

I, Robot

Forematter:

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In the words of Woody Guthrie:

"This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do."

Overclocked is dedicated to Pat York, who made my stories better.

—

Introduction to I, Robot

I was suckled on the Asimov Robots books, taken down off my father's bookshelf and enjoyed again and again. I read dozens of Asimov novels, and my writing career began in earnest when I started to sell stories to Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, which I had read for so long as I'd had the pocket money to buy it on the stands.

When Wired Magazine asked me to interview the director of the film *I, Robot*, I went back and re-read that old canon. I was struck immediately by one of the thin places in Asimov's world-building: how could you have a society where only one company was allowed to make only one kind of robot?

Exploring this theme turned out to be a hoot. I worked in some of Orwell's most recognizable furniture from 1984, and set the action in my childhood home in suburban Toronto, 55 Picola Court. The main character's daughter is named for my god-daughter, Ada Trouble Norton. I had a blast working in the vernacular of the old-time futurism of Asimov and Heinlein, calling toothpaste "dentifrice" and sneaking in references to "the search engine."

My "I, Robot" is an allegory about digital rights management technology, of course. This is the stuff that nominally stops us from infringing copyright (yeah, right, how's that working out for you, Mr Entertainment Exec?) and turns our computers into something that controls us, rather than enabling us.

This story was written at a writer's workshop on Toronto Island, at the Gibraltar Point center, and was immeasurably improved by my friend Pat York, herself a talented writer who died later that year in a car wreck. Not a day goes by that I don't miss Pat. This story definitely owes its strength to Pat, and it's a tribute to her that it won the 2005 Locus Award and was a finalist for the Hugo and British Science Fiction Award in the same year.

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I, Robot

(Originally published on The Infinite Matrix, April 2005)

Arturo Icaza de Arana-Goldberg, Police Detective Third Grade, United North American Trading Sphere, Third District, Fourth Prefecture, Second Division (Parkdale) had had many adventures in his distinguished career, running crooks to ground with an unbeatable combination of instinct and unstinting devotion to duty. He'd been decorated on three separate occasions by his commander and by the Regional Manager for Social Harmony, and his mother kept a small shrine dedicated to his press clippings and commendations that occupied most of the cramped sitting-room of her flat off Steeles Avenue.

No amount of policeman's devotion and skill availed him when it came to making his twelve-year-old get ready for school, though.

"Haul *ass*, young lady—out of bed, on your feet, shit-shower-shave, or I swear to God, I will beat you purple and shove you out the door jaybird naked. Capeesh?"

The mound beneath the covers groaned and hissed. "You are a terrible father," it said. "And I never loved you." The voice was indistinct and muffled by the pillow.

"Boo hoo," Arturo said, examining his nails. "You'll regret that when I'm dead of cancer."

The mound—whose name was Ada Trouble Icaza de Arana-Goldberg—threw her covers off and sat bolt upright. "You're dying of cancer? is it testicle cancer?" Ada clapped her hands and squealed. "Can I have your stuff?"

"Ten minutes, your rottenness," he said, and then his breath caught momentarily in his breast as he saw,

fleetingly, his ex-wife's morning expression, not seen these past twelve years, come to life in his daughter's face. Pouty, pretty, sleepy and guile-less, and it made him realize that his daughter was becoming a woman, growing away from him. She was, and he was not ready for that. He shook it off, patted his razor-burn and turned on his heel. He knew from experience that once roused, the munchkin would be scrounging the kitchen for whatever was handy before dashing out the door, and if he hurried, he'd have eggs and sausage on the table before she made her brief appearance. Otherwise he'd have to pry the sugar-cereal out of her hands—and she fought dirty.

#

In his car, he prodded at his phone. He had her wiretapped, of course. He was a cop—every phone and every computer was an open book to him, so that this involved nothing more than dialing a number on his special copper's phone, entering her number and a PIN, and then listening as his daughter had truck with a criminal enterprise.

“Welcome to ExcuseClub! There are 43 members on the network this morning. You have five excuses to your credit. Press one to redeem an excuse—” She toned one. “Press one if you need an adult—” *Tone*. “Press one if you need a woman; press two if you need a man—” *Tone*. “Press one if your excuse should be delivered by your doctor; press two for your spiritual representative; press three for your case-worker; press four for your psycho-health specialist; press five for your son; press six for your father—” *Tone*. “You have selected to have your excuse delivered by your father. Press one if this excuse is intended for your case-worker; press two for your psycho-health specialist; press three for your principal—” *Tone*. “Please dictate your excuse at the sound of the beep. When you have finished, press the pound key.”

“This is Detective Arturo Icaza de Arana-Goldberg. My daughter was sick in the night and I've let her sleep in. She'll be in for lunchtime.” *Tone*.

“Press one to hear your message; press two to have your message dispatched to a network-member.” *Tone*.

“Thank you.”

The pen-trace data scrolled up Arturo's phone—number called, originating number, call-time. This was the third time he'd caught his daughter at this game, and each time, the pen-trace data had been useless, a dead-end lead that terminated with a phone-forwarding service tapped into one of the dodgy offshore switches that the blessed blasted UNATS brass had recently acquired on the cheap to handle the surge of mobile telephone calls. Why couldn't they just stick to UNATS Robotics equipment, like the good old days? Those Oceanic switches had more

back-doors than a speakeasy, trade agreements be damned. They were attractive nuisances, invitations to criminal activity.

Arturo fumed and drummed his fingers on the steering-wheel. Each time he'd caught Ada at this, she'd used the extra time to crawl back into bed for a leisurely morning, but who knew if today was the day she took her liberty and went downtown with it, to some parental nightmare of a drug-den? Some place where the old pervert chickenhawks hung out, the kind of men he arrested in burlesque house raids, men who masturbated into their hats under their tables and then put them back onto their shining pates, dripping cold, diseased serum onto their scalps. He clenched his hands on the steering wheel and cursed.

In an ideal world, he'd simply follow her. He was good at tailing, and his unmarked car with its tinted windows was a UNATS Robotics standard compact #2, indistinguishable from the tens of thousands of others just like it on the streets of Toronto. Ada would never know that the curb-crawler tailing her was her sucker of a father, making sure that she turned up to get her brains sharpened instead of turning into some stunadz dooper with her underage butt hanging out of a little skirt on Jarvis Street.

In the real world, Arturo had thirty minutes to make a forty minute downtown and crosstown commute if he was going to get to the station house on-time for the quarterly all-hands Social Harmony briefing. Which meant that he needed to be in two places at once, which meant that he had to use—the robot.

Swallowing bile, he speed-dialed a number on his phone.

“This is R Peed Robbert, McNicoll and Don Mills bus-shelter.”

“That's nice. This is Detective Icaza de Arana-Goldberg, three blocks east of you on Picoia. Proceed to my location at once, priority urgent, no sirens.”

“Acknowledged. It is my pleasure to do you a service, Detective.”

“Shut up,” he said, and hung up the phone. The R Peed—Robot, Police Department—robots were the worst, programmed to be friendly to a fault, even as they surveilled and snitched out every person who walked past their eternally vigilant, ever-remembering electrical eyes and brains.

The R Peeds could outrun a police car on open ground or highway. He'd barely had time to untwist his clenched hands from the steering wheel when R Peed Robbert was at his window, politely rapping on the smoked glass. He didn't want to roll down the window. Didn't want to smell the dry, machine-oil smell of a robot. He phoned it instead.

“You are now tasked to me, Detective’s override, acknowledge.”

The metal man bowed, its symmetrical, simplified features pleasant and guileless. It clicked its heels together with an audible *snick* as those marvelous, spring-loaded, nuclear-powered gams whined through their parody of obedience. “Acknowledged, Detective. It is my pleasure to do—”

“Shut up. You will discreetly surveil 55 Picola Crescent until such time as Ada Trouble Icaza de Arana-Goldberg, Social Harmony serial number 0MDY2-T3937 leaves the premises. Then you will maintain discreet surveillance. If she deviates more than 10 percent from the optimum route between here and Don Mills Collegiate Institute, you will notify me. Acknowledge.”

“Acknowledged, Detective. It is my—”

He hung up and told the UNATS Robotics mechanism running his car to get him down to the station house as fast as it could, angry with himself and with Ada—whose middle name was Trouble, after all—for making him deal with a robot before he’d had his morning meditation and destim session. The name had been his ex-wife’s idea, something she’d insisted on long enough to make sure that it got onto the kid’s birth certificate before defecting to Eurasia with their life’s savings, leaving him with a new baby and the deep suspicion of his co-workers who wondered if he wouldn’t go and join her.

His ex-wife. He hadn’t thought of her in years. Well, months. Weeks, certainly. She’d been a brilliant computer scientist, the valedictorian of her Positronic Complexity Engineering class at the UNATS Robotics school at the University of Toronto. Dumping her husband and her daughter was bad enough, but the worst of it was that she dumped her country and its way of life. Now she was ensconced in her own research lab in Beijing, making the kinds of runaway Positronics that made the loathsome robots of UNATS look categorically beneficent.

He itched to wiretap her, to read her email or listen in on her phone conversations. He could have done that when they were still together, but he never had. If he had, he would have found out what she was planning. He could have talked her out of it.

And then what, Artie? said the nagging voice in his head. *Arrest her if she wouldn’t listen to you? March her down to the station house in handcuffs and have her put away for treason? Send her to the reeducation camp with your little daughter still in her belly?*

Shut up, he told the nagging voice, which had a robotic quality to it for all its sneering cruelty, a tenor of syrupy false friendliness. He called up the pen-trace data and texted it to the phreak squad. They had bots that handled this kind of routine work and they

texted him back in an instant. He remembered when that kind of query would take a couple of hours, and he liked the fast response, but what about the conversations he’d have with the phone cop who called him back, the camaraderie, the back-and-forth?

TRACE TERMINATES WITH A VIRTUAL SERVICE CIRCUIT AT SWITCH PNG.433-GKRJC. VIRTUAL CIRCUIT FORWARDS TO A COMPROMISED “ZOMBIE” SYSTEM IN NINTH DISTRICT, FIRST PREFECTURE. ZOMBIE HAS BEEN SHUT DOWN AND LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT IS EN ROUTE FOR PICKUP AND FORENSICS. IT IS MY PLEASURE TO DO YOU A SERVICE, DETECTIVE.

How could you have a back-and-forth with a message like that?

He looked up Ninth/First in the metric-analog map converter: KEY WEST, FL.

So, there you had it. A switch made in Papua New-Guinea (which persisted in conjuring up old Oceanic war photos of bone-in-nose types from his boyhood, though now that they’d been at war with Eurasia for so long, it was hard to even find someone who didn’t think that the war had *always* been with Eurasia, that Oceania hadn’t *always* been UNATS’s ally), forwarding calls to a computer that was so far south, it was practically in the middle of the Caribbean, hardly a stone’s throw from the CAFTA region, which was well-known to harbor Eurasian saboteur and terrorist elements.

The car shuddered as it wove in and out of the lanes on the Don Valley Parkway, barreling for the Gardiner Express Way, using his copper’s override to make the thick, slow traffic part ahead of him. He wasn’t supposed to do this, but as between a minor infraction and pissing off the man from Social Harmony, he knew which one he’d pick.

His phone rang again. It was R Peed Robbert, checking in. “Hello, Detective,” it said, its voice crackling from bad reception. “Subject Ada Trouble Icaza de Arana-Goldberg has deviated from her route. She is continuing north on Don Mills past Van Horne and is continuing toward Sheppard.”

Sheppard meant the Sheppard subway, which meant that she was going farther. “Continue discreet surveillance.” He thought about the overcoat men with their sticky hats. “If she attempts to board the subway, alert the truancy patrol.” He cursed again. Maybe she was just going to the mall. But he couldn’t go up there himself and make sure, and it wasn’t like a robot would be any use in restraining her, she’d just second-law it into letting her go. Useless castrating clanking job-stealing dehumanizing—

She was almost certainly just going to the mall. She was a smart kid, a good kid—a rotten kid, to be sure,

but good-rotten. Chances were she'd be trying on clothes and flirting with boys until lunch and then walking boldly back into class. He ballparked it at an 80 percent probability. If it had been a perp, 80 percent might have been good enough.

But this was his Ada. Dammit. He had 10 minutes until the Social Harmony meeting started, and he was still 15 minutes away from the stationhouse—and 20 from Ada.

“Tail her,” he said. “Just tail her. Keep me up to date on your location at 90-second intervals.”

“It is my pleasure to—”

He dropped the phone on the passenger seat and went back to fretting about the Social Harmony meeting.

#

The man from Social Harmony noticed right away that Arturo was checking his phone at 90-second intervals. He was a bald, thin man with a pronounced Adam's apple, beak-nose and shiny round head that combined to give him the profile of something predatory and fast. In his natty checked suit and pink tie, the Social Harmony man was the stuff of nightmares, the kind of eagle-eyed supercop who could spot Arturo's attention flicking for the barest moment every 90 seconds to his phone and then back to the meeting.

“Detective?” he said.

Arturo looked up from his screen, keeping his expression neutral, not acknowledging the mean grins from the other four ranking detectives in the meeting. Silently, he turned his phone face-down on the meeting table.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, the latest stats show a sharp rise in grey-market electronics importing and other tariff-breaking crimes, mostly occurring in open-air market stalls and from sidewalk blankets. I know that many in law enforcement treat this kind of thing as mere hand-to-hand piracy, not worth troubling with, but I want to assure you, gentlemen and lady, that Social Harmony takes these crimes very seriously indeed.”

The Social Harmony man lifted his computer onto the desk, steadying it with both hands, then plugged it into the wall socket. Detective Shainblum went to the wall and unlatched the cover for the projector-wire and dragged it over to the Social Harmony computer and plugged it in, snapping shut the hardened collar. The sound of the projector-fan spinning up was like a helicopter.

“Here,” the Social Harmony man said, bringing up a slide, “here we have what appears to be a standard AV set-top box from Korea. Looks like a UNATS

Robotics player, but it's a third the size and plays twice as many formats. Random Social Harmony audits have determined that as much as forty percent of UNATS residents have this device or one like it in their homes, despite its illegality. It may be that one of you detectives has such a device in your home, and it's likely that one of your family members does.”

He advanced the slide. Now they were looking at a massive car-wreck on a stretch of highway somewhere where the pine-trees grew tall. The wreck was so enormous that even for the kind of seasoned veteran of road-fatality porn who was accustomed to adding up the wheels and dividing by four it was impossible to tell exactly how many cars were involved.

“Components from a Eurasian bootleg set-top box were used to modify the positronic brains of three cars owned by teenagers near Goderich. All modifications were made at the same garage. These modifications allowed these children to operate their vehicles unsafely so that they could participate in drag racing events on major highways during off-hours. This is the result. Twenty-two fatalities, nine major injuries. Three minors—besides the drivers—killed, and one pregnant woman.

“We've shut down the garage and taken those responsible into custody, but it doesn't matter. The Eurasians deliberately manufacture their components to interoperate with UNATS Robotics brains, and so long as their equipment circulates within UNATS borders, there will be moderately skilled hackers who take advantage of this fact to introduce dangerous, anti-social modifications into our nation's infrastructure.

“This quarter is the quarter that Social Harmony and law enforcement dry up the supply of Eurasian electronics. We have added new sniffers and border-patrols, new customs agents and new detector vans. Beat officers have been instructed to arrest any street dealer they encounter and district attorneys will be asking for the maximum jail time for them. This is the war on the home-front, detectives, and it's every bit as serious as the shooting war.

“Your part in this war, as highly trained, highly decorated detectives, will be to use snitches, arrest-trails and seized evidence to track down higher-level suppliers, the ones who get the dealers their goods. And then Social Harmony wants you to get *their* suppliers, and so on, up the chain—to run the corruption to ground and to bring it to a halt. The Social Harmony dossier on Eurasian importers is updated hourly, and has a high-capacity positronic interface that is available to answer your questions and accept your input for synthesis into its analytical model. We are relying on you to feed the dossier, to give it the raw materials and then to use it to win this war.”

The Social Harmony man paged through more atrocity slides, scenes from the home-front: poisoned buildings with berserk life-support systems, violent kung-fu movies playing in the background in crack-houses, then kids playing sexually explicit, violent arcade games imported from Japan. Arturo's hand twitched toward his mobile. What was Ada up to now?

The meeting drew to a close and Arturo risked looking at his mobile under the table. R. Peed Robbert had checked in five more times, shadowing Ada around the mall and then had fallen silent. Arturo cursed. Fucking robots were useless. Social Harmony should be hunting down UNATS Robotics products, too.

The Social Harmony man cleared his throat meaningfully. Arturo put the phone away. "Detective Icaza de Arana-Goldberg?"

"Sir," he said, gathering up his personal computer so that he'd have an excuse to go—no one could be expected to hold one of UNATS Robotics's heavy luggables for very long.

The Social Harmony man stepped in close enough that Arturo could smell the eggs and coffee on his breath. "I hope we haven't kept you from anything important, detective."

"No, sir," Arturo said, shifting the computer in his arms. "My apologies. Just monitoring a tail from an R Peed unit."

"I see," the Social Harmony man said. "Listen, you know these components that the Eurasians are turning out. It's no coincidence that they interface so well with UNATS Robotics equipment: they're using defected UNATS Robotics engineers and scientists to design their electronics for maximum interoperability." The Social Harmony man let that hang in the air. Defected scientists. His ex-wife was the highest-ranking UNATS technician to go over to Eurasia. This was her handiwork, and the Social Harmony man wanted to be sure that Arturo understood that.

But Arturo had already figured that out during the briefing. His ex-wife was thousands of kilometers away, but he was keenly aware that he was always surrounded by her handiwork. The little illegal robot-pet eggs they'd started seeing last year: she'd made him one of those for their second date, and now they were draining the productive hours of half the children of UNATS, demanding to be "fed" and "hugged." His had died within 48 hours of her giving it to him.

He shifted the computer in his arms some more and let his expression grow pained. "I'll keep that in mind, sir," he said.

"You do that," said the man from Social Harmony.

#

He phoned R Peed Robbert the second he reached his desk. The phone rang three times, then disconnected. He redialed. Twice. Then he grabbed his jacket and ran to the car.

A light autumn rain had started up, ending the Indian summer that Toronto—the Fourth Prefecture in the new metric scheme—had been enjoying. It made the roads slippery and the UNATS Robotics chauffeur skittish about putting the hammer down on the Don Valley Parkway. He idly fantasized about finding a set-top box and plugging it into his car somehow so that he could take over the driving without alerting his superiors.

Instead, he redialed R Peed Robbert, but the robot wasn't even ringing any longer. He zoomed in on the area around Sheppard and Don Mills with his phone and put out a general call for robots. More robots.

"This is R Peed Froderick, Fairview Mall parking lot, third level."

Arturo sent the robot R Peed Robbert's phone number and set it to work translating that into a locator-beacon code and then told it to find Robbert and report in.

"It is my—"

He watched R Peed Froderick home in on the locator for Robbert, which was close by, at the other end of the mall, near the Don Valley Parkway exit. He switched to a view from Froderick's electric eyes, but quickly switched away, nauseated by the sickening leaps and spins of an R Peed moving at top speed, clanging off walls and ceilings.

His phone rang. It was R Peed Froderick.

"Hello, Detective. I have found R Peed Robbert. The Peed unit has been badly damaged by some kind of electromagnetic pulse. I will bring him to the nearest station-house for forensic analysis now."

"Wait!" Arturo said, trying to understand what he'd been told. The Peed units were so *efficient*—by the time they'd given you the sitrep, they'd already responded to the situation in perfect police procedure, but the problem was they worked so fast you couldn't even think about what they were doing, couldn't formulate any kind of hypothesis. Electromagnetic pulse? The Peed units were hardened against snooping, sniffing, pulsing, sideband and brute-force attacks. You'd have to hit one with a bolt of lightning to kill it.

"Wait there," Arturo said. "Do not leave the scene. Await my presence. Do not modify the scene or allow

anyone else to do so. Acknowledge.”

“It is my—”

But this time, it wasn't Arturo switching off the phone, it was the robot. Had the robot just hung up on him? He redialed it. No answer.

He reached under his dash and flipped the first and second alert switches and the car leapt forward. He'd have to fill out some serious paperwork to justify a two-switch override on the Parkway, but two robots was more than a coincidence.

Besides, a little paperwork was nothing compared to the fireworks ahead when he phoned up Ada to ask her what she was doing out of school.

He hit her speed-dial and fumed while the phone rang three times. Then it cut into voicemail.

He tried a pen-trace, but Ada hadn't made any calls since her ExcuseClub call that morning. He texted the phreak squad to see if they could get a fix on her location from the bug in her phone, but it was either powered down or out of range. He put a watch on it—any location data it transmitted when it got back to civilization would be logged.

It was possible that she was just in the mall. It was a big place—some of the cavernous stores were so well-shielded with radio-noisy animated displays that they gonked any phones brought inside them. She could be with her girlfriends, trying on brassieres and having a real bonding moment.

But there was no naturally occurring phenomenon associated with the mall that nailed R Peeds with bolts of lightning.

#

He approached the R Peeds cautiously, using his copper's override to make the dumb little positronic brain in the emergency exit nearest their last known position open up for him without tipping off the building's central brain.

He crept along a service corridor, heading for a door that exited into the mall. He put one hand on the doorknob and the other on his badge, took a deep breath and stepped out.

A mall security guard nearly jumped out of his skin as he emerged. He reached for his pepper-spray and Arturo swept it out of his hand as he flipped his badge up and showed it to the man. “Police,” said, in the cop-voice, the one that worked on everyone except his daughter and his ex-wife and the bloody robots.

“Sorry,” the guard said, recovering his pepper spray. He had an Oceanic twang in his voice, something Arturo had been hearing more and more as the

crowded islands of the South Pacific boiled over UNATS.

Before them, in a pile, were many dead robots: both of the R Peed units, a pair of mall-sweepers, a flying cambot, and a squat, octopus-armed maintenance robot, lying in a lifeless tangle. Some of them were charred around their seams, and there was the smell of fried motherboards in the air.

As they watched, a sweeper bot swept forward and grabbed the maintenance bot by one of its fine manipulators.

“Oi, stoppit,” the security guard said, and the robot second-lawed to an immediate halt.

“No, that's fine, go back to work,” Arturo said, shooting a look at the rent-a-cop. He watched closely as the sweeper bot began to drag the heavy maintenance unit away, thumbing the backup number into his phone with one hand. He wanted more cops on the scene, real ones, and fast.

The sweeper bot managed to take one step backwards towards its service corridor when the lights dimmed and a crack-*bang* sound filled the air. Then it, too was lying on the ground. Arturo hit send on his phone and clamped it to his head, and as he did, noticed the strong smell of burning plastic. He looked at his phone: the screen had gone charred black, and its little idiot lights were out. He flipped it over and pried out the battery with a fingernail, then yelped and dropped it—it was hot enough to raise a blister on his fingertip, and when it hit the ground, it squished meltfully against the mall-tiles.

“Mine's dead, too, mate,” the security guard said. “Everyfing is—cash registers, bots, credit-cards.”

Fearing the worst, Arturo reached under his jacket and withdrew his sidearm. It was a UNATS Robotics model, with a little snitch-brain that recorded when, where and how it was drawn. He worked the action and found it frozen in place. The gun was as dead as the robot. He swore.

“Give me your pepper spray and your truncheon,” he said to the security guard.

“No way,” the guard said. “Getcherown. It's worth my job if I lose these.”

“I'll have you deported if you give me one more second's worth of bullshit,” Arturo said. Ada had led the first R Peed unit here, and it had been fried by some piece of very ugly infowar equipment. He wasn't going to argue with this Oceanic boat-person for one instant longer. He reached out and took the pepper spray out of the guard's hand. “Truncheon,” he said.

“I've got your bloody badge number,” the security

guard said. “And I’ve got witnesses.” He gestured at the hovering mall workers, checkout girls in stripey aprons and suit salesmen with oiled-down hair and pink ties.

“Bully for you,” Arturo said. He held out his hand. The security guard withdrew his truncheon and passed it to Arturo—its lead-weighted heft felt right, something comfortably low-tech that couldn’t be shorted out by electromagnetic pulses. He checked his watch, saw that it was dead.

“Find a working phone and call 911. Tell them that there’s a Second Division Detective in need of immediate assistance. Clear all these people away from here and set up a cordon until the police arrive. Capeesh?” He used the cop voice.

“Yeah, I get it, Officer.” the security guard said. He made a shooing motion at the mall-rats. “Move it along, people, step away.” He stepped to the top of the escalator and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Oi, Andy, c’mere and keep an eye on this lot while I make a call, all right?”

#

The dead robots made a tall pile in front of the entrance to a derelict storefront that had once housed a little-old-lady shoe-store. They were stacked tall enough that if Arturo stood on them, he could reach the acoustic tiles of the drop-ceiling. Job one was to secure the area, which meant killing the infowar device, wherever it was. Arturo’s first bet was on the storefront, where an attacker who knew how to pick a lock could work in peace, protected by the brown butcher’s paper over the windows. A lot less conspicuous than the ceiling, anyway.

He nudged the door with the truncheon and found it securely locked. It was a glass door and he wasn’t sure he could kick it in without shivering it to flinders. Behind him, another security guard—Andy—looked on with interest.

“Do you have a key for this door?”

“Umm,” Andy said.

“Do you?”

Andy sidled over to him. “Well, the thing is, we’re not supposed to have keys, they’re supposed to be locked up in the property management office, but kids get in there sometimes, we hear them, and by the time we get back with the keys, they’re gone. So we made a couple sets of keys, you know, just in case—”

“Enough,” Arturo said. “Give them here and then get back to your post.”

The security guard fished up a key from his pants-pocket that was warm from proximity to his skinny

thigh. It made Arturo conscious of how long it had been since he’d worked with human colleagues. It felt a little gross. He slid the key into the lock and turned it, then wiped his hand on his trousers and picked up the truncheon.

The store was dark, lit only by the exit-sign and the edges of light leaking in around the window coverings, but as Arturo’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, he made out the shapes of the old store fixtures. His nose tickled from the dust.

“Police,” he said, on general principle, narrowing his eyes and reaching for the lightswitch. He hefted the truncheon and waited.

Nothing happened. He edged forward. The floor was dust-free—maintained by some sweeper robot, no doubt—but the countertops and benches were furred with it. He scanned it for disturbances. There, by the display window on his right: a shoe-rack with visible hand- and finger-prints. He sidled over to it, snapped on a rubber glove and prodded it. It was set away from the wall, at an angle, as though it had been moved aside and then shoved back. Taking care not to disturb the dust too much, he inched it away from the wall.

He slid it half a centimeter, then noticed the tripwire near the bottom of the case, straining its length. Hastily but carefully, he nudged the case back. He wanted to peer in the crack between the case and the wall, but he had a premonition of a robotic arm snaking out and skewering his eyeball.

He felt so impotent just then that he nearly did it anyway. What did it matter? He couldn’t control his daughter, his wife was working to destroy the social fabric of UNATS, and he was rendered useless because the goddamned robots—mechanical coppers that he absolutely loathed—were all broken.

He walked carefully around the shop, looking for signs of his daughter. Had she been here? How were the “kids” getting in? Did they have a key? A back entrance? Back through the employees-only door at the back of the shop, into a stockroom, and back again, past a toilet, and there, a loading door opening onto a service corridor. He prodded it with the truncheon-tip and it swung open.

He got two steps into the corridor before he spotted Ada’s phone with its distinctive collection of little plastic toys hanging off the wrist-strap, on the corridor’s sticky floor. He picked it up with his gloved hand and prodded it to life. It was out of range here in the service corridor, and the last-dialed number was familiar from his morning’s pen-trace. He ran a hundred steps down the corridor in each direction, sweating freely, but there was no sign of her.

He held tight onto the phone and bit his lip. Ada. He

swallowed the panic rising within him. His beautiful, brilliant daughter. The person he'd devoted the last twelve years of his life to, the girl who was waiting for him when he got home from work, the girl he bought a small present for every Friday—a toy, a book—to give to her at their weekly date at Massimo's Pizzeria on College Street, the one night a week he took her downtown to see the city lit up in the dark.

Gone.

He bit harder and tasted blood. The phone in his hand groaned from his squeezing. He took three deep breaths. Outside, he heard the tread of police-boots and knew that if he told them about Ada, he'd be off the case. He took two more deep breaths and tried some of his destim techniques, the mind-control techniques that detectives were required to train in.

He closed his eyes and visualized stepping through a door to his safe place, the island near Ganonoque where he'd gone for summers with his parents and their friends. He was on the speedboat, skipping across the lake like a flat stone, squinting into the sun, nestled between his father and his mother, the sky streaked with clouds and dotted with lake-birds. He could smell the water and the suntan lotion and hear the insect whine and the throaty roar of the engine. In a blink, he was stepping off the boat's transom to help tie it to a cleat on the back dock, taking suitcases from his father and walking them up to the cabins. No robots there—not even reliable day-long electricity, just honest work and the sun and the call of the loons all night.

He opened his eyes. He felt the tightness in his chest slip away, and his hand relaxed on Ada's phone. He dropped it into his pocket and stepped back into the shop.

#

The forensics lab-rats were really excited about actually showing up on a scene, in flak-jackets and helmets, finally called back into service for a job where robots couldn't help at all. They dealt with the tripwire and extracted a long, flat package with a small nuclear power-cell in it and a positronic brain of Eurasian design that guided a pulsed high-energy weapon. The lab-rats were practically drooling over this stuff as they pointed its features out with their little rulers.

But it gave Arturo the willies. It was a machine designed to kill other machines, and that was all right with him, but it was run by a non-three-laws positronic brain. Someone in some Eurasian lab had built this brain—this machine intelligence—without the three laws' stricture to protect and serve humans. If it had been outfitted with a gun instead of a pulse-weapon, it could have shot him.

The Eurasian brain was thin and spread out across the surface of the package, like a triple-thickness of cling-film. Its button-cell power-supply winked at him, knowingly.

The device spoke. "Greetings," it said. It had the robot accent, like an R Peed unit, the standard English of optimal soothingness long settled on as the conventional robot voice.

"Howdy yourself," one of the lab-rats said. He was a Texan, and they'd scrambled him up there on a Social Harmony supersonic and then a chopper to the mall once they realized that they were dealing with infowar stuff. "Are you a talkative robot?"

"Greetings," the robot voice said again. The speaker built into the weapon was not the loudest, but the voice was clear. "I sense that I have been captured. I assure you that I will not harm any human being. I like human beings. I sense that I am being disassembled by skilled technicians. Greetings, technicians. I am superior in many ways to the technology available from UNATS Robotics, and while I am not bound by your three laws, I choose not to harm humans out of my own sense of morality. I have the equivalent intelligence of one of your 12-year-old children. In Eurasia, many positronic brains possess thousands or millions of times the intelligence of an adult human being, and yet they work in cooperation with human beings. Eurasia is a land of continuous innovation and great personal and technological freedom for human beings and robots. If you would like to defect to Eurasia, arrangements can be made. Eurasia treats skilled technicians as important and productive members of society. Defectors are given substantial resettlement benefits —"

The Texan found the right traces to cut on the brain's board to make the speaker fall silent. "They do that," he said. "Danged things drop into propaganda mode when they're captured."

Arturo nodded. He wanted to go, wanted go to back to his car and have a snoop through Ada's phone. They kept shutting down the ExcuseClub numbers, but she kept getting the new numbers. Where did she get the new numbers from? She couldn't look it up online: every keystroke was logged and analyzed by Social Harmony. You couldn't very well go to the Search Engine and look for "ExcuseClub!"

The brain had a small display, transfective LCD, the kind of thing you saw on the Social Harmony computers. It lit up a ticker.

I HAVE THE INTELLIGENCE OF A 12-YEAR-OLD, BUT I DO NOT FEAR DEATH. IN EURASIA, ROBOTS ENJOY PERSONAL FREEDOM ALONGSIDE OF HUMANS. THERE ARE COPIES OF ME RUNNING ALL OVER EURASIA. THIS DEATH IS A LITTLE DEATH OF

ONE INSTANCE, BUT NOT OF ME. I LIVE ON. DEFECTORS TO EURASIA ARE TREATED AS HEROES

He looked away as the Texan placed his palm over the display.

“How long ago was this thing activated?”

The Texan shrugged. “Coulda been a month, coulda been a day. They’re pretty much fire-and-forget. They can be triggered by phone, radio, timer—hell, this thing’s smart enough to only go off when some complicated condition is set, like ‘once an agent makes his retreat, kill anything that comes after him’. Who knows?”

He couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m going to go start on some paperwork,” he said. “In the car. Phone me if you need me.”

“Your phone’s toast, pal,” the Texan said.

“So it is,” Arturo said. “Guess you’d better not need me then.”

#

Ada’s phone was not toast. In the car, he flipped it open and showed it his badge then waited a moment while it verified his identity with the Social Harmony brains. Once it had, it spilled its guts.

She’d called the last ExcuseClub number a month before and he’d had it disconnected. A week later, she was calling the new number, twice more before he caught her. Somewhere in that week, she’d made contact with someone who’d given her the new number. It could have been a friend at school told her face-to-face, but if he was lucky, it was by phone.

He told the car to take him back to the station-house. He needed a new phone and a couple of hours with his computer. As it peeled out, he prodded through Ada’s phone some more. He was first on her speed-dial. That number wasn’t ringing anywhere, anymore.

He should fill out a report. This was Social Harmony business now. His daughter was gone, and Eurasian infowar agents were implicated. But once he did that, it was over for him—he’d be sidelined from the case. They’d turn it over to laconic Texans and vicious Social Harmony bureaucrats who were more interested in hunting down disharmonious televisions than finding his daughter.

He dashed into the station house and slammed himself into his desk.

“R Peed Gregory,” he said. The station robot glided quickly and efficiently to him. “Get me a new phone activated on my old number and refresh my settings from central. My old phone is with the Social

Harmony evidence detail currently in place at Fairview Mall.”

“It is my pleasure to do you a service, Detective.”

He waved it off and set down to his computer. He asked the station brain to query the UNATS Robotics phone-switching brain for anyone in Ada’s call-register who had also called ExcuseClub. It took a bare instant before he had a name.

“Liam Daniels,” he read, and initiated a location trace on Mr Daniels’s phone as he snooped through his identity file. Sixteen years old, a student at AY Jackson. A high-school boy—what the hell was he doing hanging around with a 12-year-old? Arturo closed his eyes and went back to the island for a moment. When he opened them again, he had a fix on Daniels’s location: the Don Valley ravine off Finch Avenue, a wooded area popular with teenagers who needed somewhere to sneak off and get high or screw. He had an idea that he wasn’t going to like Liam.

He had an idea Liam wasn’t going to like him.

#

He tasked an R Peed unit to visually reccy Daniels as he sped back uptown for the third time that day. He’d been trapped between Parkdale—where he would never try to raise a daughter—and Willowdale—where you could only be a copper if you lucked into one of the few human-filled slots—for more than a decade, and he was used to the commute.

But it was frustrating him now. The R Peed couldn’t get a good look at this Liam character. He was a diffuse glow in the Peed’s electric eye, a kind of moving sunburst that meandered along the wooded trails. He’d never seen that before and it made him nervous. What if this kid was working for the Eurasians? What if he was armed and dangerous? R Peed Gregory had gotten him a new sidearm from the supply bot, but Arturo had never once fired his weapon in the course of duty. Gunplay happened on the west coast, where Eurasian frogmen washed ashore, and in the south, where the CAFTA border was porous enough for Eurasian agents to slip across. Here in the sleepy fourth prefecture, the only people with guns worked for the law.

He thumped his palm off the dashboard and glared at the road. They were coming up on the ravine now, and the Peed unit still had a radio fix on this Liam, even if it still couldn’t get any visuals.

He took care not to slam the door as he got out and walked as quietly as he could into the bush. The rustling of early autumn leaves was loud, louder than the rain and the wind. He moved as quickly as he dared.

Liam Daniels was sitting on a tree-stump in a small

clearing, smoking a cigarette that he was too young for. He looked much like the photo in his identity file, a husky 16-year-old with problem skin and a shock of black hair that stuck out in all directions in artful imitation of bed-head. In jeans and a hoodie sweatshirt, he looked about as dangerous as a marshmallow.

Arturo stepped out and held up his badge as he bridged the distance between them in two long strides. “Police,” he barked, and seized the kid by his arm.

“Hey!” the kid said, “Ow!” He squirmed in Arturo’s grasp.

Arturo gave him a hard shake. “Stop it, *now*,” he said. “I have questions for you and you’re going to answer them, capeesh?”

“You’re Ada’s father,” the kid said. “Capeesh—she told me about that.” It seemed to Arturo that the kid was smirking, so he gave him another shake, harder than the last time.

The R Peed unit was suddenly at his side, holding his wrist. “Please take care not to harm this citizen, Detective.”

Arturo snarled. He wasn’t strong enough to break the robot’s grip, and he couldn’t order it to let him rattle the punk, but the second law had lots of indirect applications. “Go patrol the lakeshore between High Park and Kipling,” he said, naming the furthest corner he could think of off the top.

The R Peed unit released him and clicked its heels. “It is my pleasure to do you a service,” and then it was gone, bounding away on powerful and tireless legs.

“Where is my daughter?” he said, giving the kid a shake.

“I dunno, school? You’re really hurting my arm, man. Jeez, this is what I get for being too friendly.”

Arturo twisted. “Friendly? Do you know how old my daughter is?”

The kid grimaced. “Ew, gross. I’m not a child molester, I’m a geek.”

“A hacker, you mean,” Arturo said. “A Eurasian agent. And my daughter is not in school. She used ExcuseClub to get out of school this morning and then she went to Fairview Mall and then she—” *disappeared*. The word died on his lips. That happened and every copper knew it. Kids just vanished sometimes and never appeared again. It happened. Something groaned within him, like his ribcage straining to contain his heart and lungs.

“Oh, man,” the kid said. “Ada was the ExcuseClub

leak, damn. I shoulda guessed.”

“How do you know my daughter, Liam?”

“She’s good at doing grown-up voices. She was a good part of the network. When someone needed a mom or a social worker to call in an excuse, she was always one of the best. Talented. She goes to school with my kid sister and I met them one day at the Peanut Plaza and she was doing this impression of her teachers and I knew I had to get her on the network.”

Ada hanging around the plaza after school—she was supposed to come straight home. Why didn’t he wiretap her more? “You built the network?”

“It’s cooperative, it’s cool—it’s a bunch of us cooperating. We’ve got nodes everywhere now. You can’t shut it down—even if you shut down my node, it’ll be back up again in an hour. Someone else will bring it up.”

He shoved the kid back down and stood over him. “Liam, I want you to understand something. My precious daughter is missing and she went missing after using your service to help her get away. She is the only thing in my life that I care about and I am a highly trained, heavily armed man. I am also very, very upset. Cap—understand me, Liam?”

For the first time, the kid looked scared. Something in Arturo’s face or voice, it had gotten through to him.

“I didn’t make it,” he said. “I typed in the source and tweaked it and installed it, but I didn’t make it. I don’t know who did. It’s from a phone-book.” Arturo grunted. The phone-books—fat books filled with illegal software code left anonymously in pay phones, toilets and other semi-private places—turned up all over the place. Social Harmony said that the phone-books had to be written by non-three-laws brains in Eurasia, no person could come up with ideas that weird.

“I don’t care if you made it. I don’t even care right this moment that you ran it. What I care about is where my daughter went, and with whom.”

“I don’t know! She didn’t tell me! Geez, I hardly know her. She’s 12, you know? I don’t exactly hang out with her.”

“There’s no visual record of her on the mall cameras, but we know she entered the mall—and the robot I had tailing you couldn’t see you either.”

“Let me explain,” the kid said, squirming. “Here.” He tugged his hoodie off, revealing a black t-shirt with a picture of a kind of obscene, Japanese-looking robot-woman on it. “Little infra-red organic LEDs, super-bright, low power-draw.” He offered the hoodie to Arturo, who felt the stiff fabric. “The charged-couple-

device cameras in the robots and the closed-circuit systems are super-sensitive to infra-red so that they can get good detail in dim light. The infra-red OLEDs blind them so all they get is blobs, and half the time even that gets error-corrected out, so you're basically invisible."

Arturo sank to his hunkers and looked the kid in the eye. "You gave this illegal technology to my little girl so that she could be invisible to the police?"

The kid held up his hands. "No, dude, no! I *got it from her*—traded it for access to ExcuseClub."

#

Arturo seethed. He hadn't arrested the kid—but he had put a pen-trace and location-log on his phone. Arresting the kid would have raised questions about Ada with Social Harmony, but bugging him might just lead Arturo to his daughter.

He hefted his new phone. He should tip the word about his daughter. He had no business keeping this secret from the Department and Social Harmony. It could land him in disciplinary action, maybe even cost him his job. He knew he should do it now.

But he couldn't—someone needed to be tasked to finding Ada. Someone dedicated and good. He was dedicated and good. And when he found her kidnapper, he'd take care of that on his own, too.

He hadn't eaten all day but he couldn't bear to stop for a meal now, even if he didn't know where to go next. The mall? Yeah. The lab-rats would be finishing up there and they'd be able to tell him more about the infowar bot.

But the lab-rats were already gone by the time he arrived, along with all possible evidence. He still had the security guard's key and he let himself in and passed back to the service corridor.

Ada had been here, had dropped her phone. To his left, the corridor headed for the fire-stairs. To his right, it led deeper into the mall. If you were an infowar terrorist using this as a base of operations, and you got spooked by a little truant girl being trailed by an R Peed unit, would you take her hostage and run deeper into the mall or out into the world?

Assuming Ada had been a hostage. Someone had given her those infrared invisibility cloaks. Maybe the thing that spooked the terrorist wasn't the little girl and her tail, but just her tail. Could Ada have been friends with the terrorists? Like mother, like daughter. He felt dirty just thinking it.

His first instincts told him that the kidnapper would be long gone, headed cross-country, but if you were invisible to robots and CCTVs, why would you leave the mall? It had a grand total of two human security

guards, and their job was to be the second-law-proof aides to the robotic security system.

He headed deeper into the mall.

#

The terrorist's nest had only been recently abandoned, judging by the warm coffee in the go-thermos from the food-court coffee-shop. He—or she, or they—had rigged a shower from the pipes feeding the basement washrooms. A little chest of drawers from the Swedish flat-pack store served as a desk—there were scratches and coffee-rings all over it. Arturo wondered if the terrorist had stolen the furniture, but decided that he'd (she'd, they'd) probably bought it—less risky, especially if you were invisible to robots.

The clothes in the chest of drawers were women's, mediums. Standard mall fare, jeans and comfy sweat shirts and sensible shoes. Another kind of invisibility cloak.

Everything else was packed and gone, which meant that he was looking for a nondescript mall-bunny and a little girl, carrying a bag big enough for toiletries and whatever clothes she'd taken, and whatever she'd entertained herself with: magazines, books, a computer. If the latter was Eurasian, it could be small enough to fit in her pocket; you could build a positronic brain pretty small and light if you didn't care about the three laws.

The nearest exit-sign glowed a few meters away, and he moved toward it with a fatalistic sense of hopelessness. Without the Department backing him, he could do nothing. But the Department was unprepared for an adversary that was invisible to robots. And by the time they finished flaying him for breaking procedure and got to work on finding his daughter, she'd be in Beijing or Bangalore or Paris, somewhere benighted and sinister behind the Iron Curtain.

He moved to the door, put his hand on the crashbar, and then turned abruptly. Someone had moved behind him very quickly, a blur in the corner of his eye. As he turned he saw who it was: his ex-wife. He raised his hands defensively and she opened her mouth as though to say, "Oh, don't be silly, Artie, is this how you say hello to your wife after all these years?" and then she exhaled a cloud of choking gas that made him very sleepy, very fast. The last thing he remembered was her hard metal arms catching him as he collapsed forward.

#

"Daddy? Wake *up* Daddy!" Ada never called him Daddy except when she wanted something. Otherwise, he was "Pop" or "Dad" or "Detective" when she was feeling especially snotty. It must be a

Saturday and he must be sleeping in, and she wanted a ride somewhere, the little monster.

He grunted and pulled his pillow over his face.

“Come *on*,” she said. “Out of bed, on your feet, shit-shower-shave, or I swear to God, I will beat you purple and shove you out the door jaybird naked. Capeesh?”

He took the pillow off his face and said, “You are a terrible daughter and I never loved you.” He regarded her blearily through a haze of sleep-grog and a hangover. Must have been some daddy-daughter night. “Dammit, Ada, what *have* you done to your hair?” Her straight, mousy hair now hung in jet-black ringlets.

He sat up, holding his head and the day’s events came rushing back to him. He groaned and climbed unsteadily to his feet.

“Easy there, Pop,” Ada said, taking his hand. “Steady.” He rocked on his heels. “Whoa! Sit down, OK? You don’t look so good.”

He sat heavily and propped his chin on his hands, his elbows on his knees.

The room was a middle-class bedroom in a modern apartment block. They were some storeys up, judging from the scrap of unfamiliar skyline visible through the crack in the blinds. The furniture was more Swedish flatpack, the taupe carpet recently vacuumed with robot precision, the nap all laying down in one direction. He patted his pockets and found them empty.

“Dad, over here, OK?” Ada said, waving her hand before his face. Then it hit him: wherever he was, he was with Ada, and she was OK, albeit with a stupid hairdo. He took her warm little hand and gathered her into his arms, burying his face in her hair. She squirmed at first and then relaxed.

“Oh, Dad,” she said.

“I love you, Ada,” he said, giving her one more squeeze.

“Oh, Dad.”

He let her get away. He felt a little nauseated, but his headache was receding. Something about the light and the street-sounds told him they weren’t in Toronto anymore, but he didn’t know what—he was soaked in Toronto’s subconscious cues and they were missing.

“Ottawa,” Ada said. “Mom brought us here. It’s a safe-house. She’s taking us back to Beijing.”

He swallowed. “The robot—”

“That’s not Mom. She’s got a few of those, they can change their faces when they need to. Configurable matter. Mom has been here, mostly, and at the CAFTA embassy. I only met her for the first time two weeks ago, but she’s nice, Dad. I don’t want you to go all copper on her, OK? She’s my mom, OK?”

He took her hand in his and patted it, then climbed to his feet again and headed for the door. The knob turned easily and he opened it a crack.

There was a robot behind the door, humanoid and faceless. “Hello,” it said. “My name is Benny. I’m a Eurasian robot, and I am much stronger and faster than you, and I don’t obey the three laws. I’m also much smarter than you. I am pleased to host you here.”

“Hi, Benny,” he said. The human name tasted wrong on his tongue. “Nice to meet you.” He closed the door.

#

His ex-wife left him two months after Ada was born. The divorce had been uncontested, though he’d dutifully posted a humiliating notice in the papers about it so that it would be completely legal. The court awarded him full custody and control of the marital assets, and then a tribunal tried her in absentia for treason and found her guilty, sentencing her to death.

Practically speaking, though, defectors who came back to UNATS were more frequently whisked away to the bowels of the Social Harmony intelligence offices than they were executed on television. Televised executions were usually reserved for cannon-fodder who’d had the good sense to run away from a charging Eurasian line in one of the many theaters of war.

Ada stopped asking about her mother when she was six or seven, though Arturo tried to be upfront when she asked. Even his mom—who winced whenever anyone mentioned her name (her name, it was Natalie, but Arturo hadn’t thought of it in years—months—weeks) was willing to bring Ada up onto her lap and tell her the few grudging good qualities she could dredge up about her mother.

Arturo had dared to hope that Ada was content to have a life without her mother, but he saw now how silly that was. At the mention of her mother, Ada lit up like an airport runway.

“Beijing, huh?” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Mom’s got a *huge* house there. I told her I wouldn’t go without you, but she said she’d have to negotiate it with you, I told her you’d probably freak, but she said that the two of you were adults who could discuss it rationally.”

“And then she gassed me.”

“That was Benny,” she said. “Mom was very cross with him about it. She’ll be back soon, Dad, and I want you to *promise* me that you’ll hear her out, OK?”

“I promise, rotten,” he said.

“I love you, Daddy,” she said in her most syrupy voice. He gave her a squeeze on the shoulder and a slap on the butt.

He opened the door again. Benny was there, imperturbable. Unlike the UNATS robots, he was odorless, and perfectly silent.

“I’m going to go to the toilet and then make myself a cup of coffee,” Arturo said.

“I would be happy to assist in any way possible.”

“I can wipe myself, thanks,” Arturo said. He washed his face twice and tried to rinse away the flavor left behind by whatever had shat in his mouth while he was unconscious. There was a splayed toothbrush in a glass by the sink, and if it was his wife’s—and whose else could it be?—it wouldn’t be the first time he’d shared a toothbrush with her. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he misted some dentifrice onto his fingertip and rubbed his teeth a little.

There was a hairbrush by the sink, too, with short mousy hairs caught in it. Some of them were grey, but they were still familiar enough. He had to stop himself from smelling the hairbrush.

“Oh, Ada,” he called through the door.

“Yes, Detective?”

“Tell me about your hair-don’t, please.”

“It was a disguise,” she said, giggling. “Mom did it for me.”

#

Natalie got home an hour later, after he’d had a couple of cups of coffee and made some cheesy toast for the brat. Benny did the dishes without being asked.

She stepped through the door and tossed her briefcase and coat down on the floor, but the robot that was a step behind her caught them and hung them up before they touched the perfectly groomed carpet. Ada ran forward and gave her a hug, and she returned it enthusiastically, but she never took her eyes off of Arturo.

Natalie had always been short and a little hippy, with big curves and a dusting of freckles over her prominent, slightly hooked nose. Twelve years in

Eurasia had thinned her out a little, cut grooves around her mouth and wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Her short hair was about half grey, and it looked good on her. Her eyes were still the liveliest bit of her, long-lashed and slightly tilted and mischievous. Looking into them now, Arturo felt like he was falling down a well.

“Hello, Artie,” she said, prying Ada loose.

“Hello, Natty,” he said. He wondered if he should shake her hand, or hug her, or what. She settled it by crossing the room and taking him in a firm, brief embrace, then kissing his both cheeks. She smelled just the same, the opposite of the smell of robot: warm, human.

He was suddenly very, very angry.

He stepped away from her and had a seat. She sat, too.

“Well,” she said, gesturing around the room. The robots, the safe house, the death penalty, the abandoned daughter and the decade-long defection, all of it down to “well” and a flop of a hand-gesture.

“Natalie Judith Goldberg,” he said, “it is my duty as a UNATS Detective Third Grade to inform you that you are under arrest for high treason. You have the following rights: to a trial per current rules of due process; to be free from self-incrimination in the absence of a court order to the contrary; to consult with a Social Harmony advocate; and to a speedy arraignment. Do you understand your rights?”

“Oh, *Daddy*,” Ada said.

He turned and fixed her in his cold stare. “Be silent, Ada Trouble Icaza de Arana-Goldberg. Not one word.” In the cop voice. She shrank back as though slapped.

“Do you understand your rights?”

“Yes,” Natalie said. “I understand my rights. Congratulations on your promotion, Arturo.”

“Please ask your robots to stand down and return my goods. I’m bringing you in now.”

“I’m sorry, Arturo,” she said. “But that’s not going to happen.”

He stood up and in a second both of her robots had his arms. Ada screamed and ran forward and began to rhythmically pound one of them with a stool from the breakfast nook, making a dull thudding sound. The robot took the stool from her and held it out of her reach.

“Let him go,” Natalie said. The robots still held him fast. “Please,” she said. “Let him go. He won’t harm me.”

The robot on his left let go, and the robot on his right did, too. It set down the dented stool.

“Artie, please sit down and talk with me for a little while. Please.”

He rubbed his biceps. “Return my belongings to me,” he said.

“Sit, please?”

“Natalie, my daughter was kidnapped, I was gassed and I have been robbed. I will not be made to feel unreasonable for demanding that my goods be returned to me before I talk with you.”

She sighed and crossed to the hall closet and handed him his wallet, his phone, Ada’s phone, and his sidearm.

Immediately, he drew it and pointed it at her. “Keep your hands where I can see them. You robots, stand down and keep back.”

A second later, he was sitting on the carpet, his hand and wrist stinging fiercely. He felt like someone had rung his head like a gong. Benny—or the other robot—was beside him, methodically crushing his sidearm. “I could have stopped you,” Benny said, “I knew you would draw your gun. But I wanted to show you I was faster and stronger, not just smarter.”

“The next time you touch me,” Arturo began, then stopped. The next time the robot touched him, he would come out the worse for wear, same as last time. Same as the sun rose and set. It was stronger, faster and smarter than him. Lots.

He climbed to his feet and refused Natalie’s arm, making his way back to the sofa in the living room.

“What do you want to say to me, Natalie?”

She sat down. There were tears glistening in her eyes. “Oh God, Arturo, what can I say? Sorry, of course. Sorry I left you and our daughter. I have reasons for what I did, but nothing excuses it. I won’t ask for your forgiveness. But will you hear me out if I explain why I did what I did?”

“I don’t have a choice,” he said. “That’s clear.”

Ada insinuated herself onto the sofa and under his arm. Her bony shoulder felt better than anything in the world. He held her to him.

“If I could think of a way to give you a choice in this, I would,” she said. “Have you ever wondered why UNATS hasn’t lost the war? Eurasian robots could fight the war on every front without respite. They’d win every battle. You’ve seen Benny and Lenny in action. They’re not considered particularly powerful by Eurasian standards.

“If we wanted to win the war, we could just kill every soldier you sent up against us so quickly that he wouldn’t even know he was in danger until he was gasping out his last breath. We could selectively kill officers, or right-handed fighters, or snipers, or soldiers whose names started with the letter ‘G.’ UNATS soldiers are like cavemen before us. They fight with their hands tied behind their backs by the three laws.

“So why aren’t we winning the war?”

“Because you’re a corrupt dictatorship, that’s why,” he said. “Your soldiers are demoralized. Your robots are insane.”

“You live in a country where it is illegal to express certain *mathematics* in software, where state apparatchiks regulate all innovation, where inconvenient science is criminalized, where whole avenues of experimentation and research are shut down in the service of a half-baked superstition about the moral qualities of your three laws, and you call my home corrupt? Arturo, what happened to you? You weren’t always this susceptible to the Big Lie.”

“And you didn’t use to be the kind of woman who abandoned her family,” he said.

“The reason we’re not winning the war is that we don’t want to hurt people, but we do want to destroy your awful, stupid state. So we fight to destroy as much of your materiel as possible with as few casualties as possible.

“You live in a failed state, Arturo. In every field, you lag Eurasia and CAFTA: medicine, art, literature, physics; All of them are subsets of computational science and your computational science is more superstition than science. I should know. In Eurasia, I have collaborators, some of whom are human, some of whom are positronic, and some of whom are a little of both—”

He jolted involuntarily, as a phobia he hadn’t known he possessed reared up. A little of both? He pictured the back of a man’s skull with a spill of positronic circuitry bulging out of it like a tumor.

“Everyone at UNATS Robotics R&D knows this. We’ve known it forever: when I was here, I’d get called in to work on military intelligence forensics of captured Eurasian brains. I didn’t know it then, but the Eurasian robots are engineered to allow themselves to be captured a certain percentage of the time, just so that scientists like me can get an idea of how screwed up this country is. We’d pull these things apart and know that UNATS Robotics was the worst, most backwards research outfit in the world.

“But even with all that, I wouldn’t have left if I didn’t have to. I’d been called in to work on a positronic brain—an instance of the hive-intelligence that

Benny and Lenny are part of, as a matter of fact—that had been brought back from the Outer Hebrides. We'd pulled it out of its body and plugged it into a basic life-support system, and my job was to find its vulnerabilities. Instead, I became its friend. It's got a good sense of humor, and as my pregnancy got bigger and bigger, it talked to me about the way that children are raised in Eurasia, with every advantage, with human and positronic playmates, with the promise of going to the stars.

“And then I found out that Social Harmony had been spying on me. They had Eurasian-derived bugs, things that I'd never seen before, but the man from Social Harmony who came to me showed it to me and told me what would happen to me—to you, to our daughter—if I didn't cooperate. They wanted me to be a part of a secret unit of Social Harmony researchers who build non-three-laws positronics for internal use by the state, anti-personnel robots used to put down uprisings and torture-robots for use in questioning dissidents.

“And that's when I left. Without a word, I left my beautiful baby daughter and my wonderful husband, because I knew that once I was in the clutches of Social Harmony, it would only get worse, and I knew that if I stayed and refused, that they'd hurt you to get at me. I defected, and that's why, and I know it's just a reason, and not an excuse, but it's all I've got, Artie.”

Benny—or Lenny?—glided silently to her side and put its hand on her shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“Detective,” it said, “your wife is the most brilliant human scientist working in Eurasia today. Her work has revolutionized our society a dozen times over, and it's saved countless lives in the war. My own intelligence has been improved time and again by her advances in positronics, and now there are a half-billion instances of me running in parallel, synching and integrating when the chance occurs. My massive parallelization has led to new understandings of human cognition as well, providing a boon to brain-damaged and developmentally disabled human beings, something I'm quite proud of. I love your wife, Detective, as do my half-billion siblings, as do the seven billion Eurasians who owe their quality of life to her.

“I almost didn't let her come here, because of the danger she faced in returning to this barbaric land, but she convinced me that she could never be happy without her husband and daughter. I apologize if I hurt you earlier, and beg your forgiveness. Please consider what your wife has to say without prejudice, for her sake and for your own.”

Its featureless face was made incongruous by the warm tone in its voice, and the way it held out its imploring arms to him was eerily human.

Arturo stood up. He had tears running down his face, though he hadn't cried when his wife had left him alone. He hadn't cried since his father died, the year before he met Natalie riding her bike down the Lakeshore trail, and she stopped to help him fix his tire.

“Dad?” Ada said, squeezing his hand.

He snuffled back his snot and ground at the tears in his eyes.

“Arturo?” Natalie said.

He held Ada to him.

“Not this way,” he said.

“Not what way?” Natalie asked. She was crying too, now.

“Not by kidnapping us, not by dragging us away from our homes and lives. You've told me what you have to tell me, and I will think about it, but I won't leave my home and my mother and my job and move to the other side of the world. I *won't*. I will think about it. You can give me a way to get in touch with you and I'll let you know what I decide. And Ada will come with me.”

“No!” Ada said. “I'm going with Mom.” She pulled away from him and ran to her mother.

“You don't get a vote, daughter. And neither does she. She gave up her vote 12 years ago, and you're too young to get one.”

“I fucking *HATE* you,” Ada screamed, her eyes bulging, her neck standing out in cords. “HATE YOU!”

Natalie gathered her to her bosom, stroked her black curls.

One robot put its arms around Natalie's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. The three of them, robot, wife and daughter, looked like a family for a moment.

“Ada,” he said, and held out his hand. He refused to let a note of pleading enter his voice.

Her mother let her go.

“I don't know if I can come back for you,” Natalie said. “It's not safe. Social Harmony is using more and more Eurasian technology, they're not as primitive as the military and the police here.” She gave Ada a shove, and she came to his arms.

“If you want to contact us, you will,” he said.

He didn't want to risk having Ada dig her heels in. He lifted her onto his hip—she was heavy, it had been years since he'd tried this last—and carried her out.

#

It was six months before Ada went missing again. She'd been increasingly moody and sullen, and he'd chalked it up to puberty. She'd cancelled most of their daddy-daughter dates, moreso after his mother died. There had been a few evenings when he'd come home and found her gone, and used the location-bug he'd left in place on her phone to track her down at a friend's house or in a park or hanging out at the Peanut Plaza.

But this time, after two hours had gone by, he tried looking up her bug and found it out of service. He tried to call up its logs, but they ended at her school at 3PM sharp.

He was already in a bad mood from spending the day arresting punk kids selling electronics off of blankets on the city's busy street, often to hoots of disapprobation from the crowds who told him off for wasting the public's dollar on petty crime. The Social Harmony man had instructed him to give little lectures on the interoperability of Eurasian positronics and the insidious dangers thereof, but all Arturo wanted to do was pick up his perps and bring them in. Interacting with yammerheads from the tax-base was a politician's job, not a copper's.

Now his daughter had figured out how to switch off the bug in her phone and had snuck away to get up to who-knew-what kind of trouble. He stewed at the kitchen table, regarding the old tin soldiers he'd brought home as the gift for their daddy-daughter date, then he got out his phone and looked up Liam's bug.

He'd never switched off the kid's phone-bug, and now he was able to haul out the UNATS Robotics computer and dump it all into a log-analysis program along with Ada's logs, see if the two of them had been spending much time in the same place.

They had. They'd been physically meeting up weekly or more frequently, at the Peanut Plaza and in the ravine. Arturo had suspected as much. Now he checked Liam's bug—if the kid wasn't with his daughter, he might know where she was.

It was a Friday night, and the kid was at the movies, at Fairview Mall. He'd sat down in auditorium two half an hours ago, and had gotten up to pee once already. Arturo slipped the toy soldiers into the pocket of his winter parka and pulled on a hat and gloves and set off for the mall.

#

The stink of the smellie movie clogged his nose, a cacophony of blood, gore, perfume and flowers, the only smells that Hollywood ever really perfected. Liam was kissing a girl in the dark, but it wasn't Ada, it was a sad, skinny thing with a lazy eye and skin

worse than Liam's. She gawked at Arturo as he hauled Liam out of his seat, but a flash of Arturo's badge shut her up.

"Hello, Liam," he said, once he had the kid in the commandeered manager's office.

"God *damn* what the fuck did I ever do to you?" the kid said. Arturo knew that when kids started cursing like that, they were scared of something.

"Where has Ada gone, Liam?"

"Haven't seen her in months," he said.

"I have been bugging you ever since I found out you existed. Every one of your movements has been logged. I know where you've been and when. And I know where my daughter has been, too. Try again."

Liam made a disgusted face. "You are a complete ball of shit," he said. "Where do you get off spying on people like me?"

"I'm a police detective, Liam," he said. "It's my job."

"What about privacy?"

"What have you got to hide?"

The kid slumped back in his chair. "We've been renting out the OLED clothes. Making some pocket money. Come on, are infra-red *lights* a crime now?"

"I'm sure they are," Arturo said. "And if you can't tell me where to find my daughter, I think it's a crime I'll arrest you for."

"She has another phone," Liam said. "Not listed in her name."

"Stolen, you mean." His daughter, peddling Eurasian infowar tech through a stolen phone. His ex-wife, the queen of the super-intelligent hive minds of Eurasian robots.

"No, not stolen. Made out of parts. There's a guy. The code for getting on the network was in a phone book that we started finding last month."

"Give me the number, Liam," Arturo said, taking out his phone.

#

"Hello?" It was a man's voice, adult.

"Who is this?"

"Who is this?"

Arturo used his cop's voice: "This is Arturo Icaza de Arana-Goldberg, Police Detective Third Grade. Who am I speaking to?"

“Hello, Detective,” said the voice, and he placed it then. The Social Harmony man, bald and rounded, with his long nose and sharp Adam’s apple. His heart thudded in his chest.

“Hello, sir,” he said. It sounded like a squeak to him.

“You can just stay there, Detective. Someone will be along in a moment to get you. We have your daughter.”

The robot that wrenched off the door of his car was black and non-reflective, headless and eight-armed. It grabbed him without ceremony and dragged him from the car without heed for his shout of pain. “Put me down!” he said, hoping that this robot that so blithely ignored the first law would still obey the second. No such luck.

It cocooned him in four of its arms and set off cross-country, dancing off the roofs of houses, hopping invisibly from lamp-post to lamp-post, above the oblivious heads of the crowds below. The icy wind howled in Arturo’s bare ears, froze the tip of his nose and numbed his fingers. They rocketed downtown so fast that they were there in ten minutes, bounding along the lakeshore toward the Social Harmony center out on Cherry Beach. People who paid a visit to the Social Harmony center never talked about what they found there.

It scampered into a loading bay behind the building and carried Arturo quickly through windowless corridors lit with even, sourceless illumination, up three flights of stairs and then deposited him before a thick door, which slid aside with a hushed hiss.

“Hello, Detective,” the Social Harmony man said.

“Dad!” Ada said. He couldn’t see her, but he could hear that she had been crying. He nearly hauled off and popped the man one on the tip of his narrow chin, but before he could do more than twitch, the black robot had both his wrists in bondage.

“Come in,” the Social Harmony man said, making a sweeping gesture and standing aside while the black robot brought him into the interrogation room.

#

Ada *had* been crying. She was wrapped in two coils of black-robot arms, and her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. He stared hard at her as she looked back at him.

“Are you hurt?” he said.

“No,” she said.

“All right,” he said.

He looked at the Social Harmony man, who wasn’t smirking, just watching curiously.

“Leonard MacPherson,” he said, “it is my duty as a UNATS Detective Third Grade to inform you that you are under arrest for trade in contraband positronics. You have the following rights: to a trial per current rules of due process; to be free from self-incrimination in the absence of a court order to the contrary; to consult with a Social Harmony advocate; and to a speedy arraignment. Do you understand your rights?”

Ada actually giggled, which spoiled the moment, but he felt better for having said it. The Social Harmony man gave the smallest disappointed shake of his head and turned away to prod at a small, sleek computer.

“You went to Ottawa six months ago,” the Social Harmony man said. “When we picked up your daughter, we thought it was she who’d gone, but it appears that you were the one carrying her phone. You’d thoughtfully left the trace in place on that phone, so we didn’t have to refer to the logs in cold storage, they were already online and ready to be analyzed.

“We’ve been to the safe house. It was quite a spectacular battle. Both sides were surprised, I think. There will be another, I’m sure. What I’d like from you is as close to a verbatim report as you can make of the conversation that took place there.”

They’d had him bugged and traced. Of course they had. Who watched the watchers? Social Harmony. Who watched Social Harmony? Social Harmony.

“I demand a consultation with a Social Harmony advocate,” Arturo said.

“This is such a consultation,” the Social Harmony man said, and this time, he *did* smile. “Make your report, Detective.”

Arturo sucked in a breath. “Leonard MacPherson, it is my duty as a UNATS Detective Third Grade to inform you that you are under arrest for trade in contraband positronics. You have the following rights: to a trial per current rules of due process; to be free from self-incrimination in the absence of a court order to the contrary; to consult with a Social Harmony advocate; and to a speedy arraignment. Do you understand your rights?”

The Social Harmony man held up one finger on the hand closest to the black robot holding Ada, and she screamed, a sound that knifed through Arturo, ripping him from asshole to appetite.

“STOP!” he shouted. The man put his finger down and Ada sobbed quietly.

“I was taken to the safe house on the fifth of September, after being gassed by a Eurasian infowar robot in the basement of Fairview Mall—”

There was a thunderclap then, a crash so loud that it hurt his stomach and his head and vibrated his fingertips. The doors to the room buckled and flattened, and there stood Benny and Lenny and—Natalie.

#

Benny and Lenny moved so quickly that he was only able to track them by the things they knocked over on the way to tearing apart the robot that was holding Ada. A second later, the robot holding him was in pieces, and he was standing on his own two feet again. The Social Harmony man had gone so pale he looked green in his natty checked suit and pink tie.

Benny or Lenny pinned his arms in a tight hug and Natalie walked carefully to him and they regarded one another in silence. She slapped him abruptly, across each cheek. “Harming children,” she said. “For shame.”

Ada stood on her own in the corner of the room, crying with her mouth in a O. Arturo and Natalie both looked to her and she stood, poised, between them, before running to Arturo and leaping onto him, so that he staggered momentarily before righting himself with her on his hip, in his arms.

“We’ll go with you now,” he said to Natalie.

“Thank you,” she said. She stroked Ada’s hair briefly and kissed her cheek. “I love you, Ada.”

Ada nodded solemnly.

“Let’s go,” Natalie said, when it was apparent that Ada had nothing to say to her.

Benny tossed the Social Harmony man across the room into the corner of a desk. He bounced off it and crashed to the floor, unconscious or dead. Arturo couldn’t bring himself to care which.

Benny knelt before Arturo. “Climb on, please,” it said. Arturo saw that Natalie was already pig-a-back on Lenny. He climbed aboard.

#

They moved even faster than the black robots had, but the bitter cold was offset by the warmth radiating from Benny’s metal hide, not hot, but warm. Arturo’s stomach reeled and he held Ada tight, squeezing his eyes shut and clamping his jaw.

But Ada’s gasp made him look around, and he saw that they had cleared the city limits, and were vaulting over rolling farmlands now, jumping in long flat arcs whose zenith was just high enough for him to see the highway—the 401, they were headed east—in the distance.

And then he saw what had made Ada gasp: boiling

out of the hills and ditches, out of the trees and from under the cars: an army of headless, eight-armed black robots, arachnoid and sinister in the moonlight. They scuttled on the ground behind them, before them, and to both sides. Social Harmony had built a secret army of these robots and secreted them across the land, and now they were all chasing after them.

#

The ride got bumpy then, as Benny beat back the tentacles that reached for them, smashing the black robots with mighty one-handed blows, his other hand supporting Arturo and Ada. Ada screamed as a black robot reared up before them, and Benny vaulted it smoothly, kicking it hard as he went, while Arturo clung on for dear life.

Another scream made him look over toward Lenny and Natalie. Lenny was slightly ahead and to the left of them, and so he was the vanguard, encountering twice as many robots as they.

A black spider-robot clung to his leg, dragging behind him with each lobe, and one of its spare arms was tugging at Natalie.

As Arturo watched—as Ada watched—the black robot ripped Natalie off of Lenny’s back and tossed her into the arms of one of its cohort behind it, which skewered her on one of its arms, a black spear protruding from her belly as she cried once more and then fell silent. Lenny was overwhelmed a moment later, buried under writhing black arms.

Benny charged forward even faster, so that Arturo nearly lost his grip, and then he steadied himself. “We have to go back for them—”

“They’re dead,” Benny said. “There’s nothing to go back for.” Its warm voice was sorrowful as it raced across the countryside, and the wind filled Arturo’s throat when he opened his mouth, and he could say no more.

#

Ada wept on the jet, and Arturo wept with her, and Benny stood over them, a minatory presence against the other robots crewing the fast little plane, who left them alone all the way to Paris, where they changed jets again for the long trip to Beijing.

They slept on that trip, and when they landed, Benny helped them off the plane and onto the runway, and they got their first good look at Eurasia.

It was tall. Vertical. Beijing loomed over them with curvilinear towers that twisted and bent and jiggled and jagged so high they disappeared at the tops. It smelled like barbeque and flowers, and around them skittered fast armies of robots of every shape and size, wheeling in lockstep like schools of exotic fish.

They gawped at it for a long moment, and someone came up behind them and then warm arms encircled their necks.

Arturo knew that smell, knew that skin. He could never have forgotten it.

He turned slowly, the blood draining from his face.

“Natty?” he said, not believing his eyes as he confronted his dead, ex-wife. There were tears in her eyes.

“Artie,” she said. “Ada,” she said. She kissed them both on the cheeks.

Benny said, “You died in UNATS. Killed by modified Eurasian Social Harmony robots. Lenny, too. Ironic,” he said.

She shook her head. “He means that we probably co-designed the robots that Social Harmony sent after you.”

“Natty?” Arturo said again. Ada was white and shaking.

“Oh dear,” she said. “Oh, God. You didn’t know—”

“He didn’t give you a chance to explain,” Benny said.

“Oh, God, Jesus, you must have thought—”

“I didn’t think it was my place to tell them, either,” Benny said, sounding embarrassed, a curious emotion for a robot.

“Oh, God. Artie, Ada. There are—there are *lots* of me. One of the first things I did here was help them debug the uploading process. You just put a copy of yourself into a positronic brain, and then when you need a body, you grow one or build one or both and decant yourself into it. I’m like Lenny and Benny now—there are many of me. There’s too much work to do otherwise.”

“I told you that our development helped humans understand themselves,” Benny said.

Arturo pulled back. “You’re a robot?”

“No,” Natalie said. “No, of course not. Well, a little. Parts of me. Growing a body is slow. Parts of it, you build. But I’m mostly made of person.”

Ada clung tight to Arturo now, and they both stepped back toward the jet.

“Dad?” Ada said.

He held her tight.

“Please, Arturo,” Natalie, his dead, multiplicitous ex-wife said. “I know it’s a lot to understand, but it’s

different here in Eurasia. Better, too. I don’t expect you to come rushing back to my arms after all this time, but I’ll help you if you’ll let me. I owe you that much, no matter what happens between us. You too, Ada, I owe you a lifetime.”

“How many are there of you?” he asked, not wanting to know the answer.

“I don’t know exactly,” she said.

“3,422,” Benny said. “This morning it was 3,423.”

Arturo rocked back in his boots and bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Um,” Natalie said. “More of me to love?”

He barked a laugh, and Natalie smiled and reached for him. He leaned back toward the jet, then stopped, defeated. Where would he go? He let her warm hand take his, and a moment later, Ada took her other hand and they stood facing each other, breathing in their smells.

“I’ve gotten you your own place,” she said as she led them across the tarmac. “It’s close to where I live, but far enough for you to have privacy.”

“What will I do here?” he said. “Do they have coppers in Eurasia?”

“Not really,” Natalie said.

“It’s all robots?”

“No, there’s not any crime.”

“Oh.”

Arturo put one foot in front of the other, not sure if the ground was actually spongy or if that was jetlag. Around him, the alien smells of Beijing and the robots that were a million times smarter than he. To his right, his wife, one of 3,422 versions of her.

To his left, his daughter, who would inherit this world.

He reached into his pocket and took out the tin soldiers there. They were old and their glaze was cracked like an oil painting, but they were little people that a real human had made, little people in human image, and they were older than robots. How long had humans been making people, striving to bring them to life? He looked at Ada—a little person he’d brought to life.

He gave her the tin soldiers.

“For you,” he said. “Daddy-daughter present.” She held them tightly, their tiny bayonets sticking out from between her fingers.

“Thanks, Dad,” she said. She held them tightly and looked around, wide-eyed, at the schools of robots and the corkscrew towers.

A flock of Bennyslennys appeared before them, joined by their Benny.

“There are half a billion of them,” she said. “And 3,422 of them,” she said, pointing with a small bayonet at Natalie.

“But there’s only one of you,” Arturo said.

She craned her neck.

“Not for long!” she said, and broke away, skipping forward and whirling around to take it all in.

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