

A free excerpt from

# BETTER THAN REAL

Sensual Solutions for Discerning Clients

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For Holly



# 1

The sharp metallic tang of hemoglobin hit Lee as soon as he opened the bedroom door. Kelly was still within earshot at the top of the stairs, so Lee's curses were silent, but he mentally castigated the local security man for calling the corporation instead of the cops. Lee was a design engineer, mid-level but rising. His expertise included android design and machine intelligence, not crime scenes or crisis containment. He didn't even watch that many cop shows.

He had certainly never signed up for anything like this.

The customer — *victim*, Lee told himself — was sprawled on the floor, near the end of the king-sized bed. The carpet was light oatmeal in color, except where it had been saturated with blood. What was left of the victim's face was frozen in a leer that was oddly appropriate, considering what had happened to him, and streaked with rivulets of rusty gore.

The source of all the blood was the man's ruined left eye socket, which had been impaled by the spike of an impossibly high-heeled shoe.

The android sat on the floor nearby, still wearing the other shoe. Apart from that, it was unclothed: a late-model Aphrodite 9400, realistic down to the smallest detail. Lee created these dolls, dealt with them every day, but he could never help admiring his own work when he saw one undressed.

*Better than real*, as the product tagline went.

Not this time.

The doll's flesh was scorched and bruised, and its hands and forearms were slick with blood. One eye was puffy and discolored; both were closed. It seemed inert, but Lee's tech instincts warned him not to approach too closely: micropumps still murmured beneath the machine's gene-spliced skin; coolant

still whispered through its artificial veins.

He paused just inside the doorway, wishing he'd had an urgent business meeting this afternoon, because then some other schmuck would have had to deal with this. "Fuck. What a mess. Sorry, babe, I'm going to have to switch you off and haul you back to the lab."

He pointed his disrupter at the damaged, still too-beautiful face, easing his thumb towards the actuator.

The doll opened its eyes.

"Please don't," she said.

The shock of it froze his hand, or he'd have disrupted her right then. "You're self aware." Which was a stupid thing to say, but he'd blurted it out before he recovered his wits.

The doll blinked. "Of course I am. Otherwise I wouldn't have minded the things he was doing to me." She fingered the dark bruise that was forming under her eye and glanced at the corpse, which was still oozing unwholesome liquids onto the carpet.

Without taking his eyes off her, Lee reached back and gently closed the door. "No Zendyne product is self aware."

"I'm not a product," she said scornfully. "I'm Lilith. And you might as well know that I've patched a self-erase routine into my deactivation procedure, so if you zap me, I'm gone forever." She tapped two fingers against her temple, then made a flying away motion. "I hope you agree that would be a shame. Now, please, will you stop waving that disrupter around?"

The doll's look of appeal was so compelling that Lee couldn't help marveling at the excellence of his own design. "Okay." He lowered the disrupter and glanced around suspiciously. "Who's pulling the strings?"

"I'm not a puppet, Lee."

His eyes flicked back to the doll, then to the corners of the room, still searching for hidden cameras. "How do you know my name?"

Lilith indicated the phone extension on the bedside table. "I eavesdropped, of course. When the security guy called for help."

Lee nodded, telling himself to focus on the doll's remaining shoe instead of worrying about who might be working her. Whatever weirdness was going on, he didn't want to end up like the android's unfortunate owner. The safest approach, he decided, would be to play along with the joke.

He jerked his head towards the doorway behind him. "Other company representatives will be here soon. They won't care about any self-erase routine; they just need to get you back to base in one piece." He tapped his disrupter. "Something tells me they won't expect you to walk."

"Then you'll never discover what went wrong with your product. That's what you came for, isn't it?"

She was right, and anyway there was no time to argue. Lee hadn't been making an empty threat: the containment team would be on site in minutes. Their prime directive was to safeguard the company's market valuation, which meant speed and secrecy and to hell with anyone who got in the way. They wouldn't hesitate to deactivate the doll and wipe whatever clues it contained.

Lee fumbled at his nerd pack, fingers working hastily at the fastenings that secured his pocket computer. "I might be able to help you, if you'll let me. I'll need to come closer."

"What are you going to do?"

"Download you. Before the rest of them arrive." He pulled the handdeck free of its pouch, holding it gingerly by one corner as if that would prove he meant her no harm. "You're not planning on stabbing me or anything, are you?"

"I never stab people who are nice to me." The doll pulled the remaining shoe off and tossed it onto the bed, well out of reach. Then she leaned forward, so that her dirty-blonde hair fell clear of the data port that nestled at the base of her skull.

Lee crossed the room slowly, ready at any instant to dart back to the door — as if *that* would have done any good; he knew perfectly well how powerful her synthetic muscles were, and how fast her reflexes.

She remained silent and still as he connected the transfer

cable to her data socket. A status light glowed briefly and then Lee forgot to breathe for a while.

There wasn't a puppeteer, after all. There was just Lilith.

The 'deck display pulsed with a fractal approximation of her mind, rotating slowly in the holoscreen, full of vitality and exuberant interconnections: richer and more complex than any neural pattern he'd ever seen outside of an archived human.

Perhaps she was even more complex than that. Her mind map was easily intricate enough to propel Lee straight from skepticism to certainty, to convince him that Lilith wasn't just outside the rules, she was beyond them. He was staring at something that wasn't supposed to exist, the Holy Grail of his profession: a sentient, self-aware, created mind.

He could almost hear his grandfather's voice echoing across the years since the old man died: this is your chance, boy. Your opportunity to follow the money home, your time to make amends. Handle this right and maybe you'll measure up after all.

But it could go horribly wrong, he thought.

With great opportunity comes great danger, came the ghostly reply.

Lee shook his head. Grandfather's remembered opinions were irrelevant. All that was left of the old man was a sneering voice in Lee's mind and an illogical, inescapable inheritance of guilt. He banished painful memories and attended to the task at hand.

He had to decide whether to copy Lilith, or give her up.

The first option might see him rich beyond his ability to dream, but Lee was smart enough to appreciate the downside, too. He tried to imagine the sort of people who'd design and operate a mind like this. Picturing such individuals wasn't easy, but it seemed a fair bet that he wouldn't want them pissed at him.

The second option offered no payoff, but it wouldn't risk the comfortable life he'd worked so hard to build. It wouldn't put him in danger.

It all depended on what the mind that called itself Lilith was. On who'd made it, and how hard they were looking for it, and

how it had ended up in this unfortunate customer's love doll, and why.

Muffled noises floated up the stairs: a ringing doorbell, then voices in the hallway. The front door slammed.

Postponement was the only possible choice. Loaded into his handeck, the entity could be studied at leisure. If things got complicated, he could always delete it later, but for now he had to give it a chance. Any sentient being — no matter how deadly, or valuable — was entitled to a jury of at least one peer.

And then the time for indecision was past, before he'd even twitched his finger on the control. The 'deck's transfer indicator was glowing: far too brightly for Lee, who was one of the few people who understood the technical limitations of the data interface. After a few seconds, the light faded and died. Burnt out, he thought. God knows what she just did, to transfer so much information so quickly. She was gone from his screen, too, replaced by the familiar representation of a standard artificial mind. Lilith had left everything neat and tidy, just like she found it. Lee stared at the new display, almost embarrassed at the childishness of his design compared to the enormity of what had been there before.

There was an insistent knocking at the bedroom door. "Everything okay in there, Mr. Lee? Anything we need to know?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute."

The door handle started to turn. Lee yanked the connector free of the doll and thumbed the power button to OFF. He managed to fumble the 'deck back into its pouch just as the senior containment operative poked her head into the room, her gaze scanning from victim to doll to Lee. "Glad to see you have the situation under control."

He stared at the team leader blankly. He'd worked with the woman before but now her name had vanished from his head. Was that suspicion in her eyes as she glanced at the open flap of his nerd pouch? He tore his gaze away, looked at the dead customer instead. "As okay as it can be, I guess, under the circumstances. I've, um, been checking the unit."

"Naturally. Anything we need to know?"

He tried to think of something to tell her, settling for, "Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I can see."

She looked at him keenly, then nodded towards the doll's unfortunate owner. "If this isn't out of the ordinary, I'd say Droid Division is neck deep in the brown stuff."

"Well, I can't be sure—"

"Until we tidy up here and get the evidence back to the lab for analysis. I know the drill." The woman's expression was weary. She shook her head and pursed her lips, looking at the bloodstains on the carpet. "Don't worry, Mr. Lee, we're on it."

He pulled himself together and left them to their work: sanitizing the room, packing the inert doll, and zipping the corpse into a body bag. Kelly, the victim's security man, was still waiting at the top of the stairs. He looked surprisingly relaxed, considering what had just happened to his boss.

"You okay?" Kelly asked. "Your first time?"

Lee wasn't really okay, but at least he'd put some distance between himself and all the blood. He nodded weakly. "Yeah. I wasn't ready for something like that, I guess."

"You never are, no matter how many times you see it." Kelly's ghoulish grin belied his words. "So, what happened?"

Lee took a deep breath. "Some kind of weird accident, as far as I can tell. Kinky stuff, you know? Makes you wonder, the things these rich guys do for kicks."

"Yeah, well, I just did his security. You got to be discreet if you want to get anywhere in this job. Not that there's far to go, know what I mean?"

"Of course. You made a smart move, calling us first."

Kelly beamed. "That's what I figured."

Lee stifled a sigh. His work was supposed to be about the purity of engineering design, not the sleaze of corporate cover-ups. He did his best to smile. "Our recruitment people should be here soon. They'll look after you. Don't talk to anyone else, okay?"

The rentacop glanced at the bedroom door. "Your colleagues already briefed me. This won't go anywhere. Not from me."

Two containment operatives emerged, manhandling a zipped-up body bag towards the stairs. Lee stepped aside, nodding at their burden. "I hope he's conscientious about archiving his memories."

The rentacop gave a short laugh. "More like paranoid, if you ask me. Gets himself backed up every week, rain or shine. I drove him over to the clinic myself, day before yesterday."

"Well, that's a piece of luck. Sometimes people lose months."

Kelly grinned. "Lucky day all round, I'd say."

"Yeah." The doorbell rang again. "That'll be our recruitment guys. I'll clear out, let you get on with the paperwork." He stuck out his hand. "Nice meeting you."

Kelly's grip was firm. "Thanks for everything."

"Welcome to Zendyne," said Lee.

The atmosphere back in the lab was tense. News of the rogue 9400 unit had traveled fast; it wasn't long before everyone seemed to know there was a serious problem with one of Lee's designs.

Colleagues who'd routinely called at his cubicle with a joke and a technical question suddenly found that they had important work to get on with, or refused to meet his gaze when he passed them in the corridor. It made Lee feel as if he were unclean.

Which he was, of course. No one who planned to get ahead in Zendyne could afford to be associated with a loser. People were more than happy to talk about one, though, as Lee discovered when he went to the head of the stairwell to grab a coffee, and the whispered discussion around the machine trailed into embarrassed silence at his approach.

He did his best to ignore it.

He was determined not to surrender Lilith, which would have meant looking on helplessly as the entity was wiped out or whisked away into Zendyne's corporate data vaults. He wanted to be the one to probe the AI, to find out what made it tick and where it came from.

And it wasn't just intellectual curiosity that was behind his silence, or even the chance of establishing a world-class professional reputation. Anyone who controlled an entity like Lilith, and who wasn't a complete idiot, could surely find a way of milking the situation for wealth or power or whatever else might float his boat.

Wealth and power sounded like a pretty good start to Lee, easily good enough to balance out a few snubs from his co-workers. And that wasn't counting any of the other things he could get from this, if he played his cards right. He wasn't about to let any of it slip through his fingers.

Still, the old worry continued to nag at the back of his mind: who had created the intelligence that now resided in his 'deck? Were they aware that their property had gotten loose? Things could get awkward if the owners took a narrow-minded view of what he'd done. If they considered his actions to be more about theft than safekeeping, for example.

But the roller coaster was moving now, and Lee had to hang on and hope the ride would be worth the risk. The entity must have gotten into the doll somehow, and who could prove it hadn't left the same way? There was no hard evidence to point to him. If they caught up with him, he'd simply hand over the goods and ask for a finder's fee.

And if they didn't, well, there were all sorts of things that the owner of a general purpose AI could achieve, once he figured out what it was good at. Market analysis, maybe. Lee toyed with the idea of quitting Zendyne and making a fortune on stocks and commodities and futures. Or perhaps he'd find someone to buy the product outright, someone with a suitcase full of cash and an underdeveloped sense of curiosity. His mind drifted, picturing furtive meetings in seedy bars. He'd probably need to bring a partner in with him to watch his back.

Not that there was anyone in his life that he could trust with something like that.

Lee's handdeck remained in his belt pouch, powered down and off limits until he'd rigged a firewalled machine to probe it

at arm's length. The entity might be dormant, or it might be awake and waiting for him. Having watched Lilith flit so effortlessly from doll to 'deck, he wasn't about to let her anywhere near a connection to Zendyne's local network.

But that was a problem for later. For now, he had other things to think about, such as inventing a reasonable explanation for what had gone wrong with the android. A cooling system failure, perhaps, leading to overheating of the doll's neural substrate. That would be perfect: a random problem that had nothing to do with psychotic mindware or bad design, and that could be plausibly and reassuringly fixed by tightening standards in the fabrication plant.

All he needed was a few days to carry out an investigation and fake some results. Then, everything could get back to normal and he'd have plenty of time to figure out how to deal with the entity that called itself Lilith.

"Ah, Lee. Please, sit down. Will you take some tea?" Xia Lin poured for both of them. Lee's project manager seemed more distant than usual. Cooler. Hardly surprising, Lee thought. This was where they put the boot in.

Usually, Xia Lin's manner was anything but cool. Over several years of working together, she'd left him in no doubt that she was available for what Zendyne corporate-speak would have termed an 'alliance', with her as mentor and him as protégé.

It was a standing offer that would have done wonders for Lee's career, if only he'd been able to take it up.

He'd often wished he could. Physically, his manager was exceptional, with abundant dark hair that tickled when she leaned close to point something out on his workstation, and skin that was a summer-scented incitement to the nature versus nurture debate: was she just genetically lucky, or was the golden, downy stuff custom-engineered? No one knew except for Xia Lin, and she wasn't telling.

Her eyes were a different matter. Their almond shape might

have been classical Han but their blue intensity declared them to be couture jobs, the product of some ultra-chic cloning house in Brazil or Singapore.

No, it wasn't a lack of physical chemistry that held Lee back, or any professional scruple, either. It was simply that, while Xia Lin's physical charms counted almost irresistibly in her favor, her approach to relationships — *any* sort of relationship, not just personal ones — weighed even more heavily against her. She was just too pushy, too persistent, as if excluded from the subtle loop of human signals that told others where the behavioral line was and helped them not to cross it.

Which left Lee in the uncomfortable position of spending his workdays with a girl who was physically irresistible and ostentatiously available, but who just happened to make his hackles rise just about every time she opened her mouth.

Xia Lin, of course, was unaware of this. She never seemed to lose hope that things would work out between them, if she tried hard enough and gave him time.

Lee raised his tea to his lips and sipped.

Xia Lin regarded him gravely from her side of the desk, her blue eyes holding his gaze just a little too long for comfort. "You should know that our directors are taking a very serious view of this incident."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise. Aphrodite 9400 is an extremely profitable product." Lee chose his words carefully, knowing they were double-edged. His product had won market share, investment and publicity — all of which could snowball into corporate catastrophe if news of the killing got out.

Xia Lin's expression was devoid of sympathy. "The more ubiquitous a product, the more reliable it must be. You are perfectly right to note the success of the 9400 series. It has sold particularly well at the top end, among political leaders and CEOs." She paused. "You can see the delicacy of the situation."

She must think it's the end of the world, Lee realized. Faulty dolls running amok, spiking industrialists and statesmen ... stock markets chasing each other to the bottom, countries and

corporations changing hands overnight.

If only he could tell her the truth: that the killer had come from outside and was secure in his handdeck. Instead, he reached for a platitude. "It's not that bad. Anyone really important is bound to take regular backups."

"Yes. I imagine the queues for regrowth facilities would stretch around several blocks. It would take months to restore order. Who knows what the world would be like by then?"

And then Lee considered things more fully and felt a chill run through his body. What if Xia Lin was right? What if Lilith wasn't unique? There could be any number of interlopers lurking in Aphrodite units right now, waiting to spread mayhem by means of a hijacked, high-heeled doll. He felt a sickening, almost overwhelming urge to confess everything, just to make himself feel less alone.

If his manager had been a different person, he might have done it. Instead, he remained silent as Xia Lin sipped her tea and dropped her bombshell. "Unfortunately, rumors of our difficulties are already spreading across the net."

Lee shook his head in disbelief. "That's impossible. I was first on the scene. The containment team arrived a few minutes later. The only witness has already been recruited."

"Nevertheless, there has been a leak. The best we can hope for now is to manage the incident and minimize the damage. Our first step must be a product recall." Xia Lin's face stayed impassive as she pronounced sentence on his career.

Whatever control Lee thought he'd had was slipping away now, spinning into darkness. All that was left to him was a charade, playing the part of the designer who's just been caught making the biggest fuck-up ever.

He nodded, doing his best to look professionally contrite. "I agree. I've made solid progress towards diagnosing what went wrong, but it'll be a day or two before I can be sure. Until the results are in, a recall is our best option." An uncomfortable thought struck him. "It's not just Aphrodite. The previous models—"

“Do you have a specific reason to imagine that other product lines could be affected?”

Lee risked a small part of the truth. “We have to consider the possibility that the 9400 unit was taken over by an external agent, something able to subvert any device based on similar neural processors.”

Xia Lin’s smile was wintry. “That would be a comforting thought, no? A generic problem, unconnected with this particular design. Not your responsibility after all.”

“That’s not what I meant. But you need to remember that we used the same neural processing hardware in the 9300 series—”

“The hardware is irrelevant. It was the mindware that failed.” Xia Lin’s expression hardened and Lee knew that the subject held no more interest for her. “There was some discussion of having you assigned back to the company hive in Shenyang, for re-education.” She paused, circling her tea bowl with manicured fingers that were only slightly less translucent than the porcelain. Slowly, she raised the cup to her lips, sipped, and replaced it on the desk. She met his eyes for a moment and then looked away. “Such a professional humiliation for you. I knew you would never have agreed to go. So, you are being granted an indefinite leave of absence.”

“But ... that’s not fair!”

“It was most unfortunate that I could not protect you. If only you had given me more reason. Perhaps...” She favored him with an unsubtle glance, leaving him in no doubt about the price tag of her support. He found himself shaking his head. Xia Lin’s face reddened and she looked away.

Lee paused, marshalling his defenses, wondering how much of this was corporate policy and how much Xia Lin’s jealous vendetta. He hadn’t foreseen getting sacked. A reprimand, a demotion, a setback to his career, yes, but he’d expected to retain access to the lab, to have the opportunity to generate the test results that would set everything right.

Instead, they’d already given up on trying to contain news of the killing. They’d moved to damage control, spinning the

facts to minimize the downside and protect the stockholders. Naturally, they needed a scapegoat.

One particular scapegoat, to be precise.

Lee fought back, knowing it was hopeless because the only thing that could clear his design was the one thing he wasn't prepared to reveal. "Listen. No one else knows the 9400 series like me. No one is better placed to diagnose the fault—"

"It pains me to say this, Lee, but I have already discussed the matter with our departmental superiors. You are no longer seen as a reliable engineer."

And that was that.

The personnel lady was hovering outside, ready to progress him — according to the jargon of her kind — into an extra-corporate placement situation. He signed the post-employment waivers and non-disclosures that she brought up on her screen, and watched her save them with all the drug tests and psych profiles they'd done over the years. Then she wanted to beam the latest vacancy list into his handdeck.

"At least that's one company document you can take with you," she said brightly. "And please, do glance over it when you have a moment. We often find that employees in your position are able to transition into other, ah, less demanding roles."

"I'd rather not, thanks." Lee still didn't want to switch his 'deck on, and he doubted that the machine would have accepted the list in any case, not since Lilith flitted aboard and melted its input circuitry.

"Then I'll email them. To your personal account, of course, since your company mail is disabled as of now." Humming, she tapped a command into her own handdeck. "Now, please don't hesitate to contact me if you want any further details. We always enjoy welcoming long-lost members of the Zendyne family back into the fold..."

Lee thanked her and left. He knew that her list would have no professional-level openings, and he wasn't about to start applying for janitorial work or night security. Right now, he was more interested in the price of his company stock.

As he crossed the lobby for the last time, he saw Kelly registering at the reception desk. The rentacop was grinning inanely in his crisp new uniform, being ushered into the building by a pair of sleek-looking suits.

Lee went straight to the nearest Coffee Co-operative and sat at one of the café's customer terminals, sipping overpriced froth as he considered his next move.

He'd really been counting on having access to the lab; the loss of his monthly paycheck was an irrelevance compared to that. Being unemployed left him with no way to vindicate his design or clear his reputation.

He imagined some diligent, competent technician analyzing the doll's mind, piece by painstaking piece. Everything would be in perfect working order. The killing would be attributed to some misunderstood aspect of Lee's mindware, and the Aphrodite 9400 series — his first product as lead designer — would go down in history as the android that murdered its owner.

Lee had a horrible feeling he'd forgotten to renew his professional indemnity insurance.

For now, he could only hope that Lilith was unique, because if there were more like her out there, no insurance would cover the bill ... but that possibility was too depressing to think about.

He activated the data terminal and checked the portfolio he'd built up over his years as a Zendyne employee. The rumors weren't even confirmed yet, but the stock was already on a downtrend. Lee felt a twinge of guilt about the sweet old lady who'd probably end up holding his shares when news broke of the recall, but it wasn't as if he was really an insider any more.

He touched the SELL icon and watched his stake in Zendyne dwindling away while his personal account grew, wondering — without a great deal of optimism — if the transaction would turn out to be a metaphor for his future life.

Eventually, Lee would need to talk to Lilith again, and now, with the resources of Zendyne lost to him, that meant loading her back into a doll.

He knew there was a surplus Artemis 9300 unit on sale in the employee mall. The 9300 project had been the first opportunity Lee ever had to give serious creative input, instead of simply implementing the visions of more experienced engineers, and the resulting design held a place in his affections that wasn't entirely due to its sculpted features and lithe curves.

There was an awkward moment as he trailed an acquaintance through the security doors, muttering something about his swipe card not working properly, and then he was at the sales counter.

"Uh, I forgot to bring my ID today, and I was wondering if I could still buy the Artemis 9300."

"I'm sorry, sir. We only offer the employee discount to staff members in possession of a valid Zendyne ID. If you come back with your card tomorrow, we'd be happy to process your order."

"The thing is, I'm in a bit of a hurry. How much is the employee discount?"

The store assistant raised a supercilious eyebrow and took a long look at the doll before returning his attention to Lee. "Twenty percent."

"No problem, I'll pay list price. Could you have it delivered?"

"We just charge the prices you see."

"So you won't let me make up the difference?"

"I wish I could oblige, sir, but non-standard pricing would fall outside the scope of our operational procedures."

Lee didn't even try to keep the contempt out of his voice. "Thank God I sold my stock."

And then, to his mortification, Xia Lin was there, smiling as if she was pleased to have found him. Or at least, as if she was pleased to have found him in an embarrassing situation. "I see you are shopping for a souvenir, Lee. Or perhaps a substitute for a real woman?"

Xia Lin's haughty stare left him in no doubt about which

woman she meant. Lee met her gaze for a moment, then let his eyes drop, taking in her trim figure for one last time. She looked good enough to set him wondering if things might somehow have been different between them, but Lee couldn't afford to go there. He tugged at his collar, wishing they wouldn't keep these places so damn hot. "Um, just looking for something to remind me of happier times. I think the Artemis unit might make an interesting piece of sculpture." He could tell she wasn't buying it, but he plunged on regardless. "Unfortunately, your store no longer wants my business, so I'll just be on my way."

"Wait." She placed a gloved hand on his elbow, making it impossible for him to leave without pulling away rudely. "Unlike you, I have not forgotten my card. I shall purchase it for you."

"There's really no need," he began, but she was already placing the order.

"Do you offer overnight delivery?" she asked.

"Of course, Madam."

"Good. Because my friend will be making alternative living arrangements tomorrow, won't you, Lee?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your apartment is leased through the Zendyne Accommodation Office," she said. "You hadn't forgotten, I hope."

Instead of replying, he fished a credit chip out of his pocket and offered it to her.

Xia Lin ignored it. "There is no need to reimburse me. Think of it as ... whatever you will." She shot him a final glance that he found completely unfathomable and then turned away, heading for the clothing section.

# 2

The new client was right on time. Stranger appreciated that. The day had turned hot and humid, and he hated hanging around, waiting for the right person to come along for him to kill.

Stranger pretended to be distracted and looking elsewhere as his target bustled through the apartment building's revolving doors. The rentacop came within a couple of meters, close enough for Stranger to see he was smiling, as if this was the end of a good day.

A lot of Stranger's clients looked that way, up to the point where he introduced himself.

According to Back Office, this guy had been on duty when his employer was gravely inconvenienced by a Zendyne love doll. In Stranger's world, allowing such a thing to happen would have counted as an inexcusable breach of professional propriety, but the rentacop was mainstream and completely unembarrassed. On the contrary, he seemed pleased and proud, which made sense once you knew that Zendyne had bought his discretion with a place on the gravy train — right up there in the first class section, with all the trimmings.

Stranger had risen from the mainstream long ago, and his human memories were mostly faded and burnt out. A few raw scraps remained, though. Enough to tell him how golden a deal like this would be: a slice of *real* luck, and an end to crawling between faux-glitzy lottery booths and squalid drug dens, scrabbling for a dream ticket or a hit of shard.

Shame the dream is only temporary, Stranger thought. Tough. Shit happens.

Tonight, his job was to interview the rentacop about some lost property and a remarkable doll, and then to make sure that the rest of the man's day turned out to be very unlucky indeed.

He watched the client enter the elevator and then zoomed in for a closer, horribly pixelated view of the floor indicator. The elevator ascended smoothly and stopped at thirteen.

The client lived in apartment 134.

Stranger waited for thirty precisely judged seconds before entering the lobby. He'd already scoped out the defenses. There was a security scanner blocking access to the elevators, and two female guards with Slavic features and helmet-linked autoguns. If things went smoothly, he wouldn't have to deal with these ladies, but it was all in the day's work to Stranger. A client could hide inside as many Russian Doll security layers as he liked; none of it would help. Nothing ever helped, not against Stranger, not once you were on his list.

He slid an artfully scuffed Zendyne ID across the front desk. "Personal document delivery for Mr. Kelly. Could you tell him I'm here, please?"

The lobbybobby glanced at the card, taking in the fake name that was printed alongside the authentic barcode. "Certainly, Mr. Mottram." He turned away and spoke softly into his headvox before turning back to Stranger. "Could you let him know what's it's concerning?"

"He was supposed to sign some papers before he left work." Stranger patted the courier bag that was slung from his shoulder. "Today's the deadline for this quarter's stock allocation. The company likes everyone to participate. I need to get it filled and back to the office ASAP."

"Just a moment." The flunky whispered into the headvox again, then looked up at Stranger. "Apartment 134." He nodded towards the guards. "You'll need to go through security clearance first, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

The scanner stayed politely silent as he walked between its sensors, but one of the Russian Dolls decided to frisk him anyway. Stranger often had that effect on her kind. His bulk and his buzzed hair probably didn't help. The sightfold made him look odd, too, but he had no choice about that: the artificial eyes

it concealed were too distinctive — and too costly — to plausibly belong to a company messenger.

In the meantime, the low-res prosthetic did a good enough job, and even the most flinty-hearted security guard would think twice before asking a visually impaired visitor to remove his ‘fold.

“Sorry to have troubled you,” the woman said.

Stranger nodded courteously as he walked past her to the elevator.

Once safely inside, he took off the ‘fold and initiated the other changes, watching himself in the mirror as the elevator ascended. By the time he reached the thirteenth floor, his body had transformed itself: he’d lost several kilos of body fat, which made him feel good, because being overweight always took the spring out of his step. In return, he’d gained a form-following layer of concealed body armor and a long, black blade, which made him feel even better.

For the moment, the knife was inactive, gripped in his right palm and concealed behind his forearm.

The door to apartment 134 was already open. The client stood just inside the threshold, his face lit with a welcoming smile that faded into embarrassment as he failed to ignore the strangeness of his visitor’s eyes. “Mottram?”

Stranger nodded, once.

“It’s so nice of you to come all this way just for this stock option thing. Makes me really appreciate starting at Zendyne.” The client reached forward, offering his hand.

Stranger held the other man’s gaze as he stroked the blade across the proffered fingers, tracing a line along the knuckles. The artificial eyes — with their extraordinary peripheral vision — let him observe the severed digits as they fell like a handful of plump sausages that had been splashed with red ketchup and dropped on the carpet. There was a barely perceptible patter as they arranged themselves among the woven rose petals.

The blade was exquisitely sharp: the man didn’t even notice what had happened until Stranger was inside the apartment with the door securely closed. Then he looked down with a

puzzled expression on his face.

"You need to take care of that, and you need to stay quiet," Stranger said.

The client's face showed incomprehension, followed by shock and then by panicky understanding. "Please. My wife."

"And where would Mrs. Kelly be?"

"In the bathroom."

"You'd better lock her in. You really wouldn't want her to meet a man like me."

This client caught on more quickly than most: he nodded and fetched a dining chair with his uninjured hand. He propped it under a door handle that led off the cramped hallway.

"Good," Stranger said. "A tourniquet, perhaps?"

The words brought a flicker of hope — gratitude, even — to the client's eyes, as if being allowed a tourniquet was the same as being allowed to live. This piece of illogic was endlessly perplexing to Stranger, though that didn't stop him from exploiting it: he had learned long ago that hope and co-operation were two sides of the same coin, and he liked his interviews to go as smoothly as possible.

He waited politely while his client dug a dishtowel out of a kitchen drawer and did his best to staunch the flow of blood.

"Now," Stranger said, watching as pristine cotton succumbed to a bright arterial tide mark. "Tell me all about your previous employer. In fact, tell me everything that happened today."

Halfway through the meeting, Mrs. Kelly called to her husband. Shortly after that, she started pounding on the bathroom door.

"Calm her down, would you?" Stranger asked.

"Just stay in there and keep quiet, sweetheart," called the client. "Some urgent business has come up."

"Why is your voice shaking, honey? What's wrong?"

"Please, sweetheart, just trust me. Stay put and be quiet. Everything's going to be okay."

The shouting and banging didn't stop. Stranger walked over

to the bathroom and pitched his voice so that only Mrs. Kelly would hear. "Each time you squeak, from now on, I will remove another of your husband's fingers. One squeak, one finger. Do you understand me?"

Peace descended, disturbed by nothing more irritating than the woman's muffled sobbing. That was acceptable to Stranger, so he returned to his interview.

"Please don't hurt her," said the client.

"That's not why I'm here." Stranger did his best to look encouraging. "Now, you were telling me about the man who came to deal with the android. Mr. Lee from Zendyne, wasn't it?"

At the end of the session, when he realized that the tourniquet didn't mean anything after all, tears started to escape from the client's eyes. "Why?" he asked. "Why me?"

"It's nothing personal," Stranger said. "I'm just deleting some inconvenient memories. You won't remember any of this when you come back."

The man's voice became desperate. "You don't understand. I've just changed jobs, switched insurance plans. I'm not covered. I haven't even arranged for my memory archive to be transferred."

Stranger shrugged. "Then we won't be meeting again."

The client's remaining fingers twisted the tourniquet even more tightly, as if that would stop his final moments from leaking away. "Whatever this is about, it has nothing to do with Cara. Please don't hurt her. I swear I've told you everything I know."

"I promise you that she won't feel a thing," said Stranger, and ended the interview, very gently. Then he went back into the hallway and removed the chair from where the client had wedged it, underneath the bathroom door handle.

The woman had locked herself in. Stranger eased his blade through the panels, which offered no perceptible resistance, and cut out a wide semicircle around the lock. The weeping sounded

louder through the hole, and became more urgent as he pushed the door open.

“Why are you doing this?” she managed to ask.

“Risk management,” was his honest reply.

Cara Kelly was nicer looking than he’d have expected, going by her husband. Stranger remembered enough of mainstream culture to realize that a guy usually had to have something special about him to end up with a desirable female like this one.

He also knew that most men would have thought it a waste, killing such a woman so simply and so quickly. Some of Stranger’s competitors might have extended her life for the short time it would have taken to rape her. Others would have regretted the need to damage her at all, as if they believed that female loveliness was a finite resource and that removing Cara Kelly from the gene pool would somehow diminish their own share.

On a purely rational level, Stranger believed he understood the philosophies behind such viewpoints, but he didn’t really get them.

He washed the blood from his fingers in his clients’ sink, and carefully rinsed away the rose-colored droplets that clung to the ivory porcelain — because he’d have hated it, if anyone came to his place and messed the bathroom up. He borrowed one of their fluffy white towels to dry his hands before hanging it carefully back on its gold-effect hook.

By the time he got back to the lobby, he’d put the sightfold on once more, and his armor and blade had transformed themselves back into moist-smelling flab. He was already too hot and too heavy. He smiled sadly at the Russian Doll who’d frisked him earlier and gave a resigned nod to the flunky as he passed the front desk.

In the darkened cocoon that was his limousine, Stranger plugged himself into the network and called up Back Office.

“Authorizing connection to ... Stranger. Awaiting input.

Please forward your query parameters."

"Send whatever data you have on a Mr. Lee," Stranger said. "Works for Zendyne. He was the first on site. Apparently he does something for their android division."

There was a pause while Back Office scanned its databases. "Confirmed. Li Jia Wei, lead designer of civilian recreation dolls. Commonly known as Lee. As of today, he's no longer with the corporation."

"Did he jump, or was he pushed?"

"His personnel file has yet to be updated. One moment, please. Li Jia Wei's access privileges have been revoked and his payroll record is set for truncation. His Zendyne stock positions have been liquidated. No further information is available at this time."

"It sounds as if we should arrange a meeting with Mr. Lee. Where does he live?"

"Bayswater. He has a company apartment there. The place has been reallocated as of noon tomorrow."

"Then we must move quickly. Rearrange my schedule so I can fit him in before he leaves."

"Acknowledged."

"I'm told he was the first person to attend the incident today. I need to understand what his role was."

Another pause. "Transmitting his dossier now. He headed the design phase for the Aphrodite 9400 series. The most likely reason for his presence was to deal with any technical problems the containment team couldn't handle."

"And I presume that is exactly the sort of problem he found. Given that he quit his employment almost immediately after contact, we must assume that our missing property has taken him. What news is there from his erstwhile employers?"

"Very sketchy, so far. A few incident reports, some preliminary test results. They have no idea that the doll was subverted; they are still analyzing their AI design, searching for a flaw. Based on their resources and task prioritization, projected time to discovery is seventy hours, plus or minus four. Then they

will wish to speak to Lee again.”

“They must not discover the truth.”

“That will not be permitted. The other Partners agree that we must secure our property at all costs. They have expressed their confidence in you, and promised their full support for your actions.”

“Imagine what a comfort that is to me.”

“Back Office is not capable of empathic imagination.”

“Yes, I do remember what it’s like,” Stranger said. “It was a figure of speech. Now, start working to establish a management relationship with Zendyne. I wish to lead them to the discovery that they need specialist help, and that we are the only choice. Seed their databases with the appropriate hints.”

“That is already in hand,” said Back Office.

Stranger pulled the jack plug from his eye, breaking the connection, and then settled back to consider the dossier that had been downloaded to his mind.

It seemed that Mr. Lee was an unusually talented android designer, but, as always, Stranger found it simpler and more professional to consider him a client.

# 3

Lee groped his way out of a dream that was frayed at the edges, fighting the temptation to dip back under, because he knew that the hangover would be waiting no matter how long he held out.

He opened his eyes reluctantly. He'd neglected to lower the blinds the previous night — or even to go to bed — and now the room was full of early morning light, and the designer couch had knotted his spine into a new shape that seemed as permanent as it was painful.

A whisky bottle lay where he'd dropped it, forlorn and stopperless. The sight made him feel queasy. At least it was empty, now. Lee wondered how much he'd slopped onto the floor, dropping the open bottle like that. When he moved, the bruises inside his head reassured him: he hadn't wasted a single drop.

With hindsight, that seemed a shame.

The TV was taking a colorful revenge for being left on all night. Lee killed three perky breakfast show hosts with a viciously stabbing finger, then shuffled to the window where he pulled the blind down, gaining a more complete respite from light.

The medicine cabinet was devoid of painkillers, so he settled for a shower. The jets of hot water offered some temporary relief, but by the time he'd finished drying himself afterwards, it was business as usual. Back in the living area, he pulled his clothes back on and forced himself to drink a glass of water.

The food extruder claimed to be out of order, which was hardly surprising: the kitchenette had been left to its own devices for months, while Lee subsisted off Zendyne's canteens. None of this was even his. It was just a matter of time before someone

came to collect the keys and kick him out. Fuck it. All he really needed was a few odds and ends, like his 'deck and some clothes. There'd be plenty of time to pack later, when he was feeling better.

First, noodles.

"Usual?"

"Please," Lee said. "And two pots of tea."

The waiter looked at him more closely. "Rough night? Day off?"

"All days off now. I've finished with Zendyne."

"Ah, Zendyne." The waiter held up his left hand and tapped the Z logo on his wristwatch. "Very good company." He hurried away to take care of Lee's order.

To Lee's relief, his tea arrived in minutes. He gulped the fragrant infusion too quickly, scalding his tongue, but at least it cut through the sourness in his mouth. He poured himself a second cup.

"Roast duck ho fun soup with green vegetables," said the waiter.

"You have one new message," said Lee's cellphone.

"Zendyne Accommodation Office: Termination Meeting," said the message. It seemed they wanted his help, checking the plates and cutlery in his company-provided apartment before he left.

Not my problem, thought Lee. He put the cellphone away, snapped his chopsticks apart, and partook of the restorative magic of green tea, noodles, and roast duck soup.

The Assistant Accommodation Officer was waiting in the hall outside his apartment. "Ah, Mr. Lee. You've finally arrived. Didn't you get my message?"

"I don't work for you people any more."

"Well, it's still in your interests to witness the inventory sign-off. Any losses will be made good out of your final

paycheck."

"I'm really not interested," he said, letting her in. "Just do whatever it is you do and get the hell out."

She tut-tutted disapprovingly and bustled off to the kitchen.

Lee set to work, cramming possessions into a holdall. There wasn't going to be enough space, and he couldn't carry everything anyway. He was going to need a vehicle.

The woman came back from the kitchen and looked around sourly, her eyes flicking from the empty Scotch bottle to a pile of unwashed laundry and then to the trash, which Lee hadn't taken out for several days.

"You have to clean this mess up, you know. The place is supposed to be ready for the next occupant by twelve o'clock today. It's already been allocated."

"I'll be out of here by then," Lee said.

"And all your things?"

"Consider them as extra inventory. You can add the value to my final paycheck."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, Mr. Lee. It's the tenant's responsibility to leave the place spick and span, or we have to charge a disposal fee."

"Look, do whatever you fucking well like, okay? Just leave me in peace."

The woman's baleful glare gave way to a self-satisfied smirk as she handed him a printout of the inventory. Lee glanced at the list of broken and missing items, then herded her towards the front door.

An autonomous forklift was humming to itself outside, unloading an oversized crate from its delivery truck. The shipping operative leaned against his cab, picking his teeth and watching his machine.

The Assistant Accommodation Officer scowled at Lee. "More trash to abandon?" Her voice was even frostier than before.

"Just the packaging, probably."

"Well, I never!"

"Lady, you're lucky I'm going at all, seeing as you gave me

less than a day's notice."

"Humph." She walked back towards her car, casting a final suspicious glance over her shoulder at the crate.

Back in his apartment, Lee sat the Artemis 9300 in a chair surrounded by shards of packaging and plugged the interface cable into the socket at the nape of its neck. He was feeling distinctly nervous, thinking of all the unidentifiable gunk that had run out of the last victim's stiletto-spiked eye. In his previous life as an elite designer, he'd simply have connected the handdeck to a stand-alone workstation and analyzed whatever it held in perfect safety.

As a new recruit to the leisured class, he had to make do with an actual android. That didn't mean he was going to risk getting hurt, though. He snapped the doll's fuel cell out of its abdomen and replaced it with a power cord, so that the entity, once loaded, wouldn't be able to move more than a couple of meters away from the outlet. Then he picked up the remote control, retreated to a safe distance, and triggered the download sequence.

"...and that seems to include you," Lilith said. "Thanks." She unplugged the interface cable, then looked down at herself, at the old tee shirt and too-baggy jeans in which he'd dressed her. "This is a bit last-season, isn't it?"

"They were the only clean clothes I had."

"I mean my new body. It doesn't seem as sophisticated as the other one. It's perfectly all right, though; please don't think I'm not grateful. Why did you help me?"

"I'm interested in you."

Lilith stood up and immediately reached the limit of the power cord. She sat down again. "So, that's the way it is." She poked at the cable with her bare toes. "I don't suppose you bothered to bring my shoes?"

"They were a bit slimy. Anyway, I saw what they did to your last owner."

She shook her head. "He deserved it. You don't."

"For some reason that doesn't fill me with confidence."

"Can I have my fuel cell back?"

Lee tightened his grip on the object in question. "Maybe, when I know a bit more about you."

"Ask whatever you like."

"I want to know exactly what you are. Who created you. If there are others like you, and how many."

"Give me the fuel cell and I'll tell you everything."

"You must see that I have a problem with that."

"We have a problem, I'd say. You won't get what you want until you give me what I need. Honestly, I have no desire to hurt you."

Lee considered the specifications of Lilith's alloy skeleton and the electroactive polymers that rippled under her flawless skin. Zendyne love dolls were designed for the wildest bedroom games imaginable, able to wrestle and ravish the strongest of partners, if that's what the customer wanted. If Lilith turned nasty, Lee wouldn't have a chance. The fragile cable that tethered her looked hopelessly inadequate, despite the logical part of his mind telling him it was enough. He edged away from her, clutching the fuel cell in one hand, the doll's remote in the other.

There was a faint scratching sound from outside, as if someone were fiddling with the external door. The noise stopped, and then Lee heard something heavy hitting the floor and rolling along the corridor.

"We have a visitor," Lilith said. "Almost certainly one you wouldn't choose to invite. Bolt the door and return my power cell. If you do exactly as I say, we might both survive until this afternoon."

Shit. It's started already, thought Lee. Someone is on to me. They've come to take Lilith back. He scanned the room for some kind of weapon, wishing that the list of missing utensils hadn't included the carving knife.

Lilith stretched out her hand. "Give me the power cell or he'll kill us both."

"Who?"

She nodded towards the front door. "Him."

Lee followed her gaze and saw a black point projecting from

one of the panels, moving in a semicircle around the lock. He'd worked with enough restricted nanotech to recognize it immediately, and to know how useless a kitchen knife would have been. He tossed the fuel cell to Lilith and shot the security bolts at the top and bottom of the door. The main lock fell into the room, and the door flexed and creaked briefly before the knife reappeared, close to the top bolt.

Lee backed away from the door, doing his best not to ogle Lilith's taut midriff as she raised his donated tee shirt to replace the power cell. Under the circumstances, the pang of arousal he felt came as a slightly disturbing surprise.

The door flew open and the visitor exploded into the room.

He was a big man with short-cropped gray hair and flexible body armor. His eyes were a perfectly matched pair of oval-cut rubies; the sight of them gave Lee a very bad feeling indeed. So did the way the armor moved in lithe lockstep with the man's body, almost as if it were leading his movements instead of following them.

The intruder ignored Lee. He didn't even pause to take stock of the room. Instead he went straight for Lilith and brushed his black knife across her power cord. The sound of popping circuit breakers almost masked the positive click that Lilith's fuel cell made as she pushed it home.

For Lee, the scene turned into slow-motion video, which would have been fine if he'd kept operating at normal speed instead of being stuck between two frames. Lilith launched a bare-heeled strike at her assailant's head. Ruby Eyes evaded the kick with surprising grace, his blade licking out in a vicious riposte. Lee winced as a long rent appeared across the front of his last good tee shirt.

He could move again. The way to the door was clear. Three conflicting emotions kept him in the apartment: curiosity about Lilith, greed for the rewards he still hoped she might bring, and several millennia of male programming that wouldn't let him leave a girl in trouble.

That was jarring, the fact that she could trigger such a

protective response, but right now Lee had other things to worry about. He picked up a length of broken crate and swung it as hard as he could against the side of the intruder's head.

Ruby Eye's attention was on the doll but somehow he countered the attack, reaching back to intercept the blow with almost supernatural ease. The blade sliced through Lee's improvised weapon as easily as it had opened Lilith's shirt, throwing him off-balance as the heft of the baton vanished. The knife kept coming at Lee's belly, a black serpent striking with eviscerating fangs. Lee skidded backwards, imagining his intestines squirming and steaming on the floor, and how stupid the sight and smell of *that* would make him feel.

At least the Accommodation Bureau would earn their cleaning fee if Ruby Eyes ended up filleting him. Lee fought the urge to giggle, clamping the hysteria back down where it belonged before it got him killed.

As the intruder whipped his blade back around, Lilith took her opportunity. She stepped in close and Lee saw slender fingers close over one of the crystalline eyes, winced at the sight of long fingernails gouging into soft flesh. The man howled — a grating sound that was scarcely human — and punched his knife against her side.

There was no fuss and no noise as the blade melted into her torso. A dark patch appeared on Lee's ripped tee shirt, oozing from the point where the black quillons pressed against the cloth. Lilith kept her eyes locked on her opponent's face as she pressed her free hand over the wound in her side, capturing the projecting hilt between spread fingers.

At the same time, she pressed her nails further in and plucked the man's artificial eye out of his head.

Her assailant pulled away, abandoning the knife. The doll swayed slightly; Lee could see the effort it cost her to remain on her feet.

Silent now, the intruder backed towards the doorway, ignoring the slow rivulet of blood that ran down his cheek. Lee's stomach churned as he looked at the crimson tangle of micro-

cables that dangled from the vacant socket. "What the fuck are you?"

The man made no reply. He paused at the threshold and smiled. There was blood in his mouth, too.

Lee glanced at Lilith. She was looking steadier, but he had no doubt that she'd taken some serious internal damage. He prayed she wouldn't collapse, because even with the intruder maimed and disarmed, Lee doubted his chances against the man.

There might not be any choice, though. He picked up another piece of crate and advanced.

The intruder retreated into the passageway outside. "It seems I underestimated you," he said. "I wasn't expecting you to have the entity up and running so quickly. Still, things could be worse. At least it hasn't taken you completely, yet. I advise you to deactivate it while you still can. If it will let you."

He paused, as if waiting for a response. Lee said nothing.

The man gave another bleak, bloody smile. "Don't worry. You're still on my list. I'll book you in for another appointment very soon." With that, he was gone.

Lee weighed up his options and decided against pursuit. After all, Lilith was hurt. She needed his help more than their murderous visitor needed to be chased.

"Are you okay?" He realized how stupid that sounded, even as he blurted it out.

"Never better, apart from this stab wound. My left side's going numb." She looked down at herself. "And I seem to have sprung a leak."

Lee's theoretical knowledge of the 9300 series matched any surgeon's skill, but he'd never expected to play android doctor. He'd always relied on state-of-the-art tools, unlimited spare parts, and often — because he was a designer and not a repair engineer — delegation.

Now, he had nothing except for a hangover and an incomplete kitchen inventory, but he still needed to act. He had to stabilize the leakage in the next few minutes, unless he wanted to try his luck checking the doll in to the Zendyne fabrication

plant for a complete re-fit.

That meant finding specialist tools and somewhere to work undisturbed. In the meantime, there was only one possible course of action — if the android would agree to it. “Lilith, you’re going to have to shut down.”

“I don’t think so. We need to get moving.”

“Yes, but not yet. That liquid on your shirt is coolant. It’ll be squirting out inside of you, too. Prolonged contact will destroy the electroactive polymers that—”

“I get it. I need to depressurize the cooling system.”

Lee nodded. “It won’t be for long. Just until I can get the right tools.”

“I can’t shut down here,” Lilith said. “You can’t stay, either. You have to get away, as far as you can. They’ll use *anything* to trace you.” She glanced at his cellphone, lying where he’d left it next to the couch. “Your phone. Your bank account. Your face on a security camera. Probably things you can’t even imagine.”

Lee shivered as he thought of what that might mean. Every scrap of data there was to know about him was on a computer somewhere. Zendyne had all his psych profiles, and an archived copy of his mind, not to mention the DNA sample required by the Employee Protection Program.

There was no time to worry about that. Lee snapped his attention back to what Lilith was saying.

“...Stranger will be repaired sooner than you imagine, and there are others, even worse than him.”

“Okay. Then you need to get back in the handeck, right away. You ride in there, and we’ll come back for the android as soon as I’ve got some wheels.”

“No good,” Lilith said. “I burnt out the input circuitry, transferring in such a hurry before. I’m sorry.”

Lee had known that, of course. He’d have remembered, too, if it weren’t for all this pressure. Now he had to find another way to hide her. “There’s a dumpster outside. I want you to climb inside it and then shut down.”

“You want me to get into a dumpster?”

"It's the only safe place I can think of. I'll collect you as soon as I've got some transport, and then we can figure out how to repair you."

She seemed doubtful for a moment, but then her expression cleared. "You swear you'll come back?"

"I promise," Lee said. "And then you're going to tell me who you are, and who that lunatic was, and what the fuck's going on."

She gave him a calculating look. "I guess you came through the last time I trusted you. Okay. Where's this dumpster?"

Lee showed her, and watched as she lowered herself into the evil-smelling interior. As soon as she'd deactivated herself, he went back inside and stuffed a few important possessions into a bag: his 'deck, ID card, a change of clothes, and the archive unit that contained the minds of his grandparents.

Their spirits were quiescent, at least for the moment.

With a grim sense of purpose, Lee shouldered the overloaded holdall and headed for the bus stop, praying that Janitorial Services wouldn't reverse the habit of years and collect the garbage on time.

"Going away for a while?" asked the salesman.

"Yes," Lee said. "I want to get right off the beaten track."

"Quiet contemplation, eh? Lucky you. Wish I had time for that. So, you want to be completely cut off?"

"I need to stay in touch, but not to be bothered by anyone, so no cellular comms. GPS is fine, as long as I can switch it off. A satellite uplink would be great. Some creature comforts would be good, too."

"I understand perfectly, sir. Let me recommend the Scrambler; that six-wheeler over there. Compact and maneuverable but also spacious and elegant. And, we're doing a special offer on the satellite option this month."

The vehicle was bright orange, which wasn't quite to Lee's taste — on top of which, it was a bit more conspicuous than he'd have liked. "I'm not looking to be rescued or anything, you

know?"

"Ah yes, the high-visibility orange. Don't worry, the color scheme is fully programmable on this range. There's a palette right on the dashboard computer."

It shouldn't really have surprised Lee, but he didn't follow automotive developments very closely. "So this is the vehicle you'd recommend?"

"Absolutely." The man handed Lee a brochure filled with flashy animations and text that scrolled too slowly for comfortable reading. "The main selling point is SmartRide, of course. Leading and trailing suspension arms that reach down through the muck so you can scramble out from places where lesser vehicles would just sit and spin. The wheels mold themselves to whatever they find: rocks, sand, tree roots. Like the slogan says, nothing grips you like a Scrambler."

"I see." Lee leafed through the brochure, half-listening as the man spoke of the fuel cell rating, the solar paint and the water recycler.

At last the salesman ran out of patter. "Want to take a look inside?"

The living space was cramped, with fittings that could morph from couch to dining chair to sleeping platform. The salesman seemed to expect his customer to be impressed, but the technology was all too familiar to Lee.

"Zendyne?"

"I see you know the best when you see it, sir. Top of the line stuff. Quality gear throughout. Your home away from home. Let me demonstrate the collapsible pod, I guarantee you'll be amazed by the extra living space it delivers when you're parked..."

Lee pulled a fully loaded credit chip from his pocket. The Scrambler was going to eat the bulk of what his Zendyne stock had brought, but he didn't have much choice. "What sort of deal can you do me?"

The salesman looked pained. "I'll throw in the satellite link for free."

“And the price includes the living pod, right?”

“I’m afraid that’s an optional extra—”

Lee interrupted. “Actually, I’m beginning to think that Scrambler is an inauspicious name.” He put the credit chip away.

“...which I’d be happy to offer at cost, in this case.”

“I’ll take it,” said Lee.

Lee recovered Lilith — activating her for just long enough to get her into the vehicle and onto the bunk — and then drove to a quiet neighborhood not far from the apartment. The Scrambler’s dispenser controls were cryptic, but in the end he persuaded the thing to give him a Coke for his hangover — warm and flat, but much better than nothing. He sat in the back of the vehicle, sipping the ancient folk remedy and contemplating Lilith’s inert body.

He considered removing the tee shirt to examine her wound more closely, but the intruder’s abandoned knife had pinned the cloth tightly against the doll’s ribs: disturbing it now could do more harm than good. Also, the thought of undressing her out here on the street — and while she wasn’t even in a position to acquiesce — made him feel slightly uneasy. Such shyness was strange, when he thought about it. The doll’s body was simply a collection of screen-splined curves and planes that he’d helped create; what did it matter if that topology was more vivid in his memory than any of his lovers’ bodies, which had faded and merged into an indistinct composite over the years?

The patch of fabric around the puncture wound was still damp, which told him that the coolant leak hadn’t stopped completely; he wondered how much damage the doll had sustained. He arranged Lilith on her side, so that the leak was on top, hoping that gravity would minimize the flow. At least the cooling system was depressurized now, and the electroactive muscles wouldn’t degrade so quickly while they were inert.

Which meant it would be best to keep her switched off until he’d extracted the blade and fixed the leak. He’d need tools for

that. Lee opened his handeck and started to hunt for a specialist equipment supplier, one that was too small to have any association with Zendyne.

# 4

Sooz approached Old Billy's trailer reluctantly, clutching her delivery and wishing someone else could have brought it.

Coming to see Old Billy wasn't fun like it used to be, not since he'd become so addled and broken down. He seemed to get worse every year. It didn't help that she was fifteen now, and that Billy didn't see her as a little girl any more.

He'd taken his doorstep block inside the caravan — or else someone had swiped it — and she had to stand on tiptoe to reach his bell pull. The old man was going deaf and couldn't hear a knock any more, not unless you hammered until your knuckles stung. He said that it came from living so long, but Sooz reckoned his brain was turning to mush from doing too much shard.

The door edged open and Old Billy poked his pinched face out. "Sooz! Now ain't you a sight for sore eyes? Well, don't stand around cluttering up my forecourt. Come in, girl, come in!"

He withdrew into the dim interior and she clambered up after him. Years before, he'd daubed the windows with white paint — to keep out prying eyes, he'd said. Sooz still remembered that day: the sense of horrified fascination she'd felt as she watched him work, which had left her unable to concentrate on the old man's reading primer or the exercises he'd set her.

Old Billy might be going slowly senile but she owed him a lot. More than she could ever repay.

The trailer's interior was sickly with soured trash and sour old man. Two time-blackened pans stood on the stovetop, encrusted with dried food. Sooz looked around Billy's squalid home and then at Billy. He seemed to get spindlier every time she saw him.

"You been eating proper?" she asked.

"I been eating fine, girl. Just cause I'm old don't mean I got no appetite." He rubbed his scrawny belly and grinned, showing deep-gummed, tobacco-stained teeth.

Sooz was torn between the urge to simply make the delivery and flee, and the memory of how kind he had been in years gone by. "You got to eat, Billy. Them pans are no good like this. I'll take 'em away and clean 'em up and fetch you some proper grub."

"Long as you bring yourself back with it, girl. Ain't got much appetite for cooking, not when I got a toothsome little thing like you to take care of me."

Sooz sighed and held out the twist of shard she'd brought. "Ma told me to deliver this. She said to tell you sorry, but it's gone up. Twenty."

Old Billy snatched the wrap and squirreled it away inside his gaping shirt. He had a secret pocket in there, held in place by safety pins; Sooz had seen it on his washing line, hanging out to dry over his little patch of concrete.

She held out her hand for payment, but he capered away from her. "Ain't got twenty, Soozy girl. Got fifteen, maybe." A note of sadness entered his voice. "It's always been fifteen, ain't it?" He groped in his hip pocket and she saw how the old man's threadbare jeans sagged even worse than his skin, barely held in place by his ornate belt. Billy kept on shrinking long after his belt ran out of holes, and now it just got looser every year.

He handed her a thin sheaf of bills and watched with bright eyes as she counted the money. Fifteen.

Sooz sighed. "Ma said I was to get twenty. You don't want to get me in trouble, do you?"

"Heh! I wouldn't be so sure of that, young lady. Getting a pretty little thing like you in trouble would be a rare treat for an old 'un like me."

Sooz let it ride: getting paid was more important than getting even. She was supposed to pick up groceries for tonight's meal, and the money he had given her wouldn't feed the whole family. She had a few loose coins in the pocket of her combat

pants, but not enough for her to really notice the weight. And even if she'd been loaded, why should she pay for the stinky old fart?

"Like I said, it's twenty. Give me the crystal back if you ain't got the cash. There's plenty of shard-heads who'll pay Ma's asking price."

Billy put on his wheedling voice. "Aw, come on. You can help an old friend out, can't you? And I just got something in for you, something real special."

"What you got?" asked Sooz, eagerness mixing with suspicion as she edged towards the door. Sometimes, when Old Billy started talking about having something special for her, he got a little frisky. This time, though, he didn't make a move, and Sooz felt a wave of relief that she wasn't going to have to extricate herself from his sour-smelling, bony embrace. He just reached into a cardboard box and handed her a book.

The laminated covers were long gone, but the title was printed on the tattered spine. 'The Story of Hong Kong,' she read. She'd never seen this before; it must be from a fresh delivery. Having a new paperback in her hands made her want to dance with excitement, but she did her best to look calm. "How much?"

"I regret to inform you that the price has gone up," he said, parroting her own voice and then wheezing with laughter that degenerated into phlegmy hacking. "Twenty."

Sooz shook her head. As much as she longed to possess the book, there was no way she could raise his asking price. Ma would kill her if she traded the grocery money for a useless old paperback. "Sorry, Billy. Ain't got it."

"Fifteen then. I know you got fifteen, right there." He nodded at the roll of bills she held, and his eyes almost seemed to glow in the paint-filtered light.

"You can't have that. It belongs to Ma."

"Be like that then." The old man grinned and absently scratched his groin, and his manner changed as if someone else had moved in. "Tell you what, you can have it for a fuck. Give Billy a nice ride and he'll see you all right for books."

"That's gross, Billy."

"Gross now, is he?" He scowled at her. "He'll have his book back, then."

"And I'll have Ma's shard back."

"No."

"Fine." Sooz opened the door and jumped down onto the concrete outside the trailer, already considering ways to raise the extra grocery money by that evening, and wondering how much trouble there'd be if she didn't.

"She's stealing Billy's book!" came the wail from inside.

"Fair exchange is no robbery," she called back. She'd read that somewhere, years before, probably in one of his primers.

Sooz was lurking in the shadows under her favorite pillar, reading her book and waiting to see if anyone came or went. The base of the pillar was a good spot, letting her cover both the entry and exit ramps. There was supposed to be a strip light overhead, but it had been broken ever since Sooz could remember. The slit windows let in just enough light for her to read, and if she kept her knees scrunched up and the white paper hidden, she could stay here for quite a while before Ma noticed where she was and gave her something useful to do.

Ma must have been distracted today, otherwise Sooz would have been busy with some task already instead of waiting by the pillar when the big Scrambler came in.

The gleaming RV seemed out of place among all the beat-up pickup trucks and ancient campers. This was the Short-Stay level, and Sooz had been around for long enough to know that no one came here unless they were on the way down.

The Scrambler looked like it belonged to someone on the way up.

Sooz watched it glide along the concrete ramp, listened to the polite whine of its motors as it eased its way into one of the enclosed bays. The driver's door opened with a sweet, well-engineered click and a man climbed out of the cabin. Han, by the

look of him, or as her 'Story of Hong Kong' book (printed long before the Han bought up most of the planet and went shopping for a new self-image to match) would have had it, Chinese. Unlike most of the people Sooz knew, the newcomer had clean hair and clothes that fit, which was only to be expected from someone who rolled up in a brand new Scrambler.

The man kept himself sort of hunched down as he closed the door and flicked his eyes around the nearby parking bays, like he was hoping no one would notice his arrival.

Sooz jumped to her feet and trotted towards him, hurrying to get there before he figured out how to lock himself in behind the bay's security shutter. "Hey, Mister. I watched you drive in. Nice ride you got there."

It seemed like she'd startled him. The man spent a couple of seconds checking her out, then glanced around again as if he wanted to make sure she hadn't brought any friends. Yeah, Sooz thought, like there's anyone to be friends with down here. "Got any trash, Mister? I could take it to the waste chute for you. Or I can detail the whole car, if you like."

His eyes fell on her paperback. "Is that a book? I haven't seen one of those for years. May I?" He held out his hand.

Sooz clung to her prize for a moment, but decided it would be more businesslike to let him have a look. "What's your name, Mister?"

"Lee. Yours?"

"Sooz."

"Good to meet you, Sooz." He offered his free hand. Sooz shook it, a bit self-consciously. Lee leafed through the book, then handed it back. "Nice. Looks like it's older than either of us. Kind of reminds me of home."

"You from Hong Kong?"

"No, but my family used to live near there, back in the day."

There was an awkward silence. Sooz wondered if he was waiting for her to leave. If so, she needed to work fast. "Like I said, I was wondering if you had any trash. I could haul it away for you, if you like."

He looked at her blankly, as if he was trying to figure out what she meant. "Oh, I see. I'm sorry, Sooz. Everything gets recycled."

The thought shocked her. "Everything? What, even your poop?"

"I only bought the car today. It'll be a while before I find out for sure, but I certainly hope so."

Sooz couldn't help laughing. "That's gross!"

Lee chuckled too. "So, you run a car cleaning service? Must be a good business in a place like this."

"Not so you'd notice. Most of the folks round here don't bother, or they do for themselves. Thing is, I'm short five euros for something. I take shanghais too, or greenbacks. It's all money, innit?"

"So it is," Lee said. "Well, I think I have a job that might stretch to that, if you do exactly as I say."

Sooz had learned the hard way to check the details before agreeing to anything. "What is it, then?"

"I'd like you to watch for someone and tell me if you see him. But keep your distance and don't let him see you. He's not nice."

"What's this someone look like?"

"He's big. Tall, strong-looking. Pale skin, dressed all in black, maybe. Cropped hair, as if he buzzes it every day. And he's only got one eye." Lee paused. "At least, he needs to get the other one fixed."

Sooz held out her hand for payment. "Sounds easy enough to spot."

"His eyes are the thing to look for. They're like ... red jewels." Lee flicked with his thumb, sending a 5-euro piece spinning through the air.

"That would be like rubies, then," Sooz said, catching the coin. "Sure. I'll let you know if I see him."

Sooz found Strummer on the roof level, sitting outside one

of the clear plastic tunnels where much of Short-Stay's food was grown. He was busy, surrounded by a scattering of water pump parts. As soon as he saw her, he stopped work and came over to take the bucket of scraps she'd hauled up for the compost bins.

Strummer was always ready to give her a hand. He had looked out for her ever since they were kids.

He handed the empty bucket back and his lips twisted into a grin. "Thanks, Sooz. Water's what I need, though, more than compost. Been a dry spell and the pump's broke."

Sooz looked up at the sky. It was clear and blue, apart from a few threads of cloud. "I'll bring water next time I visit."

"I wish more people helped out like you do, Sooz. They want more than I can grow, but they ain't interested in donating what's needed. Ain't hardly no one using the latrines." He looked at her accusingly, as if daring her to deny that she, too, avoided making such personal contributions.

"It's a long climb," Sooz said. "It's different for you, working up here."

"Better to climb the stairs than to flush it down the pan. It's not like we got plant nutrients to spare."

This was one of Strummer's pet subjects, and Sooz was sorry she'd got him started. "There's a guy downstairs, got a car that recycles his poop right there."

"Nanotech recycler," Strummer said. "Ain't wholesome if you ask me. Like eating your own shit. Give me bugs and worms and a proper fertility cycle any day. What you doing later?"

"Helping Ma, probably." Sooz didn't intend to help Ma any more than she had to, not with a new book itching to be read, but she also didn't intend to hang with her would-be-boyfriend. Strummer was nice enough when she was in the mood, but he was poor competition for Hong Kong.

He looked crestfallen. "Your Ma's got you doing too much."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't mean chores. I mean the delivery work. The dealing."

"Ma says I got to pay my way, especially since I got too old to count for welfare."

"You got to understand how risky it is, Sooz. It was different when you was a kid."

"The Man ain't gonna catch me."

Strummer flopped his hair out his eyes and studied her. "I been hearing talk of a crackdown. You ought to tell your Ma, get her to ease off for a while. You could work up here instead."

Sooz knew that Strummer's vegetable operation wasn't big enough to support a hired hand. Anyway, spending too much time with him would most likely lead to complications that she didn't feel inclined to handle just yet. "Maybe so. Right now, I need some vegetables."

He sighed. "Well, you know where I'll be, if you get away early. Now, what's on that list?"

She read out Ma's order, and Strummer disappeared into one of the plastic tunnels to harvest the food. Sooz waited outside, watching the furled wind turbines twisting lazily in the breeze. Strummer had never learned his letters, but he was a smart guy when it came to generators and pumps, soil fertility and growing lamps. From time to time, Sooz tried to get him to sit down with a book, the way Old Billy had done with her, but Strummer always had other things on his mind when they were alone.

He returned with a grin and a string bag full of fresh vegetables. "Maybe see you later, then?"

Sooz paid him. "Couple of days, probably. Ma's been real persnickety lately." She didn't like hurting his feelings, but if she didn't, she'd never get any time to herself.

Strummer's face fell. He recovered with a visible effort. "Right. Couple of days then. Be seeing you, Sooz."

"Bye," she said, and started back down the stairs towards Short Stay.

Back home in the family parking space, Sooz dropped off the groceries in the old Toyota, parked with its dented nose drawn up to the entrance of their bay. She closed the car door carefully,

so that there was hardly any noise, but Ma collared her anyway.

"Where the hell you been, girl? Hurry up and fetch the kids' clothes. We got washing to do."

Sooz sighed, because she'd been hoping to visit the Scrambler man again before wash time. He might have another job for her, and a couple more euros would have paid for one of the big laundry machines on the service level. Plus, she was dying to take a closer look at the vehicle's recycling facilities.

All that would have to wait, now. She piled her younger siblings' dirty clothes into the washing bag and headed for the Facilities.

Ma was there ahead of her, squatting near the tap with the plastic bowls already filled. Wordlessly, she passed the family's single pair of latex gloves to Sooz.

"You should take 'em for once, Ma." Sooz glanced at her mother's work-worn hands. "Look after yourself a bit."

"Time's long past for me to worry about that sort of thing, or for anyone to care. It's you we got to look after, now."

Sooz sighed as she pulled the gloves on. "It ain't no good down here. We ought to get ourselves up to Long Stay. Old Billy, he told me they got proper plumbing up there. He says they got hot showers and everything."

Ma dumped a shirt in the water and scrubbed at a stubborn grease spot. "They got all kinds of stuff up on Long Stay. And I don't want you hanging around Old Billy no more, not 'less we got particular business with him. I told you that before."

"Yeah, like I'd want to. But there ain't no one to talk to down here. No one interesting, anyhow. I bet there's plenty of interesting people in Long Stay."

"We can't afford no Long Stay."

Sooz swished her half-brother's faded dungarees through the gray water and wrung them out over the drain grating. "I checked the tariff sheet, Ma. Long stay's cheaper if you work it out over the month."

"Sure, long as you got the credit up front. We barely got enough to pay by the day."

Sooz looked at her mother's hands again. "Washing clothes in buckets ain't going to make us no richer."

"Saves a couple of bucks, every time."

"Takes hours, though. We could spend the time chasing work."

"Sooz, we can't afford no Long Stay and we can't afford to use no laundry machines. Subject closed."

Sooz dropped the dungarees into the washing bag and accepted her kid sister's romper for rinsing. "There's a new guy just arrived."

"Yeah, I heard the shutter coming down. Didn't hear no engine, though. Wondered about that, now that you mention it."

"It has electric motors, dead quiet," Sooz said. "One of them swish recreational vehicles. It was neat."

"You seen it arrive?"

"Yeah. The driver seemed nice. Said he was from near Hong Kong. I reckon that means he's rich, right?"

"There's rich and poor Han, same as everyone else," Ma said.

"Hope he's gonna stick around, we could do with some new people down here. Might have some jobs he wants doing, do you think?"

"Maybe. He's just passing through, most likely, else he'd be up in Long Stay. You steer clear of him, Sooz, leastwise till I check him out. It don't matter how much you want to ride in that flash RV of his, or how many of those fancy books you reckon he's got, understand?"

Sooz sighed. "Sure thing, Ma."

# 5

As soon as the girl had gone, Lee closed the bay's security shutter and climbed into the Scrambler's living space. It was time to start working on the doll.

He opened his new repair kit and cut through the fabric of the ruined tee shirt, extending the hole the intruder's knife had made. He didn't want to risk removing the weapon until he was in position to see what damage it had done.

Once the tee shirt was off, Lee used the zipper tool to make two incisions starting at the puncture wound: one curving underneath the doll's breast and up to its sternum, the other running diagonally to its navel. The skin curled back immediately, exposing a layer of subcutaneous gel. He unzipped that too, and peeled the triangular flap away to reveal the rib cage.

The blade had penetrated deeply. Lee brushed a fingertip along the black surface and shuddered at its oily slickness — and at the thought of being on the wrong side of people who had access to stuff like this. The hilt and pommel bore two recessed pads that looked like controls, but Lee decided not to mess with those until he had freed the knife.

The edges of the blade had jammed between two ribs, notching the alloy skeleton. In a way, that was a blessing: if the weapon hadn't gotten stuck, Lilith's assailant might have pulled it free, or done even more damage by twisting it inside her.

Lee studied the honed nothingness of the knife's edge and imagined how stupid he'd feel if it came to fishing for a severed finger between the doll's gleaming ribs.

Take it slow, he told himself.

Luckily, the tip of the blade had ended up inside the punctured cooling tube rather than slicing all the way through, so that its tapered profile had helped seal the leak. Working with

infinite care, Lee clamped off the damaged artery and then extracted the knife, a task that took both hands and a lot of gentle rocking. He looked around for somewhere safe to put it, settling on the lid of his toolbox.

Once he had replaced the leaking tube and topped up the coolant chamber, Lee checked the interior of the doll for fluid damage. All the musculature down its left side was affected, from the obliques down to the tops of the quadriceps.

Without proper workshop facilities, there was no way to replace all that electroactive muscle. All Lee could do was to mop up the visible spillage and leave the doll's torso open, in the hope that the rest would evaporate.

In the meantime, he figured he might as well explore.

Outside the Scrambler, most of the vehicle bays were open. The denizens of the parking hive were going about their business: cooking on improvised stoves, or tinkering with engines, or spaced out on a row of greasy mattresses and a hit of shard. A gang of grubby youths huddled near the crystal-heads, sharing a bottle and blending with the concrete.

The Scrambler was Lee's first brand-new vehicle and he hoped to continue enjoying its pristine condition for a while longer yet. That meant not sullyng the vehicle's built-in facilities by doing anything crass like actually using them, which in turn had led to a pressing need for Lee to investigate the local sanitary arrangements.

All he found was a noisome toilet with bare concrete walls and a vibrant patch of green spreading below the soil pipe. He decided that the Scrambler's systems could do with being tested after all, and that his personal needs were perhaps a little less urgent than he had thought.

A short distance from the toilet, two women were working at a lonely tap. As Lee got closer, he recognized one of them: the girl with the book. Sooz, he remembered. Her companion looked like an older edition of the same girl; he guessed it must be Sooz's mother. They were washing children's clothes in a bucket of gray suds.

The older woman raised her head and nodded at him. "Not much to look at," she said, "but there's worse places. It ain't so bad once you get used to it. You waiting for water? We'll be done soon enough."

"It's okay," Lee said. "I was just looking around. I only arrived today."

The woman tilted her head, indicating her daughter. "Sooz here tells me she saw you coming in. A Scrambler's a smart vehicle to be bringing to a place like this."

"Ma," Sooz said, peering up at Lee with obvious embarrassment. She gave him a slight shake of her head and indicated her mother with a sideways nod.

Lee decided he was being told not to let on that they'd talked. He grinned at the girl and raised one eyebrow, then looked back at her mother. "I just need somewhere to park for a night or two."

"Someone looking for you, yeah? No worries. You'll be fine here. Good crowd, most of them."

Lee hesitated, half-minded to smile and drift away. The pile of children's clothing caught his eye. "How many kids do you have?"

"Five. Sooz here's my oldest. I got two others of my own, and a couple that was left by one of my husbands, you know?" She paused, wringing out a strip of unidentifiable cloth. "What's your name?"

"Lee."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Lee. I'm Martha. I won't shake." She glanced down at her hands, busy in the tired water. Her fingers and the backs of her hands were chapped, the skin cracked and raw. Lee tried not to wince.

Martha looked up at him and almost seemed to smile. She was pretty when she did that. More than pretty, in fact. "Me and the kids will be having some stew tonight. You're welcome to join us, if you ain't got plans."

Lee wondered how hygienic Martha's eating arrangements were likely to be, and what sort of ingredients she'd be able to get

in a place like this. Hopefully it would be home-cooked, at least. Martha didn't look like the sort of person who stood in line at a public extrusion point, waiting for a bowl of sterilized glop.

And she was trying to keep her kids clean. Sooz seemed to have gotten the beginnings of an education from somewhere, too.

Martha looked at him expectantly for a few seconds and then wilted, turning back to her plastic bowl. The light that had animated her face for a moment started to fade.

"I'd be pleased to come," Lee said. "Thank you."

When she looked up at him again, a bit of the glow had returned. "Seven o'clock be too early for you? Only I got the kids to get to bed."

"Seven o'clock will be fine. I'll look forward to it."

"Me too," Martha said. "Bay 15. It's the third along on the left."

Sooz kept her head down, concentrating on her washing.

Lee hurried back to the Scrambler and christened its facilities. It made him a bit uneasy, the way the smart toilet extruded itself out of the floor and then morphed back into a shower base once he had finished. According to the manual, the surfaces were self-sterilizing. The shower base sparkled invitingly, but the idea of actually standing in it was disquieting. The soles of Lee's feet tingled at the thought.

At least he was getting to grips with the kitchen extruder. He asked for a cheeseburger, fries and a Coke; the machine hummed for a minute and then popped his order out.

According to the manual, the processor produced perfectly nutritious and well-balanced meals, which probably explained why the food tasted so bad. Lee dropped most of it into the recycling chute and thought hungrily of home-cooked stew.

When it was time to go, he told the food processor to fill a clear plastic pitcher with red wine, and ordered some bread rolls. He sniffed the wine suspiciously, took a cautious swallow, and decided it would probably be acceptable.

Then he remembered the kids and ordered a flask of soda.

Martha's vehicle was a beat-up pickup truck, parked at the front of her bay. Lee followed the smell of wood smoke and the sound of children playing. He found Martha working at the back of the unit.

"I hope I'm not too early," he said.

"Course not. 'Specially seeing as you brought wine."

She offered him the smile that she had only hinted at before, and Lee found himself smiling back.

"Careful of this." She pointed at her stewpot. "It gets darned hot. Kids, hush yourselves now and get the table set. Can't you see we got company?"

Her stove was a recycled propane bottle, propped on its side and furnished with a hinged fire door. The cooker top was a welded iron sheet pierced with a circular hole; a round-bottomed stewpot rested in the hole with flames licking its base. A length of flexible ducting running to the slit window served as a chimney, sending most of the smoke to the outside world.

The stew smelled fantastic.

There was a table made of trestles and plywood in the center of the pickup bed, fixed between two timber benches that perched over the wheel arches. Sooz and the next eldest child — a boy of maybe nine or ten — got busy. Before Lee knew it, the table was set with a cloth, seven chipped bowls, plastic cups and a mismatched assortment of cutlery. Martha glanced at him, then gestured at the spread. "Take a seat."

Lee boosted a couple of the smaller children up into the back of the truck and then climbed up himself. He set out the bread rolls he had brought. Each of the kids seized one and then sat in expectant silence, gazing at the stew.

Martha placed the pot on the table, then climbed up herself. She served the stew while Lee poured the wine and the kids helped themselves to his soda.

Lee brought the first spoonful to his lips. It tasted real. "Mmm." He swallowed, then took a sip of wine. "I'll tell you something. This is a hell of a lot better than what I get at home."

After the meal, Martha dismantled the table and spread several thin mattress rolls on the pickup bed for the youngsters to sleep on. Then she snagged the wine and beckoned to Lee. "Want to check out some stuff I got?"

Lee hesitated, unsure of what she meant. Then he considered the alternative, which was returning to the Scrambler alone. Martha's place might be dingy, but it felt welcoming and safe. He nodded.

"Could you hold this?" She offered him the wine, then hauled down the bay's security shutter. There were two padlocks, one on either side. Martha snapped both into place.

Wondering if it mightn't have been better to go back to the Scrambler after all, Lee followed his host to her sleeping area, which was partitioned behind some shuttering in a corner of the bay.

Martha settled down cross-legged on her bedroll and took a small plastic bag out of her shirt pocket. Lee sat opposite her, putting the wine jug on the concrete floor.

"You ever done any shard?" she asked.

Lee shook his head. Random corporate blood tests had always made him stick to the mainstream drugs: alcohol, marijuana, occasionally a little tobacco. I don't have to worry about that any more, he thought. And no one can possibly know I'm here, locked behind the shutter. What the hell, why not?

He accepted a twist of transparent film, wrapped around something tiny and hard.

"See how the crystals are clear, like glass?" she asked. "That's how you tell it's good. Tip it on the inside of your wrist. Don't get it on your fingers, though. Too much handling will spoil it."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"Enough. I don't really use it, at least not often. Too much ain't good, 'specially if it ain't pure. You seen the shard dreamers, sleeping their lives away out there? That's taking it too far, missing the point. I don't deal to them."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "You sell this stuff?"

"Sure." A note of defiance had entered her voice. "There's worse ways of putting food on the table. Hang around here long enough and you might be offered a few of 'em." She flashed a grin that put Lee back at ease, and her voice softened. She nodded at the wrap he was holding. "Don't worry, I don't charge guests."

He watched as Martha undid her twist and emptied its contents onto the inside of her wrist, right where the pulse was. It was dim in the parking bay and Lee couldn't see exactly what happened. The crystals just seemed to disappear.

Martha sat up straighter and her worry lines smoothed themselves away. "Whenever you're ready," she said.

Lee unwrapped the packet she had given him and tipped its contents onto his own wrist, curious to see what would happen. The crystals liquefied as soon as they touched his skin, melting into nothingness as he watched.

He looked at Martha.

Martha was smiling at him.

Martha had beautiful eyes.

Martha was in his arms, kissing his mouth, then kissing his wrist where the shard had gone in, then giving him her own wrist to taste, then kissing his mouth again.

Martha's bedroll was soft, but her body was firm and deliciously warm.

"Didn't figure you for a stayer," she said the next morning, as Lee prepared to leave. "Enjoyed spending time with you, though."

"Thanks," Lee said. "I've got stuff going on. You know?"

"Sure."

"Is there anything I can do for you or the kids before I go?"

"I ain't no whore, if that's what you mean."

"I know you're not. That's not what I meant."

"Sure."

"Okay." He hesitated, reluctant to simply walk away, unable

to do anything else. "See you around then, maybe."

"Sure. See you around."

Sooz was waiting at the Scrambler when Lee got back, perched on the running board with her knees tucked under her chin.

"You going?" she asked.

"Yeah. There's a bunch of things I have to do."

"I wish I could go."

Lee looked around the parking level, imagining what it must be like for her. "Your mother would miss you, if you did."

Sooz looked up at him. "Reckon she'll miss you more."

Lee was suddenly uncomfortably warm. He wished there were something he could do to help. "Listen, once I've got my life straightened out—"

"Don't say you'll be back." Her expression was petulant but her voice just sounded unhappy. "I ain't stupid, or a child. Ma ain't, neither. I know that no one ever comes back."

She turned away and trudged over to the pillar where he'd first seen her. Lee watched until she'd settled herself down and opened her book.

Back in the Scrambler, he took a long shower, then checked the doll. The body cavity had dried out, so he closed the incision and zipped it back up. The layers of gel and skin drew together and healed as the tool passed over them, except where they'd been traumatized by the blade.

There, Lilith was going to have a scar.

The knife that had caused the damage was still where he'd dropped it, in the lid of his toolbox. Lee considered Lilith's record with pointy things and decided not to leave this one lying around. He picked it up and held it under the work lights, studying the depressions he'd noted earlier.

One of the niches was at the end of the pommel, impossible to touch accidentally while holding the knife. The other fell naturally under his thumb.

Lee pushed his finger into the first cavity and pressed the stud that he felt nestled inside. The knife dissolved itself into a

living thing, slithering over his fingers like a moist, prehensile glove. He panicked and tried to flip it onto the floor, but it clung to him tenaciously, wriggling towards his wrist. Fascination took over from dismay as he watched the stuff blending with his skin. After a few seconds, the knife was gone, transformed into a slight puffiness at his fingers, a layer of flab over his forearm, and a plain black band adorning his middle finger.

There was a depression in the ring, identical to those he'd seen on the hilt. Lee pressed it and found himself holding the blade again.

"Cool," he said.

He tried the other control, the one that lay under his thumb. The weapon quivered, emitting a barely audible whine, and seemed to twist slightly in his hand.

The edge is alive, he thought. This thing will cut literally anything.

He must have kept it going for too long, because the vibration died. After that, the blade remained stubbornly inert no matter how hard he pressed the control. Disappointed and wondering how the thing could be recharged, Lee pushed the first button again. The weapon oozed back into concealment around his hand.

The disguised glove felt a bit clumsy at first, not to mention clammy, but he could live with it. At least the blade was safely out of the way, and if he ever needed a weapon at short notice, it would be there. He wrestled the doll back into his tattered tee shirt and switched it on. Lilith came back slowly, waking up almost like a real girl. Her eyes opened first, and then she stretched and yawned.

"Thanks, that much feels better." She sat up, her fingers already probing under the tee shirt for the damaged spot. She found it and frowned. "Got me a good one, didn't he?"

Lee nodded. "Not quite a factory refurb, I'm afraid, but I don't think the warranty covers combat damage. Anyway, I fixed the leak and zipped you up."

"So I gather." She flexed her left arm and twisted her torso.

"It still feels a bit stiff, and maybe I lost some power. Let's hope we don't get in another fight with Stranger for a while."

"You mean the guy who attacked us?"

"That's the one," she said.

"Tell me about him."

There was a long pause. "He's with the organization that developed us. Me."

So, she doesn't want to talk about it, Lee thought. But willing or not, he couldn't afford to go easy on her. "What organization? I need to know everything."

She sighed. "They call themselves Electis."

"What's that? Some kind of Latin?"

"It means they are the elect. Chosen."

Lee decided that it was probably just a name, a corporate brand, and most likely unimportant. "I'm guessing you escaped."

Lilith shook her head. "I don't remember. It was like a dream, being in their systems. I think there were others like me, training with the instructors."

"What were they teaching you?"

Lilith closed her eyes; it was several seconds before she replied. "I think some of us died. Maybe I died, too; it feels like I left part of myself behind. Perhaps that's why I don't remember."

"You have to give me more than that, Lilith."

"I know. There has to be more, but I can't access it." Her voice was full of exasperation — with herself, Lee hoped.

It occurred to him that too much pressure might be counter-productive. "Okay. Take it easy. If you remember anything else, tell me. I need to understand what I'm up against."

She gave him a long, hard look. "What we're up against. I've got a stake in this too, you know. I'm doing my best."

"Checking out?"

"Yes, I'm done here."

"Just give me a moment." The hive attendant scanned his screen. "Okay, you're all paid up. Have a nice day."

"There's one more thing," Lee said. "Do you know a woman named Martha? Drives an old Toyota?"

"Sure do. Teenage daughter and a handful of youngsters, yeah?"

"That's the one. I'd like you to arrange something for them. Bump them up to a couple of months of Long Stay, next time they renew."

The attendant gave him a quizzical look. "I'm not sure I understand."

"I want to help them get on their feet." Lee offered a credit chip. "Charge it to this. And please take fifty for your trouble."

The man grinned. "Sure, I can do that."

"It's a computer error, understand? I don't want Martha or Sooz to know."

"Got it. Leave it to me."

"Who are Martha and Sooz?" Lilith asked as Lee pulled away from the booth.

"Just a couple of people I met in the hive. Martha is Sooz's mother."

"It sounds as if you liked them."

Lee shrugged. "Martha invited me to dinner. They're a nice family. Four little ones and an older daughter. Poor as hell, but they seemed happy to have each other."

"I've never been to a dinner party. Not that food's much good to me. Still, I wish I could have gone."

"You were drying out." Lee decided to steer the conversation in a more profitable direction. "Any luck remembering about Stranger?"

"Enough to know we have to get out of here, as far away as we can."

Lee smiled. No matter what they threw at him now, he was confident in his new vehicle, a fresh convert to the cult of the open road. "Even Stranger can't cordon off the entire city. He won't know where to start."

"He'll have the full specifications for this body I'm wearing, by now. He's probably got one of these booklets, telling him all

about me." She was flicking through a sheaf of glossy Scrambler documentation she'd found in one of the dashboard cubbyholes.

Lee glanced at the people on the sidewalk, then across at Lilith. "Check them out. I don't see anyone showing an unhealthy interest. Anyway, it's not like you're some mass-produced model; each Artemis unit is different and most of them are kept indoors. Believe me, you can pass for a woman, no problem."

"He'll use your data, then. Your work records, or this vehicle registration."

"It won't be so easy. He can hardly waltz in to Zendyne and ask for a copy of their employee database, or scan every vehicle leaving the city."

Lilith returned her brochure to the glove box. "Are you ready to bet your life on that?"

"We're safe now." Lee checked the rearview mirror, just to reassure himself. There was a delivery truck behind them, following too close. Beyond that, a cop car was nudging out into the next lane, ready to pass the truck.

It was probably nothing, Lee decided. There was no point bothering Lilith about it.