just weren't willing to look hard enough to find it.

Yes, you. And me. And every one of us. Few people can change the world in sweeping gestures. Most only get the chance to change it by themselves. Doesn't mean it can't be done. It just means that you have to be aware that everything you do to affect the world, and everything you don't do, actually does affect it. So far we just haven't done it entirely right.

This world is inarguably in need of changing, but deep down I'm afraid that if we somehow do, we'll only end up making it worse. "We're free from the SCC, and yet we're all stuck with something worse."

If we'd stood up and stopped the injustice and the wrong back when we'd had the chance, this world could be a utopia. It's too late for right now, but we can still change the world for the better, simply by not settling for what works but by continuing to build until we get something that works *right*.

Otherwise we'll just end up in this same old mess that we've found ourselves throughout history. A horrible, nightmarish terror of existence unchanging in its acrimony and bereft of any hope from which we will never be free.

And yet at least the trains run on time.







