

Puppeteer

By

jaebi

What a waste. Station city hasn't seen a homicide in over forty years. Way back around the time I joined the Department. A case history won't let any of us forget. In the academy, they used the details of the case as class material—taught it from every angle. Forensics, psych, legal, you name it. Least of it all wasn't media training.

The last homicide ever covered in this city was a shining example for us all of how loose the reigns on freedom had gone. The Netcasts had a field day—for weeks. The story

topped every newsfeed. Reporters and pundits alike couldn't suppress their collective morbid enthusiasm for something *good*, something *interesting* at long last. In almost no time, Interweb hounds were fraggin for the best shots of little Sally Perkin's hide stretched out like canvas. Hits across the Interwebs soared--ISP's couldn't get enough. The public did. Freedom of the Press? *Good riddance.*

News hounds can't get within 250 feet of a crime scene anymore. Reporters from every news outlet were camped outside Gilmore's apartment wagging their tails for treats when the story broke.

Gilmore--what a waste. They say she had been likable by all accounts, even by journalist standards. Now her mangled corpse was being scavenged by the Departments forensics. One guy in particular was scanning for prints when I entered the scene. A frail looking specimen, with thinning hair and an annoyingly round nose--I hadn't realized a nose could be annoying until I saw his.

"Anything, Bub," I asked? The forensic turned in my direction; acknowledging my existence for the first time it seemed. He gave me a quick scan with an unnatural gleam on his iris. Most likely he was cross-referencing my face

with the Departments detective database. His smooth forehead wrinkled, prepping his mouth for the question I'd heard a thousand times.

"Your not with the 33rd," he sneered, raising an eyebrow.

"Not anymore," I conceded. From that look of concentration, he was obviously searching for my profile in other sectors of the Departments mainframe. "Try Honorable Brigadiers."

"Ah," he exclaimed, "Retired." I nodded with that, couldn't help but grin at his failed nonchalance. "But irrelevant. You should not be here, unless the Field Detective assigned to the case okay's it."

"Who might that be?"

"That's privileged CAD information Mr. Knowledge, and while your service record is exceptional, I simply-- "

"I know the drill Bub, I'm on assignment here." I wasn't, but the CAD Nets couldn't feed him an answer if the Architect cleared the entire pipeline for this twerp's antenna. Still, he didn't seem convinced, so I laid on an extra serving of bravado. "Listen Bub, I was busting my balls for the Department when you were a sticky spot after one of Daddy's lucid dreams, now all I'm asking for is a little respect and some professional courtesy." That

speech had worked on the Green guarding the entrance, but the forensic seemed sincerely indifferent.

"You seem to have me confused with whoever let you in, Mr. Knowledge," he said, adjusting his glasses. "I'm afraid I'm still going to have to ask you to leave." He stepped closer, gesturing toward the door.

What an asshole. There was no reason for anyone to wear frames anymore. He wanted to look intelligent—probably made'em feel important. I'd already made him for the type of Borg that preferred nuero-bionics. If there were two types of folk in Borg culture—he was one, I was the other. You ask me, we're born as smart as we need to be. But too often we're not strong or fast enough. Borgs like the forensic felt the need to be smarter, consume more information and access the Interweb like they did old memories.

I took a deep breath and glared into his glassy eye lense, my arms crossed. The forensic stopped short, taking in how much bigger than he I was.

"Very well," he conceded.

"Very well indeed," said a voice coming from the journalist's doorway. The forensic and I looked toward the door to find a sickingly handsome fellow in a long black

trench coat and trendy shoes. He wore his Civilian Authority Department badge on a chain around his neck and a confident smile on his face. If his voice let on that he was used to command his square chin backed it up.

"Detective Frank Roman," he said, holding his hand out. I offered my own along with my name, but he stopped me there. Apparently he knew me well, at least on paper. Even laid on how much a pleasure it was to meet the legend. The kid said my reputation had been instrumental in him joining the Department. For a second, it felt like my commendation all over again except I was sharing the stage with a dead body.

Roman apologized for Cutter, his colleague meant well and happened to be head of his division. Not that any of that mattered he said, because the forensic wasn't a *hunch detective like we were*.

I didn't think the kid had earned the right to compare us professionally just yet, but I took the opportunity to flash Cutter another grin anyway.

Cutter winced and went back to scanning the crime scene for evidence.

"Shame isn't it," said Roman, shaking his head at the bloody corpse. I nodded. "I'm glad you're here actually.

You know we haven't seen anything like this in a long time. With your experience, well, I'd appreciate anything you can add."

I raised an eyebrow. Since he walked in, I'd taken him for a braggart hotshot more interested in being a charming media personality than a detective. But he'd proven me wrong all the way. Sometimes the ol' Gut is off—but not often.

"You're right. We're looking at the first homicide in some time. Whoever did it had some damn strong feelings. Love." Roman looked at me sideways as if to say, *this ain't any love I've ever seen*. Further explanation was necessary.

"Well it ain't likely to be hate, Roman. Who in Station City or elsewhere in the civilized world makes time for grudges anymore? They'd just as soon pop a gram of coke at the convenience store, then buy a few good time lucid memories from Mementex."

"Lucid dreams can't be violent."

"You say that like you've got credits riding on the damned system."

"Do I? Or maybe you're not a fan of lucid dreams."

After a moment of silence, he said, "Listen Knowledge, I want you on this, but leave your personal crap out of it."

I smirked and then said, "Like I said--no one makes time for grudges anymore."

Now that we understood each other, I took a look at Gilmore's blood soaked sheets, Roman close on my heels. We moved around Cutter as if he were invisible, he seemed to want to be. "Look at the way she's done up," I said, hovering my fingers over the carvings in the carcass. It wasn't anything like a 21st century stab and run. These were clean incisions, maybe tempered steel, probably a saber or some type of laser, across her breasts and stomach but they weren't fatal. The one through the neck finished her. She had on a blue negligee and string swimsuit to match--she'd been expecting company. "Judging from the bottle of Merlot--"

"1999," Cutter chimed in enthusiastically, studying a piece of glass. I cut an eye at him without stopping.

"--And that broken wine glass, looks like a romantic evening gone awry."

"The lover," asked Roman? "Possible. There's no forced entry."

"Mm. No signs of a real struggle either. Suppose the lover discovered something. Something unforgivable fell in his lap, harsh and sudden. Girl like Gilmore could have a dozen men at once."

"Heat of passion?" I grunted in agreement. Roman flipped a lock of his full black hair, obviously tossing around the same question's I was. "We got anything Cutter?"

"No murder weapon. A few smudges here, there, but no prints, no semen, no skin cells—not even an aura trace."

"Aura," I blurted? Roman jeered, explaining it was fresh out of the lab tech. Just about everything alive emitted miniscule amounts of trace elements into the atmosphere. The Department had spent millions into categorizing the traces, especially human "aura". Turns out they can be more accurate than fingerprints—no shit.

"There's one thing I don't get," said Roman. "If this was a crime of passion, then why is everything so neat, including the incisions?"

"Once the adrenaline's wore off, a person comes to their senses and realizes their going to burn for something like this, so I expect them to cover their tracks, clean things

up a bit. You're right about one thing though—the incisions. They'd had to have something in mind."

"Premeditated passion?" Roman stood there with his arms crossed trying to get his mind around his own question.

"Eureka," Cutter exclaimed, as if he'd won the federally subsidized-life lottery. He was holding up a strand of hair so small, light seemed to pass through it.

I felt myself nodding off; the ride in the Departments hydroplane was smooth. This generation of CAD had a lot more credits to throw around than back when I was on the force. Made'em soft. They relied too much on an ever expanding assortment of thinkers and scanners instead of good 'ol Gut and a strong arm. Our rides still used wheels and A.I. Nav was still too new to be affordable. Damn smooth ride though.

They didn't skimp on manpower either. Central mobilized nearly every available operative in range. Half of all the noise was curiosity, half was not knowing what to expect. It was inevitable that a drop in violent crimes made the city's police force a tad under prepared.

Central identified the Perp en route, his last known residence loaded into the squads GPS, his face and threat

level downloaded into every officers com-link. Roman and I rode with Tactical Response, a bunch of clean-shaven chaps no older than thirty, fresh out of Ranger academy. The only action they'd seen was from a late 21st century simulation of the first Citizen Uprising. A.I. or not, random is random. No matter how sophisticated a computer ya' got, you can't replicate it with a tool designed with exacting formula's. Makes as much sense as trying to create peace with war.

Roman placed his com-link on the hydroplanes floor panel so everyone got a clean look at Stanley Kubert's mug. His miniature wiry frame did a three-sixty above the tiny projector. Thin fellow, glasses propped on the edge of his bulbous nose, rosy cheeks, thinning hair—not exactly someone you would picture Samantha Gilmore with. Nine times out of ten, credits seal the deal though. And Kubert had lots of ones and zeroes in his account.

Kubert was a surgeon, a good one at Liberty Med. That gave him plenty of access to surgical sabers and the know how to use it—Roman's superiors were satisfied. They were gonna take him down and I was feeling nostalgic about it all.

It felt good until my Gut started nagging. A guy that looked like Kubert might expect his lady to shop around. There was something else too, something that made my balls itch. Could be a glitch in my nuero-bionics or maybe I just didn't want it to be over so quick.

I backup my photographic memory every few years to make room for new cases but whatever gave me a hunch stays hard wired in my cortex. I always thought it too risky futzing around in the brain—a little static and you could wind up a tomato. That's why Memtex works hard to make it the thing to do. Nowadays folks can upload patented crib memories of Mom and Dad having great parties and boom—they're outgoing.

"Knowledge, I'm gonna have to ask you to put this on," Roman said, handing me a shock absorber. He was geared up in one of TR's body suits, effective against projectiles and energy bursts. I pulled a flap of my coat open and rapped my glock against my chest—distinct sound of metal against metal. Roman understood. "Let's do it."

The rangers filed into Kubert's lobby, arm cannons ready, Roman and I trailing them. The door bot nearly blew a transistor asking every TR ranger to sign the guest list. Ranger leader, Pike, led his men up five flights of stairs,

down a well-lit hallway to apartment 509. After the customary three second warning, they rammed through Kubert's door and flooded his apartment. Three rangers secured the first room; another six covered quadrants to the rear I couldn't see. Roman and I headed toward the bedroom with Pike and two more of his rangers. As silly as I thought all the fuss was, it felt damn good holding my piece like that again. Couldn't remember the last time I drew it on the force; must've backed up those memories.

Pike lent his crass voice to our party, booming it through Kubert's sheet wood door. Gave him five seconds to come out, which he took. The door was a slider, no hinges to break off, but it had to be less than half an inch thick. Pike himself had to be about twelve inches thicker. He took the door. Went straight through and slid across the floor while the rest of us filed in with our weapons drawn.

The bedroom was elegant. White and gray including the marble bar off to one side. Kubert's bed was made. No one home. Pike was audibly pissed. We all shared some of the sentiment. It was as if we'd arrived at the wrong address for a New Years Eve party ten minutes before midnight. Roman was upset for another reason.

"Did anyone even bother to check with Liberty Med?"

Being back at the Department didn't hold as much zeal as did storming Kubert's apartment. I always hated paperwork. Didn't help that I had to listen to Cutter's nasal cavity lead every syllable as he droned a report to his desktop.

A simple phone call had checked out Kubert's alibi. The surgeon had been on a volunteer relief tour in Eurasia at the time of the murder. Foreign consulates can be bought easy enough but the good doctor had an even better witness—a ten-year-old girl whose leg he'd saved.

Roman returned from his Captain's office looking like he had a case of shuttle nausea. I asked anyway. "How'd it go?"

"Not good," he said, shaking his head. "I'm taking a lot of heat on this one—you know what's at stake. Every decision I make is being scrutinized now."

"Setbacks happen, Kid."

"It isn't just a setback Knowledge, the press is all over this one, especially our latest mishap. The mayor's been on the wire all damn day and now I hear the governors due to make a statement. And I've got nothing!"

I regretted feeling nostalgic about this case. "You through whining, Kid."

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Now lets do some detective work." Truth was I didn't know where to start. As much as I would have liked to make Cutter squirm a bit more, I had to assume his team had been thorough and I certainly wasn't going to get into the gene splicing business. That left one option: the morgue.

With the Kubert angle going nowhere, we had to turn our focus back to the source—Gilmore. Jessica Gilmore was a straight arrow, no-nonsense journalist with a flare for the dramatic. She led a glamorous public persona—classy and too stylish. When you wear your nice clothes out for the world to see, usually means your trying to distract'em from something else. As put together as Gilmore was, her smoke screen was likely hiding something ugly.

The day was dragging on by the time we reached the morgue. It was the tail end of the workday when we stepped inside. Roman held his badge up to the tin man stationed at the front desk. Seemed like they were upgrading man's best friend endlessly now. The bot was a brand new model, not one I'd seen in ads yet. The lines of its head and

torso were smooth and shone despite its gray matte finish. It had actual orbs for eyes instead of the dots you'd see on older models. A faint blue light shone behind its eyes making it seem more alive.

"Good night, Detective Roman, badge number 4431. I have been expecting you. Proceed to the elevator on the left. Take it to floor number two. Make a right and proceed to the end of the corridor. Walk straight through the double doors."

"They sound more and more like us," I said.

"Yes, that's correct," the droid responded. "Some day we will learn to speak just as you do. Everything we are, everything we know, we owe to the Creator."

They were able to synthesize our voices fine, but they still sounded like machines trying to talk like people. Something about human speech just doesn't translate into machine language.

"Don't make them like they used to eh, Knowledge." Roman gave me a pat on the shoulder. I grinned, leading the way to the lift.

We followed the droids directions. A right out of the lift, straight down the corridor. Morgues were all the same. Bland walls, bland lighting, an environment made to

transition the dead. It's as if they forget that the people that work in these places are actually still alive.

I never enjoyed visiting morgues. It wasn't so much the dead people—although that aspect wasn't anything to look forward to. It was their setup. Some of the legacy morgues had row after row of cold boxes. Numbered and labeled, racked like products in the freezer section of the grocer. Naturalists boycott and condemn bionics but they seem to have no problem with the way we tag our dead.

"This one's a lot smaller than County," I said.

"I guess we haven't had this kind of body in so long they overlooked protocol."

"Helluva trade-off."

"What do you mean?"

"No violent deaths—the luxury of its absence almost makes us forget who we are—how to operate."

"You almost sound like you'd prefer it the other way."

I stopped just outside the double doors, shot Roman a bewildered look. "Shit—do I?" He shrugged his eyebrows.

We pushed our respective doors. The scene on the other side was serene but my Gut stirred. Felt like we'd just missed something go down. A stiff lay on the far right of the room, covered in a hospital blue blanket. A steel

operating deck took center stage, a mortician's instrument arm descending from directly overhead.

I opened my mouth to call for the mortician on duty but it was the arm that cracked the silence. Rotors and transistors hummed to life, an electronic squeal echoed as the arm swiveled on its axis, the tip end swinging toward Roman and I.

There was another sound, similar to the arms motion yet distinct, electric. It wasn't until I caught end of the tip, glowing a fiery blue that I realized what the sound had been.

"Down," I shouted. Pushing Roman one way while I dove the other. Air sizzled and popped as the laser sliced through space. There was a metallic whine as the arm charged its photo emitters, then another blast. Efficient. It took less than a second. Sparks rained into the air. At least that meant Roman had taken cover—sparks don't bounce off skin.

I hit the ground on my shoulder, rolled into a crouch and pushed off again with everything left in my old legs. It wasn't enough. I screamed as the laser fried my skin. I landed on the hospital blue blanket, feeling lifeless flesh beneath me. The body was warm. I pulled my weight

away from the arm and the table crashed hard. The body on top spilled like pasta next to me. The table throttled as if it were hit by a ram and sparks rained over my head.

"Knowledge! Are you alright—ahh!" With neither of us in open shot, the arm was alternating its blasts, keeping us pinned.

I fingered my wound through the hole in my coat. Stung like a bitch. But my chest plate was intact and the heat from the beam had seared the wound shut. At least I wouldn't bleed to death.

Between blasts, I screamed back, "I'm good—we gotta deactivate this damned thing."

"Where the hell's the mortician?"

"I found the mortician—don't think she's gonna be much help." There was a pause, and I knew Roman was coming to the realization I had the moment I toppled the table, felt a woman's body under me. She was still wearing her lab coat and spectacles. There was a sliver of blood seeping into the lines around her lips. "This isn't a malfunction."

"The droid—it did this..."

Roman's statement had all the intonations of a question, even though it was as plain as daylight. We'd walked right

into a trap, a lethal one set by a bot. The very thought of it was nuts.

"We're wasting time," I shouted. "I have an idea!"

I sat on the edge of the ambulance while a young medic bandaged the three holes in my chest. It was her creamy skin that got me. The kind of skin that some redheads tend to have when they're lucky enough to be free of blotches and freckles.

Meanwhile, Roman transferred the crime scene to Cutter and his crime scene investigators. I doubted they'd find much more than the mangled reception bot behind the counter.

The shiny bot that greeted us high tailed it the moment we stepped in that elevator cab. There were failsafes built into mans best friend that prevented them from doing anything other than assisting humans. It was supposed to be hardwired in their circuitry. I didn't figure that prevented someone with the know how from removing OEM programming.

"You're lucky the beam hit you in your reinforced area," the medic said. "You should have a physician do a thorough

scan. Bionic armor endurance is better than it used to be but some of the older inserts are prone to—

The medic caught my expression; smooth indifference that conveyed the question: 'Old?'

She blushed and said, "Oh, I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright—I know what ya meant." I gave her my best 'you're cute as shit, don't matter what you say' smile.

"Take these," she said, handing me a few packets of tissue accelerant. When you change the bandages, apply those—you'll be like new in no time."

"Don't worry girlie, a lot of noise left in this ticker."

"Bionics in there too," Roman says, breaking my moment with the creamy-skinned medic

"Detective Roman," he says. His smile and gaze say more. The medic's knees twist slightly as he grabs her hand. Damn pretty boys.

"Miss—we all done," I ask?

"Oh...yes, all done."

"Great. Thanks," I said, patting Roman on the back as if we had somewhere urgent to go right that second.

"Thank you for all that you do--truly," Roman says. The girl closed up the back of her Emergency Response vehicle, her face beaming brightly, then headed for the cockpit.

Roman's eyes follow her hips all the way. I'll be damned if she didn't put on a good show.

Who was I kidding anyway; I was probably old enough to be her grand dad. She certainly wasn't my flavor if she went for square-jawed and thin-nosed types like Roman.

"Laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

"I'd like to lay a bit of thick on her—huh. She's my type."

I laughed. When I was that age, anything with a smile and a pulse was 'my type.'

"The good news is," I said, changing the subject. "We are alive."

"Thanks to you, Knowledge." I grunted in agreement. More like thanks to modern science. Besides, we didn't have many options. The thought of using the late mortician as a shield did cross my mind. Just didn't seem right.

When I enhanced my torso with bionics, I never intended on intentionally taking propulsion blasts. But that's exactly what I'd done and I had lived to tell about it. Best money I ever spent.

"So whatawe got," I asked?

"Two homicides, Knowledge—two! Cutter's pulling as much from here as Gilmore's place. No leads—not yet.

"Well we know who to look for now."

"Someone who can hack an android."

I shook my head and said, "Yup—we find out who's pulling this bot's strings, we find our guy."

"Pulling the strings," Roman repeated. "Like a puppeteer."

Puppeteer. It was one of those buzz words the media would run with. But Roman was dead on. We were after the puppeteer.

"Way ahead of you, Knowledge. I've already got intel fishing for an ID on anyone within 50 miles with that kind of skill."

"Perfect. In the meantime, lets pay a visit to HU Corp, see if we can't track down this bot ourselves."

"HU Corp!"

"That Bot was one of theirs. Spankin' new—remember?"

"You know how long it's going to take to get that warrant."

"No."

"A long time."

"Okay."

"Why do I get the feeling you're not listening to me?"

"I've got a contact. By the time a warrant goes through, we just may be able to cut the strings on that bot before anyone else gets hurt." I felt my emotions bubbling. Old age adding flames to my cool. Two women in one day. Who knows what Gilmore had coming but the mortician-she didn't deserve this. "Whaddaya say?"

Roman nodded. "You drive."

The three holes in my chest didn't hurt after whatever the medic gave me kicked in. But I was in and out of consciousness on the ride to Silicon City. I felt the warmth of the autumn sun fade into twilight and the events of the day and the drugs I was on wearing me down like an anchor.

I popped awake when the hoverplane announced we were arriving. Up ahead was Silicon City's capitol—the HU Tower. Blue glass and steel loomed over the landscape, silent, but you could still feel its presence. It was an almost oppressive intensity, one you couldn't escape like the desert sun mid day.

We stopped a block away so we had a clear view of the tower's main entrance. A meter maven about faced as we pulled into an open lot. "This is a no parking zone, Monday through Friday, 7AM through 7PM. The voice was

metallic and hollow "Official CAD business—check the plates," Roman answered. The bot took almost a dozen hobbled steps to cover a distance of two feet, about faced, and then leveled its optical lenses with the plates. I got comfortable while the bot did its thing. Must have taken a few seconds to connect to CAD's database—painfully slow. This was the kind of android they hoisted on the back of a truck bed full of 'em after it hobbled up and down the street 12 hours a day.

The gears in its waist churned as the meter maven lifted its torso. "Thank you for your cooperation," it droned, as I slid back in my seat.

"Comfy?"

"You'd think someone I took two laser blasts for wouldn't mind if I rested my eyes. Us old guys need more rest than you youngins'."

"You're sure she's gonna come out this way?"

"It's the only way—fort Knox, remember."

"How do we know she's even working today?"

"Shit, you're right—what day is it?"

"Thursday."

"She's working. Might be a little while, she's one of those overachiever types. You can pull any citizens file here, can't you."

"Didn't they have these when you were on the force?"

"Yea, but we also had something called privacy. Now, everyone's got a public profile on Me-NET. The name's Dalia Dellin. Let me know when she shows," I said, pulling my fedora over my face. I ignored Roman's protests and fell asleep almost instantly.

I was tired, but sleep has always been more than just rest for me. Things don't always add up on a case. Despite the stories Roman had been fed about honorable brigadier's, more had gone down today than a full year on the force. I needed insight.

They say when you sleep, the brain works a lot like disc drives when they defragment. Pieces of information rearranging, the relevant stuff grouping so it's more sensible, easier to access. We call it dreaming. So far, not too much was making sense. Some shuteye would do well.

I felt like I'd just closed my eyes when Roman shouted, 'It's her!'

I jumped, my head a tad fuzzy but I knew where I was. "Pull up."

"She's hiring a taxi."

"That'll get us away from prying eyes here. Let's pull'em a few blocks up."

Roman hit the lights when the taxi turned off the main street. I walked over to the side Dalia sat on and tapped on the window. A quick look of surprise, then amused suspicion came across her face as she lowered the window.

"Long time, Miss Dellin."

"Junot," Dalia says, a warm smile on her full lips. She always thought it was cute to call me by my first name. She frowned next and said, "Are you following me—am I one of your cases."

"Of course not, Dalia."

"Time to pay the piper, then." She smiled.

The hoverplane guided itself in a holding pattern within a quarter mile of the tower. She'd heard about the murders, but not that an android might be involved. Of course Dalia thought the idea was preposterous.

"Maybe, but it's true. Three bodies, two human, one android. And now Gilmore's body is missing."

"Why would a Companion steal a dead woman?"

"Because that's what the puppeteer wanted it to do," Roman said. "If we'd gotten to the morgue earlier, we would have discovered what he's trying to hide."

"Something just occurred to me," I said. My dreams at work. "What if the body winding up at the public morgue wasn't a mix-up?"

"I'm not following you."

"If Gilmore's body had gone to county, it would have been a lot more difficult for that bot to slip in and out."

"Someone on the inside?"

"Maybe." Roman got on his earpiece and called up Central. I turned in my seat toward Dalia in the back. "Dalia, we need to find this bot if we've got any chance of finding out who's pulling the strings."

"There on it," Roman says, ending his call with Central.

"There may be," Dalia said. "In case of theft or loss—"

"Loss," Roman asked?

"It's possible—One of ours got caught in a storm running an errand. Imagine what a few hundred million volts can do to their orientation systems."

Roman made a thoughtful grunt. But I didn't want to get sidetracked. "Electricity bad. Got it. So how can we track the bot we're looking for?"

"It's pretty simple. As long as the Sentient Human Companion has its transmitter turned on and an active GPS account."

"GPS isn't standard? Shouldn't we always know where these things are?"

"I'm surprised to hear that coming from you, Junot. You don't even have a public profile on the Interweb."

"This isn't about privacy."

"Isn't it?" She settled it with that. Privacy, and costs. It's cost effective for the company to install transmitters in every SHC, but HU won't turn them on unless the customer pays setup fees and buys a subscription."

"Wait," Roman says. "You're telling me that every single android has GPS? My dealer said that would cost extra."

"Just because it's cost effective for us doesn't mean we have to pass those savings on to the customers."

"If the puppeteer is skilled enough to tweak this bot's hardwiring so it kills two women, and marks us, what's to say he couldn't remove the bot's transmitter."

"But you said it was an Alpha series."

"Yeah?"

"Then you might be in luck—part of what makes GPS cost effective in Alpha models is building the processor around a GPS transmitter."

"That may mean something in Genius land--"

"He can't alter that chip," Roman said. "It's like brain surgery, but the brain is the size of a pebble."

"Exactly—to that, he would need access to a ton of resources. HU resources," Dalia said. I looked at Roman skeptically.

"I do my homework before I spend that kind of money. Salaries haven't increased much since you left, Knowledge. You'd do the same."

"Junot doesn't own a Companion," Dalia said. The girlish smile on her face made me feel like I was on a playground.

"Can you get us inside?"

"You need 24 hours clearance."

"We have you," I said. We shared a knowing exchange in silence.

"This is a big favor Junot. I could lose my job. I do this and we're even."

"I'll still call just to hear your charming voice, darling."

We parked the hoverplane and followed Dalia to the tower. I could hear Roman's curiosity overflowing as we trailed behind Dalia.

"What did she mean 'we're even,'" Roman asked.

"That's a story for another time. Over a beer."

Inside, the tower gleamed even brighter than the exterior but it was warm and inviting. Deep blue and gold granite everywhere. A single droid waited at the welcome desk. It looked just like the one from the morgue, except for the blue trim lining it's joints.

"Good evening, Mrs. Dellin," the bot chimed. It had the voice of a warm female.

"Hi Sally," Dalia said. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you for asking. How may I log your two guests?"

"Sally."

"Yes."

Dalia spoke clearly, enunciating her words like an anchorwoman. "Have you ever seen the sun set over the Great Wall of China and discussed the finer points of rocket propulsion in null gravity?"

Sally bot stood straight up, its eyes dead ahead. A second later its shoulder slouched, arms dangling. The

glowing blue lights inside it's joints and eyes dimmed, almost completely dark. I was surprised when it spoke again.

"Yes."

"Sally, I went up alone." You waited here and kept my guests company. When I returned, we all left together."

"Yes."

Dalia turned to Roman and me with a sharp, "Let's go."

I could never walk into a room, without casing it. If I hadn't gone into law enforcement, I might have been a thief. Dalia's office was immaculate. She never ate food there. There was a sole thermos on her desk she used to stay hydrated. She had great skin so it was probably always full of water. There weren't any pictures of life outside, no loved ones, none of her either. As much as she loved her work, she kept that life very separate from her personal one.

Dalia sat behind her desk, Roman and I on the other side. She booted her system up and turned on her projector. A notebook sized box of light materialized over her desk, as she slipped on a stylish pair of pointers. Specialized gloves that covered her fingertips and the center of her

palm that would allow her to manipulate whatever image the projector displayed with her fingers.

She typed in a few commands into the touch pad surface on her desk. White lights danced under her fingers when they made contact. The box shifted and waved, then became a green and blue orb. The orb zoomed into our corner of the states.

"Let's start with all the Alpha series SHC's in the city." Dalia hit a few keystrokes and red dots sprinkled the map like a rash. There were three concentrations of them. Clusters in certain districts. One was Peachtree, the other Norfolk. The two wealthiest districts in the city. The third cluster was Silicon City, naturally.

Dalia held her hands over the image and slid the map over the clusters of red dots so we got a good look at each.

"There's so many of them," Roman said.

"Which of them have subscriptions," I asked?

"Computer," Dalia said. "Isolate subscribers." The clusters glowed hotter at once. "Remove subscribers from view."

In an instant, nearly all of the dots dropped off the map. There were still clusters but you could finger each dot. I got that feeling I always get when I got this close

to breaking a case. Excitement in my chest, the rush you feel just before jumping out of a plane without a parachute—used to be one of my favorite lucid trips.

“What’s that,” Roman asked. He was pointing to one of the dots. I hadn’t noticed before, but it wasn’t red like the others. It had more of an orange hue.

Dalia placed her thumb and index finger over the dot Roman pointed to, then moved them apart. The image stretched as she moved her two fingers apart, zooming in on a distance around the odd dot.

“How far in are we,” I asked. Dalia tapped her desk and the projector displayed metrics around the edges of the image.

“5 miles—that’s a pretty big estate,” said Roman. The feeling in my chest gyrated like a ball of electricity. Dalia made an inquisitive sound, then repeated the gesture with her thumb and index finger, only she began with the two further apart on the map.

The image zoomed out to include a dozen or so more dots, all of them the same standard red. The orange-red dot in the center stood out like a sore thumb.

“Computer,” Dalia said. “Isolate units in view. Show depth.”

The dots changed colors. Gone were the reds and we were now looking at blues and one white dot. We all looked in amazement as the same questions formed in our mind. It was the only question you could ask when you read the legend floating on the bottom right of the image. The blue dots were at sea level. The white dot was 20 feet below.

"That's in Norfolk. What are we looking at," I asked?

"Computer. Overlay a map of the Rapid Underground Transit network." The RUT system drew across the map, a rainbow of lines that represented the different transit lines in the underground system. A yellow line headed in the direction of the white dot from the north, but broke off west before reaching it. Silicon City was west of it and no other lines came close to the white dot.

"Dalia, can we see an earlier map of the RUT."

"How early?"

"Before they built the tower. Twenty years." Dalia entered a few strokes into her desk. The RUT map reloaded, the yellow line drew directly over the white dot. "Yes."

Dalia sent the coordinates of the white dot to our cruiser right before she reminded me her debt had been paid. She made me say those words exactly. When I did she

handed me a small screen with a handle. It was a portable tracker with our bot's unique serial number locked in.

We loaded our weapons as the hoverplane sped to the location, both our eyes focused on the overhead on the windshield. The white dot inched closer every minute.

'INCOMING CALL' flashed next to the map. A moment later Cutter's egg-shaped head replaced it.

"Jeez, can't you ignore the calls," I asked Roman.

"All the CAD cruisers auto-answer."

"I can't say I'm overjoyed to see you either, Detective Knowledge," said Cutter. "But I have something interesting for the two of you—it can't wait."

"News on our mystery programmer," Roman asked?

"That pursuit turned up nothing. But I spoke with dispatch and there's something interesting about how Gilmore's body wound up in that morgue."

Arrival at destination in ten minutes.

"Cutter, it doesn't matter, we've located the rogue Android. Once we have it in custody it will lead us to the puppeteer."

"That's just it; I think the two might have more correlation than you think. It's pertinent that I speak to you about my findings immediately."

"Well dammit, spit it out, Cutter," I snapped.

"Not over the Net. Send me your flight plan." Roman pressed a button on the dashboard. "I'll meet you there. Its important you don't go in until I speak with you both." Cutter's face flashed into the map. The white dot was just a few minutes away.

Roman had a spare set of night vision goggles. They fit like the kind you wear in competitive swimming. We waited outside a manhole were the old station used to be. A prefab community had replaced the old station; right around the time they started digging to build Silicon City out west. Each home was a slight variation of the one next to it. Tons of repeats. Boring. And I was tired of waiting.

"Where the hell is Cutter," I asked?

"The station's only 15 minutes from Norfolk. He should be here."

"Shit—it's on the move." Roman leaned over my shoulder and we both watched the white dot blip from the center of the screen toward the right. "We can't wait."

We climbed down the rising, ending up directly on a platform. The goggles made everything look like an old black and white that had been colorized. You almost forget

what the original picture is like. The air was stale and a little stifling and dam hot. It felt like the foyer to hell.

The white blip was still on the move. The tunnel that led out of the station stretched east and west. We hopped down to the track and followed the blip east. The white seemed to be moving toward the edge of the screen faster and faster. Before I knew it we were full out sprinting after the bot. The staleness in the air became replaced by something solid, a choking smolder. It grew stronger every few seconds as we raced down the tunnel.

Suddenly we were making better gain. The blip had become a stationary dot then became a blip a moment later. Only now it was moving west. I nearly tripped over a track when I stopped, realizing it was coming straight at us. Fast.

"What" Roman asked? He looked at the screen, and then we both looked down the tunnel. I slipped the tracker in my coat pocket and drew my piece. We backed up slowly and then moved apart toward the walls of the tunnel as if we were trying to avoid an oncoming train.

I suddenly started wondering whether our bullets were going to do the job. Whether these bot's high-density polymer chassis could withstand high velocity projectiles.

Why the hell hadn't I asked Dalia where the most vulnerable area on the bot lay? Would she have even been able to answer questions about destroying machines she only thought about building? Why would you need to protect yourself against machines that can't hurt people? It was one of the rare moments when you get to actually stand on the edge of a tipping point.

The bot came down the tunnel just like a train, its arms and legs moving like a man. I might have thought it was a man until it got close enough to gleam. A wordless sound filled the tunnel, a frightening jabber that speed up as the bot emerged between us.

The bot that had fed us to the morgue stopped and turned in Roman's direction ominously. I rounded about to its left and opened fire. For a moment I worried that we'd damage it beyond hope of tracking its puppeteer.

All those thoughts were shot to hell when the bot took evasive maneuvers. I managed to plug a few in its torso, the sound of ice cracking bounced off the walls. The bot folded to the ground with alarming ease, maneuvering on its hands and legs like some lizard. It moved faster than I thought possible crawling up to Roman then stood and grabbed his firearm. I heard Roman's wrist snap before he

screamed. The bot swatted him against a column like a pancake. Roman slid to the ground unconscious.

I'd stop firing out of fear of hitting Roman when the bot turned on me. Its face chilled me to the bone. They didn't build bots to express emotions you might expect a person to have in murderous situations. Bots had variants of smiling expressions or neutral, sleep mode, faces. A blank smile was the last thing Gilmore and the mortician saw before they died.

The bot was all smiles as it rammed straight into me like a bull. I flew a good ten feet off the ground. Felt my chest stinging. The bot was almost over me again by the time I hit the tracks. I fired my glock without thinking and hit it square in the left side of its face. Another round ripped into its shoulder. Plastic and metal splintered into the air but the bot kept charging. I curled my feet up, catching the bot on its torso. Its momentum swung it over my head along with my legs. This time the bot was airborne.

I saw it readjusting as I rolled over my neck. By the time I turned, I saw its half smiling face as it swung its good arm. I felt like I'd taken a wrecking ball to the stomach. I slammed into the tunnel wall, my bionics taking

most of the brunt. But there was no protection against the sensation of being yanked awake after my lungs forgot to breathe. I collapsed gasping, realizing my hand was empty—weaponless.

The thoughts that go through your mind are never appropriate in these situations. All I could think about was how much money I'd wasted on Memtex lucid trips. Here I was about to die for real and nowhere was that rush I felt when I jumped out of a plane without a chute.

The bot marched toward me. I struggled to stand, my feet sliding uselessly under twenty years of black dirt and soot.

The bot's arms and side sparked and jerked suddenly as shots rang. It took off in the direction of the attack.

I turned as it leaped on Cutter's frail form. I could breathe again and forced myself onto uncertain feet and dragged them toward Cutter. Cutter was a pinhead, but no way would I let him be bludgeoned to death.

There were homes thirty feet above us. The third rail may have been dead, but lines in the wall had to be alive. They had to be.

I took off my coat and bundled my hands over it twice. I couldn't hold a fork but I had enough dexterity to pull the

feed running into a circuit panel free. They didn't bother to hide hot boxes underground. The closest one was about a foot too high.

The bot had begun to tear into Cutter, who was doing his best to guard the blows from the bot's one arm. Each one would splinter his forearms to pieces until he couldn't hold them up any longer. His skull would come next.

I took a running start and made a pitiful leap toward the fat cable feeding into the hot box. I tried again. No good. I was tired. My top was too heavy and I was too old. I felt the panic of desperation. I heard Cutter scream again. The way a man should never have to.

I hobbled to the other side of the tunnel, conserving all the strength I could. A little momentum is all I needed. I had one more shot at best before Cutter stopped screaming for good. Then the bot would be on top of me again.

I took off, pushing hard, making each step count. I reached the wall but my feet kept moving, speed carrying me a few steps up the rounded edges of the tunnel wall. I leaped when I felt gravity beginning to slide my feet down the curve. I felt the fat wire in my hands through the coat and yanked downward. Sparks rained in the tunnel like the tail end of fireworks.

I rammed the live end of the wire into the bot's head like soldiers stake conquered territory with a flag. It froze mid-swing, gyrating like a pinball. Lights ignited in its head and around its joints. I held the line steady, my eyes nearly closed from the brightness of the charge. As long as the juice kept pumping, I would hold that line steady. I knew they could withstand a quick jolt of lightning so I would hold as long as I had power.

When the juice dripped dry, the bot toppled beside Cutter lifeless. I dropped the line and fell to my knees, caught myself with both hands flat on the ground. I thought about it and saw no reason why I wasn't laying down. So I did, gasping heavily. My chest weighed a ton.

"You okay," I asked? I was barely able to speak.

"I think my arms are broken."

"Better that than your face."

"Thanks, Knowledge—you saved my life."

"You--mine. Just hope...can still use chip...and nail puppeteer."

"That's just it," Cutter said, panting heavily. "Back at dispatch. Gilmore's body should have gone to CAD's morgue. It was that way in the manifest. Just a log of

snapshots for the backup data, once every minute. One minute it was routed to ours, the next snapshot—

“It had changed.” Cutter managed a nod.

“In one minute. Even if the change had gone in manually, it would take an operator more than a minute just to physically update the request.” Cutter took a few gasps. “A superior has to approve that kind of request.”

“You checked—you verified it?”

“I checked—I double checked. The data tech said it was—like a ghost in the machine.”

Cutter’s data team had traced the ghost across the public Interweb. There were inexplicable deletions of Gilmore’s private documents. Not everything was missing, just a string of entries where other notes remained intact.

It was Dr. Kubert—our original suspect--that turned everything around. He gave Roman a disc with the last story Gilmore ever worked on. She gave it to him just a month before she was killed but he hadn’t viewed what was on it until after she died.

Gilmore had been working on a story about HU Corp. and it was anything but fluff. The story implicated Victor Cupertino—Standing Chair of HU Corps Board of Directors.

Gilmore's polished delivery and powerful prose painted Victor Cupertino as a hustler with a briefcase. A corporate thug and adulterer. That had been motive enough. The case cracked wide open when we verified whose estate Android 7AB823 had been registered to. None other than Victor Cupertino. We had him.

Roman was issued a warrant in no time. Two assault teams followed us to Cupertino's estate. It was crawling with all kinds of robots and way too many androids. One outfitted as a butler opened the door. Another offered us beverages, then scuttled away as twelve sets of boots marched through the hall. An overly friendly hostess bot escorted us toward the back patio where Cupertino was *expecting* us.

I felt the snarl on my mouth listening to it approximate a female voice. I almost lost it when it casually mentioned our bandages.

Sitting on the back patio was a broad shouldered and narrow chinned man wearing an expensive suit.

"Victor Cupertino," Roman asked, as if he might take a swing once he was sure.

"Detective Knowledge, Detective Roman, I am Philip Stanbaen, Victor Cupertino's attorney. Unfortunately he has had to attend business out of town."

"What the hell is this," I said.

"Why are you here," Roman asked?

"He asked that I see that you get everything you need. Mr. Cupertino was very disturbed by the Gilmore and Pinkin accidents." He knew the mortician's name. "Their families have already been reached, their losses recouped."

Translation: Bought. "Where is he," I barked?

"As I said—out of town on business."

"The homicidal Android, 7AB823 belonged to his estate. He also happened to be the focus of the late journalists unpublished expose."

"You are correct, Android 7AB823 went missing over two weeks ago. Here's a copy of the report we filed," Stanbaen said, handing over a sheet of paper. "I'm afraid I don't know about any...expose."

"I bet Cupertino does," Roman said.

"Mr. Cupertino also wanted to extend his deepest apologies for the trauma you and your colleagues have experienced. He's graciously agreed to pay all of your

medical expenses and has made appointments with his personal physicians for the two of you and a Mr. Cutter."

"This is bullshit," I screamed.

"I assure you that they are the best doctors available."

"As expensive as his lawyers," I asked?

"Not quite," Stanbaen said, with a smug smirk. He stood to leave. "I will notify you when Mr. Cupertino returns. We can setup an appointment for him to speak with you at that point. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"When the analysis confirms that Cupertino rewired that bot, we'll see how long that smile lasts," I said. The lawyer giggled lightly and continued walking.

Cupertino didn't just have Stanbaen—he had a team of lawyers, a dense defensive line. HU Corp. was an even further reach. They saw to it Gilmore's death didn't go in the official reports as murder despite my testimony as a decorated retiree. Despite aura analysis of the burning smell in the tunnel confirmed to have been Gilmore's body. In the end, they called it accidental death.

Accidental. No different from driving into a ravine. No different from severing a major artery making a sandwich. Android 7AB823 was dismantled and each of the production models recalled. It costs HU Corp. hundreds of millions

but the public never got the full story and the press never connected the dots.

Roman started out hot, paid a lot of lip service to seeing justice done. I think he meant it. Then they shoved a rank his way and changed his tax bracket just a month after the case had officially closed. Can't say I blame him for playing the game. Makes me glad to be retired.

I laid low for the next few months after everything blew over. After a while, the hover parked outside my office building lost interest in my phone conversations. I made certain of it. Whoever hired them to listen would be bored to tears when reviewing the data from my phone taps.

7AB823's analysis revealed it had been wired like every other bot ever made. Like all the others, it should not have been able to do anything except assist and protect.

What if it could have been convinced somehow that it was protecting. Protecting its Creator—Cupertino.

Everything we are, everything we know, we owe to the Creator. The words swam around in my Gut. The more I thought about it the more sense it seemed to make.

In the end, it didn't really matter why the bot had gone berserk. Everything had changed. We stumbled on a flaw in

the design of our newest best friend. Cutter and Roman knew. I knew. Gilmore's death was a murder the world wasn't ready to cope with.

I couldn't think through it, but I could feel it in my Gut. Our potential for destroying ourselves had been matched. We were the creator. We were the puppeteers.

A year later, I find myself in a new office, new phone line, new town and new business. Kind of new. Took a while to get settled in. But with the rent in bot city being what it is, the phone ringing is music to my ears. I took a gamble with the new angle but my Gut keeps telling me it will pay off.

I compose myself while the phone rings, flexing the new nanofibers in my calves and thighs. They feel strong. I answer the phone, confident and ready, "Detective Knowledge, Private Investigator."

The voice on the other end sounds shaken and unsure. He asks a question that I had practiced answering twenty dozen times. I answer, "That's right. I specialize in Cyber Crimes—Robotics."