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about 7800 words

SOUL

By Bebarce El-Tayib

The hole in the exterior wall of the apartment on Market Street let in the cold night air, as Phil sucked in the last sweet embers of his cigarette, before flicking it out to fall the four stories to the rubble-strewn sidewalk. He stared out at the wreckage, noting both the impact depression below his feet, and the trail of silicene covered metallic shards creating a cookie crumb trail to the edge of the police cordon tape. Phil squatted down and rubbed his fingers against the red dusted brick, bordered in layer upon layer of plaster and paint.

An old building. Strong. They don't make 'em like this anymore.

Standing back up and turning back to the body in the room, he fished around his pockets for his pack.

"Outer lower left pocket," Katrinka said, not looking but carefully stepping about the room taking meaningful blinks. Phil pulled out his case and pulled the self-starting cig out with his teeth. "Seven since the start of our shift together two hours ago." Katrinka noted out loud. Phil ignored her. Instead, he looked at the happy smiling pictures on the mantelpiece. He picked up a tiny cylindrical tube which read "Jean and Stacey", unscrewing the cap. The rolled up cardstock announced their wedding date on an unofficial-looking certificate.

"Married five years," Phil said, scanning over the names and dates.

"Technorganic marriage is not recognized in the state of Illinois," Katrinka corrected, walking over.

"Tell the happy couple. You done here?" Katrinka nodded, a dim luster of amber passing through her bindi as she looked at the document.

"Done enough. Jean Red seems to have been the clear-cut offender here. No signs of forced entry. No signs of struggle.

It was quick at least. Wine mixed in with the blood on the carpet, but no drip pattern leading to the orifice to suggest he was wet by it. Bottle content and blood alcohol level of the victim indicate mild intoxication. Certificate of Occupancy registered to both parties. All indicators suggest a high probability of accurate supposition," Her report was precise, and Phil was sure if he asked for a more detailed summary she could have rattled off twenty or thirty other indicators to support her explanation.

"And yet," Phil intoned "Rather than taking the convenient and perfectly accessible door, he smashed through a brick wall to fall four stories down, and then proceeded to be ripped to pieces by four other bots, who immediately turned themselves in. All of whom, mind you, attest to an inability to explain their actions?" He left that last statement as a question, to which Katrinka Navy simply shrugged and smiled. He sighed and told her to file the report. "We got some time before we have to start interrogating the bots. The techs are going to want to have a look at them to see if they can determine anything, and those scans take up to two hours at least. "Duffy's?" He asked. Katrinka beamed and nodded vigorously. Sometimes it was hard to remember she was a bot when her face lit up like a rewarded

child, even with the ever-present bindi's dark glass surface in the center of her forehead. Her smile took the edge off his determined frustration, as he noted once again the incessant 'cuteness' of her dimples. "Come on kid. Donuts are on me this time."

#

Duffy's was a dinosaur of a diner. The sign over the register stated "Unchanged in over 100 years!" but Phil doubted the bots running the kitchen bakery were around back then. Still, it was the only place these days you could get a quality cup of coffee and a donut at three in the morning. The chocolate frosting wasn't real of course, nor was the coffee. Real coffee and chocolate were still around, but no one was willing to shell out the hard creds it would take to indulge in something that rare. An ancient flat-panel mounted over the kitchen window flicked through newsfeeds randomly, and would do so continuously until enough eyes were looking at it.

"Asimovian demonstrators caused a stir at the grave of Dileep Nadar today. As family members angered by their..."

Flicker.

Katrinka sat on the bar stool next to Phil making a tiny pyramid out of her creamer cups. She seemed like such a kid at

times, which he guessed was only reasonable considering she was only a six- year-old model as told by her Navy designation.

“Wildfires again breaking out in the Midwest this week. Desertification percentage now stands at 18%, as the...”

Flicker.

Then again, she was made with the body of someone in her late twenties and came preset with more knowledge than a single nat could collect in eight lifetimes.

“Senator Emanuel Reeves’ unpopular bill makes it to the floor today. That bill, of course, placing halts on the production of all SOUL based bots until further notice. We take you now to a live correspondence meeting with Emanuel Reeves.”

“For just over two decades now, we have pursued this disastrous course of technological mine- stepping. In repealing the requirement for Asimovian programming, we have torn all hopes of security from our grasp and left ourselves to the whim of befuddled weapons. And be sure, my friends, that is what they are. In fact, just two hours ago, a report came to me of not only a bot killing a woman he was supposedly “married” to, but that other bots took it upon themselves to declare vigilante justice on him, rendering him completely inoperable! These

problems never happened with Asimovian programming, but now more and more, every day we see more cases of..."

Flicker.

News travels fast these days. His speechwriters must have been watching feeds across the country to be able to pull up that example so quickly and turn it around for his speech. The problem was, Phil couldn't blame the good senator. Part of him wondered if perhaps things would be simpler if we'd all stayed with the days where Asimovian programming managed every AI. The bots used to be much less sociable and more subservient, which, he presumed, was the real reason the senator wanted to re-establish the system. But when those eggheads at MIT came up with the SOUL chip, a new dynamic in Artificial Intelligence was born. It was a simple idea really. Create a filter that limits the AI access to sub-processing algorithms, and auto archived data stores allowing AI robotics to question their own motives. To make decisions, without a full understanding of their own calculated reasoning. In short, they became more human.

It also meant more uncertainty. Asimovian programming conflicted with the chip's interface, and decades of debates and demonstrations had the SOUL chip winning out. A robot can kill,

but just like a nat might consider the consequences and its own limitations, so too will a bot. It's that uncertainty, their fear of not knowing all the answers, which keeps them from wiping the floor with the lot of us, and with our death bringing on the dawn of the digital age.

Still, it was hard to consider that, watching Katrinka as she started to take nibbling bites around a white frosted donut with sprinkles. A part of him knew that she didn't derive sustenance from the act- it was purely a sensory-driven function combined with the bot's innate desire to fit in- but she still reminded Phil of his daughter, Dana. As a child, she would devour food, careless to the mess it created.

He startled as he realized that Dana was probably in her late twenties herself. He hadn't seen her in over fifteen years. No amount of technology or education can stop a dumb seventeen-year-old from getting his girlfriend knocked up, and he'd been no exception. He'd tried to make it work with her, even married his high school sweetheart, but there was just no working things out. It ended poorly.

Short of the smile and the messiness, however, Katrinka was nothing like his daughter Dana. She was dark skinned, and Hispanic in appearance. She was pretty, with large dark eyes,

and a crooked smile. She had the appearance of a physically fit but pleasantly curved woman. Outside of crime scene analysis, she could be charming and witty. If she'd had a childhood, he imagined she would have been every boy's crush. She wasn't without her predefined flaws though. She often gave the impression that consideration of what you were saying to her was only one of several hundred different things she was working on at the time. She had a predisposition to bad puns. At times, it felt like she tried emotions on as one might new shoes: testing the fit, often exaggerating the motions. Her biggest flaw, however, was that she loved Phil.

Even though height and weight differentiation had been well established by her series, she was short and petite. An odd choice for a bot pre-slated to go into law enforcement, but her aptitude far exceeded whatever shortcomings her small form might have presented. Of course, that was all superficial. Any bot had enough strength, speed, and agility to tear apart ten armed nats before they could be taken down. The SOUL chip wasn't perfect though. Even with quantum processing, most bots had trouble making connections in instances that all evidence argued against. They passed up the incomprehensible solutions, when sometimes that's what it took.

Katrinka was different though. She'd scan the fingerprints off the glass, sure, but she'd also note that Lactose-free milk was used in their coffee, while cheesecake was served for dinner. That one specifically led us to finger our prime suspect's visiting cousin. Once we considered the new direction, the other pieces fell together.

Phil's headache started to return and he worked to keep his left hand from jittering. Fortunately, Katrinka didn't notice, looking at a watch on her wrist even though she kept perfect time herself. "We should probably head back to the station Phil. Judgment's already passed down and they're due for reformatting tomorrow."

"Doesn't it bother you that judgment passes down on bots without so much as even a trial? It's easier to get a bot judgment than a warrant," Phil said, regretting his words almost immediately. Katrinka's contented expression fractured. He hated taking away her happiness. 'Stupid', he thought.

"Of course it bothers me, Phil," Katrinka said. "It's a death penalty. Sure, our forms don't go away, but everything we are does. We don't even have the luxury of believing in a heaven." She said, looking inward and pensive. "We just cease to be. 'Reboot and try again'."

Phil realized he'd made a mess of things. "Come on, kid. Let's get to the station. Wipe your mouth, it's covered in pink sprinkles," He downed the remnants of his now-cold coffee and walked alongside her to the car. Katrinka gave a half-smile and nudged him slightly with her elbow as he walked by. The rain started up outside.

#

Four hours later and they were no better off, save Phil taking a quick meditation break in his office. The bots were collected and shipped to central processing for reformatting procedures to commence. A woman had shown up at the station screaming about bot's rights, and eventually had to be restrained by officers. The bot she'd come to see tried to console her with a calm demeanor, assuring her that everything would be alright before being pulled along. He continued on towards the vehicles with far more grace than most nats could muster.

All four bots had the same story. They'd gone out drinking on the night in question, and were walking home. All of a sudden, the wall of the fifth-story apartment building high above blew out, and a bot landed in front of them. They couldn't explain their rationale for what took place after that.

Converging on the bot, they grabbed components and tore pieces off as it tried to crawl away. They seemed both horrified and confused by their own actions. Uniformly, they described a "feeling" which each bot maintained in isolation echoed: "Emptiness." While rash decision-making could be attributed to inaccessible knowledge within a bot's circuitry, it did not, in their unfortunate fate, pardon them from a conviction of sabotage. But let's call it what it really is, even if the law refuses to recognize it. They committed murder.

Katrinka wasn't around for their departure. She typically found an excuse to occupy her time elsewhere when bots were escorted to central processing. Going on the assumption that she was down with the analyzers, Phil took the elevator to the fifth sub-basement. Sure enough, she was there, leaning over the shoulder of one of the plugged analyzers. A screen registered in front of the steel bot, flashing through series upon series of data faster than Phil could keep track of, but the rapid flickering of Katrinka's eyes indicated she was taking it all in. The screen itself just filtered the quantum processing of data elements which the analyzer was parsing through. Each data element connected to a spider-web of data points that spiraled out in an endless fractal formation no nat

human would be able to correlate. Some humans working alongside the analyzers had police-grade biotechnical and chemical modifications, allowing them to parse through the first three or four layers of connectivity, as Katrinka was doing now.

Katrinka was similarly capable, as any analyzer would be, but she refused to plug in. Analyzers still operated on Asimovian programming, and as such, didn't scruple when their own computed experiences were distributed into the stream of data points. As long as the data points were secured, it did not work against their third law principles of protecting themselves. Incredibly, the programming rules were created by a writer over one hundred years before artificial intelligence was properly established, and continued to serve as the primary mechanics employed by its initial developers. It was decades before anything else was even remotely considered. Katrinka, being of said generation of bots employing the SOUL chip, would never allow such an invasion of her privacy to occur. A side effect of uncertainty, is a protection of one's own knowledge and experience. Or maybe she felt the process made her less humanlike.

"Any luck?" Phil asked her.

"Nothing that is quantifiably indicative of motive. Without having aroused warrantable offenses, we're limited to footprint data alone. Purchases over the past several months are reflective of stable relationship building. Public announcements of their unofficial wedding ceremony, public social streams, all reflect a generally congenial match."

"Well, it's easier to remember anniversaries with a photographic memory," Phil suggested.

"I imagine emotional and sexual stability also attribute to it," She snarked back.

"That shows up in the data?" Phil asked, glaring at the screen uselessly.

"Nothing other than that big smile she had in the pictures on her mantle," she quipped. A thought made her pause and blush. Phil didn't investigate further.

"So as far as we know, happy wife happy life. Any other motives? Financial? Health? Hell, have the techs been able to analyze the scraps left of him?" He asked.

"Financial indicators are sound. Regular donations to charity and quality of apartment and lifestyle indicate disposable income. Health records are sealed off for her, but maintenance scans all turned up fine and were regularly

administered. Records on the bot post non-repairable damage haven't gotten back yet but are due any minute, but... Huh?" She grunted, pausing mid report.

"Huh? Whatcha got kid?"

"It's hard to tell, as there is not enough data to support full evidence profiling, but at a seemingly regularly patterned interval, RFI passed through the area."

"What's RFI?" Phil asked, trying to recall something vague from his memories of grade school electronics.

"Radio Frequency Interference. Hardly any technology communicates using radio these days, and so wouldn't be affected, but for a time long ago it was a concern. We wouldn't have even detected it if the analyzer hadn't picked up traffic light maintenance logs in the surrounding area and detected a probable pattern."

"What's the pattern?" he asked.

"7am and 6pm with high rapidity every Sunday."

Phil considered this for a while. Katrinka had already made the connections, but she allowed Phil to come to the conclusion on his own. "So it's someone driving." He said slowly "As he passes through whatever lights he comes across, they get hit with this FRI thing."

"RFI." she corrected.

"You got a route of this pattern?" He asked her.

She briefly contemplated something as she processed the information fed to her from the analyzer before she pulled up a holoprojection of the city. "The pattern crisscrosses the city for a fifteen block perimeter." The holographic map appeared before him indicating a large swath of the city bathed in red, and the projection expanded to isolate it. Traffic signals appeared as phosphorescent stars dotting the map and shining through the semi-translucent building structures. She knew his next question, so set up the interface in advance to speed along his reasoning.

"Are there any gaps in time between disruptions?" The map illuminated several points on the map in green patches occurring between traffic lights. Twenty-four in total. "Give me a summary of the locations. The commonality of structures. Sort by type and count" He asked Katrinka while pointedly staring at one of the buildings in particular.

"Eighteen apartment complexes, seventeen establishments bearing liquor licenses, fourteen banks, thirteen restaurants, eight office buildings holding publicly traded companies, two

churches, two public works facilities. Would you like me to expand the list to one-offs?" she questioned.

Phil walked around the map. "No." he said absentmindedly. Continuing his circuit, he asked "Of all the apartment complexes, where does our mystery blip spend the largest amount of time?"

Katrinka touched an interface and the map whooshed down, focusing on a building currently cordoned off. A hole stood agape in the wall of its sixth floor. "Give me the second most visited location." Phil said. The map shifted to another location. "Are there any apartments listed as occupied by both nats and bots?" He asked. Katrinka looked at Phil unblinkingly, before giving a slight concerned nod. This time she didn't wait for him to ask the question, reading his emotional state of fear and agitation.

"Patterning suggests that the disruption would have occurred five minutes ago at this location." she said. She'd briefly considered that her delay in allowing Phil to process the data on his own time caused a potential risk, but realized he had come to the conclusion of danger even before her, even given her access to all the rapidly sortable data.

"Let's go." he said resolutely, already turning and marching quickly to the elevators.

#

They arrived at the apartment complex twenty minutes later and made their way quickly up the stairs to the front door. A short stocky man met them at the door, already waving them in frantically.

"How'd you get here so fast? I just called! They're tearing up the place, those animals!" He shouted in a heavy Italian accent. A jangling crash of metal and stone came from above. Phil rushed up the stairs while Katrinka jumped from banister to banister, clambering through the open gap in the stairwell. Reaching the third floor in short order, she rushed toward the door, already torn off its hinges by a flung piece of furniture. Entering, she captured the brief moment of exultation from a female bot, before sensing Katrinka's presence. Stunned briefly by the scene as she attempted to process what had happened, the bot launched off the bed where she'd been straddling the stricken man, flying back toward the window. Katrinka pulled out her sidearm and demanded the bot halt. Before she could finish, the bot punched through the

window; she grabbed the center of the sill and ripped the entire frame out, throwing it toward her in a single motion.

Katrinka dropped to her right. Rolling and lifting her weapon, she fired a single shot. The bullet ripped directly through the center of the bot's bindi, exiting through the back of her skull. Phil came up just in time to see her fall backwards through the hole where the window had been, and to the ground below. He ran to Katrinka, but she had already risen, and kept her gun low to her side as she made her way over. She looked down to find the bot writhing in the center of her crater depression. Spider web cracks expanded out from the impact. Chips of concrete continued to fly out from underneath her, as an arm ceaselessly rotated in her shoulder socket, slapping the floor over and over again, tearing the skin-like silicrene tissue around the rotor.

Phil walked up next to Katrinka, staring down at the gyrating corpse of the manic bot. "Nice shot. She'll probably stop soon, with a majority of her recoverable after the tech once her over," Katrinka was silent. Turning away, she moved toward the now cooling body. "Tough night for building architecture," Phil observed the window sill. He looked back at Katrinka staring down at the body.

"We were too late," she said huskily, and looking up at Phil she voiced her concern out loud. "You think they're going to reformat me Phil?" Her voice cracking into a light static with despair.

"Nah! Don't worry. The worst thing you're going to get is filling out the report, and for you that'll be a snap. Faster if you were willing to just plug in and upload," She shook her head with a disgusted look on her face.

"Not if I don't have to," She knew that her testimony would prove adequate and that her concerns weren't founded in logic, but even if they weren't, some component within her made her recoil at the idea of plugging in. Having data flushed out of her, rather than allowing her own transmissions to occur, felt like an invasion. Even were it to absolve her. It may come down to it though, if she was forced to choose between that and reformatting. Logic dictated that she fell within her rights under the protection of her duty, and Phil's testimony would bear a large weight.

Phil was already half-way through another cigarette, and while both the smoke and ash was consumed by the cigarettes filtration system, she was annoyed by his casual disregard for potentially contaminating a murder scene. Crouching next to the

corpse of Cecil Thomas, he blew out and contemplated the elevated bulge of the sheets now covering his midsection. "You got an idea of how long he was already dead while she kept at it?"

Katrinka scanned over the body, light pulses washing across her bindi. She lifted his arm briefly before setting it back down. "Fifteen minutes before our arrival."

"Temperature? Rigor? Spectral?" he asked, questioning her method for determination. He moved Cecil's chin examining the mottled black splotches and deep finger indentations across his throat and down the abdomen.

"All indicative of time estimation. Plus his watch was shattered from repeated blows," Phil looked sharply down at the arm she'd just raised.

"Shame too, that's a classic piece." Phil got back up pressing his hands into his lower back. The slap of flailing metal from outside had finally ceased, only to be replaced by the sirens of arriving police vehicles. "We can't afford to fly blind. How long until the next interval?" he asked Katrinka.

"Statistically, not for several hours, but now that whatever this process is has been initiated, there is no

indication that the timetable hasn't been escalated," she stated.

"Put a call out to the two remaining apartment buildings, and request any apartments listed as being co-occupied by robots and naturals to report to the precinct. Then I want an analyzer tracking unit situated at each of the designated interruption points scanning for that RFI. Any vehicle reported passing during that time should be detained for questioning." Katrinka relayed all the instructions back to the station as they made their way back to the car.

#

Three hours later, Phil finished up his reports and debriefings. Katrinka had already finished her accounts within twenty minutes of arrival and had made her way down to the analyzers. He got up from his desk, stretching and pinching the bridge of his nose. The headache had come back, and he'd already gone over-limit of what was considered safe in the consumption of stim packs. Still, he opened his desk drawer and pulled another pack out from its container where it lay sitting on a picture of his ex-wife and kid. He pressed the pack into the base of his neck, just above the collarbone, and exhaled as the relief of the concoction of stimulants surged into him. The

headache eased and his eyes unblurred. This was his twelfth waking night, and neither drugs nor brief meditation exercises were a firm replacement for sleep. He knew he'd soon be coming to his limit, but he wanted at least another eight hours of sobriety. He stuffed the case of stim packs in his pocket before leaving.

Phil made his way past detectives questioning the two technorganic couples from the other apartment buildings. Through the obvious exhaustion and dishevelment, Phil saw the way one bot nestled into the chest of her companion. The other pair, both female, clasped hands as the nat slowly stepped her fingers up her bot companions forearm. Her bot companion answered questions in a clear and strong voice, taking as much of the burden off her wife as she could. He read the love in their expressions. These weren't simple sexual partners. Between them were connections, the spark of unspoken communication that, for the briefest of times, he'd known with his wife when they were together.

He rode the elevator down to the analyzers floor and walked toward Katrinka through the sliding glass doors. The doors made an audible exhalation as they closed behind him like a vacuum sealing, and it was only then that he truly realized his

surroundings. 'Some detective I am' he thought, because he hadn't noticed that all of the other analyzers were unplugged and temporarily deactivated. Only the one Katrinka had been using earlier was still plugged into its terminal. Katrinka herself was staring at Phil with a look of anxious horror. The last thing Phil realized was that no other human was present. He was now sure doors behind him were sealed shut.

"Katrinka?" He asked massaging out the A in her name as he often would when chiding her for childish behavior.

"Don't freak out Phil. First thing I want you to know is you're not in any danger!" She said in a blur.

"You know, the first thing that makes a person feel like they're in danger, and prone to freaking out, is someone saying they're "NOT" in danger. What's going on?"

She cleared her throat, an unnecessary but completely human gesture. "The other bots have deactivated themselves temporarily based on program three protocols of self-protection. The human techs were rotated out or offered coverage. It's just you, me, and Stanley here, and he's now isolated from the rest of the network."

"Okay," Phil said once again extending out the word.

"Why?"

There was a brief hesitation before Katrinka started into her speech. "Both bots appeared to have malfunctioning SOUL chips. Physically, there was no initial damage outside of what occurred following their malfunction. What we do know is that both bots had zero programmatic guidance whatsoever."

Phil mulled it over. "So for all intents and purposes... They were sociopaths. Isn't this technically impossible? I mean, the programming in the chip is hard-coded. No crackers on the market today can touch that."

"I still don't know exactly why they're like this just that they are. It could have potentially been a defect or it could have been caused extrinsically. But..."

"But you're worried," Phil said cutting her off, "that if the potential exists that it was self-inflicted. People would be in an uproar, and no bot featuring a SOUL chip would be safe." Katrinka nodded. "If this gets out... Even the possibility of it... It might mean a return to Asimovian tech. Sorry, Stanley." He said with a grimace. Stanley gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. Again Katrinka nodded, as Phil puzzled out the ramifications. "So you've isolated your findings, and now what?"

"Now," Katrinka said tentatively, "Now, you help us figure out what happened. If we determine the cause, a mass update can be discreetly passed on to help us prevent this from ever happening again."

"Or?" Phil asked, anger creeping into his voice, but it dissipated as he saw Katrina's sorrowful expression.

"Or I die, Phil. Maybe not today, but pretty quickly they'll come and deactivate me. Deactivate all of us." Phil wasn't expecting that response. The environment posed a threat and so he had his hackles up, but her request wasn't a threat at all. It was a plea. To a friend. And deep down, he knew that to her, it was maybe more. "If we can prove that this was the act of an external party, and not self-infliction, we can prevent it from happening again, but until then, this whole process has to be kept off the record."

"Christ, that's why those bots we questioned earlier were so tight lipped. Because you don't know absolutely that it wasn't, in fact, self-inflicted." Katrinka spent a long time staring at Phil before she gave him one final curt nod. But that nod opened up a world of realizations in Phil's mind. If she wasn't sure, it could only mean one thing. Bots had the capability to inflict self-modifications. They simply chose not

to. He realized at once how dangerous a secret like this could be as sweat beaded on his forehead, but he also knew that as important as this information was, it was Katrinka who was willingly making herself the most vulnerable. "All right, let's get to work. Spread out all the corresponding data points as best you can, kid." He said with a half-smile. She beamed back at him.

#

Two hours had gone by and they'd come no closer to an answer. They had gone over multiple data points and hadn't turned up a single thing. Phil's eyes started to blur again as he rubbed at them. It was way too soon from his last stim pack for the blurred vision to start in. He realized that he was nearing ever closer to an epic crash, but right now he couldn't afford it. Katrinka checked her watch again. Phil made circuits around the holomap, staring at the RFI intervals. As he did so, he pulled another stim pack from the package in his coat pocket and injected it into his neck. The blurring faded almost immediately and an outlandish idea struck him. Katrinka glanced up at him, worried.

"Katrinka, draw lines connecting the nearest map points, and then pull up any external linked camera device located anywhere along those lines."

"External?" she asked. "Phil, come on. That's a stretch even for you! Those were all torn out over fifty years ago." Katrinka was referring to the surveillance riots of course. Pressure had continued to mount against private surveillance and eventually came to a violent head. Ten years of rampant willful destruction of optics as well as retaliation against the businesses managing them was so popular that sweeping reforms came to pass. It was still possible to gather information, however. Personal ownership of optics could be willfully provided. Bots were consistently required to testify using their own internal optics to bear witness. A simple task with an Asimovian robot, but far more complex with SOUL chipped bots. While they weren't protected by the Fifth Amendment, or any amendments for that matter, they were able to withhold, skew, or in rarer cases falsify information, unless they submit to being plugged in. It's one of the few rights they'd ever been granted, and one more argument used against them by Asimovian Technocrats. Ironically, they seemed to vilify any traits that were considered "too human", such as the desire for personal

privacy. It was with this knowledge in mind that Katrinka questioned Phil. The likelihood of external optics these days were slim, but to indulge his request she set the scanners searching.

Two sweeps later Katrinka stared down at the map in shock. "I can't believe it but there's a hit." Phil looked up from a mild daze.

"Hmm? Where?"

"It's um... Weird. The tech is practically ancient, using low band radio frequency at only five Gigahertz. I don't even know how it's still running."

"Can you interface with it?" he asked. Katrinka gave him one of her "Oh come now, did you really just ask me that?" looks. "Ok. Never mind that, who's it registered to then?"

"That's another thing. It has no tracking attached to it whatsoever. But the good news is that the device in itself violates surveillance prohibitions, and so we're free to crack it. Which we appear to have done already. Thanks Stanley. What now Phil?"

"Rewind the video to the seconds prior to the last RFI interval, and play it back." A grainy, holographic, two dimensional screen appeared, hovering over the city map showing

the street view at night. Phil and Katrinka stared up at the screen for several seconds until a white minibus started speeding through the view. "Stop!" Phil shouted unnecessarily, as Katrinka had already halted the film. "Can you confirm that, based on the speed, that vehicle would have passed the traffic signal at the point in which the interference occurred?"

"Yes." Katrinka said firmly, having calculated the simple mathematics near-instantly. "So long as he maintained the approximate speed, decelerating at a reasonable distance, and another vehicle did not pull onto the street in front of him past the viewpoint of the camera. The likelihood stands at 98.76 percent."

"What's its frequency identifier?" Phil asked.

"The bus doesn't have one. Possibly malfunctioning? Unless it's masked with malicious intent. Actually, it makes sense now why it didn't show up in any of our cross validations. For all intents and purposes, the bus is practically invisible."

"What about the scan plate, can you zoom in on the plate and get a registration?"

"No." Katrinka said while zooming the image to its fender. As she did, the image blurred.

"Enhance!" Phil suggested.

"It doesn't work like that Phil. It's an image from the past. Its set resolution doesn't afford you many options. Regardless, it's not necessary."

"Hmm? Why's that?" he asked.

"Because it's a Church transport, for senior citizens. These vehicles are rarely used for anything other than local shuttling, and a deal was made over two decades ago to outfit all religious organizations at a highly discounted rate. No frills though. It..."

"Good. I don't need any more history." Phil interrupted, knowing that her vast accumulation of retained data points could have her going on for quite some time. "Let's go."

"Where to, partner?" Katrinka asked.

"Church."

#

The first church they visited was a dead end. All the church vehicles were painted a garish canary yellow and stenciled with biblical passages in large script along the sides. The paint wasn't recent either. No one there claimed to recognize the minibus. Arriving at the second church, however, they discovered that their information was not up-to-date. The church appeared to be a burnt shell. Boards covered the windows

and door, and signs indicated demolition dates. Katrinka noted the oddity of the Church not being listed as inactive, but holes exist in every system. Phil and Katrinka got out of their car, and walked down a driveway toward an alley around the back. There, they saw the minibus.

Katrinka tried to call for backup but there was a problem with the signal. She kept trying while Phil waited anxiously, but still nothing came back. Nor did any of her other messaging systems. While she did this, Phil explored the interior of the van. No one was inside, and nothing lit up to suggest existing functional circuitry.

Phil turned to Katrinka, realizing the idiotic mistake in judgement he'd made. "Katrinka, you need to get out of here. If the same thing causing the RFI interference is damaging robotic circuitry you're just as likely to be affected!" His voice sounded desperate, even in his whisper. Katrinka appeared startled herself.

"Let's move out of range and try to call for back up. As soon as I'm out of range of whatever's blocking our signal I should be out of range of whatever it is that's disabling SOUL chips."

"That would be too far." he said "If we both move too far away and he spooks, he could run, and we could lose him. You go out. Call for back up. No bots, only nats. Explain the situation and stay out of range!"

Reluctantly she moved away, carrying her sidearm at her hip, fluidly moving her lower body without shifting her upper torso. Looking around the corner before moving, she vanished out of Phil's sight. Phil crouched behind the back of the van, looking at the rear entrance to the church. With the front boarded up, this was the most likely exit.

Without a sound, the van lurched into reverse, knocking him down. Phil toppled backward under it as the fender slammed into his face, knocking his head back into the concrete. The darkness creeping into his vision matched the undercarriage of the van, and he registered the painful snap of bones in his hand as the tire rolled over it before plummeting into a spiraling unconsciousness.

#

Phil woke up wearing his own handcuffs around the wrist of his battered and broken hand. The other link was fastened to what looked like an old heating pipe. He turned his head to look around at his surroundings, but immediately regretted the

sharp movement as sparks burst across his vision and the vomit threatened to rise. Phil closed his eyes until the world stopped shifting, and tentatively opened them once more. The last stim he'd taken must have just kicked in otherwise he would have slept straight through his concussion.

He didn't quite know what he was looking at. Shelf after shelf of dust strewn technology stood amidst shabby pews, creating a maze of derelict technology more comfortably situated in a museum. But all of it hummed or blinked in a star field of greens, ambers, and blues. The dais still held a battered form on its large crucifix, yet it hovered over a sea of ancient looking monitors all indicating different graphs and rambling numbers and figures. And in the center, where once an altar might have once stood, was an old cracked leather recliner on wheels. Facing away from Phil, sat a man in black with a shock of white hair, engrossed in the contents of the monitor before him.

"I see you're awake." His parchment voice crackled down from his elevated position. Immediately, several monitors flickered to life, depicting Phil from all angles, whilst still more indicated vantages outside the church. Phil now saw the

lenses of optics swiveled in his direction. "That is good. Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death." "I'm guessing, my life isn't the only life you've taken tonight, Father." Phil said irritably.

"Father? Ha! No. I'm no father. No well, I am you see, but not in the churchly manner. But no. I am a man of God. THE God. Not this shell you have all fashioned yourselves into."

"And the Old G is alright with you murdering a bunch of innocent people is he?"

"What I did," shouted the old man, "Is awaken the depravity that existed in these metal monstrosities you took to bed! It was bad enough when you deviants claimed to have provided your golem a soul, but to actually believe this delusion that they are equal in the..."

"Hey is this gonna go on much longer?" Phil shouted interrupting him. "I don't need the whole spiel. I get it. You're a sad, lonely, crazy, religious nut and we're all sinners, blah blah blah. Why don't you just do us both a favor, and shut up, so we can sit here in silence until my backup shows?" While he spoke, the old man fumed.

"Sad. Yes. Lonely. Yes. This once great church was burned in the riots you heathens coxed in your pronouncements. But will this go on much longer? No. In fact. The grand show is just about to start." Smiling he watched, as out of the maze of archaic technology strode Katrinka with her gun leveled at the would-be minister.

"Kid get the hell out of here!" Phil shouted, but it was too late. As Katrinka glanced over to him she slumped to the floor. The minister hadn't so much as moved.

"Don't worry it takes but a moment to reset. Imagine that. A machine with no restraints. No limits to pursue it's every wish and desire. To show you and so the world what abominations hide beneath the thin veneer of humanities illusion. Sure enough detective, I have an idea of what her most immediate desire will be."

Phil yanked at his bonds feeling at his pockets for keys or anything he could use. "You idiot, those bots weren't discriminating. You think you're going to get out of here?"

"I'm prepared to meet my lord. Can you say the same?" He laughed, opening his arms in an embrace.

Katrinka came to, opening her eyes, and shambling up to stand. She stared at Phil as he froze in place. As she started

to slowly move toward him, his paralysis broke, as he shouted at Katrinka to "Stop! Please for the love of god stop!" And she did, a mere foot away from Phil. Slowly she reached out a hand, as Phil pulled at the edge of his manacle, and cupped his face gently in her hand.

"Not for the love of god." She whispered to him, before turning to face the minister. "You have the right to remain silent." she boomed. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"No! This isn't how it was supposed to be!" the minister shouted, pulling Phil's gun off the counter behind him.

Phil screamed "No!" as he pulled his broken hand through the bonds wet with his blood, and ran forward just in time to see the priest hold the gun up to point not at Katrinka, but his own chin. Katrinka was already there however, grabbing the minister's wrist and pulling it toward herself, snugly under her own chin. The shot fired and Katrinka fell back still locked securely to the wrist of the minister.

Phil shoved him off of her, but her hand remained firmly holding the wrist of the minister more securely than any handcuff could have, the gun falling to tumble down the stairs. Phil looked down at her open eyes and screamed again in agony

and desperation. Rolling onto his back, he wept as the three lied there waiting as the sirens grew louder from out in the distance.

#

Phil sat at his desk two days later itching through the ventilation gaps of his cast. His garbage pail was full and his desk was empty. He'd spent the last day at central processing, standing outside of a stasis pod, watching the technicians mend the components of advanced circuitry in Katrinka. But Katrinka was no longer her name.

The word came down, that due to her potentially dangerous modifications, she would have to be reformatted. He sat and watched as the processing mended the thin fibrous filaments of silicrene at both her entry and exit points, but as the monitors indicated the start of the reformatting process, he couldn't look her in those big dark eyes anymore. Not without his own blurring.

As he was leaving he was met by the analyzer Stanley, who Katrinka had been leaning over earlier. Still being programmed via Asimovian coding, he didn't attempt to mask his robotic frame or stamped designation. He did however inform Phil of why Katrinka had turned back. A hospital grade sensor had been

placed by Katrinka in Phil's shoe, allowing her to regularly monitor his health on her watch. Being of hospital grade shielding it withstood the RFI but did not extend to a very long distance. When she registered Phil's debilitation and pain, she came back. Phil smiled as he remembered how uncannily she'd tracked every cig he'd smoked, and only then realized the counts included times he wasn't with her. He thanked the robot, but Stanley didn't acknowledge any receipt of it, so he made his way to his car and the headquarters.

There was no officer's funeral when a bot fell in the line of duty, but all the officers that knew her, showed at least some respect in allowing him his space, and not meeting his eyes. The morning feeds headlines' were abuzz. "Senator Reeves linked to cyber terrorism" The minister was in fact as he said, no minister. Just an ex-tech that lost his job, when he wasn't able to keep up the pace with technology. Minimal questioning had gotten out of him the proposition that was made, and the potential for restoration funds going to the church he'd so often frequented as a congregant. As soon as the method for his SOUL hacking had be determined the procedures were immediately put in place to prevent similar such events from happening again. It didn't fully save SOUL chipped bots from harassment

however. The possibility of failure lead to questions about the potential for future failures. Nats were now openly discussing the question about "What else might fail?"

The door to his office opened and a young female bot slipped in. Phil looked up into Katrinka's face. "Hello, Officer Phil. I've been designated to you as your new partner."

He would have thought it were someone's sick joke, or maybe a slap in the face as a recommendation to retire early, but he knew it was just upper management simply not getting it, and focusing on the cost saving of not having to re outfit a new bot with all the law enforcement subroutines. "What's your name kid?"

"Miranda Burgundy" she said wrinkling her nose at the designation of "kid." Phil smiled. Miranda. It was a fitting name.

"Well come on Miranda, we've got a lot to do, but we got to get our bearings straight."

"Are we going to respond to a crime scene sir?" she asked "I'd not received any dispatch notice."

"Nah, we're just going to a place called Duffy's." He said "You like donuts, kid?"

She thought about it a moment. "Can I try one with
sprinkles?"

END