

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 to 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

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.

I, Robot

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 jay-bird 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 Picola. 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 in-fowar 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 propagandamode 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, transreflective 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.

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