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METROPO

eight stories from the unending city

based on future events



impressions

METROPO

eight stories from the unending city
by magnus aspli



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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, events and names in this short story collection are products of the author's and illustrators' imaginations or used ficticiously.

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KULTURRÅDET
Arts Council
Norway



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LYD OG BILDE
Kulturrådet

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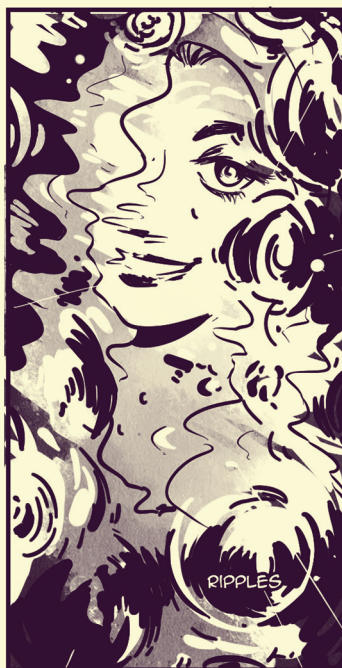
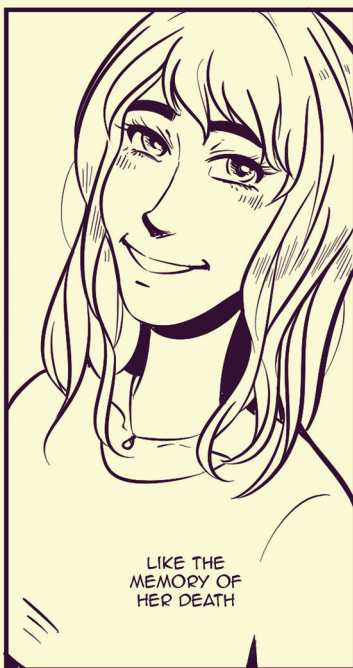
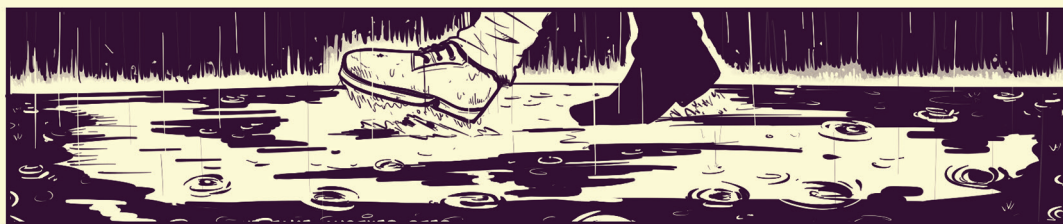
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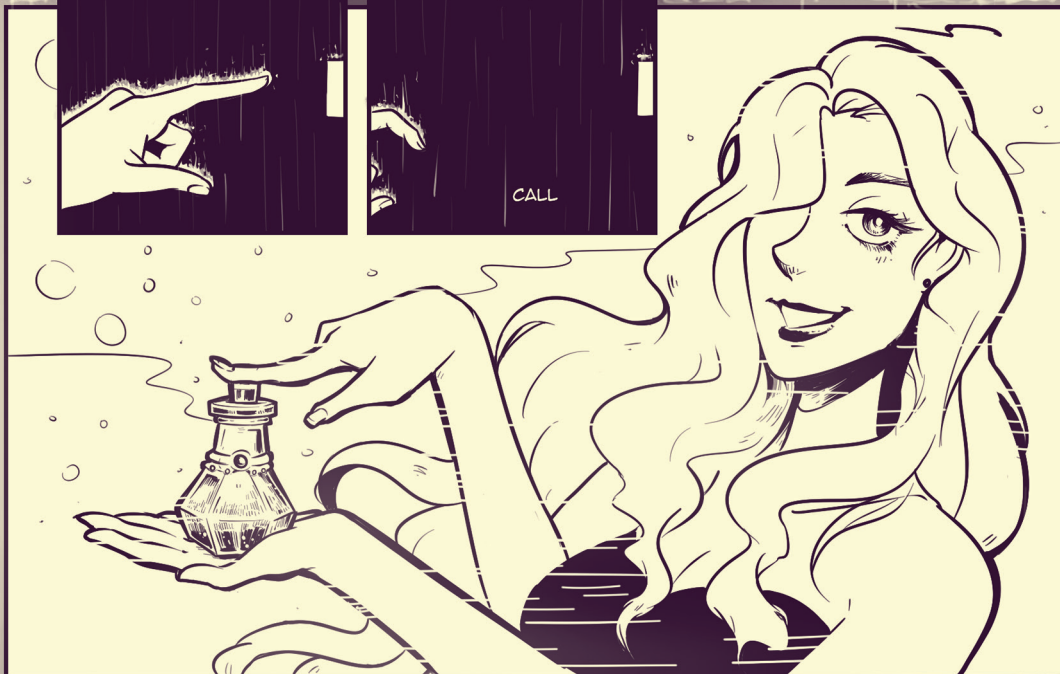
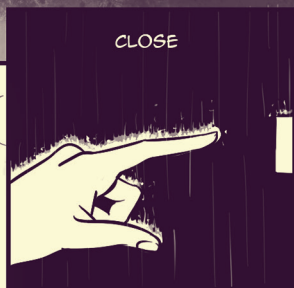
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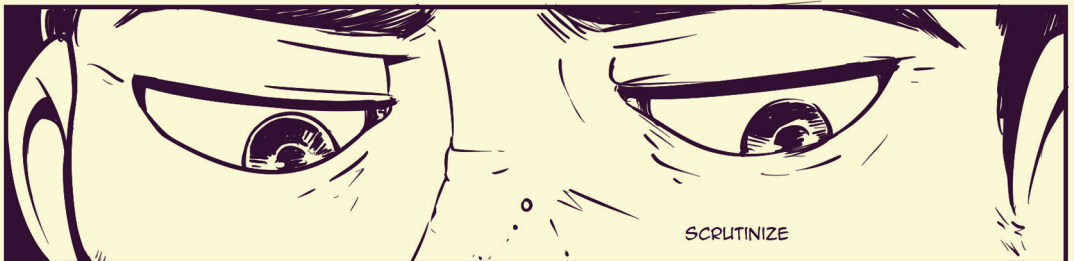
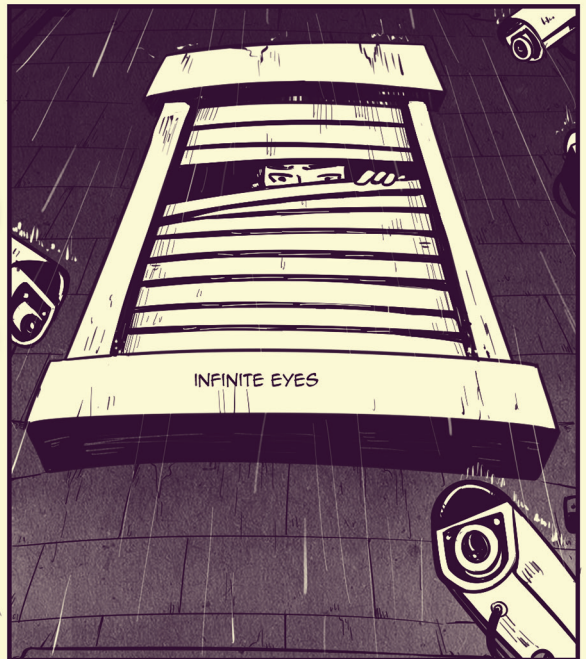
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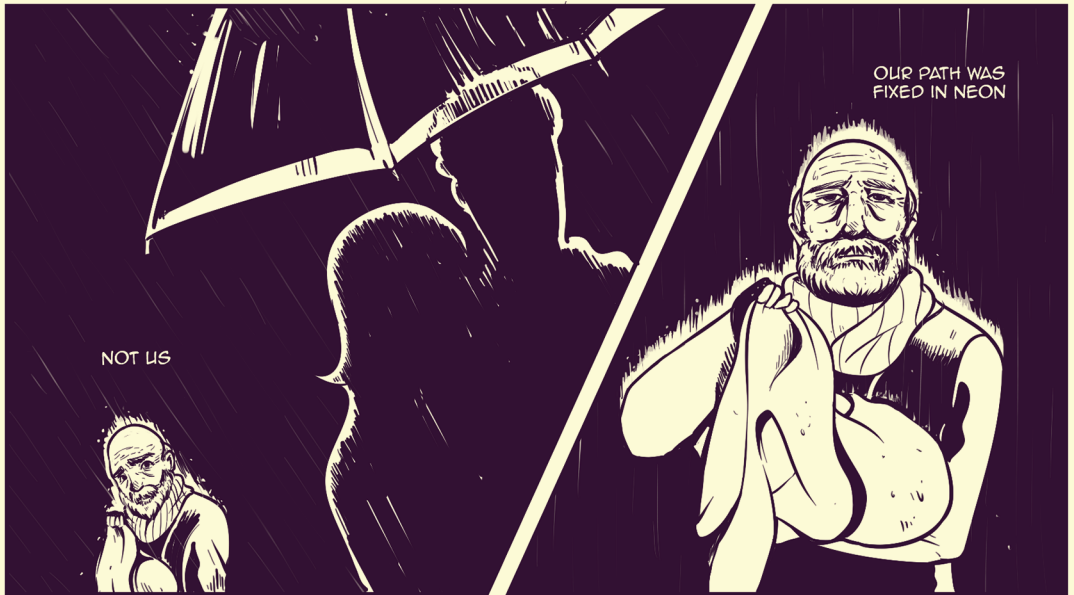


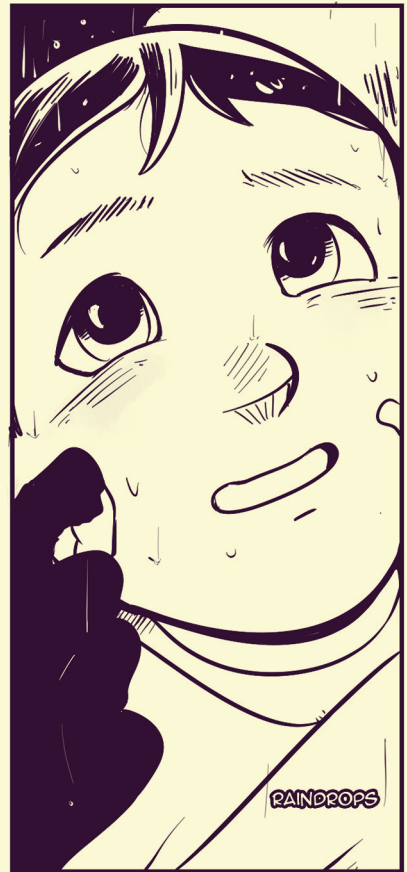
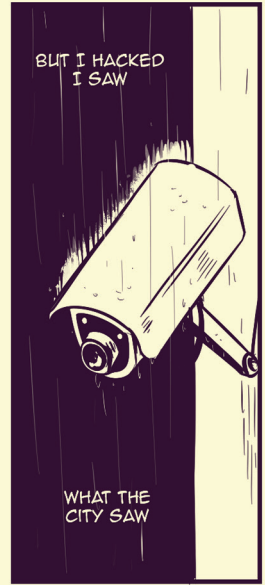
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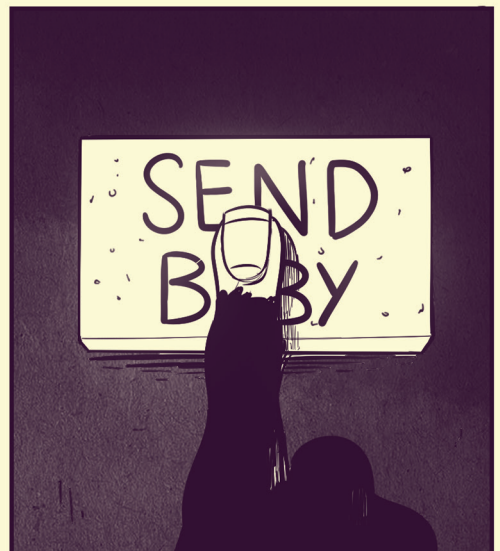
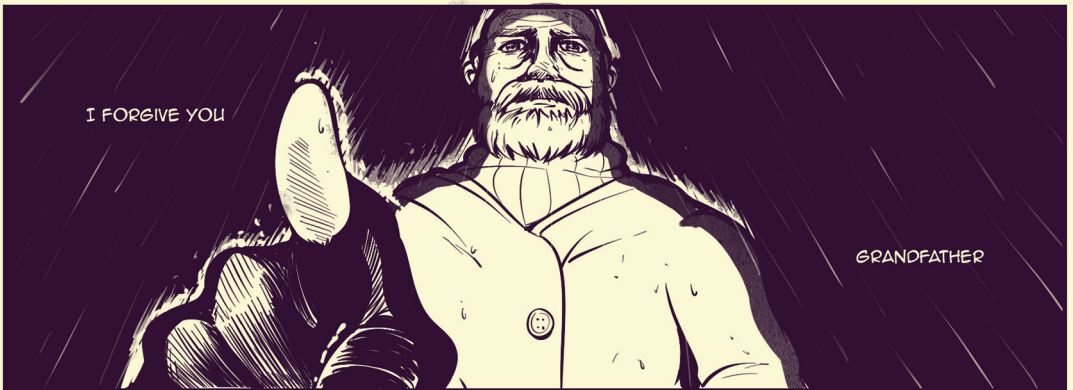
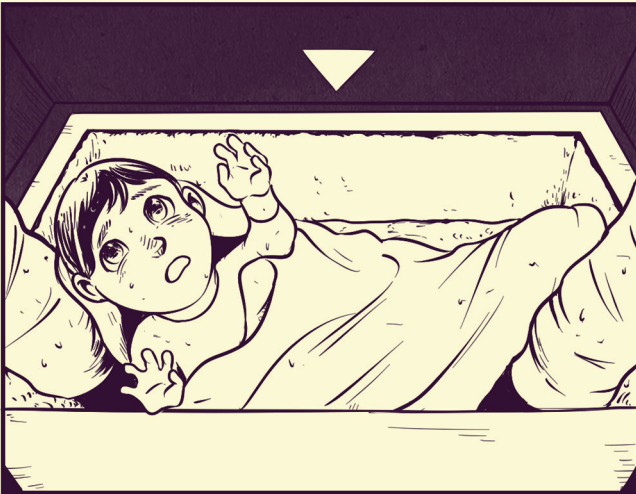
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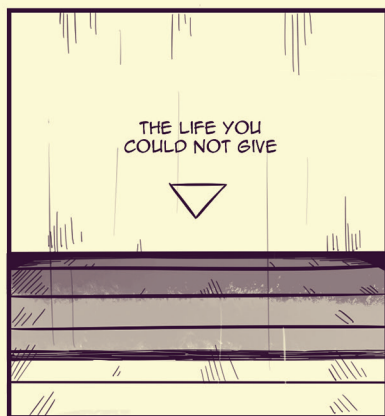
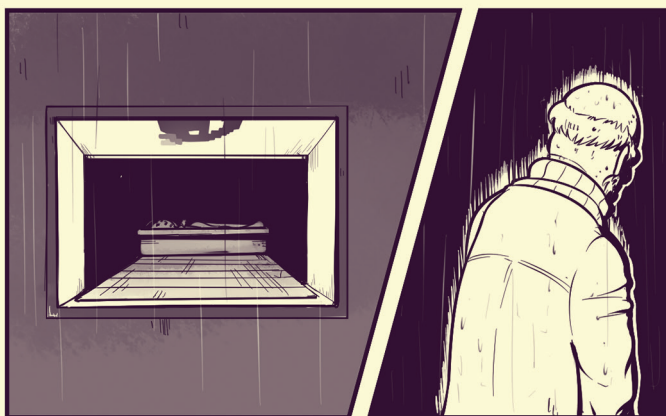
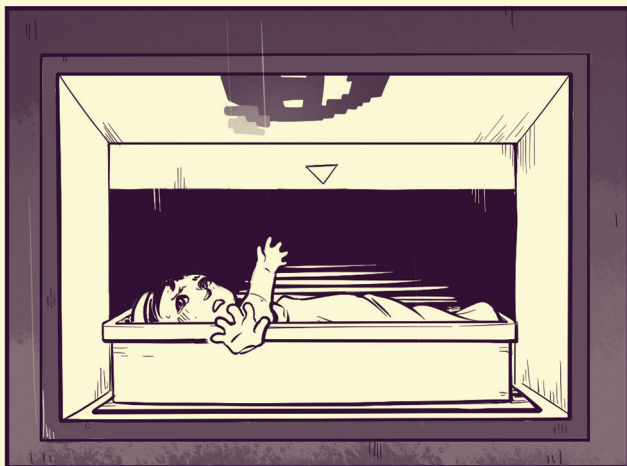














deep learning

THE FIERCE CODE

Lance stood in his cramped apartment, a sigh building up from his lungs, the beeps of a hung up telecall in his earpiece, and the sound of cursing in his brain. He wondered for a millisecond if thoughts had ever been recorded into soundwaves and concluded he'd never heard of that and shifted gears back to his main concern.

Trevor was in trouble again.

Twins were supposed to know, to feel, when there was something wrong with the other. Lance was pretty sure he'd read that on some clickbaiter.

Wreckshit.

Lance hadn't felt a thing. He'd been perfectly content eating synthetic beef jerky, watching his baby daughter sleep and scratching Spiffy behind his left ear. The right ear was no good, ever since the fur had begun to come off.

Lance knew there would be a lot of minor maintenance needed on Spiffy the day he bought him, but he'd been cheap and looked real cute. The fact Mirra didn't approve of getting a dog, a faux pet as she always—annoyingly—made sure to point out, had closed the deal for Lance.

All the annoying bits and bobs about Mirra that gnawed at him had seemed petty when she succumbed to prenatal depression and then refused the cheaper Medica Invest Anti-Depression Drug Plan™ and opted for virtual reality therapy. Eventually she was mindlost, on mythic beaches, in warm sea wind and soothing bird chirps. Lance had stopped repeating her belittling fancy words, at least out loud. As the technicians concluded, she'd been too immersed and pulling her out would lead to suicidal depression at best and brain damage at worst. In the murky parts of his mind Lance wondered if

Mirra had gotten a better deal than him.

Mirra had given birth in a tiny VR cubicle. Peeling paint on cheap plastic walls. A basic Medbot assisting an unlicensed nurse, and a VR technician making sure the systems were stable. Mirra's body shaking in pain and exhaustion. Her mind blissful at some long gone Asian beach. The techie, who was bingeing a historical documentary about nations at the same time as having one eye on the systems, had assured Lance, who had been forced to wait in the crowded narrow hallway between cubicles, that everything would be all right.

A little girl had tried to sell him plastic roses while he was stacking some trash to stand on so he could peer over the cubicle wall.

Spiffy had sat beside Lance, wagging his tail throughout the whole ordeal. He'd barked and yipped as the cubicle door opened. A baby girl was handed to Lance as his earpiece had chimed with the medical invoice dropping at the same time. Mirra's insurance would not cover the delivery as it was already running on her VR therapy and Lance knew this, but he didn't care. The baby girl he held in his arms as Spiffy tugged at his shoe had stolen his heart.

'Idiot.' Lance said into the room, wishing Trevor could hear it and hang his head in shame. Then the deep sigh erupted.

Trevor probably had a worse life than his brother, but Lance was forever jealous of his victories. Stupid and short-lived victories, yes, but crime doled out short bursts of quick cash, thrills and what Lance assumed was happiness. Trevor had never been good at stepping away when on top of a situation, though. Hence the short-lived victories. Because Lance couldn't help but feel jealous whenever his brother showed up with more credits than Lance ever had, he quietly reveled in schadenfreude when the tide turned against Trevor.

Yet, he loved his brother, and this call had sounded high on the not-good scale.

'Idiot,' he proclaimed again.

Spiffy looked up at him with the tilted head of an inquisitive terrier. In the beginning Lance had been quite impressed with all the neat behavioral algorithms Spiffy performed, despite not really knowing much how real dogs behaved. He'd seen a few, up in the higher levels. Stared after them with deep curiosity, as most low-levelers would do. But never touched one. Never felt

real fur between his fingers. Those who could afford real dogs could also afford bodyguards and security personnel. Touching a dog without permission was something you wouldn't do unless you enjoyed being arrested, or had a kink for getting shot. Trevor had seen it happen when he was fleetingly part of an animal kidnapping gang.

Lance paced the apartment once, twice and one last time trying to make up his mind. Should he head out quickly and rescue Trevor, or let him sort out his own shit? He knelt by Hannah and the makeshift table-turned-crib. Five months to the day. Her face of sleep the calmest thing Lance had ever known and would know.

He thought of bringing her along, bundled up and sleeping in the brown blankets, safe in his arms as he biked down to level C and into the Restless quadrant, but quickly thought better of it. If she woke...

It was called Quad Restless for a reason.

A sudden ounce of sadness, as if something intangible dropped from his throat and into his lower gut, hit him. If only he had money for proper stuff. He'd seen the baby stores with their monitored cribs. Even to lease, they were way above his budget. As his brain's train of thought ended on the concept of budget the sadness stuck and lingered.

Hannah's calm face was both a trigger and an antidote to such feelings. Lance ran the back of his index finger with utmost care and love up and down Hannah's warm cheek. Spiffy was on two legs next to Lance's knee, his paws on the mattress edge, his face a panting smear of happiness and curiosity. Lance smiled at his best friend and scratched his head.

A bit of fur came off and Lance shook and blew his hand to let it drop to the floor. Buddy, the little vacuumbot he'd found in a dumpster several years ago was extra handy now that Spiffy was shedding hair like an actual animal. There were quite a few promises from the company who sold him the dog that Lance eventually had to accept were pure wreckshit. Yet, ironically and comfortingly, this made Spiffy more real.

Lance went over to his bed and lifted the mattress to get to the storage space beneath. Boxes of clothes, drone parts and junk. He rummaged around in the latter and, after a few sighs and curses, found his old social device. The Taco10, which was practically useless after last year's system upgrade by TeleCine. Its dull grey frame light in his hand.

He had a plan. A pretty uncertain one, but a plan nonetheless.

//

The hallway outside his apartment was particularly cold this evening. As happened more and more often since the scraper had been sold to another estate firm, the ventilation fell out now and then and clearly needed a solid overhaul and repair. A job Lance himself had tried to be part of and had pitched the janitor several times. Every time the janitor had shaken his ugly face and sputtered words about cost and money.

Lance knelt by the door to give Spiffy a quick goodbye rub.

‘I’ll be back in a little while, buddy. You be quiet and watch the place, okay? Keep Hannah company, but no barking.’

The vacuumbot came whirring.

‘Not you,’ Lance rolled his eyes. ‘Back to your dock, Buddy,’ he commanded in a low and clear voice. He’d tried plenty of times since getting Spiffy to change the vacuumbot’s call name, to no avail.

He stood.

Spiffy turned a few times and headed back into the apartment, sat down in the middle, eyeing Lance, then the crib, then Lance again and wagged its tail.

The door slid shut and Lance pulled his coat on properly. The soft clang of his boots on the metal grating of the hallway filled the long but narrow space as he made his way outside.

Moist air and drizzle greeted his face, soft and pleasant in contrast to the blare of the city. The next-door sushi and wristcom joint had changed the colour of their sign again. Yesterday, the surfaces on bots and people’s faces were bathed in violet. Today they were bright yellow. He pulled on his biker cap.

Lance joined in on the moving stream of people and machines on the walkway. Sliding in behind a Red Blood priest and his two zealots, cutting in front of a gorgeous android prost with her *this is an android* sign matching her red metallic lips.

The queue to the garage reel was—luckily—short and consisted of two people. They were also getting their dronebikes out. Lance was on his a minute later and hovered carefully out into the wide traffic air lane between his scraper and the one opposite. As much as his body wanted to spur his bike into the lane and shoot off towards the intersection that would allow him

down to the lower level, his brain had noticed the SecForce traffic drone that hung silently above. He could not afford a chase or a fine tonight. Or any night these days.

As he flew towards the Happy High Five intersection Lance tapped his biker cap and its holodisplay came on. Speed, distance, altitude... the works. All the metrics of traffic life shone in bright green in front of his head. Most important to him was the TigerTooth icon that blinked, then became solid and made him smile. He'd connected his cap through his Taco11 to his old device, which rested on a shelf next to Hannah's makeshift crib. Any sound she made, he'd hear, thanks to the long range of the TigerTooth link. Although it made both his shoulders and his anxiety chillax some, a vague murmuring in the back of his occipital lobe told him he had forgotten something.

Lance waved all the way through the Happy High Five intersection. Waved off all the synthfood drones, with their promises of tasty lab grown snacks and beverages, all approaching with beaming smileys and jingles played with light, happy notes. He found the downward airlane as fast as dronebike-and-humanly possible, and down he went. The butterflies in his stomach the opposite of relaxed as he and a hundred other vehicles plummeted down. Down to the next tier fifty meters below, then the next, fifty more meters. Slotting in perfectly in the speedlane, Lance kicked his bike to top speed and raced towards the quad five quadrants ahead, Quad Restless. Limos, dronetaxis and SecForce drones and pursuit vehicles occupied the lane with him.

He passed the C-Level Transhuman Hospital, where, in his darkest moments as newborn Hannah cried and cried, he had contemplated bringing her. Delivering her. The hospital became a blur of neon strips in the corner of his eye, like the memory.

As Lance rushed past smartclothing shops, a temple and a gang of kids having a drone fight, the holonumbers told him he was just two kilometers from Quad Restless and the estimated time on arrival to Trevor's location was four minutes.

\\

Lance eased his dronebike into a temporary parking space on a wall scaffold-

ing just outside the Court, the hub of Quad Restless. The people streaming like cells in arteries on the walkways to and fro the Court seemed unending. The throb of every imaginable music pounded through Lance's body as he slipped into the stream and was washed into the boiling pot that was the place to be in Sector 3.

The Court, a plaza that opened up into once-old grand architecture stretching skyhigh was now a patchwork of artistic expression, light and sound pollution, all clamouring for attention from every nook and cranny. Lance waved his way through dancers, spectators, buyers and sellers. Humans and machines. The club Trevor claimed to be in was opposite the plaza and Lance could see its entrance through the splashes of colour and strobing flashes of light and the occasional naked body part.

Every now and then, Lance thought he heard Hannah in his earpiece and had to stop, but it was just the plethora of sounds from the Court, and his mind, tricking him. He forced himself not to worry, but that vague murmuring he'd felt earlier had only grown.

In line for the club Lance tried his best to avoid social interaction. He noticed several others with masks and holodistorters. Displaying your identity was, for some, a weak spot. Restless was known to be a haven for synthetic euphoria and crime, from the casual pickpocket-y kind to the rumoured (but not debunked) subcity slave trade. When you house and entertain a scourge of thrillseekers and illicit money makers, crime comes along like some incurable STD. SecForce rarely came down to Restless and if they did it was usually in droves. When he was younger and a frequent visitor to Restless and its Court, social media was buzzing with news—fake, illicit and real—that SecForce were in unending lawsuits with another security firm about the territory in this quad. Babylon Security wanted their piece of the pie. Likely a huge factor why they, even up until this day, rarely bothered to poke their taser stick in this teeming beehive.

Finally inside, only having had to engage in two awkward conversations about proposed sexual activity in the queue, Lance found the third balcony. Up there he could see the small club in all its splendour. A thousand high and sweating bodies, some moving like fluid, some like a crashed drone bouncing through oncoming traffic.

Trevor sat in the corner. Short chameleon trousers and a deep-black hoodie. His hood was pulled down casting his face in shadow. Lance knew it

was him from the tough-guy posture, and the unnaturally defined calves. One of Trevor's slightly failed shortcuts when chasing the perfect body. Before Lance stepped over his mind rummaged around the question of the perfect body. Who knew what that was these days?

After having smiled with genuine relief of seeing Lance and having clumsily hidden his handgun, after telling Lance it was mighty great of him to come down—keeping his voice so low it croaked—and after explaining his predicament that a cage fighting club that allowed biomechanically enhancement had refused to turn the other cheek after discovering the miracle protein supplement Trevor had supplied them with was a hoax at best and a health danger at worst, Trevor put his hand on his brother's shoulder and led him towards an exit.

'So how are you and Sarah doing?'

Lance wasn't surprised.

'Her name is Hannah.'

'Shit, I knew that.'

Trevor tried to keep the conversation going, but just as he was about to say something he spotted a threat near the exit.

'What is it?'

'It's them.'

Two women with glowing tank tops, bodies built to maximum muscular power, peered out over the crowd.

'I don't think they've seen us,' Trevor whispered, but he was wrong.

The two bulging pieces of human flesh elbowed their way toward Lance and Trevor. Curses and shouts.

'Wrong.' Lance pointed out.

Trevor pulled him in the other direction, but against the river of people and sexbots exiting, their progress was slow. Too slow. The women closed in and before they managed to slip out of the stream both Lance and Trevor were picked up like ragdolls. Strong fingers tight around their necks and balls. They cried out but with each yelp the grip on their crotch increased and so did the pain.

'Put me down, I don't know him!' In Lance's head they were words, but when they escaped his mouth they were like some fading corrupted audio signal.

Carrying them over their heads, the two ladies of ill-intent walked

through the exit. Outside, the exo-skulled bouncers paid them no heed. The pain blotted out Lance's vision. When it suddenly let go he was airborne. He and Trevor flew down the stairs of a side alley. The pain returned in staccato jolts as they crash-landed and tumbled down the steel-grated steps. They came to a halt in a heap at the bottom. Whatever human activity was going on down in the alley it quickly scurried off.

'Think I broke a finger!' Lance moaned as he tried to find his bearing, but already the two superior antagonists were descending the stairs with chuckles and promises of more pain. Lance tried to haul Trevor up for an escape, but he knew instantly from the weight of Trevor's body it was utterly futile.

'Some help would be nice!' Lance croaked through soon-to-be knocked out teeth.

If only he could give Trevor a long piece of his mind, to tell him how his full terrible and reckless life had led to this and how he should be utterly ashamed of how he'd brought his own brother down with him, and that his brother had something important in his life now, a daughter and by the gods if anything were to happen he would haunt Trevor for the rest of eterni--

The booming sound echoed through Lance's ears and mind. Two more cracking booms followed. Trevor held the gun with confidence even if his arm shook and his face bled. Like a sack of something heavy one of the ladies fell down the steps and skidded to a grating halt. The other one knelt as if in an awkward ritual, clutching her thigh. If Lance had been the owner of a high-end spectral contact lens he would have seen the soundwaves filling the air, painting excruciating pain.

Five minutes later, bodies aching and the taste of blood in their mouths, Lance and Trevor sat hunched behind a pile of spent electric gear somewhere in the darker parts of the Restless quadrant. After having cursed and bitten away the pain they had been able to run. Even here, in this forgotten walkway only drifters and dumpster drones came through, the sounds of entertainment and vibrations of music penetrated. Lance and Trevor hadn't dared to speak during their escape but now Trevor was ready to apologise to Lance and admit he'd never shot anyone before and how it wasn't a pleasant feeling at all and that he would get rid of the gun as soon as he could and it all came out in a flurry of words before Lance grabbed him and made him hush.

Not far off, people were shouting.

‘Come out, you snake!’

Lance assumed correctly that that snake was his brother.

They sat as still as they could. Footsteps came closer. When the footsteps were loudest it struck them both just how poor a hiding spot they’d chosen. No escape route. Cornered like a square room.

Breaths held, suddenly Lance’s wristcom beeped. His TigerTooth link was being hacked. Fumbling desperately and as quietly as possible he severed the connection. Trevor held the gun ready. The footsteps came closer.

‘Nothing but rats and stink down here, Zike! Let’s go back.’

The feet and its unknown owner walked away.

A minute of silence and the two brothers dared to breathe out.

‘That was anticlimactic.’

‘I gotta go right now. I can’t hear if Hannah wakes up anymore.’

‘What was it?’

‘Someone stumbled on my TigerTooth link. Had my outdated old device set up as mic.’

‘They get into your device they’ll rob you blind.’

‘Not much to rob, I’m afraid.’

The admittance of being poorer off than his brother struck him as the words slipped out. A stinging defeat that Trevor could clearly see in Lance’s downcast eyes. Trevor stood and helped Lance up. Bruised skin and stiff muscles. The two brothers wandered out of the dark nook.

‘Hey, would it be alright if I crashed at your place for a day or two?’

No matter how much Lance wanted to object, he said yes. Apparently there’s a link between twin brothers, he thought. But he was pretty sure this came down to his gullible kindness.

\\

After several sorry attempts at brotherly chatter from Trevor’s side, they were back at Lance’s scraper. He slotted the dronebike into the garage reel as fast he could and led Trevor to the entrance.

‘Place hasn’t changed much.’ Trevor noted. It having been over six months since last he dropped by. Also back then to lay low for a few days.

Before Lance reached his door, Trevor stopped him.

‘Hey, I want to pay up for this wreckshit I caused, okay. And you can’t

say no.'

'I don't need the credits.'

'You do. You got a kid.'

Lance didn't want to admit he needed them.

'And that dog, which is a walking malfunction. Let me fix him up, if you still want the furball around.'

Lance shrugged a weak *yeah, okay I'll accept your money*.

'Spiffy.'

'Huh?'

'Spiffy is my dog's name. Spiffy and Hannah.'

Lance unlocked the door as his mind flooded with all the good memories of Spiffy and of Hannah.

Then, the vague murmuring he'd felt earlier came like a freak tsunami.

His place was a mess. Clutter on the floor and the makeshift crib had been toppled. In front of it sat Spiffy, his fur ripped on his face, sparks twinkled in his exposed neck, but the thing that sent a terrible shiver down Lance's spine was the amount of blood. On the floor, sprayed on the makeshift crib and wall, and all over Spiffy's face. As if someone had lowered his head in a bucket of the red stuff.

'Hannah!?'

She wasn't in the ruined crib. Lance's mind raced on in desperation but no logical conclusion presented itself. Only black, irrational rage. Spiffy, Lance's little buddy, had eaten his dear little baby.

Spiffy sat waiting with his tail wagging. The curious tilted head. Eyes asking for a treat as Lance grabbed the first thing that could be used as a blunt instrument and went at his terrier. The dog's friendly and animalistic eyes asked a hundred confusing questions as the guitar came crashing down.

Lance didn't stop beating Spiffy until the yelps stopped, his limbs gave out and, flat on the floor, his core kernel broke. The electric sigh calmed Lance only to stir up the heaviest of emotions. Grief.

He knelt down by his ruined Spiffy, unable to hold the tears back. His eyes flailing around the room, looking for... anything but this.

Trevor had been shocked and frozen in the doorway during the ordeal.

'What the fuck...?'

‘Hannah...’

In a rush of sudden responsibility Trevor came to Lance and held him. He offered his brother the generic comforting words but soon felt they carried no meaning and just held Lance in silence. The hug and silence spoke louder than any words ever uttered by Trevor. But Lance was beyond consolation. Weak hulking breaths filled everything.

A rustle suddenly startled them both. From under the makeshift crib. Then came the most welcoming sound. A cry. A baby’s cry.

Lance scurried over and lifted the sheets that were pulled down from the crib. There was Hannah. Unharmed and, at least in her mind, in dire need of her bottle of formula.

His daughter was alive and as Lance pulled her close and held her, he knew he was the luckiest man alive. He knew happiness, and he knew he would never be jealous of Trevor ever again.

Trevor was wiping and blinking away tears when he saw it.

‘Uh, Lance...’

He was looking at something behind the door. Draped in shadow there between the door and Lance’s bed, was something they had missed when they first opened the door. Someone.

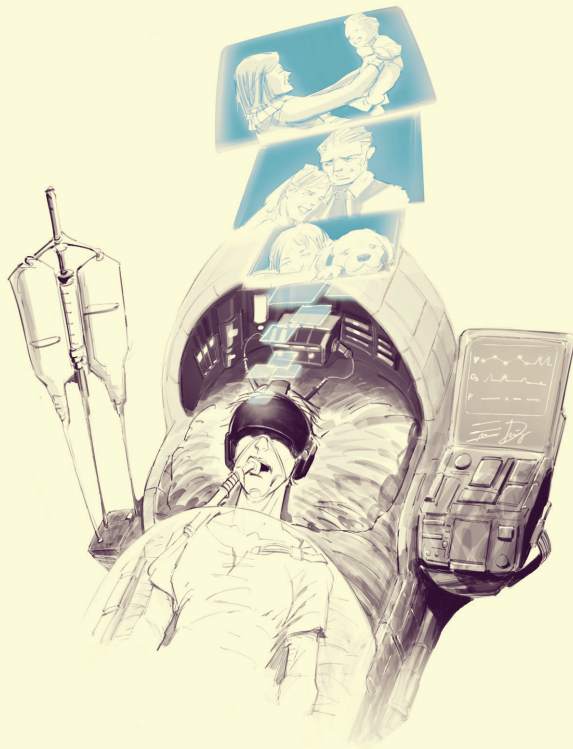
A bloody and mangled corpse.

‘A Snatcher...’ Trevor knew all the terms of all the scums of the sector.

It dawned on Lance. The lump in his throat returned to mix with the euphoric feeling of love.

Spiffy had saved Hannah. When Spiffy first noticed someone was picking the lock on the door, his algorithms had made him pull Hannah under the table and drape her with sheets. To secure her before whatever threat emerged from the doorway. The fight with the Snatcher had been brutal, but the man had not anticipated such fierce code in an outdated pet model.

A code that over the time spent with Lance, and with little Hannah, had created a neuronal pattern inside Spiffy’s kernel that resembled love.



back end

TEMPORAL

On the bed sat an android and it was female. The room small, the window tinted.

The android sat on its knees, in a posture that spoke of relaxation, anticipation and a welcoming attitude. The orange light trickling from the firmament-like ceiling specked its white skin mesh, which almost glowed, in contrast to the matte black sheets. Its skin mesh was soft, smooth, and expensive. It was grown and imbued with imperfections, just like the real thing, yet no blood flowed below. Its legs were thin and long and its thighs were of normal proportions, yet its waist was—due to customer preference—five percent narrower than the human equivalent. A milky-yellow buttoned bodysuit covered its crotch and breasts. Its shoulders were narrow and its arms slender. Its frame a facsimile of a fit eighteen-year-old human female and its face was moulded after some famous game character. It had freckles below its slightly enlarged green eyes. Above, strong and dark eyebrows. Its hair colour for the night was burning red.

Three men entered the room with white bathrobes on, which they quickly hung up by the door.

The android's lips tightened into a smile.

The smell of alcohol mixed with the sweet smell coming from the ventilation system, a long-gone type of orchard that none of the men had ever seen, known or heard the name of.

Two of the men were still chuckling after a dry break-it-you-buy-it joke from the third man out in the hallway as they came in. Their naked bodies, tanned, tightened and fixed, were facing the bed like a middle-aged wall. Smiles were shared before one of them spoke, the one who was quite certain

they had gotten an artificial one.

‘Come here, baby. I know you ain’t shy.’

This was her third mission tonight.

//

A few quadrants off, further down in Metropo, the bulky SecForce Station H3 jutted out into the airwaves with its security measures as the organic building shield shifted and grew around the impenetrable fortress. Every SecForce officer working at the station felt the shield was overkill, but the company’s PR heads wanted to show off.

Trisha was coming off her six-hour shift, just as her chemical boosters were wearing off. The juxtaposition of her freckled face inside the ugly and heavy uniform and surveillance helmet tended to make her colleagues smile. Though they’d learned since she started a few months back that her face told a lie. Underneath was a cold and often unwelcoming personality. Trisha felt her body ache as she got out of the dronecruiser and pulled off her helmet. Officer Rennoi was waiting, at ease.

Trisha handed the helmet to Rennoi without a word and he fixed it on tight in one precise move.

‘How was the shift?’

‘The usual.’

Officer Rennoi eased himself into the dronecruiser and glanced at the three security robots in the passenger seats.

‘No maintenance needed on the Cops?’

‘Sys will tell you.’ Trisha was already heading across the platform towards the main building. Her mind feeling numb as the remnants of the chemical boosters faded.

‘Did you upload the stat files?’

‘Of course. Sys will tell you that as well.’

Trisha hadn’t bothered turning around to look at Rennoi. His failed attempt at small talk made him feel dumb. He turned on the system and off the cruiser went.

Trisha stopped for a moment before entering the organic station wall with its scanners and medical check-ups waiting inside. She let the warm rain fall on her face in an attempt to wash her mind, to ease the heaviness.

Her shift had been like usual but also unusual.

Her mind was swimming with a sombre sensation, and she was quite sure it wasn't the chemical boosters' rigor mortis, but rather the accumulation of gnawing memories of the day.

The hole she'd ripped in her favourite t-shirt that morning as she recklessly put it on. The archaic blurry beach image and interlaced 3D text reading 'Waves' on the shirt was annoyingly vivid in her mind.

The coffee she spilled, which wasn't half bad this morning, despite her having downloaded a new brand on the machine.

The haunted and stricken expression on her friend Mioa's face—a special tactics officer at the station—when Trisha came in for her shift. An expression Mioa had carried since the final medical treatment of her daughter had shown little result a few days ago.

The mission on her shift where they had done a routine check on a production facility and had found a batch of androids too human-like, which Trisha had her Cop Units incinerate in front of the company scientists. With the Metropo Codex severely breached, the fine was high, likely enough to shut the company down forever. The Codex was heavily enforced down here, but often overlooked in the lucrative upper tiers of the city.

It wasn't so much the whole mission that had seared itself in Trisha's memory, but the details. The skin that bubbled and melted away on the faces of the androids before the heat had forced Trisha to step back and look away. Years of ingenious engineering and, yes, artistry, vaporized in seconds.

These and older memories had stirred a sensation in Trisha, a potpourri of emotions that had tried to formulate themselves into one concise feeling. A feeling that welled up in her now. A feeling she couldn't quite articulate, but the word that came crawling through her mind was...

She squinted upwards through the neon-lit pink rain, as if the word would materialize up there, and it did...

Temporal.

The temporal nature of all things.

Everything was like outdated code that could and would be rewritten... Trisha felt a sense of futility but mustered up the energy to move her body forward towards the platform entranceway, widening organically as she walked closer.

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What the rain couldn't wash away the shower did. Trisha felt lighter and downright better after going through the automated scans and medical check-up and letting the steam shower rinse her clean and warm for fifteen minutes. Soft retrowave played over the speakers in the locker room. A soundtrack of some classic game that stirred old and pleasant memories in Trisha, of her grandmother playing and little Trisha sitting in her lap.

The lull of the pleasant memory was cut short by the voice of Morgan and Fuk coming out of the sauna. Morgan was close to fifty, but still just of the second order, likely due to his annoying and immature personality. He was always, and desperately, trying to act below his age. Way below. Fuk on the other hand was twenty-seven, about the same age as his personality. A personality that his bulky body could barely contain. He'd applied to every social media show he could think of, starting on the top of the list and eventually going down to the bottom drawer to shows like AltFact, Clickmeister Chickmeister and Fiverr Daterr. He'd been on one show, but Trisha didn't stream it. Five minutes in Fuk had been thumbed down and then thrown off frame due to his less tempered response to his non-fans.

'I was all ready to head into Restless solo, but Sys put their foot down.' Fuk's voice always tuned in to his brag frequency.

'That woulda been radical... barging down there! You'd nail whatever wrongdoer, I'm sure!' Behind Morgan's words lay insecurity. 'What... what was it? What was going down?'

'Sys had reported gunshots and homicide, but pulled the seek order of course. Didn't have the balls. They don't dare to stir up shit in Restless. Poor woman, eh?'

'What woman?'

'The one that got shot! Sys claimed she was part of some bad gang, bioenhanced fighters, so not to bother. Kay-owardly, if you ask me!'

'Yeah!' Morgan blurted out, but didn't agree. He was glad he never had to go into Restless or other hate-filled anti-SecForce territories.

Fuk spotted Trisha half-dressed by her locker.

'Hey! You're Trisha, right? You need to have fun tonight, right? Spend those hard-earned credits.'

'I'm her, but I'm not so sure about that second bit.'

‘Come on! Chan and Ice are coming too. Payday after all. How long you been in that SecForce uniform?’

‘Six months. Why?’

‘And not one beverage with us! That is wreckshit! Right, Morgan?’

Morgan drummed up a ‘totes’ as Chen came in, uniform still on, a handsome and squared faced, flecked with blood and a confident smile.

‘Shit, Chen! Where was your shift?’ Fuk seemed irritated.

Chen delivered a nonchalant reply about Fuk’s mother’s genitals and Morgan laughed. Trisha even pulled a smile and so did Fuk, yet inside he was desperate to come up with a retort.

‘Yeah? I did your sister last week, so I had to deal with your mother today too.’

Morgan was the only one who kept up the laugh but it became a weak chuckle. Trisha caught a little smile from Chen and gave him a tiny one back.

‘Heard you were coming with us to Generative Brew tonight?’

Trisha replied with a *hmmm*, but one with a lot more agreement to it than her reply to Fuk.

‘What else should you spend your hard-earned credits on?’

Both Fuk and Morgan waited eagerly for Trisha’s reply to Chen’s question. She didn’t want them to know about her vague plan to save up enough to put her sickly father in cryo when the time came. Partly because cryo was viewed as the last desperate rites of the rich, and now, with today’s thoughtpaint about the temporality of all things, perhaps she wasn’t meant to give him this potential second chance.

The realization made her stare right through Chen to somewhere beyond.

Chen waited for his answer.

‘Oh, I guess... we’re all gonna die right so why not... why not?’

There was a little cheer from the guys and Chen offered her a high five.

‘Now we just have to wait for Ice...’ Fuk stated with a tint of disappointment in his voice. Not for the fact Ice was coming with them. That always happened. But they never knew when Ice decided the shift was over. Ice was a loyalist way beyond your average please-your-employer officer. Fuk was pretty sure Ice had been some devoted knight in a previous life, refusing to leave the queen’s side, dying in a futile battle long after the cause was lost.

But just as he was about to voice his annoyance, Ice came out of the shower.

She was naked, her milky white skin almost translucent, the veins visible all over her body, from hard legs to round breasts. Yet she looked vibrant, not sickly. Trisha had wondered many a time if Tamisha, which was her real name, had some nano-enhanced or biohacked skin and body, or if it actually was just the albinism.

‘Shit... looks like you’re the slow one today, Chen.’ Fuk was surprised.

Chen didn’t answer and instead stripped down in a hurry to get a shower to wash away the blood.

Ice had a tendency to just waltz around naked in the locker room. Not that Ice was showing off, it was all about practicality and efficiency. Trisha thought it was because Ice had decided she wouldn’t worry about her bodily privacy, as some kind of rebellious and defiant act due to her skin condition. The truth was that Tamisha didn’t care about such things as privacy and vanity. Such emotions were simply not there. There was a reason her nickname was Ice. Neither Fuk nor Chen had ever seen her betray any emotion, except a vague hint of pain during combat training and torture endurance. If any of them had been with her in the simulator they might also have detected a vague gleefulness when Ice shot and killed sims. When she began working with SecForce there were jokes and rumours about her being a state of the art prototype android SecForce and their mother company the Deus Initiative were testing, but no one believed even Deus were bold enough to pull a move like that. Such a severe breach of the Metropo Codex might down even the mighty Deus corporation. One day, when Ice had been severely wounded—a long bone-deep cut in her thigh due to a Red Blood terrorist-operated bomb drone—the robot rumours and jokes soon faded. Even if Ice didn’t show pain or shed a tear in that incident, the picture of brutalised muscle and meat mixed with gushing blood had humanised her.

Yet, they all surprisingly enough enjoyed her company post shift.

Ten minutes later they were gathered outside the ever-shifting station walls and made their way towards the main air lane between the towering structure the station was part of and the one opposite. Chen made up the rear of the group, still adjusting his impeccable hair, cursing the moist drizzle in the air. He wore a slick, fashionable sweater and beige leather trousers. Style over comfort. Fuk looked almost business-like in his raincoat blazer, except for his light-enhancing shades to combat the dreary evening darkness. Morgan

wore his usual camo-pattern trousers and leather jacket. Ice stuck out, not just because of her skin, but her tight milky grey zip-suit, which was both tactical and fashionable all at once. Trisha walked among them with baggy comfortable sweatpants and a long and thin green raincoat that matched her eyes.

They were discussing last week's murder of two SecForce officers at the Sacrament auction house while Morgan was pinging a dronetaxi. Fuk claimed people were cheering the attacker on, while Chen pointed out that was just social media spins with voice and facial manipulation.

'Whatever, people are glad when we get the boot stomped on our face, not seeing that we're keeping the same boot off of their skulls. Downright hate. Misplaced hate.'

'Well... ' Chen shrugged. Neither agreeing or disagreeing. Always the diplomat. Not wanting to get Fuk riled up on politics and policy before they even got drunk. The dronetaxi came blinking and hovered to a halt beside the walkway.

'Hate is a tool,' Ice said before she got in.

The others looked at each other with amusement, even if they were used to Tamisha's sporadic comments. Chen gestured Trisha to get into the oval acrylic glass dome before him. Once all were inside, the dronetaxi slid methodically into the slow airline. A split second after Fuk had told the vehicle to head to their destination, it sped up and surged into the main airline with the rest of the traffic. The speed and droplets of rain on the dome blurred the shapes of the people and robots walking and rolling this way and that on the walkway they just stepped off. Frothy, filthy waves up and down the blurred beach of urbanity, only lacking a title in 3D.

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The ride over to their usual waterhole would have only taken about 20 minutes, but Morgan and Fuk had demanded they stop and pick up some fungi to get a bit spored before they arrived. Chen wasn't pleased, but inhaled it too. Ice refrained. Her lungs were sacred. Chen laughed at the irony of the statement in this constantly polluted world they lived in. Trisha passed too, said she only wanted traditional brew, and the guys left it at that after a few prodding questions about her stimulation habits.

A new conversation, about the tightness of their work uniforms, was

just beginning as Trisha noticed a stray vehicle swooping towards them at full speed. One of its engines had been smashed by something and smoke trailed behind. Trisha and the guys only managed a glimpse and didn't have time to scream or speak before the damaged vehicle steered clear of them just in time and rammed into an adjacent retro dronocar.

From the safety of their dome the collision was muted and seemingly in slow motion. The damaged car folded into the side of the other dronocar and stuck to it as both machines careened into the nearby building. Both their anti-collision systems were working hard to lessen the impact as the wrecks hit the facade and slid down in a rain of sparks to the walkway below where people were already scattering to make room.

'Shit, that was close!' Fuk laughed as his adrenaline surged.

'Hope there wasn't anyone in that car...' Trisha muttered, but the fungi had already started to affect the boys and they were laughing and heading back into conversation about their uniforms and their own stimulation habits.

The devastation left behind was soon just a column of smoke shrinking and Trisha tried to get back to the present.

Morgan was spored long before they got out of the taxi and had already talked about his last sexual escapade and Chen had said he was surprised Morgan could remember that far back and Ice pointed out that memories never vanished. Trisha stayed quiet, the sombre feeling still lingering in her mind. They stepped out of the taxi and onto the walkway. The surge of life and machines was the norm, the noise a soundtrack to your life. For a split second Trisha remembered a mission she worked on a couple of weeks back that took her all the way down to the waste canals. The bottom of the city wasn't silent, but that particular zone was eerily quiet. It was bliss. Only the slush of waste murmured there, if one disregarded the echoes of her commands to her Cops. Trisha had felt alone then. Wonderfully alone.

'Thank fuck for noise-cancelling headgear,' she blurted out without intending to. The boys were busy steadying Morgan who was now laughing for no apparent reason, but Ice gave her a nod and an 'amen'.

Chen gestured Trisha into Generative Brew first. She hadn't expected much and there wasn't much to expect. It was part of a generic pub chain with LED displays and menus that rarely changed. The usual Toko service bot behind the counter. The fake memorabilia of a decade long gone. The

one loner by the door who would be better off attempting to socialise in a virtual environment. The bouncer browsing social media with one eye while using the other to survey the place like those extinct eagles you saw at the Gen-Ark.

‘What the fuck?’ Chen and Fuk spoke in unison.

What wasn’t so generic about the place was the fact that about fifty robed and hooded figures occupied most of the space with their gathering. A few of the monks glanced at the newcomers and the one without his hood up, a big long-haired fella, put up a pleasant yet ominous face. The noise of conversation died a little, letting the classic rock song take back a bit of the air.

‘Why the fuck are they here?’ Fuk demanded of the bouncer.

‘Got as much right as you to be here, Yimyim.’

‘We’re SecForce officers, this is our place.’

‘This isn’t anybody’s place ‘cept the woman who pays me. Plenty of tables available to the left there. What’s the problem?’

Chen stepped into the conversation with a more diplomatic voice.

‘Chief... they’re Red Bloods... I bet several of them are wanted and I could call in a sweep right now and get half of them off the grid in a heartbeat. Or you could ask them to leave the premises peacefully? What do you say?’

‘A robe and a hood don’t make you no terrorist. Secondly, I don’t need to take orders from the likes of you. Come back with your uniforms, and I’ll comply.’

‘Wreckshit!’ Morgan steadied himself by the door and likely had a lot on his mind, but none of them wanted to find out. Ice, who had been standing defiantly looking at the group of monks stepped outside and pulled Morgan with her. Trisha wasn’t sure what to do, so she just kept her eyes on the leader of the monks. The Union of the Red Blood were a notorious group, growing in number, out to cleanse the human body and spirit from encroaching or subjugating technology. That meant mobs of them picketing corporate meetings and commercial spaces, to branches that hunted and killed people who wore or spoke positively of the latest gadgets or apps that would—in their eyes—machinificate the human spirit. Transhumanism was the end of humankind and the Red Bloods were the guardians of humanity. A running joke by many, but a real life threat to some.

The leader took a confident step forward. But Trisha spoke up before

he could say his first word, throwing him a bit off balance. Tactics.

‘Are you celebrating or are you planning?’ Trisha cut a tone that demanded an answer even though it sounded friendly enough.

‘Uh, we are simply talking and drinking, and this here bar happened to be our bonfire tonight.’

‘A bonfire to burn things?’ Trisha asked. Chen and Fuk now paid close attention. None of them were armed except a few tactical blades, so if fifty monks decided to attack the best option would be to run.

‘No, no. Just to keep warm in a cold world. Does that metaphor get us off the hook?’

‘I don’t have a hook. But I know how to summon one.’

‘Not necessary.’ The leader smiled and demonstrably sat down among his followers. Trisha could see all the hands ready to pull hidden blades and weapons from their hiding places in the robes, but she calmly escorted Chen and Fuk outside.

‘Tell your owner I have a good memory,’ Fuk hissed at the bouncer as Trisha shoved him out the door.

She bowed in adieu to the Red Bloods, but before she vanished out the door the leader spoke up.

‘Your friend. How many nanobots and gadgets hide beneath that milky-white skin?’

The tone in his voice gave Trisha pause. She sat fierce green eyes in him and made him wait for her reply.

‘Fuck. You.’

Several monks got to their feet as Trisha slipped out the door. The leader inhaled a second to see if the anger in him grew, but it didn’t when he saw that the bouncer himself had a surprised smile on his face. Surprised at the audacity.

‘Not tonight, Cleansers.’ He gestured them all to sit back down.

//

Five minutes later and Trisha and her colleagues had gone up the walkway towards the cross section on C5. They weren’t aimlessly heading in that direction, but no one was actually taking the lead. All but Trisha were too busy talking about, and cursing, the Union of the Red Blood. Ice lived in a studio

apartment right opposite to one of their stone slab temples. She had nothing but a short warning to utter about the monks, as if she was addressing them and not her colleagues. Trisha pushed past a small child out selling plastic flowers, shaking her head as the pleading eyes of the kid locked onto hers. Fuk was loud and angry and Morgan was coming off his spores and joined in, forever Fuk's nodding sidekick. Chen played the devil's advocate, as usual.

'Next monk fucker I see when in uniform, I am going to shoot and claim self-defense.'

'And virally it'll go, again, about a tech-merged officer gone wild, who was meant to uphold safety.'

'I don't fucking care!' Fuk retorted to Chen.

'On gene-modded stimulants too. The corporate superhuman oppressing the masses.'

'Shut the fuck up, Chen!'

'I'm just stating what'll happen on the instanet.'

'The net is the net. Just big mouths and empty words.'

'If I were to wipe out Red Bloods, I'd just get a similar robe and hood, infiltrate a temple and poison them. Pin the blame on one of their elders. Sow doubt, reap chaos.' Chen was dead serious.

'Clever. And Machiavellian of you.' Ice shot in before she nudged her way through a throng of people gathered around a synth food lottery establishment. Desperate low tier dwellers were up here hoping to win, and among them were bored teens out for a thrill or food sharks out to score some goods for easy credit.

'Where are we going?'

It was Morgan who actually came up with the pressing question. They all squeezed over to the walkway railing to escape the constant stream of people and machinery. The suggestions were drowned out as Trisha looked out into the airline, the unending traffic, the unending movement of urban humanity. She wondered if anyone here even knew of anything other than Metro life. Her eyes followed the gigantic structures plummeting into the hazy bottom tier and waste canals. Somewhere down there, beneath the hazy, polluted air and the concrete pillars and the sludgy waste and the cemented canals, under the iron foundations and pressed gravel, a century old, beneath all that, was solid ground.

The idea comforted Trisha for a moment, like a hand pressing down

her anxiety of temporality as it constantly tried to emerge from the sea of her consciousness.

Yet the helping hand quickly vanished, as all she really saw was mist and maybe that was all there was down there. Morgan said something about a strap-on as Trisha let her eyes travel upwards instead, to the towers reaching to touch the sky. Babelonian projects brought to fruition by the insanely rich. Eventually they would fall.

Fuk brushed by Trisha, snapping her out of her philosophical moment. Trisha and the others followed. His annoyance of their lost waterhole still lingered and every movement and step was angry and demonstrative.

‘I know where we’re fucking going.’

He was on his wristcom to bump another taxi to them as he walked over to the nearby drop-off area. The others came up to him and he let out a sigh.

‘Fucking two minutes.’

‘Wreckshit,’ Morgan shook his head, pretending to be equally frustrated.

‘I gotta take a leak.’ Fuk looked around and spotted a narrow walkway leading into a passageway between a clinic and a dodgy repair shop for synthetic pets. ‘Who wants to hold?’ He grinned at Ice and Trisha.

‘Classy,’ Chen gave Trisha a glance that was meant to be an apology.

‘I gotta go too,’ Morgan stomped off after him.

‘Of course,’ Ice rolled her eyes.

‘Morgan’ll help you out!’ Chen called after Fuk who answered with his middle finger high, pushing through the crowd.

A minute of small talk—Chen trying to figure out if Trisha was single—went by when suddenly there came a call from the passageway. It was Morgan.

‘Hey, guys! Chen! Ice! Come! Hurry!’

Ice and Chen traded sceptical looks but all three of them went through the stream of people to find out what Morgan wanted.

Deeper inside the passageway, where steam from an automated laundry business below rolled through the steel grates and danced into the darkness, stood Fuk. He was silhouetted by a struggling violet neon light trying to brighten the alleyway, but only adding to the eeriness of the place.

‘I haven’t caught one of these in quite a while.’ Fuk grinned.

Trisha came up last to see what he was looking at behind the inactive dronedumpster.

‘Fine work!’

‘Thanks!’ Fuk said genuinely and grabbed the thing they were looking at.

‘I meant the machine,’ Chen added.

Morgan helped Fuk hoist the android up. It looked like an adolescent boy, but the gash in its throat exposed the tubes and biowires beneath. A Loved One model. Fuk spent thirty seconds bragging how he noticed the boy had a bit of a jolted walk passing by behind him, and with one hand on his private part he tripped the machine and the distinct sounds the boy’s joints made rid him of all doubt and he had slammed the android into the dumpster and kicked it in the head but missed and struck the throat.

Ice grabbed its head and inspected its skin. It was impeccably natural.

‘Customized. True craftsmanship.’

The android boy spoke of letting him go and leaving him alone, but his throat speaker was busted due to Fuk’s boot so the words came in mechanical glitches.

‘Please,’ it mouthed, making eye contact with Trisha who stood behind the others.

Fuk and Morgan pulled each of the arms of the too-human android, and counting down to zero Chen and Ice delivered a unison kick to its torso, sending it slamming into the moist wall by the dumpster. Fuk and Morgan each stood with an arm in their hands, sparks and fluid spilling from where they had been ripped off their shoulder sockets. The fingers twitched as they threw the arms in the dumpster and Morgan complained about spilling ‘robo-juice’ on his camo-trousers. Fuk and the others laughed. The android stood by the wall, armless, still pleading as its algorithms were meant to do. The usual words came in glitches and once again it made eye contact with Trisha, who seemed to be observing the situation as if she wasn’t physically present.

‘They never change.’

The words were soft and human, and they took Trisha out of her passive trance. She was certain they came from the Loved One model, but now that she focused again it was back to glitching out pleas to stop.

Fuk kicked the feet out under the android and told the others to hold it down. Chen and Morgan held the robotic creation in a sitting position as

Fuk tore at its head. Ice claimed he wasn't strong enough, but Fuk persisted. Morgan cheered him on and suddenly the head let go. Skin mesh tore, tubes snapped and liquid and sparks flew as Fuk ripped the boy's head off.

Trisha was still trying to process the soft words she'd heard. Her colleagues' laughter and the smell of nanolyte milk made her dizzy and she turned around and steadied herself.

They tossed the remains of the android in the dumpster and a few minutes later they were back at the walkway and were waiting for the taxi. A small crowd had gathered nearby because a man had jumped to his death and Ice had bid them goodbye because she was meeting someone and the guys had joked about a lover but she remained her cold self, not revealing anything. If she was excited to meet this someone, Trisha doubted even Ice herself knew. In the dronetaxi a feed showed there had been an incident between SecForce and the Babylon Group and Fuk had used some quite creative words about the other security firm. Chen had eased him down by stating that he'd heard that Babylon paid better wages.

'So where are we really going?' Trisha wanted to tell them to drop her off.

'Surprise,' Fuk grinned.

'You're not pulling an Ice on us!' Chen nudged Trisha.

She lied, and the thought of lying down in her soft bed and closing her eyes was a desperate plea inside and it yelled at her from the back of her mind.

'Great!' Chen smiled. 'I don't even know where we're going,' he added.

'Roots?' Morgan asked Fuk, but he shook his head.

'Roots turned shit last year. Just beep-jazz and inhalers there now. The place we're going to is class!'

'How class?' Chen kept his eyes on Trisha.

'Way class.'

'So Morgan won't get in?'

'Shut up!'

'He'll get in, just like you, if you pay up.'

'Shit, is this going to ruin me?'

'With your camouflage you might slip in.' Chen fist-bumped Fuk and they laughed.

‘Fuckin’ funny!’

‘You’ll prob get in for free.’ Chen smiled at Trisha.

‘Because?’

Fuk stuck his face between them.

‘Because you’re smoking sexy!’

‘I was gonna say... well, that... and, I don’t even know what place this is.’ Chen trailed off.

Trisha smiled, but it was autopilot.

‘I’ll pay, thanks.’ She said matter-of-factly, to end the conversation.

‘Oh, we’ll see...’ Fuk grinned.

There was a moment of silence between them. Morgan was drumming along to the music from the speakers and Fuk was checking his wristcom with a broad smile. Chen tried to make eye contact with Trisha, but she was gazing outside at the rain strumming the dome they were in.

She broke the silence.

‘You could have let that android walk.’

‘They’re illegal,’ Morgan stated.

Fuk and Chen waited for Trisha’s reply but it took a while.

‘Yeah.’

She hadn’t looked at either of them, as if her initial comment wasn’t really meant for anyone but herself.

‘Didn’t take you for a soft one,’ Fuk snorted.

‘I’m not.’

‘We’re off duty, so, actually, we could’ve let it go.’ Chen showed his support, but it was also meant as a joke.

‘Might be off duty, be we’re not off fun.’

‘Yeah! The fun must never die!’ Morgan almost shouted.

‘Still spored?’ Chen asked, smiling at Trisha.

‘Isn’t he always?’ She smiled back.

As if whomever controlled the weather had noticed the shift of mood in the taxi the rain stopped.

‘We’re almost there. Better zip down that raincoat if you don’t wanna pay.’ Fuk smiled.

‘You couldn’t handle it, Fuk.’ Chen grinned.

‘Neither could you.’ Trisha threw out there.

A cacophony of howling erupted between the guys and high fives were

dealt. Morgan hadn't heard Trisha's comment, but he joined nonetheless.

Trisha looked at her wristcom. It showed 2:59 on her skin and as she watched the hour died and gave way to a new one. A moment later the drone-taxi swerved upwards into the first *prominent tier*, as people called it. Ironically by everyone living below but quite seriously by the people living there.

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The establishment they arrived at was a facade of mirrors and optical illusions. All sensual. The walkway broader, cleaner and with soothing light. People here were dressed in suits, glimmering gowns and tight silken dresses. The robots and androids spotless and expensive. SecForce guards and their Cop units stood in clusters at each intersection, assisting whomever came up to them while keeping a watchful eye on anything suspicious.

Trisha and the guys looked suspicious.

A SecForce officer, a tall and muscular woman, came up to them before they reached the entrance to the establishment. The lush red glow from the *Inner Gaia* sign painted the officer's face with an unintentional sensuality.

'Who are you and what are you doing up here?'

Fuk slipped out his scannable ID on his wristcom and the officer's stern expression eased.

'Undercover report on this place,' he nudged his head at Inner Gaia.

'A report for Station H3 on tier 5?'

Fuk played along with a shrug.

'Yeah, I know. No idea why your station couldn't do it. Probably some department egos down there wouldn't let it go.'

'Tune my channel and chime in if you need assistance.'

Fuk nodded and their wristcoms tuned channels and a soft beep confirmed it.

'Good luck.'

'Thanks.' Fuk turned and let his grin slip as his face was out of eyesight from the officer. Morgan grinned and put his thumbs up but Chen slapped them back down before the officer noticed.

Fuk led them towards Inner Gaia, setting his wristcom to mute, as not to be distracted by the officer or vice versa. Trisha took in the myriad of reflections of herself as they came under the looming and delicate entrance.

Mirror images in 360. Holographic lush lips and voluptuous curves danced around them as they slipped through the revolving door which was a hologram itself.

Chen's hand on her back didn't allow Trisha to pause and decide.

Inside, false pink rain greeted them. The holographic drops twinkled like stars as they hit Trisha's skin. Water ran down the walls behind the bar counters lining each side of the room. Glowing flowers and bowls of translucent water balloons, to be digested, stood on the softly pulsing counters. Naked bartenders—light projections tracing their moves censored their breasts and private parts and made them glow bright and divine—served a few fashionable ladies on one side and an old but smooth man on the other side. Lovewave streamed gently from hidden speakers with its sporadic sounds of pleasure whispering into the room. Straight ahead, opposite the holographic entrance was a dark but welcoming passageway down to a pool area. A host, more androgynous than Ice, ascended the few steps up from the pool to greet them.

'I know this tongue, Rosemary,' Fuk mimicked a famous line from a classic and walked confidently to the host. A soft, whispered conversation ensued while Morgan gazed at one of the female bartenders, hoping to catch a glimpse and Chen looked a bit surprised at Trisha.

'Didn't know we were going to a spa...' he feigned.

'A spa?' Trisha stated the obvious and Chen smiled and looked over at the bar.

'Still want that traditional brew?'

Trisha eyed him suspiciously and pretended she liked this game he was playing.

'A metaphor?'

He shrugged.

'I'll have a beer. And you're buying.' She nudged him towards the bar. 'I can't afford this place.'

Chen bought four beers and Morgan came up and took the first one and then saw that the naked bartenders weren't actually human. Yet up close, he could vaguely see the censored secrets through the bright projection.

Three middle-aged men came from the pool entrance, freshly showered and preened and dressed for business. They eyed Trisha with a frown of disbelief at first, before they saw her face. The pink fake rain spattered their

smiles, adding to the hint of lust as they joked amongst themselves and vanished out through the revolving holographic door.

Fuk came over and took the last beer and gathered them in so he didn't have to speak up. The host watched them.

'So, I made a special arrangement.'

Morgan leaned in eagerly, invading Fuk's private space, which wasn't that big a bubble. Fuk looked at Trisha with a wink.

'I'm owed a favour by the son of the guy who runs this... hollow earth. As long as we stiff up the bill with cocktails, we can share a room for free for two hours.'

Trisha waited for more, but when it didn't come she understood. So did Morgan who responded with a grin.

Chen eyed Trisha as if to say 'you don't have to' with his glance, but also 'why not?'.

'If we want a god or goddess... or both... we have to pay one thousand.'

Morgan gulped at the price.

'That's fifty percent off, just so you know.' Fuk assured them.

Trisha backed out of the conversation and looked at the ladies opposite in the other bar. They were eating synthetic strawberries, but seemed bored. As if they were waiting for something or someone, or perhaps abandoned by someone or something.

'Trisha... what if... you had the room first, and you got to take a... god--'

'I'm not wasting my hard-earned credits on a penis, champs.'

Chen smiled and tried again, patiently.

'Okay... what if we paid then?'

'Then we'll have to pay again for a chick afterwards?' Morgan's voice was almost distraught.

'Not if our goddess here wasn't satisfied after the first run...' Fuk winked at Trisha.

Morgan waited with an involuntarily gaping mouth for Trisha to respond, but she just drank her beer and wandered away from them. Chen caught up with her and walked backwards to face her, with one big flirtatious smile. Trisha took in the room again and tried to lose herself in its vivid optical illusions so she didn't need to address the awkward situation at hand.

‘I can make sure those two don’t come in.’

Trisha stopped and let the false rain sprinkle her, the ceiling above a cosmos unto itself.

‘If I’d wanted to have sex with you, Chen, we’d already be having it.’

He held on to his smile for a couple of seconds before it gave way to his true state. A mask of irritation, near anger, flashed.

‘I take care of you and I get this...’

‘I take care of myself.’ Trisha set her disappointing eyes in his fierce black gaze.

Chen mustered his composure again and smiled. ‘You’re already regretting this.’

He headed back to the other guys and Fuk led them to the patient host and after a few words they disappeared into the pool area. All three of them cast a glance at Trisha. Disappointment, irritation, or both.

Now that she was solo, the ladies with the strawberries followed her every step with their eyes. She finished her beer and set it on the disk and a circle glowed around it and an automatic claw came up and removed it while the naked bartender touched his lips sensually and made eye contact with his now drink-less customer.

Trisha let the android do its thing, leaning closer to study it. After a few seconds that had started out with a sexual tension but quickly became a comedic moment, the bartender spoke.

‘Care for something else?’

Trisha snickered a little too loud. All heads turned.

‘Oops, sorry.’ She tried to stifle her laughter.

She looked at the bartender and whispered.

‘You’re illegal. You know that, right?’

‘We don’t discuss unpleasant stuff here at Inner Gaia. Here we only deal in pleasure.’

‘You’re lucky you’ve got rich owners.’

‘In here, everyone is lucky.’

Trisha smiled at the acute marketing algorithms.

‘Luck is fleeting. Just like an orgasm.’

‘We have experts here who could make your orgasm last until the sun rises again.’

‘Now, that’s false marketing, mister... Bright Dick.’

She looked at his crotch, obscured by glowing spotlight.

‘What are you hiding beneath that light?’

‘We’re not hiding anything. We’re revealing your imagination.’

‘I’m imagining a wee matchstick...’

‘Whatever pleases you.’

Trisha laughed again, but this time it didn’t turn heads. The host was already watching her from the steps to the pool. With a gentle smile he approached.

‘I see you are curious...’

‘Another android to tell me I can get lucky?’

‘Just a person, offering you to look around the premises if you’d like.’

He nodded to the pool area.

‘Anything you like to see, you can behold here. Within ethical boundaries, of course.’

‘Sorry, but I think I’ll save my credits and go home.’

‘I cannot stop you, but perhaps I could give you an offer you would consider?’

The holographic raindrops made his face glitter. Trisha glanced at him, genuinely intrigued. He leaned in, so not to let anyone else hear him.

‘It’s maybe a bit cheeky, and naughty, but I could let you have one of our rooms, for the rest of the night with one of our expert companions...’

Trisha was about to object but he foresaw it and held up a hand to indicate his proposal was only half-made.

‘...and by some minor slip-up, on my part of course, I could charge everything on your colleagues. Without them knowing.’

‘I’d prefer they’d know, actually.’

‘So that’s a yes?’

Trisha smiled at the bartender as if the android somehow would either encourage or try to talk her out of it, but it was touching its breast muscles in a slow sensual manner with its eyes on her.

‘Fuck. Okay. I’ll need one beer then.’

The bartender produced it right away.

‘On the house,’ the host smiled and took her hand and led her towards the pool area.

‘One caveat I must inform all patrons of, though. You may pick between a goddess, a god or something in between, but here at Inner Gaia you

will not be told if your companion is artificial or human.’

Trisha looked at him with some surprise as he led her and her beer down the steps into the warm darkness.

\\

Inside the small cubicle of frosted glass Trisha was meant to store her clothes and slip into something more comfortable from a selection that was displayed to her, but she didn’t and was occupied with doubt. A Buddy panel on the wall, tuned down to a more sensual low voice than their usual chirpy voices, spoke gently to her.

‘Have you dressed comfortably?’

Trisha ignored it, but when the question came again after some seconds, she murmured a ‘yes’.

‘Good,’ the panel said and two options presented themselves on the screen. ‘Would you like to enter the room before or after your companion?’

Trisha tried to conjure up all scenarios but her mind was buzzing due to the beers and the situation she’d put herself in. She landed on her SecForce training and posed that any scenario where she was closest to the door and closest to escaping from danger was the best one. The danger here, she assumed, would be mind-crushing awkwardness. Nothing else was likely on the line, but damn, she concluded, her pride was the one thing she had left. Or was it?

She pushed the button that indicated she wanted to enter after her companion.

‘You may now open the second door and follow the lights to your Inner Cave, where your companion awaits.’

A soft click of metal indicated that the second door, which was sturdy, now was unlocked.

Trisha touched the handle and this prompted the Buddy panel into one last announcement.

‘Whatever you will feel inside your cave; arousal, lust or love... know the feelings are you and they are allowed, *but they will pass.*’

Trisha didn’t quite catch the last words as the voice glitched, but she was pretty sure the Buddy had said exactly what she thought it had said. She pushed open the door and went in.

A narrow corridor with water running down the walls. Trisha was quite sure it was holographic but she didn't dare touch.

She crossed the corridor in less than thirty seconds, but her mind had run a marathon.

Whatever was behind this door, she was prepared to turn around. She was sure it was a man much like the bartender, or an android like the bartender, or the actual bartending robot itself. It was a high tier establishment, but the reason for the holographic doors were probably face recognition, or the bartenders ran facial recognition and everything that Trisha had ever uttered or typed or searched on the net—even though she was good at restraining herself there—was siphoned carefully, creating a profile they could use to say the exact words to lure her in. But she hadn't really been played, had she?

Even if she had, it was really her colleagues that had been played. Doubly so.

She wondered what Ice was doing. If she'd ever been here. If by some strange twist, she worked here. She would open this door at the end of the watery corridor and in that room Ice would be standing, stark naked. Trisha had seen her naked many times, yet the thought of meeting Ice here was wildly erotic.

Then a thought struck that made her hand pause right before she was about to push the door open. What if this was Chen's idea? What if they had talked the host into this, and they were waiting for her behind the door, to make her regret blowing them off. Her rational side started fighting her fears. They'd been nothing but nice to her before, though Fuk and Morgan had always brought their brotalk out of the showers and not tried to hide the fact they sometimes, at least in the beginning, had stared at Trisha changing with keen eyes, but Chen...

She looked over her shoulder. The door was right back there. The water running down the walls tranquil and soothing mixed with the lovewave music.

Trisha took her raincoat off—something to distract whatever waited for her behind the door, by throwing it or concealing her attack—and slowly pushed the door open.

Little by little the room revealed itself. It had a tinted window and a bed. On the bed sat a young woman.

Trisha surveyed the room quickly before she stepped in.

The woman sat on her knees, in a posture that spoke of relaxation, anticipation and a welcoming attitude. The orange light trickling from the firmament-like ceiling speckled her white skin, and made her glow a bit, in contrast to the matte black sheets. Her skin was soft and smooth, and clearly taken care of. Her legs were thin and long, her thighs strong and her waist lean. A milky-yellow buttoned bodysuit covered her crotch and breasts. Her shoulders were narrow and her arms slender. Perhaps nineteen or twenty. Trisha immediately thought she looked like a famous heroine she'd once played in a classic game.

Trisha let the door close and hung her raincoat on a rack nearby, keeping her eyes on her goddess.

‘Uh... so... are you...?’

The goddess smiled in response. A small smile that was a hint for Trisha to step forward. As she did the woman got up from the bed in one soft move and came closer with innocent yet confident steps.

There was a sweet smell in the room of a long-gone type of orchard that Trisha had never seen, known or heard the name of.

‘Are you real...?’

The woman took Trisha's hand and held it to her face, to let her touch her skin. Her hair was burning red. Her eyebrows dark. Trisha let her fingers run gently over her mouth, over the freckles she had under her large green eyes.

Eyes that matched Trisha's raincoat.

As the goddess opened her lips to speak, the notion that had haunted Trisha all day was clear as false rain. Everything was temporal except one thing: *We* never change.

‘You can hurt me if you want.’

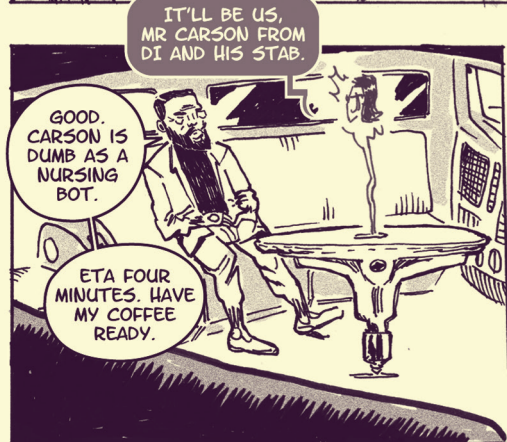
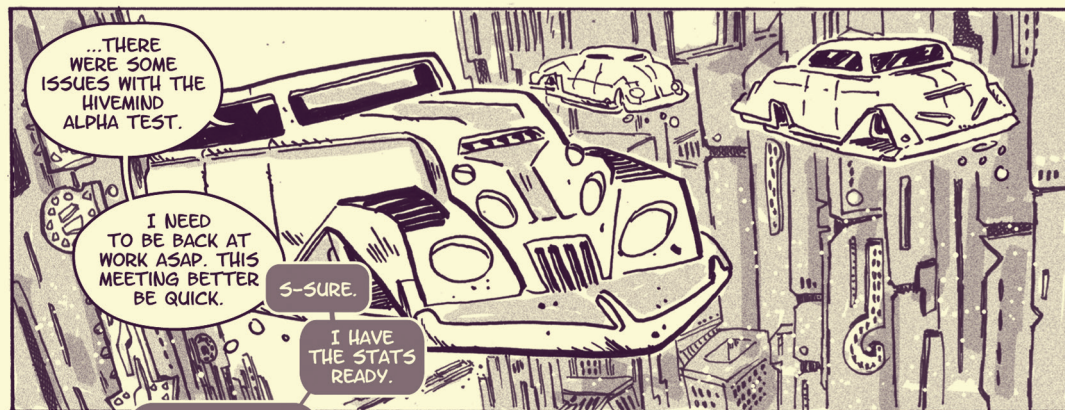
The woman with the green eyes smiled.

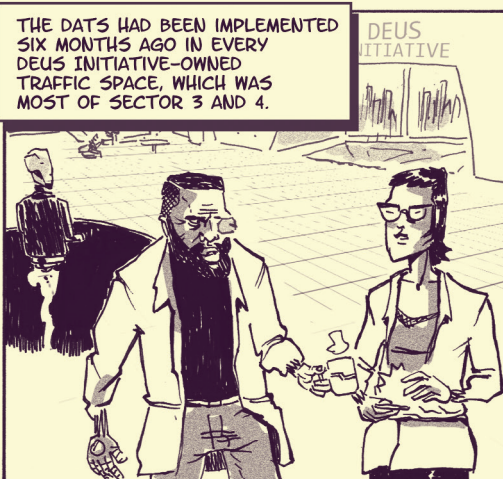
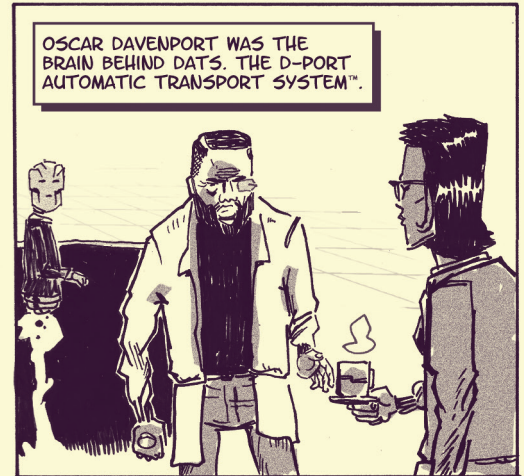
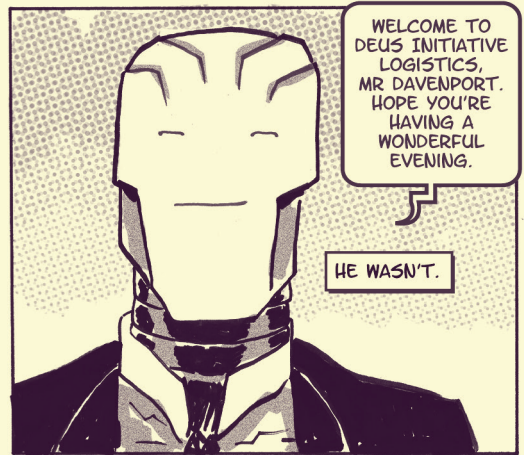
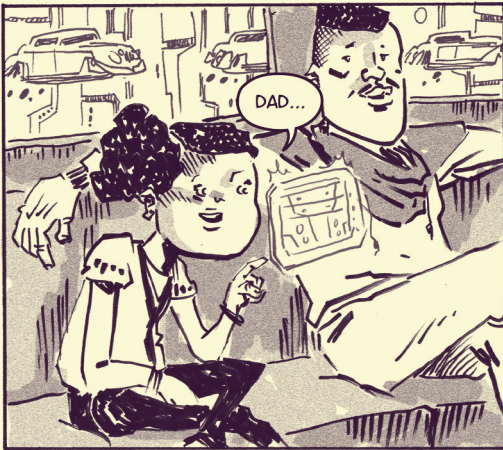
This was her fourth mission that night.

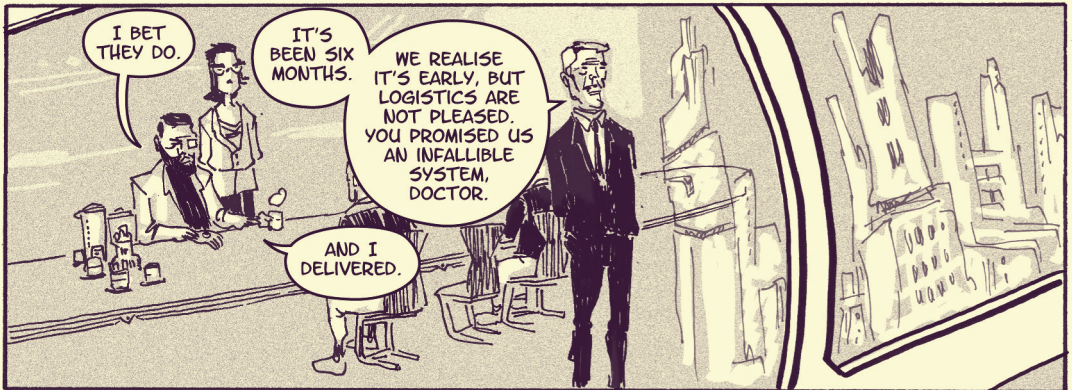


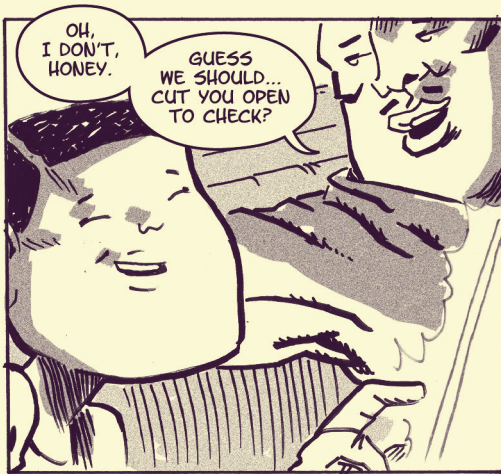
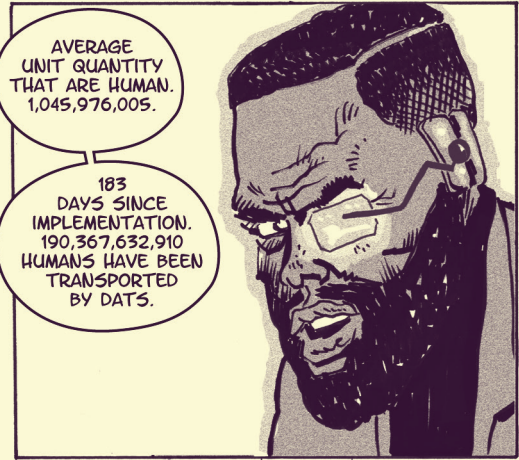
influencer

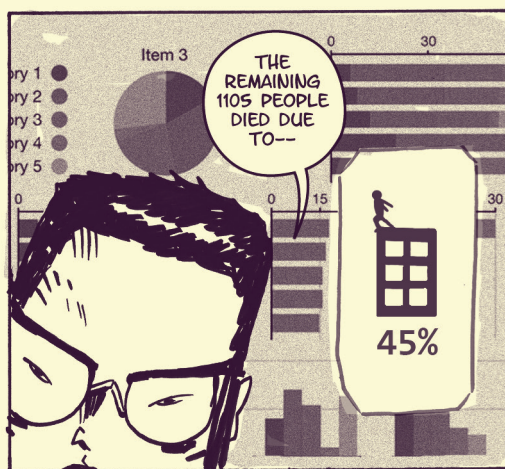
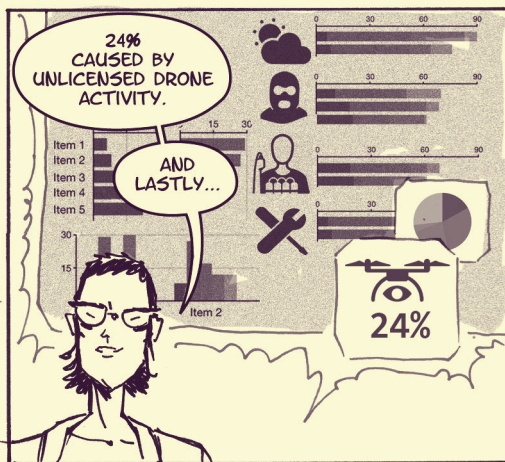
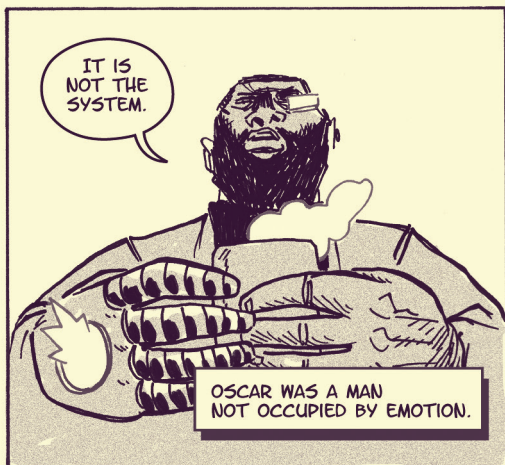
AUTOMOBILE
artist\\Rob Croonenborghs

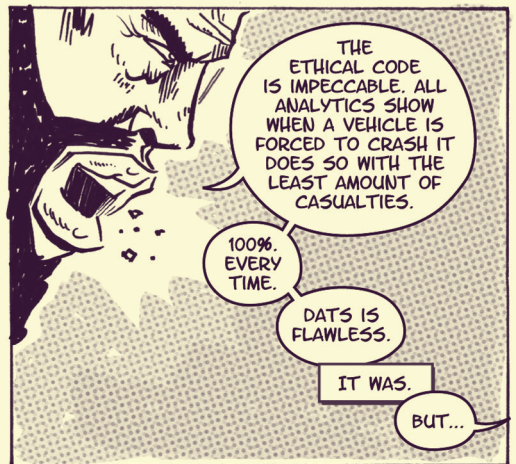
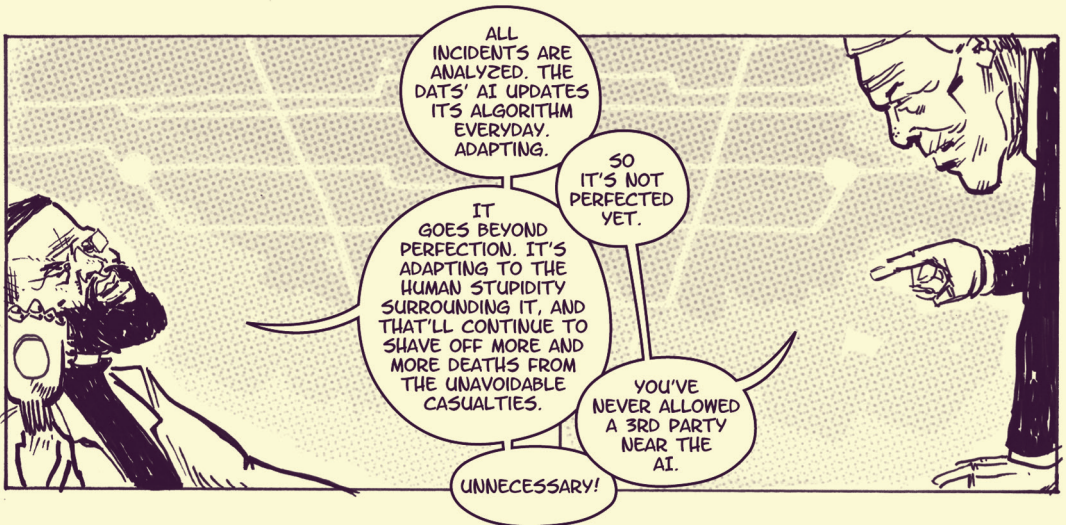




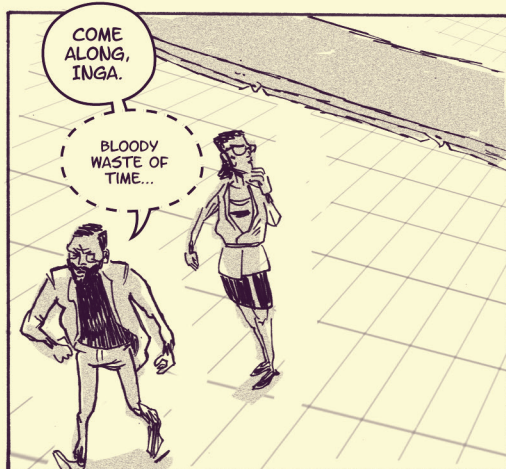


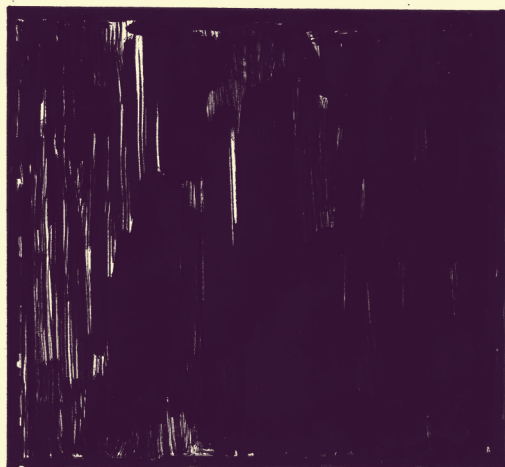


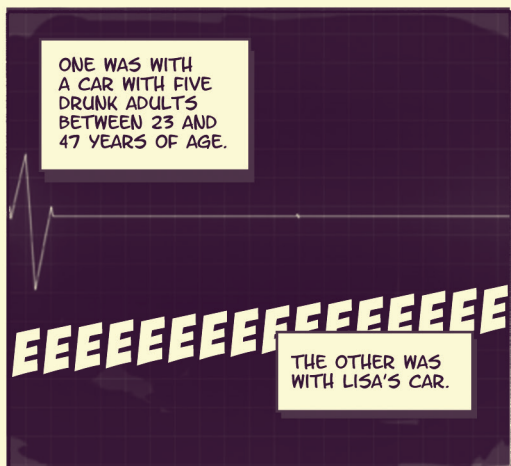
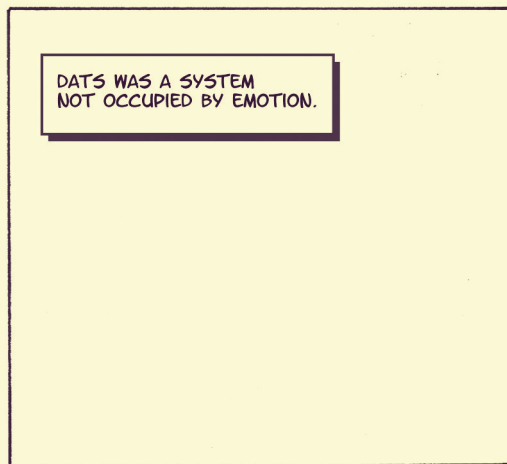
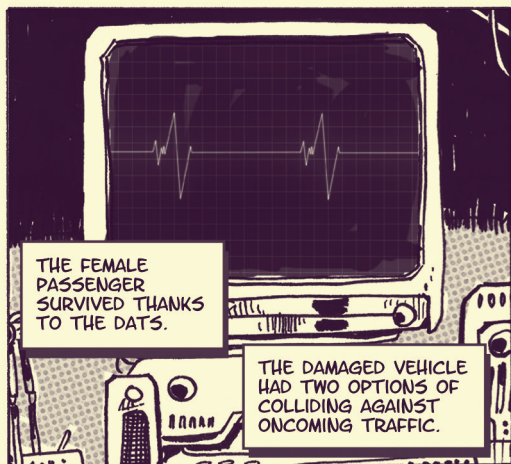
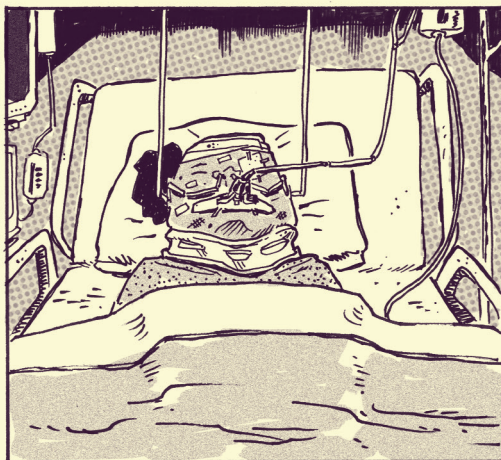
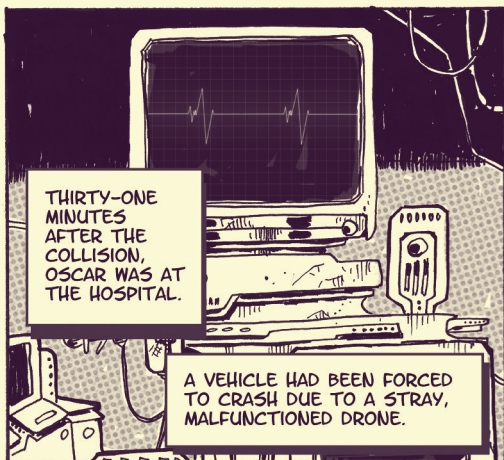




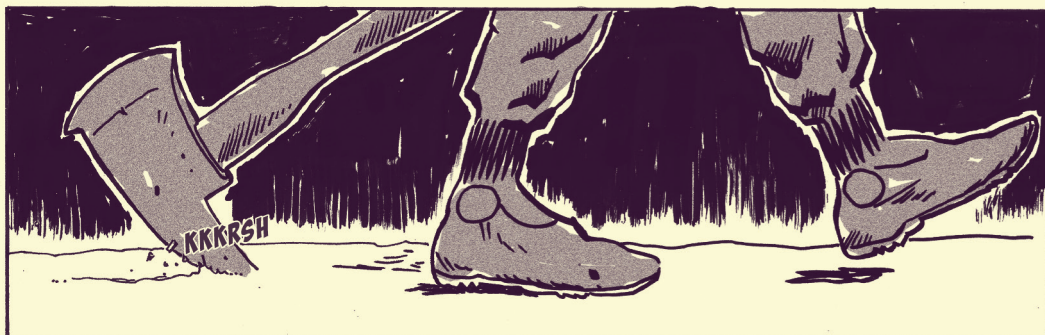
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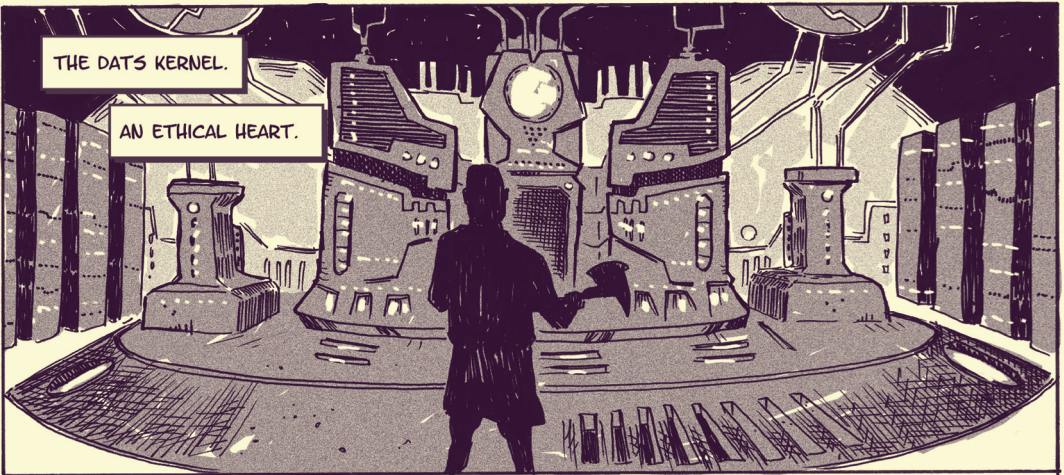






THE SYSTEM CHOSE THE LATTER.





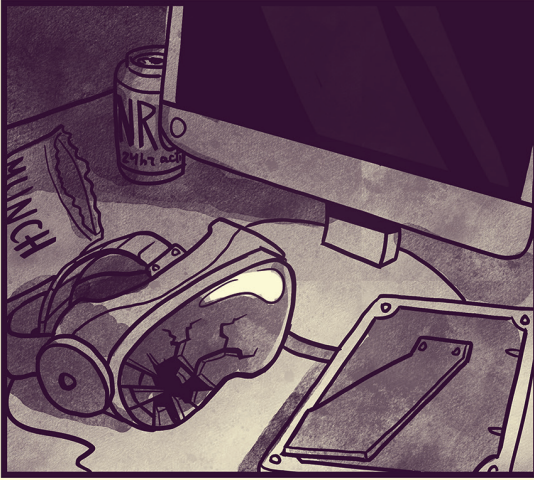


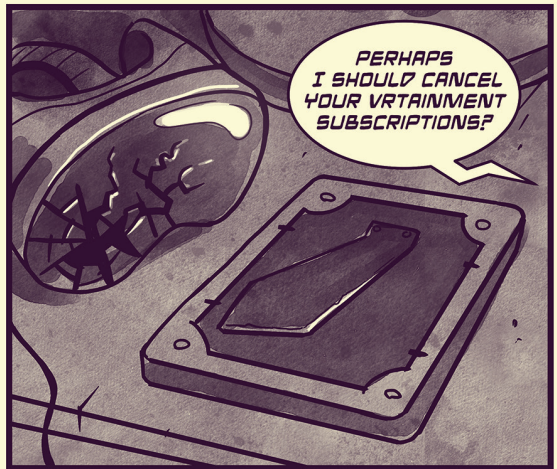
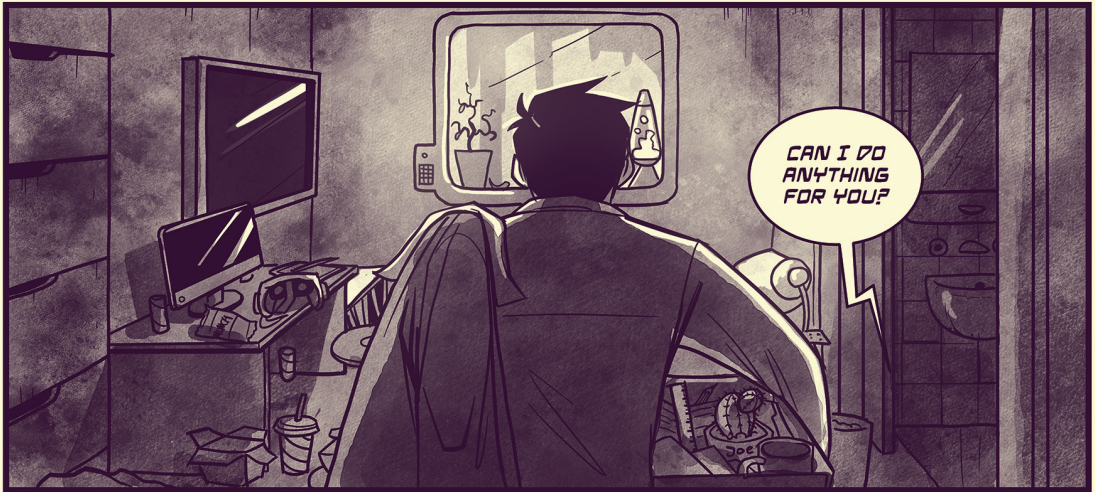


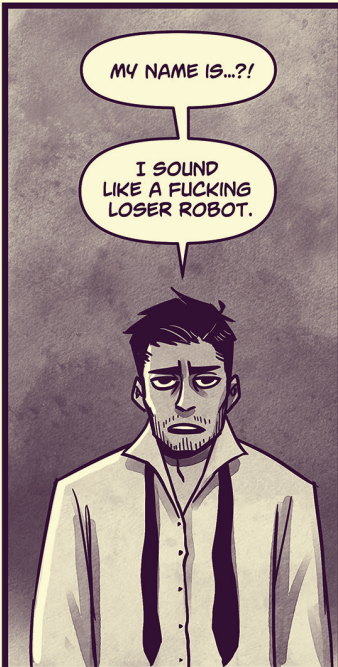
bounce rate

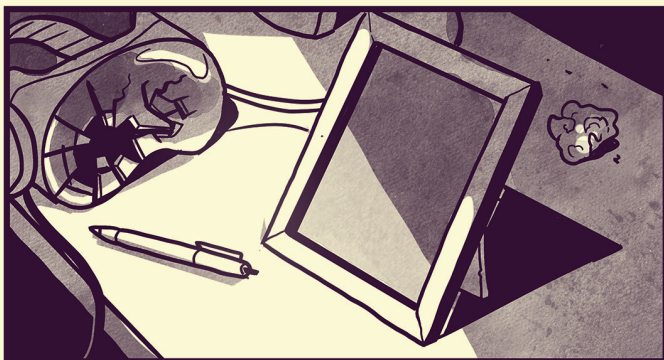
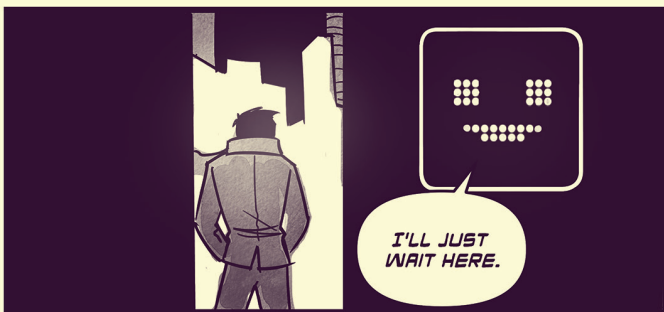
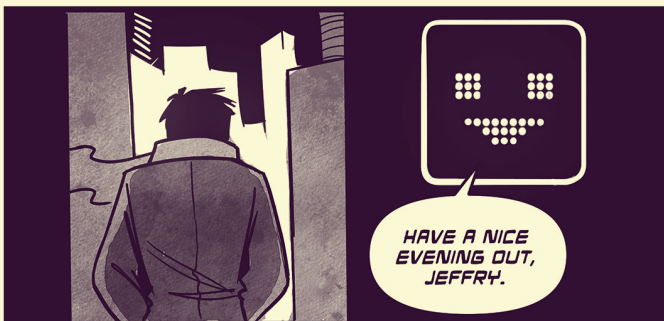
WALKWAYS
artist\\Mary Safo

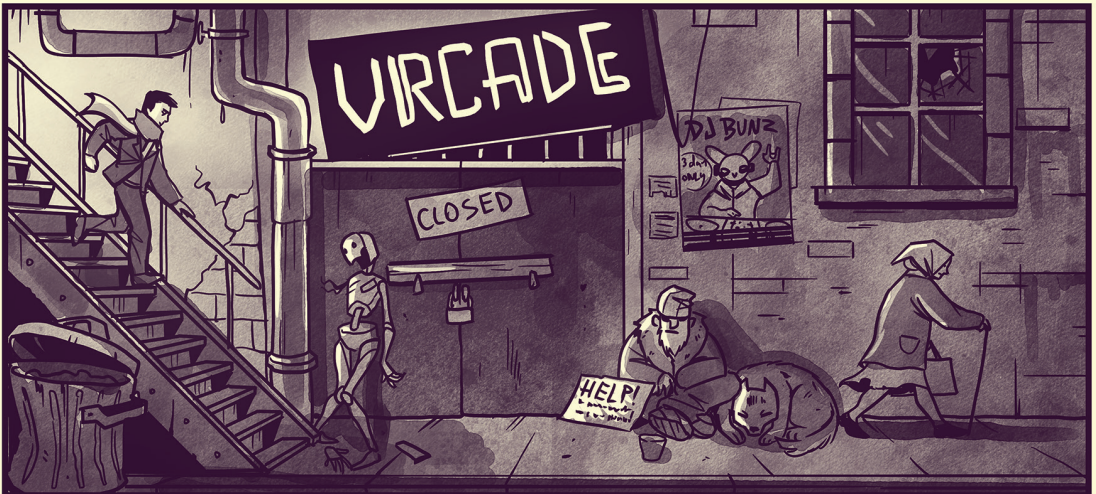
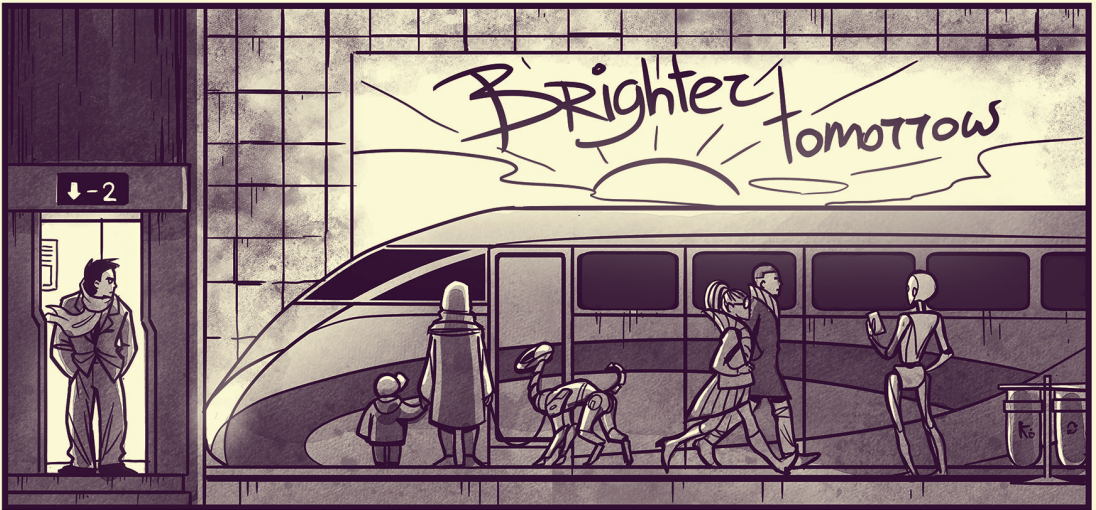
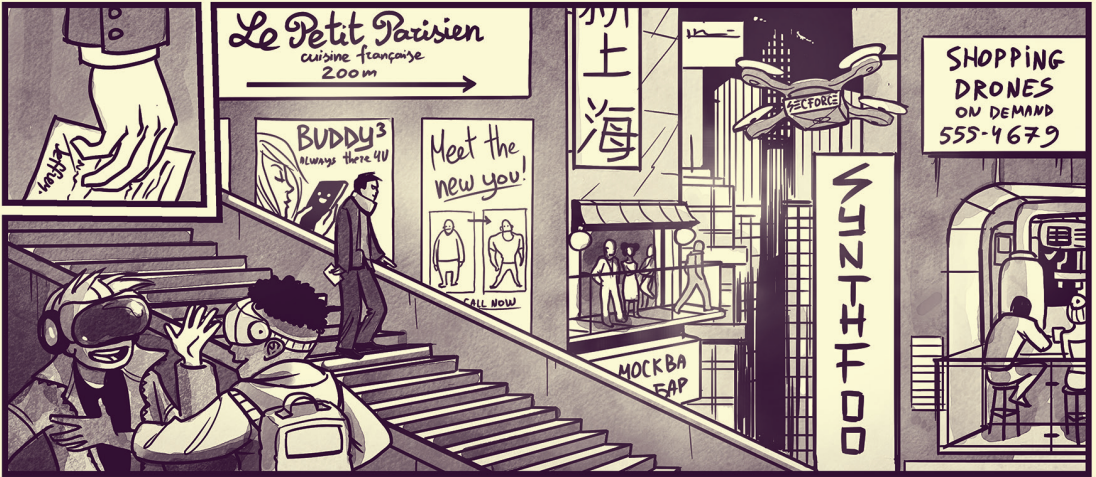


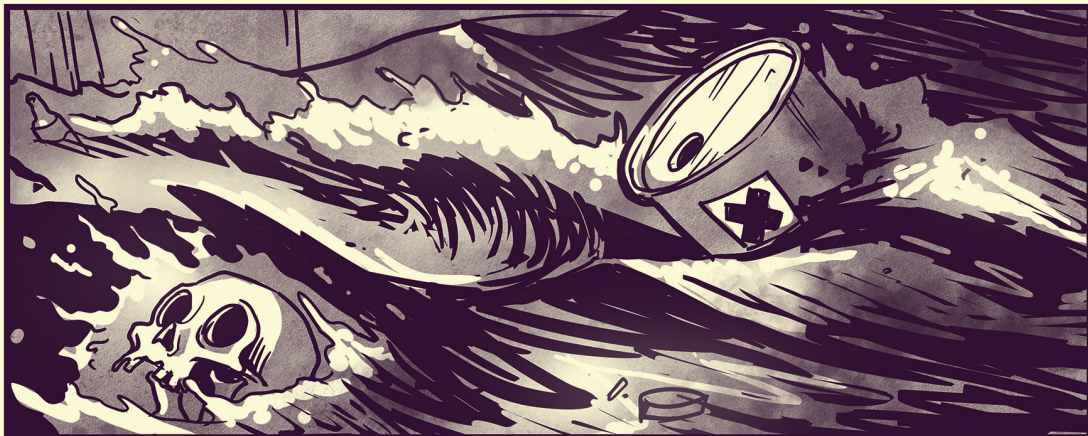
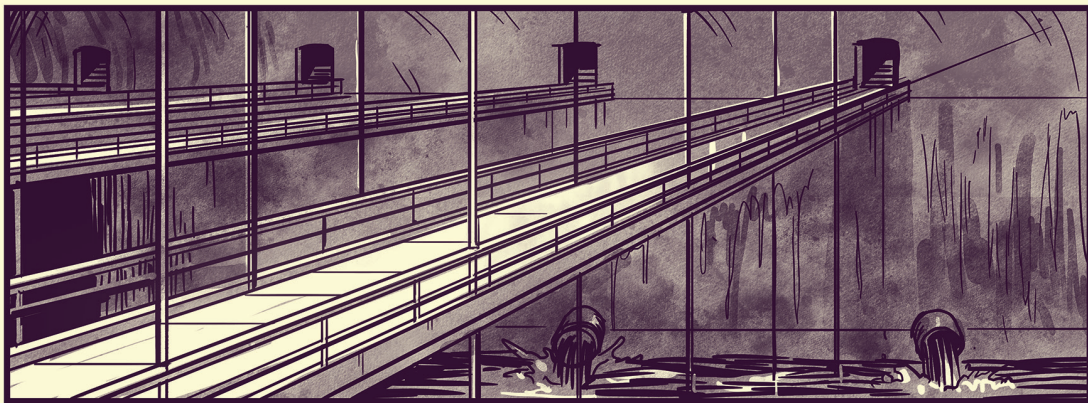


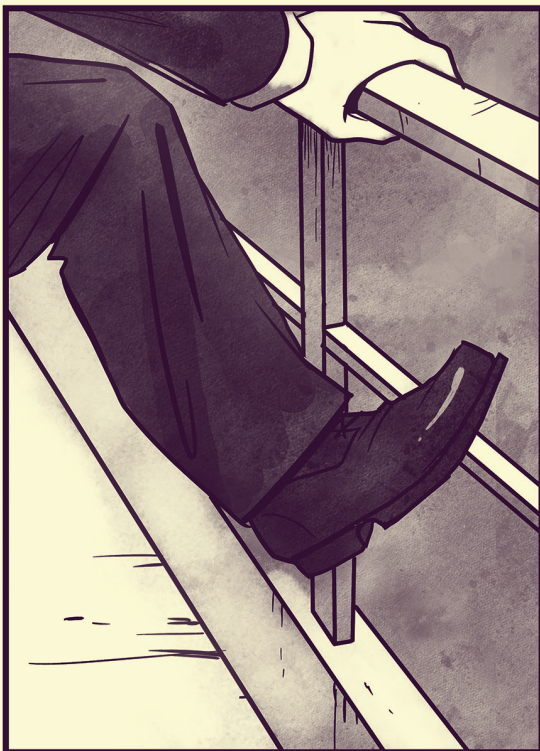
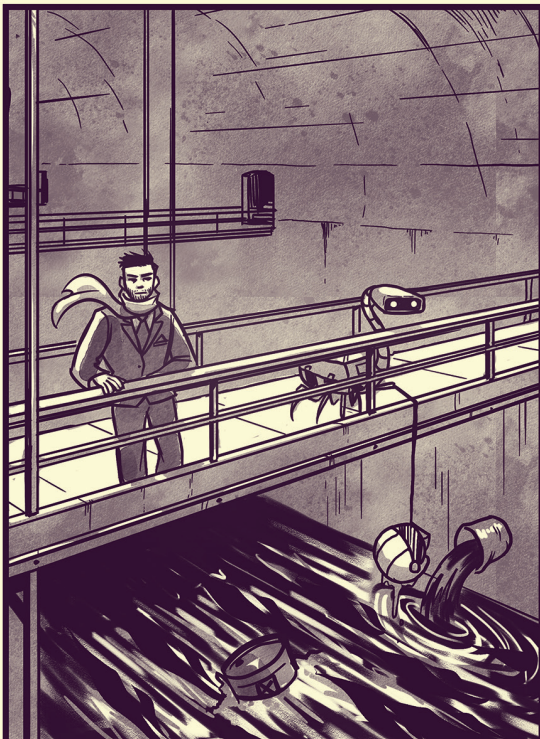
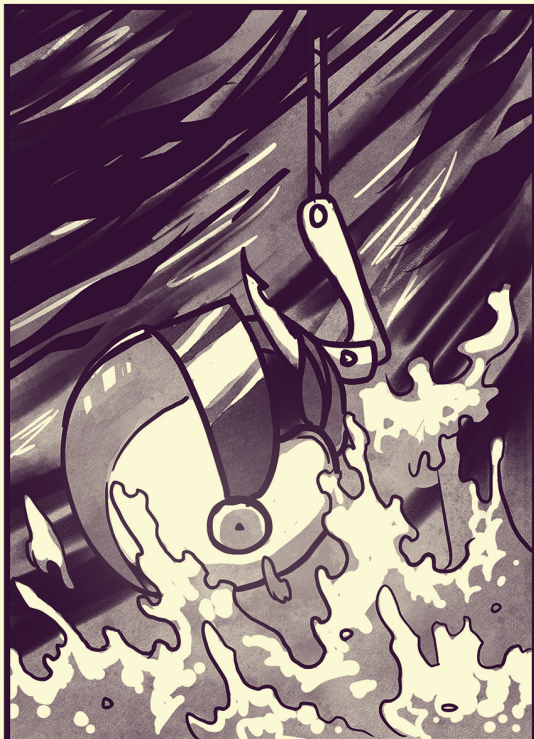


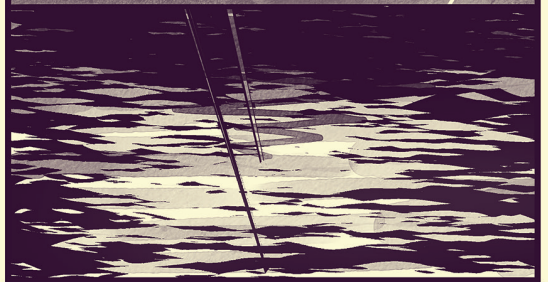
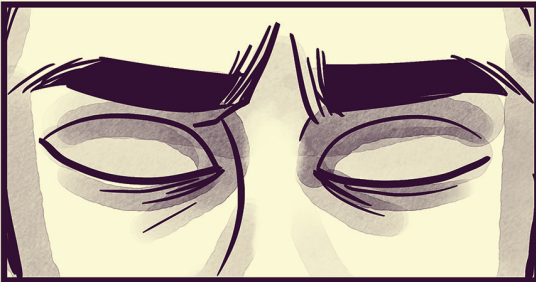
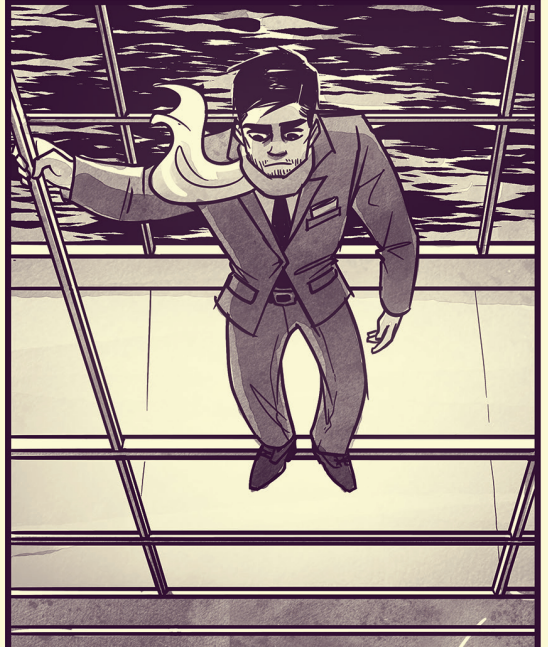


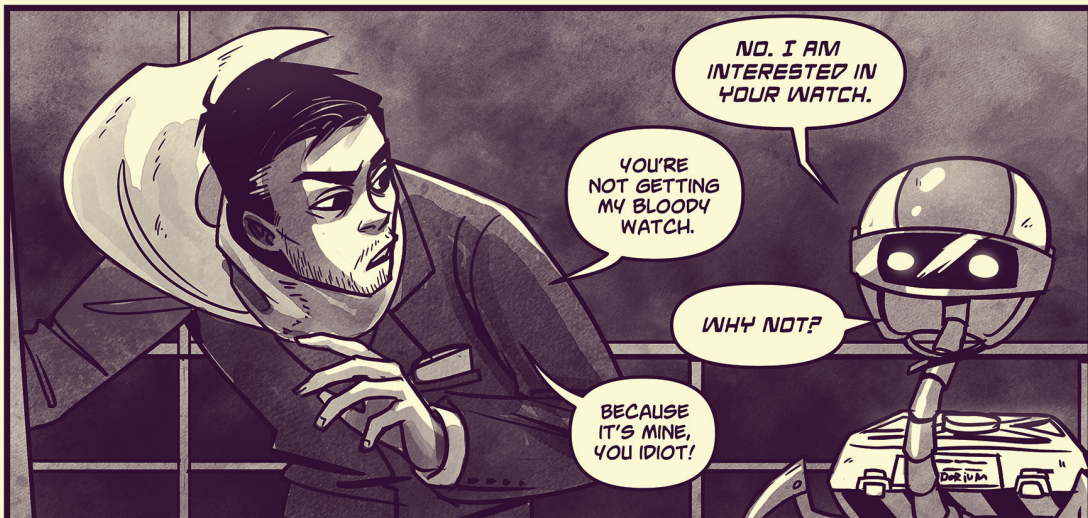
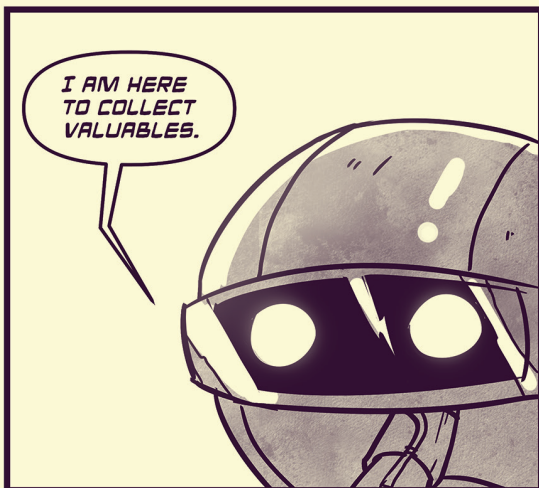
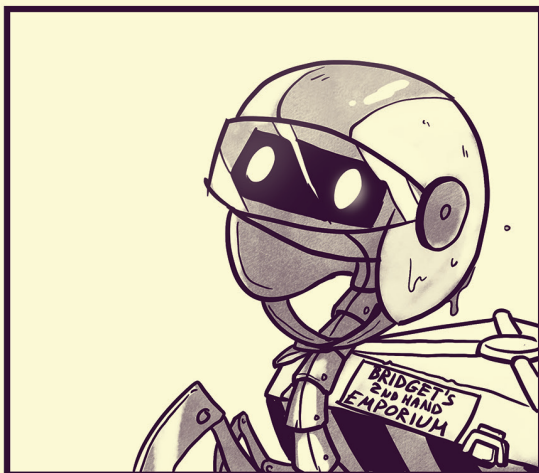


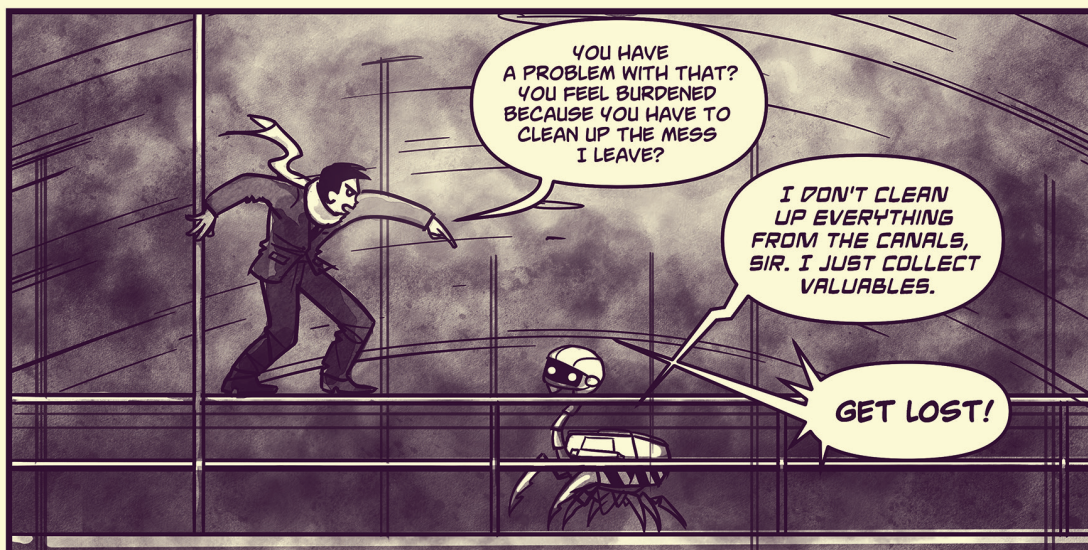
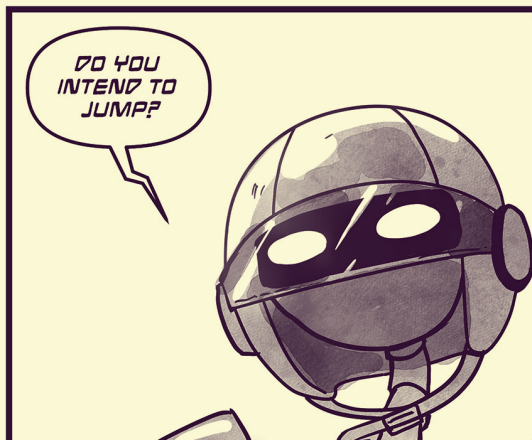
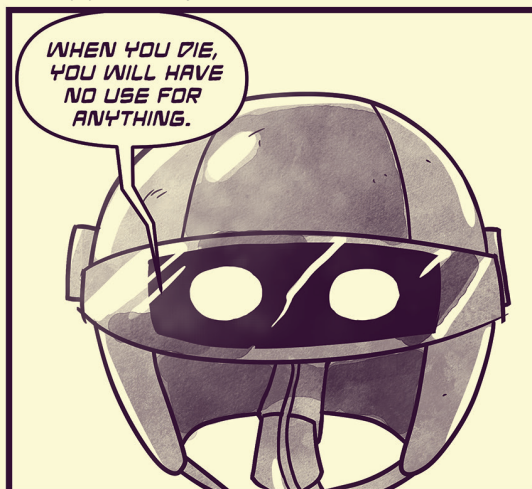


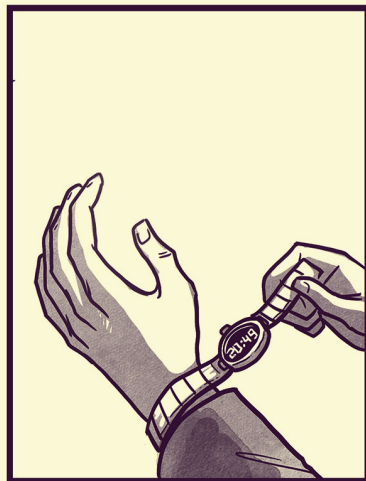
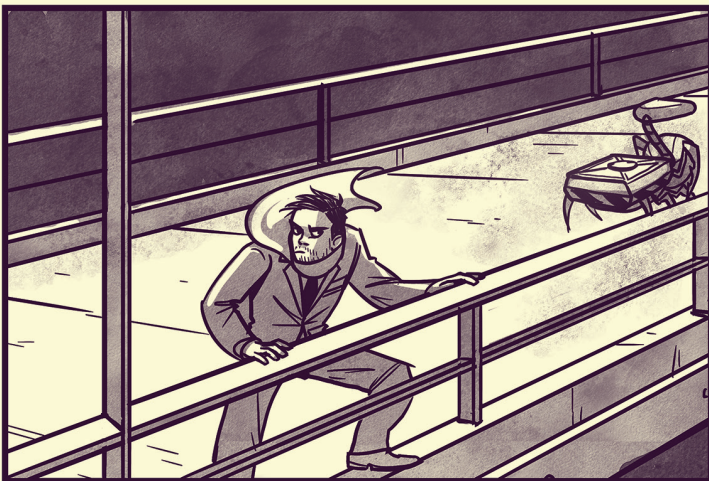
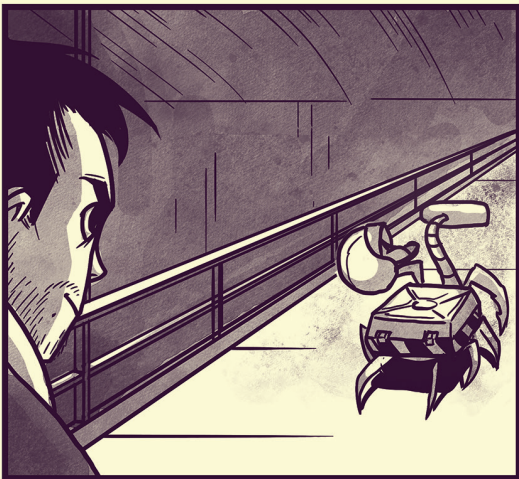


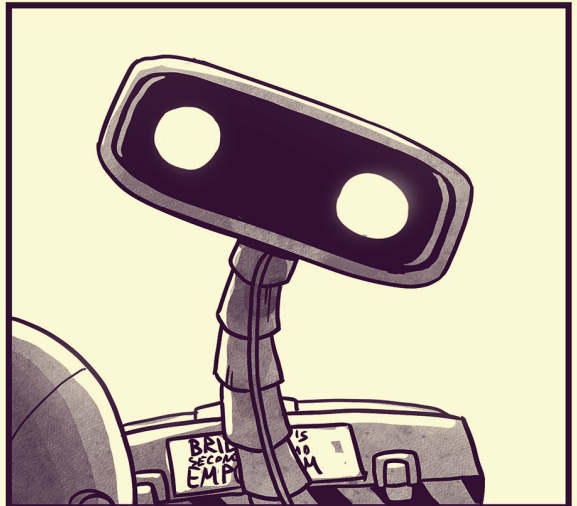
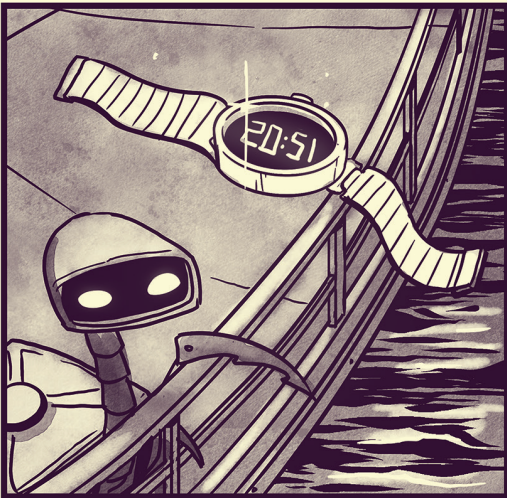
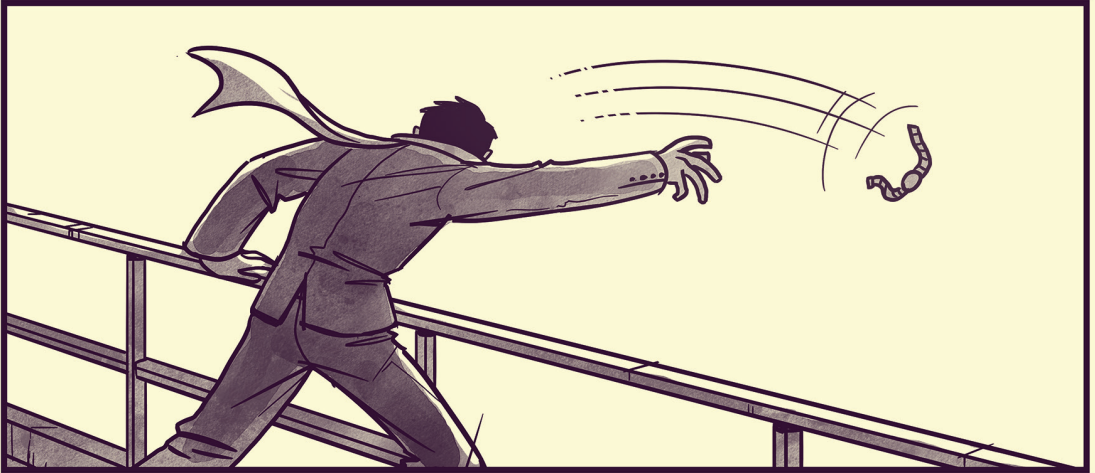


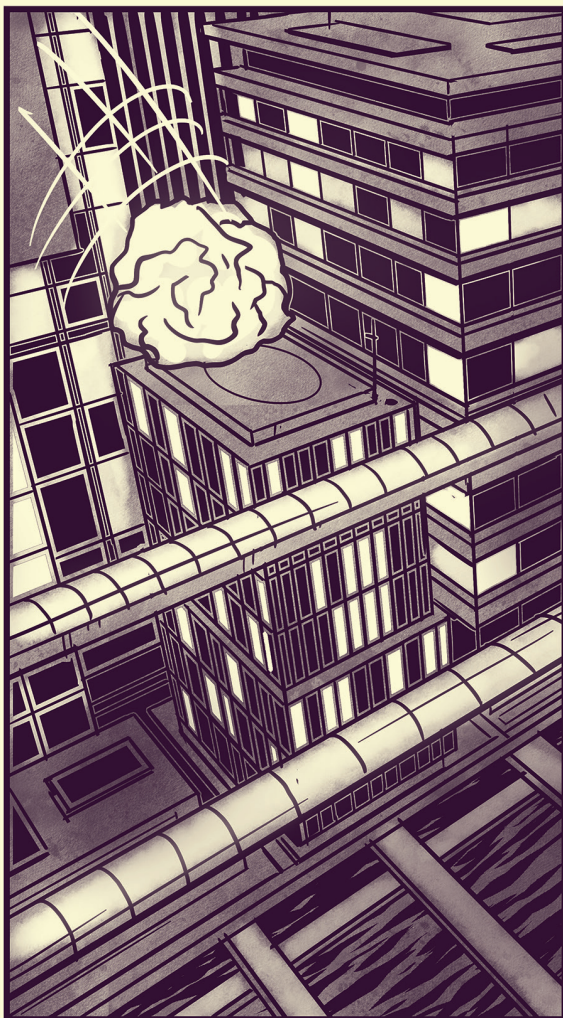
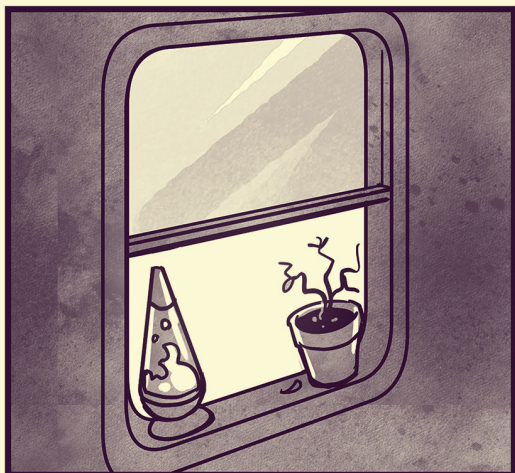














organic reach

DROWNING

SESSION I

‘Is it accurate to claim she *wanted* to drown?’

‘I... I don’t know.’

Ahmed tried to will his mind to probe the question properly, but was distracted again by the screen that was his psychiatrist’s face. Accompanying the emotionless emoji was a rhythmic glare that flashed in intervals across the screen, coming from the never-ending traffic outside.

‘You are distracted.’

The blinds crept shut and when Ahmed looked back at his psychiatrist it displayed a faint you-are-welcome smile.

‘Let me rearticulate. Do you *believe* your wife wanted to drown, Ahmed?’ Believe was emphasized to such a degree that a digitized tune came through the otherwise spotless human voice.

‘I think she knew. She knew the risks. Obviously... so, yeah, she knew...’

‘Shanira knew the risk. Valid claim. But would she recognize the Repersonalization-Rerealization Threshold before she crossed it?’

The emphasis on certain words by the android could have felt like a sting of condescension, yet they passed through Ahmed like neutrinos, undetected.

‘You mean the Gorlov Line?’

‘No, that is the point of no return. The RPRR threshold is when the mind automatically refuses the exit, when she drowned.’

‘Of course.’ Ahmed had read up on the literature, but did not re-

member much. He tried to hide the fact with a question. 'Is it even possible to recognize it?'

'Insufficient evidence. Several cases of people who later drowned showed severe signs of DPDR disorder. Did Shanira show signs of depression before the 28th of July?'

'Yes... but she was also happy.'

'Shanira's mood veered from extremely low to extremely high?'

'Extreme? I'm not sure. But yeah, she was both sad and happy.'

'What was Shanira sad about?'

'Uh...' Ahmed knew, but he couldn't let himself say the words. They would automatically be added into the digijournal of Shanira. They would become the truth.

'The accident... her job...' He trailed off before the ominous words *marriage, family and life* slipped out.

'The accident you refer to was the one that occurred the 3rd of April? An Autonomous Traffic Collision? Shanira was injured slightly, receiving a fractured collarbone. A girl and her father perished in the other vehicle.'

'Yes.'

The face display said nothing, just kept its artificial gaze at Ahmed as it had since he'd entered the lounge-inspired room. A room with a drooped floor that surrounded a terrible attempt at a fireplace, where a lava lamp bubbled and fell. Ahmed would have been able to afford a human—a real—therapist, if it hadn't been for Shanira's treatment. Luckily, the insurance absorbed some of the financial pain.

'I remember she was real shook up about the crash. That little girl... she felt it was her fault for a while. The girl was the same age as Ollie.'

The psychiatrist waited for Ahmed to continue. A social trick his quantum algorithm had learned during his earliest clients and conversations.

'She stayed away from her job--'

'Your wife.'

'Yes, Shanira. She said she couldn't deal sorting out insurance claims in case she stumbled on that poor family's claim. The girl's--'

'The dead girl from the crash.'

'Yes. My wife tried to go back after a week, but I don't think it worked. She said she kept reliving the crash whenever a case involving a fatality came up.'

‘You say she could not cope. Was this your opinion of the situation too?’

‘Yeah, sure... well... Shanira seemed fine to me. At home she didn’t seem too upset. I always told her it was just one of those things. There was nothing she could have done. It was just, you know, a coincidence.’

‘So, in your opinion, your wife did not leave her job because of the accident, then?’

‘No... I mean, that probably contributed. One morning, when she was supposed to go back to work she called in. She fired her assistant, some loser schmuck from the lower levels—not my words—and abandoned her whole branch. She’d built it from the ground up, since she was a partner. Now she wasn’t interested.’

‘She gave up her job because she wasn’t interested?’

‘Yeah, she did. I mean, the corp were probably preplacing her and her colleagues with... you know, your kind, but I guess she gave them the boot before they could do the same to her.’

Silently and unseen, a load of qubits streamed into Shanira’s journal, and Ahmed’s, and shuffled information about behind the psychiatrist’s display.

‘You said she was happy, as well? What made her happy?’

12th AUGUST

‘Ahmed... come see this.’

He was several layers into an interactive documentary about massive timber architecture and didn’t respond.

‘Ahmed!’

‘What?’ It was more a mumble than a question.

‘Come! You gotta try this! I made a really nice island... or, several islands! The ocean is just pristine blue. It looks and feels amazing! Just now the... uh, what were they called? Cute as hell, with a shell... they’re hatching on the beach!’

Ahmed went deeper into the molecular strength section, comparing the wood with threaded steel and crystal kevlar.

‘Hello! Earth calling. Come... try it.’

Ahmed’s hesitant answer made a dent in Shanira’s genuine smile.

‘Uh, yeah... later.’

She wanted to insist, but their LuxBot, which was ordaining their kitchen with a lovely dinner, stole her attention.

‘Five minutes, and dinner will be ready.’ The LuxBot, which both Ahmed and Shanira thought had been way too expensive when they purchased it, but neither had spoken up about it, continued to prepare the food.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ahmed noticed Shanira was locked in her spot. He paused the documentary, regretting his answer and wanted to make amends, but when he turned she was already vanishing into their creative office.

‘Shanira... I can take a look if you want...’ His words carried little conviction. Did he even believe in them himself?

Six minutes later, outside, Ahmed let out a faint ‘fuck’.

The word died quickly out there on the terrace. Ahmed tried to clear his mind, to excavate some positivity.

The traffic swooshed past, louder than usual, behind the hanging gardens that fenced in the high-end apartment complex. The flowers dripped colours. His neighbor’s cocktail party continued, unnecessarily loud. The smell of chamomile drifted in from somewhere. A cocktail glass fell off the railing and tumbled down into the abyss that was the lower tiers. The LuxBot chimed in on Ahmed’s subskin wristcom a second time stating dinner was served. He turned to see if his wife had come to the table, but through the window he could only see his two teenagers, already in heated and childish argument.

SESSION II

‘Ollie and Vesper. How are they feeling?’

‘They...’

It took him nearly a minute to swallow back down the lump that rose. His voice shivered.

‘Ollie is in a bubble. I’ve tried to talk to him, but he never seems to listen.’

‘Does he show signs of anger?’

‘He’s quiet. I mean, he was always a quiet kid, but he was curious, inquisitive, focused. He was always the first to ask questions in his v-class.

Always the first to answer.'

'What courses does he take?'

'Oh, Generative Design, Quantum Math and Hidden Geometry. He's only twelve, so they don't allow him to do more than three a year.'

'Heavy subjects.'

'He's a bright kid. But now? He attends the v-classes, but it's like he's ghosting them instead of participating.'

'Introversion. When was the last time you saw him display an emotion?'

'I don't know. He and Vesper do tend to argue. They argued last night. She was looking for her hoodie. I think he wasn't very helpful in the search. She called him a techjunkie, he screamed and called her an idiot.'

'Anger, lashing out at his sister. No other emotion?'

'Uhm.'

Ahmed couldn't remember anything but anger now.

'I don't remember. He gave me the finger the other day, I guess that's the same. I can upload the house cams, if you want.'

'No, that won't be necessary. Ollie has become quiet and angry, is that correct?'

'Quiet, yes. But he's not really angry. He and Vesper are always at each other. That's normal.'

It was almost a question.

Qubits logged it all in the journal once again. The uncertainty of Ahmed's voice, the amount of times his mouth dried up, and the brief but recurring glances at his hands.

'Ollie is fine.'

The psychiatrist's silence spelled 'go on'.

'Vesper though. She's definitely not quiet. She's angry, mad even. I mean, she's a teenager, and we never proposed dampeners for her. Shanira thought such things were unnatural. But, yeah, she's not dealing with it.'

'Have you tried to sit down and speak with her?'

'I can't. I mean, I wasn't really good at talking with her before.'

The admittance is logged and Ahmed feels the shame rise like bile.

'How do you even talk to teenagers these days? I've tried, but she just yells at me, always manages to spin it into some conspiracy. I'm always wrong, she's always the victim.'

‘Is she?’

‘No. No... I don’t ask for much, just some help being... being together, as a family, some family time. Why does she have to run out every night and be with her friends, you know? Can’t she at least try to enjoy a dinner with Ollie and me? Is that too much to ask?’

‘Perhaps she seeks some time to be alone to think. Away from home.’

Ahmed shrugs, annoyed. Annoyed at the droid’s insinuation, annoyed that he didn’t think of that himself.

‘Or she’s looking for solace with her friends.’

‘Her new friends, they’re from the lower tiers.’

‘New friends?’

‘I don’t know. When I ask she just yells at me.’

If there was a faint smile of compassion on the display of the psychiatrist android, Ahmed did not see it. He was looking at his hands again.

‘Do you think they blame you for their mother’s condition?’

‘Yes.’ Ahmed surprised himself how fast the truth rushed up from within.

He repeated the word and began crying.

‘You understand you must make the decision before our next appointment, right?’

Ahmed did not stop crying.

5th NOVEMBER

‘Ollie?’ Ahmed called out as he got home from a board meeting.

With renewed energy, which he’d picked up from seeing a heartfelt holommercial in the dronecar on the way home, he wanted to try and reach out to his son, maybe eat some snacks and play a game.

No response.

Ollie wasn’t in front of the sensor system in the game room where he usually—and quietly—sat.

‘Ollie? Are you home?’

Ahmed noticed the dim floor light was on in the hallway to the sleeping section. Someone had walked there recently. The door at the end was ajar.

The room was a mirror to Ahmed, a room he feared, a room he could never abandon.

What once had been a guest bedroom now had a clinical smell. A few years ago, Ahmed's mother had used it the week before she went into cryo. Now, Ahmed's wife lay there, hooked up to medical stabilizing equipment, sinking into her never-ending paradise.

Ahmed peered through the doorway. Ollie was standing by his mother. The boy's presence and posture speaking volumes in the silent room. Drawn close by longing, but too angry to hold his mother's warm, but unmoving hand.

A tremendous sadness welled up inside Ahmed and caught his breath. His body frozen. For moments they stood there, both, in silence. Ollie unaware of his father.

Then, suddenly, Ollie let out a quivering breath that shook his body—and he slipped his hand into his mother's and squeezed.

'Mom.' Ollie could have said, softly, like a question, or a plea, or the reestablishment of the truth. Or maybe it was just Ahmed who thought he'd heard his son say it. He wiped one of his eyes and the movement made Ollie turn.

'Hey.' Ahmed tried, but Ollie just looked at him briefly and then walked out, brushing past his father as if he were a ghost.

Ahmed's eyes lingered on Shanira. Her face obscured by a protective helmet to make sure nothing interfered with the gear that gave her the world she now lived in. Only her mouth and nose were visible. Intravenous tubes kept her alive, but her frame was thin, her muscles withering away.

Her lips were still full. It had been a month since Ahmed had kissed them.

'Ollie!' Ahmed came out of his reverie and followed after Ollie. 'I thought we could make some snacks and play a game... or whatever you want to do?'

No reply. His son had already placed himself in front of the sensor system, switched on his aug-lens and was speaking to fantastical beings that his father wasn't privy to.

Ahmed waited a second to see if his son would look at him, then he tried again. 'We could play a game.'

Ollie's lips were moving—he was conversing with a mechanical god hunter—yet there was no sound. Ahmed noticed the Suppressor behind Ollie's ear was lit green, turned on. He could scream as loudly as he wanted, and

so could Ollie, but the sound waves would be cancelled out around the boy's head.

Ahmed sighed as he remembered his pitch to Shanira. 'He won't be disturbed during class, he'll be much more focused.' Shanira was sceptical, as always. 'I use it all the time at work,' was his last selling point. Somehow it had worked.

Ahmed wanted to yell, but watching his son's mouth move, this conversation of imagination, this silent defiant act of mime, made his anger dissipate. He sat down on the nearest chair and watched his son. A sense of closure, terrible closure, rode his mind. As a last, but likely futile attempt of getting Ollie's attention, he connected his N-Link to Ollie's and sought permission, with one added request. That they sit down and talk.

Long ago he had promised Shanira never to use the N-Link in the house. She wasn't happy that he'd upgraded their wristcoms with the brain link in the first place. One of many broken promises.

The request wasn't answered. Instead Ollie shut down the game and the Suppressor and turned to his father.

'Okay.' Ollie said, looking his father dead in the eyes. 'Talk.'

Of all the hundreds of questions stored up in his mind, of all the apologies, nothing came to Ahmed. Ollie waited, but time was no help.

'Son...' Ahmed began but it was a beginning with no middle and definitely no end.

'Why did you let mother drown?'

A sincere explanation and a heartfelt conversation where apologies were shared mutually in the end played out in a flash in Ahmed's mind. A hug in the name of closure even, a desperately needed human contact of real skin to meet real skin, kin to kin.

But none of that happened.

Ollie was back in front of the sensory system, sharing stories with fantastical creatures, in his no-sound bubble.

Ahmed was outside, listening to the meet-and-greet party a few apartments above. Feeling his life falling, like the tiny cocktail umbrella drifting by on the faint breeze. Falling towards the bottom.

SESSION III

‘As was stated in the contract, there will be a final session in about a week. Have you already booked it?’

The android knew Ahmed had, of course, but asking questions that had simple answers worked to quicken the arrival of the only thing necessary for a successful session—trust.

‘Yes,’ Ahmed confirmed. The nervousness he’d felt in previous sessions wasn’t there anymore, as if the focus on the matter at hand, the reason for this session, peeled off every other aspect of his being.

‘Before we get to the important decision, did you speak with your children?’

‘Yes.’ Not a single algorithm picked up on the lie.

‘Good. And they understand the position you are in?’

‘Yes.’ Once again, it slipped under the radar.

‘Right. Then let’s hear your decision.’

Another android, from the insurance company, entered the room. Came down the drooping floor and stood at attention.

‘To ensure the authenticity of your sound signature, we are required to use a second party, your insurance company.’

Ahmed nodded. Both androids held out their hand and in each there was a pad.

‘Place your hands on the pads and answer my question.’

Ahmed did so and waited.

‘Ahmed Fain, 387R, born 2nd August, 2041. Lifeline of Shanira Fain, 368F, born 21st January, 2038. Do you wish to pull her up, with all the mental risk involved... or keep her drowned?’

Ahmed had prepared for this moment for two months, and gave his best answer.

30th NOVEMBER

The plants on the terrace had to be trimmed and Ahmed liked to do it himself instead of hiring a gardentech. This was the day Shanira would sink below the Gorlov Line. So uneventful here on the outside, yet so profound. Ahmed needed to occupy his mind with anything else he could find.

Most of the plants grew at normal rate and went through the cycles as programmed. Except one. The custom made orchid he'd bought at the Sacramento auction house, on his first date with Shanira.

Its stalk and leaves were shifting into a strange purple colour. A colour beyond its autumn palette.

Ignoring the connotation, he was about to inject fresh nanocompounds into the weird flower when Vesper barged through the terrace door.

'When the fuck were you going to tell me?'

She didn't stop.

'You could have helped her!'

Ahmed put down his instruments.

'Vesper, please, let me explain.'

'Wreckshit! I've heard all your excuses already!'

Ahmed didn't understand.

'Vitro hacked your insurance account. I've listened to all your sessions.'

She couldn't contain her anger.

'I've fucking heard it all! You could have pulled her out!'

'There was a massive risk--'

'A risk of what? That we could have been a family again?'

The moment she said it, she knew it wasn't true. So did Ahmed. Their eyes dropped in shame.

'Vesper, I tried to speak with you, at least I think I tried, but...'

Vesper was lost for words. The anger that had taken place inside her had obscured her from the fact that nothing would be the same ever since her mother had crashed. Even before that. Everything that had happened wasn't a drastic shift from status quo, it was just escalation.

She saw it clearly now.

'I'm going to stay with my friends from now on.'

Five seconds before it would have been a harsh demanding fact. Now it was a mix between asking for permission and examining if she really meant it.

'Okay. I won't stop you.'

Vesper stood there, cold and frail in her glitch-patterned cheongsam. Carefully, Ahmed took a step forward and hugged his daughter. When she returned the hug his heart swelled and it felt like his feet lifted off from the

terrace floor. As if gravity itself gave him a break.

‘I don’t know how, but it’ll be alright. Okay?’

Vesper was lost in thought and the only answer she mustered was a vague nod. That was when Ahmed noticed the bandage on her left hand.

‘What happened?’ Concern grew in his voice.

With that, Vesper was back, defenses up.

‘Nothing.’

‘Vesper! Tell me what--’

‘I cut it out! I took it all out. I don’t want to be part of it anymore.’

‘Your wristcom, you cut it out? Are you insane!?’

‘Wreckshit! Like you care!’

‘Of course I do!’

‘I don’t want to be linked anymore. I want to be free.’

‘Your friends put you up to this? That Vitro guy?’

Her non-answer was a clear yes.

‘They’re right, you know. Being off the net, unreachable, it’s such a great feeling. I’m happy when I’m with them.’

‘Who the hell are these people?’

‘My friends!’

Ahmed knew he could stop her from leaving, but what good would it do? His family had swerved off the cliff long ago.

Vesper vanished back inside and five minutes later she had packed her clothes and was out the door.

Ahmed noticed the neighbors looking down at him and got back to his plants. He took his trimmer and snipped the purple orchid by the stem.

FINAL SESSION

The emotionless emoji face stared at Ahmed, waiting for him to sit comfortably.

‘As you know, Ahmed, this is our final session. We have looked at the situation with your wife from several angles these last months. You made your decision to keep her hooked into her virtual world indefinitely last week.’

It was not a question, but Ahmed answered. ‘Yes.’

‘Tell me how you feel about that decision now.’

A thousand memories swirled, a thousand decisions, between him and

Shanira. Where did it ever go wrong? An earlier Ahmed would crumble in the chair, cry and proclaim all his regrets and wrongs with a shivering voice so loud even the imaginary beings in his son's game, even the very neurons in his daughter's offnet mind, even his drowned wife, would hear them.

But not this Ahmed. He buried his regrets and wrongs, deep down in some nightmare with a proper firewall. And on the surface blamed...

'Coincidences...'

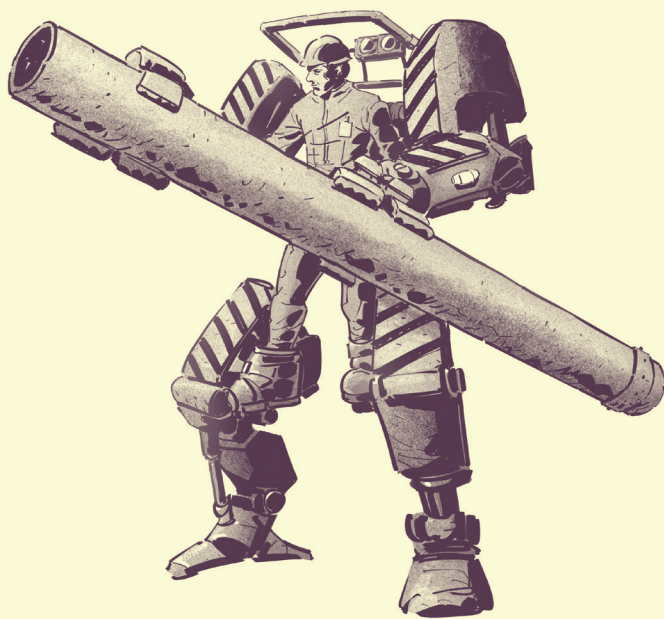
'Sorry? In what context do you mean?'

'Uh, nothing. Nothing.'

Ahmed was back outside his mind, and made his final statement.

'Shanira is happier where she is now, happier than what she'd be if she was with us. That's what I think matters most.'

Any lesser algorithms would have questioned Ahmed's beliefs, but the android let it go and displayed a smile to Ahmed. A final, conclusive smile.



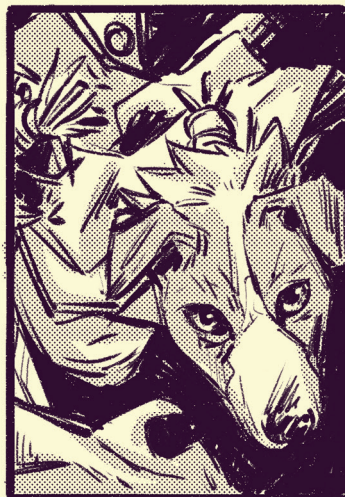
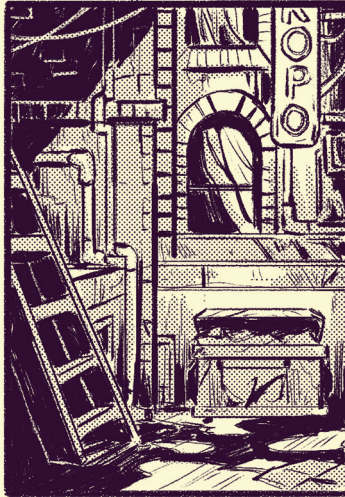
growth hacking

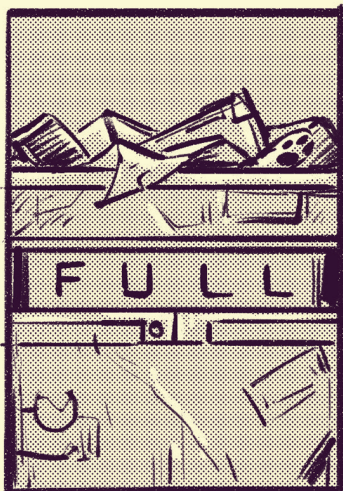
EVERY MOMENT IS A
MOMENT FORWARD
artist\\Naomi Franquiz

Next morning.

The city's asymmetric
pulse surges through
its grids.

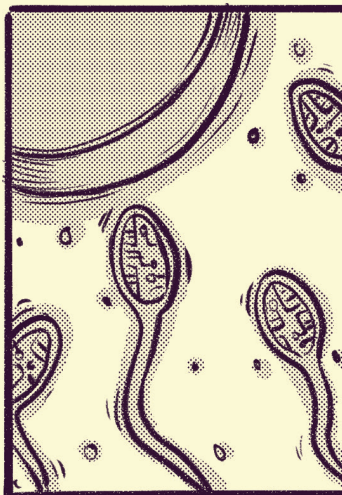
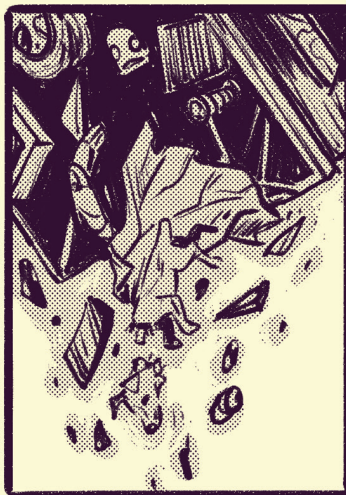
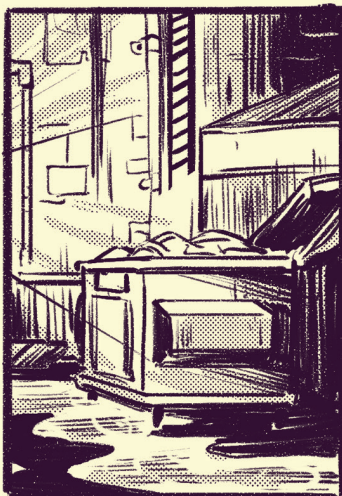
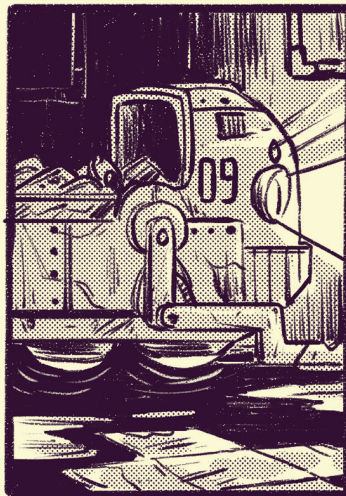
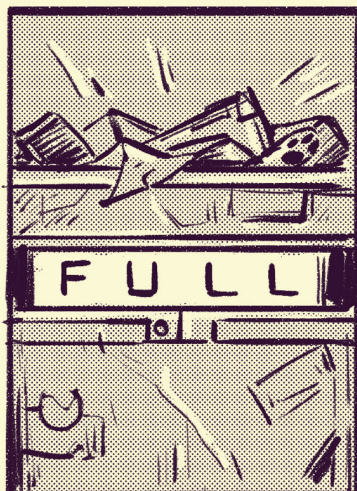
Word on the
technosphere?

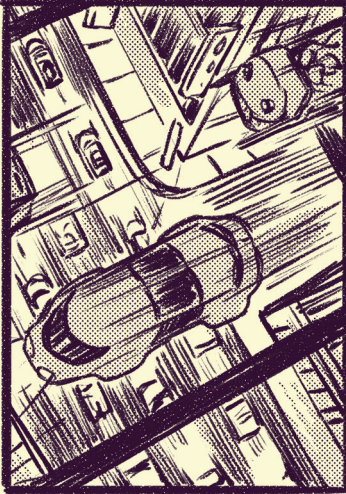
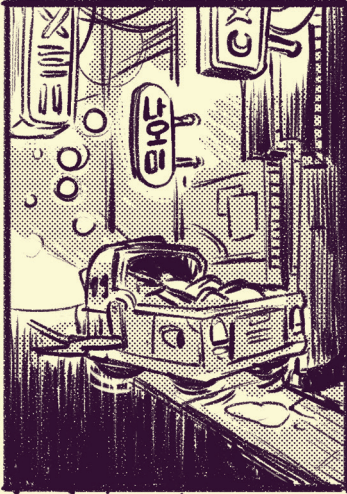




Thousands are lost
and you are
no exception.

But the pulse does
not cease.
Neither the city's
nor yours.

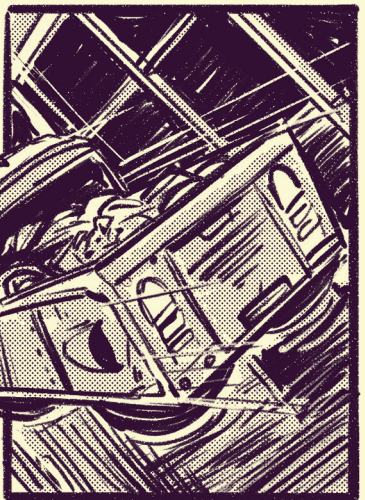
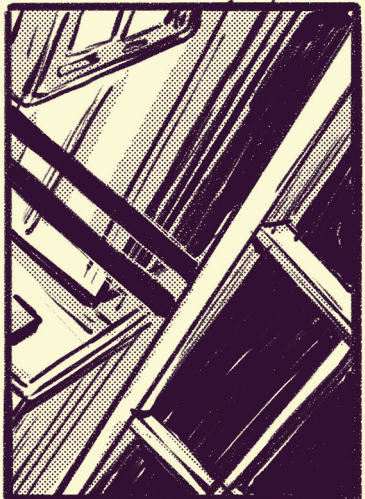
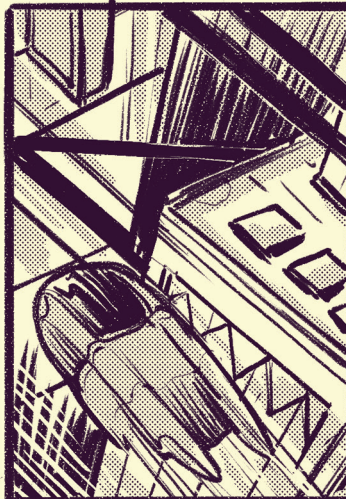
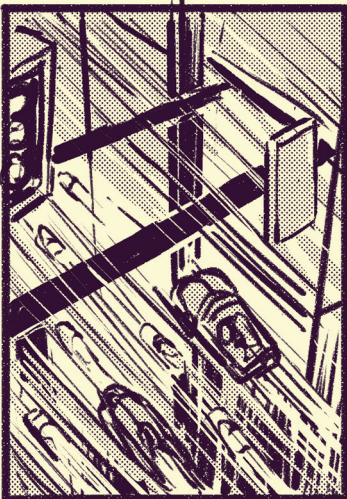


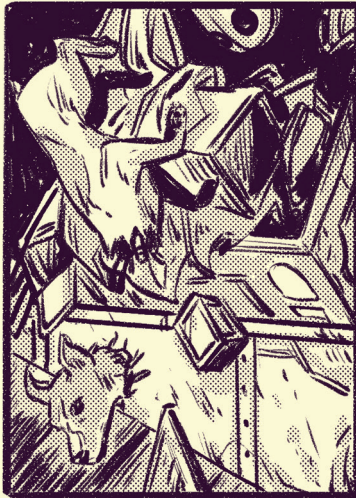
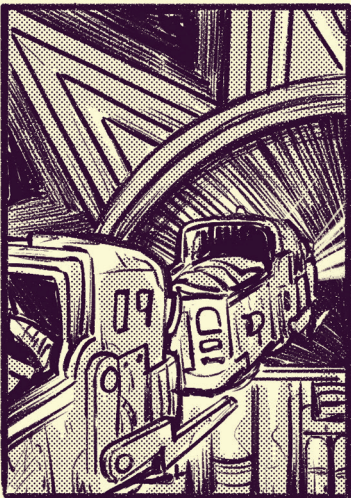


Every moment is
a moment forward,
rising high or
stooping low.

Nothing level.
No balance.

Chaotic
momentum.

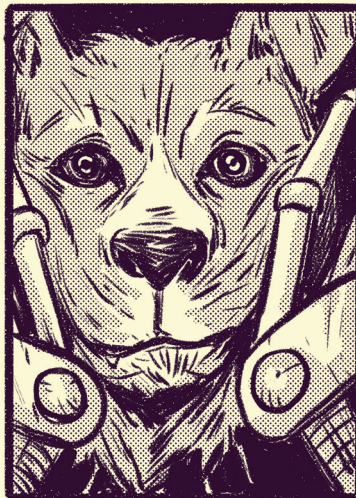
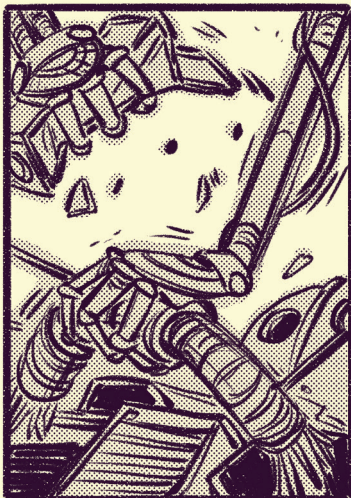
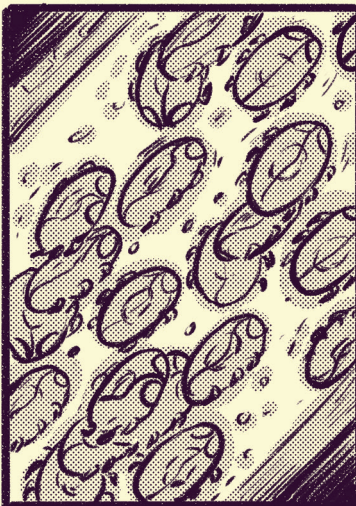
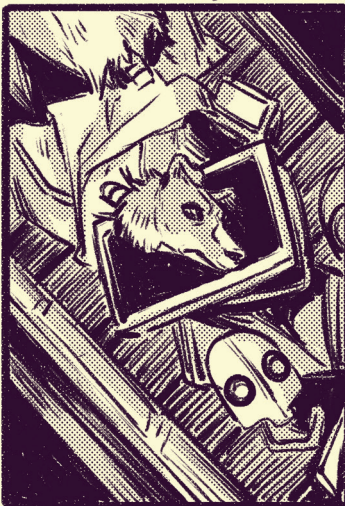


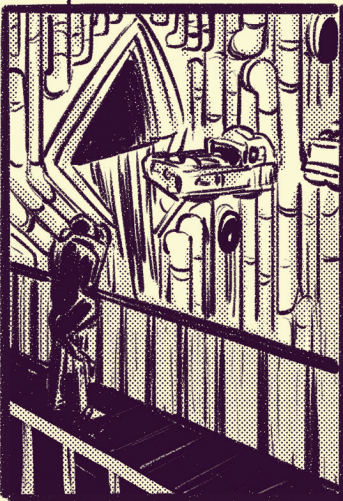
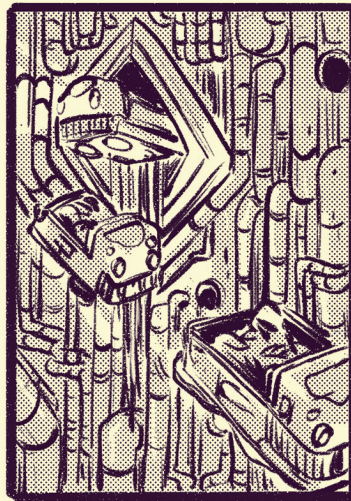
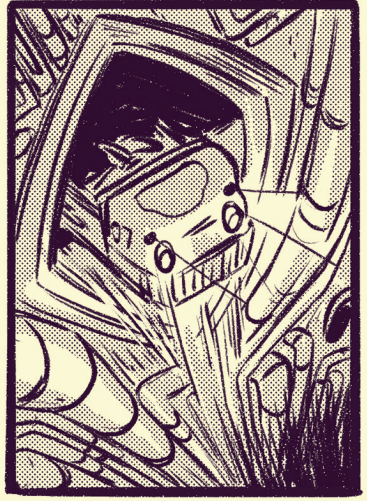
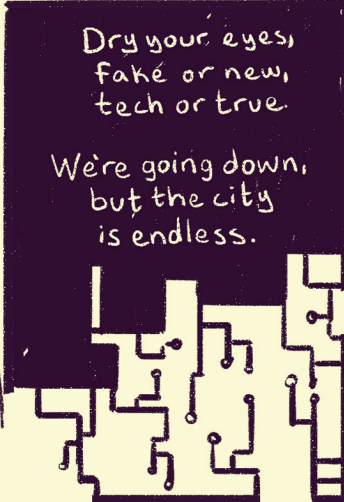
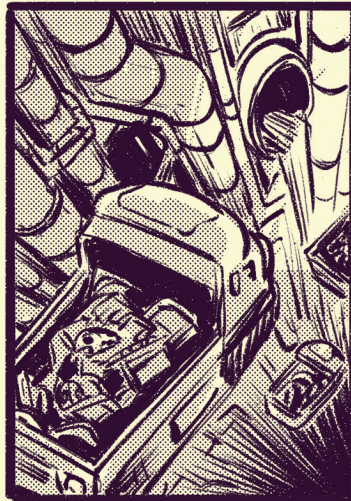
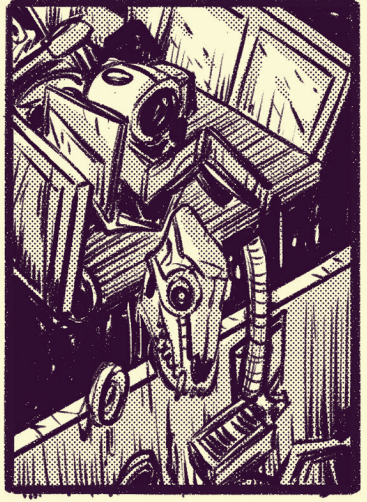
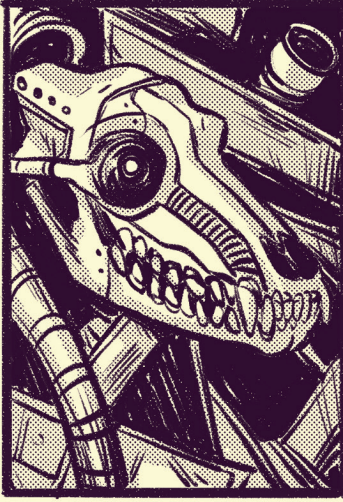
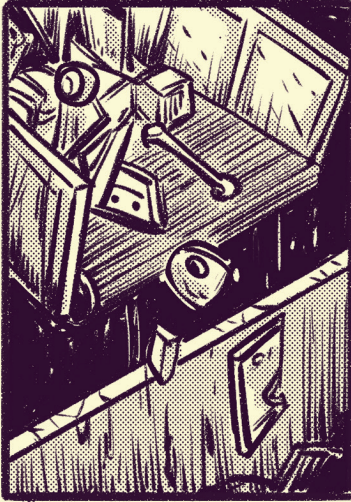


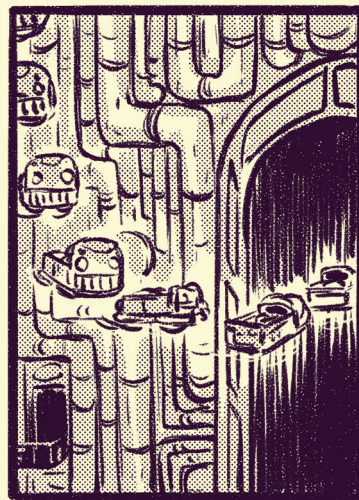
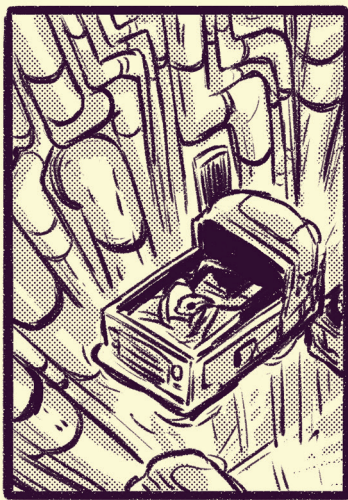
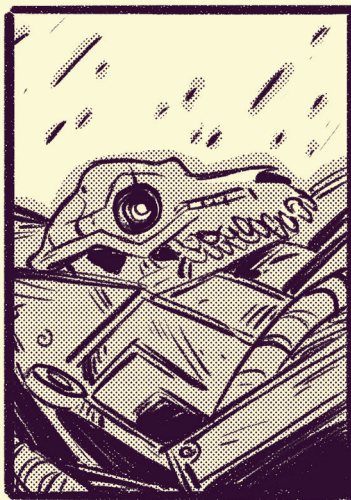
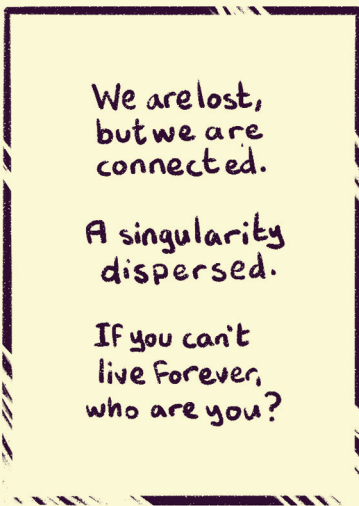
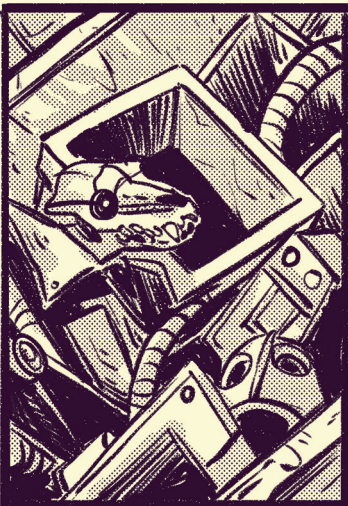
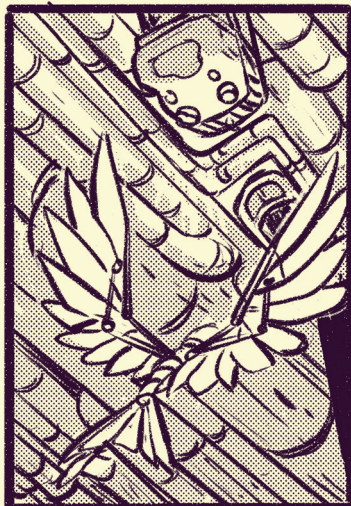
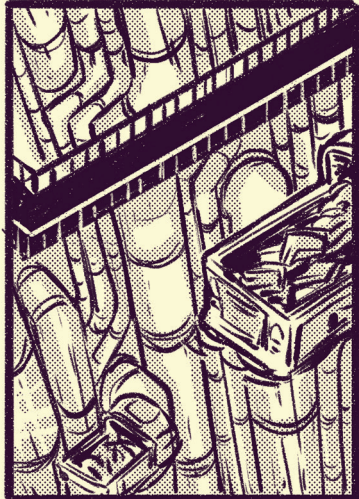
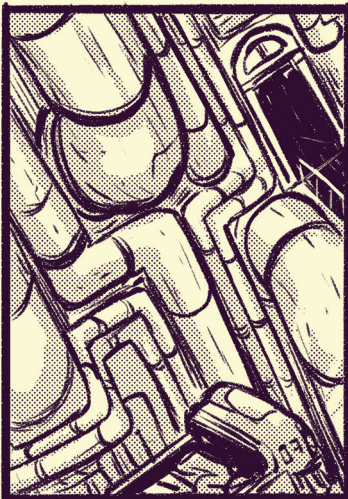
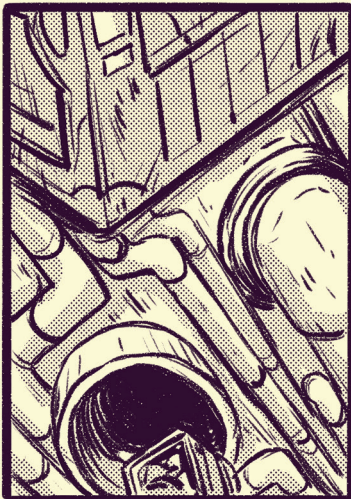
Chaos is the
water to the seed
of progress.

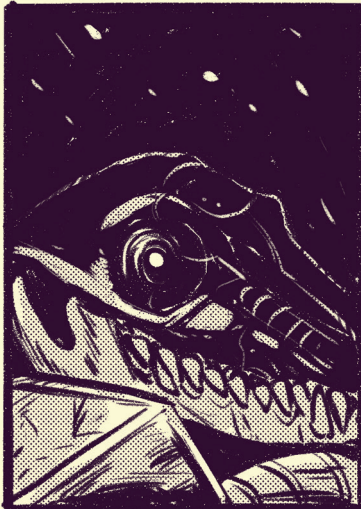
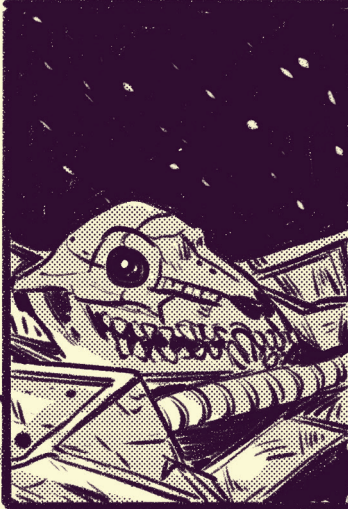
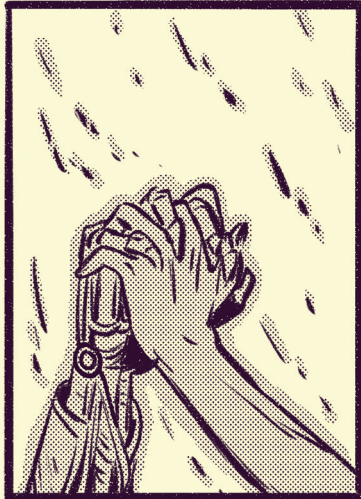
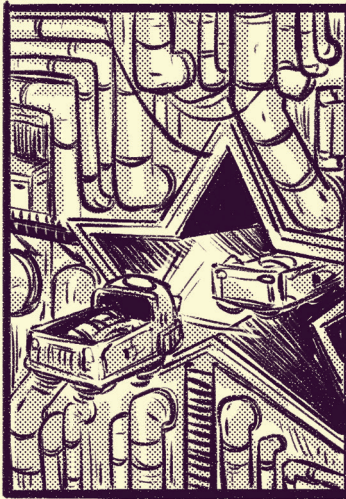
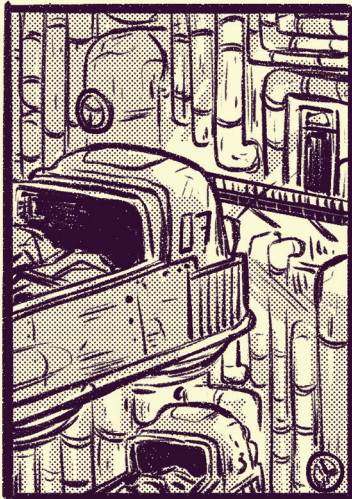
Stability is
stagnation.

Rotten and
reeking,
eventually.





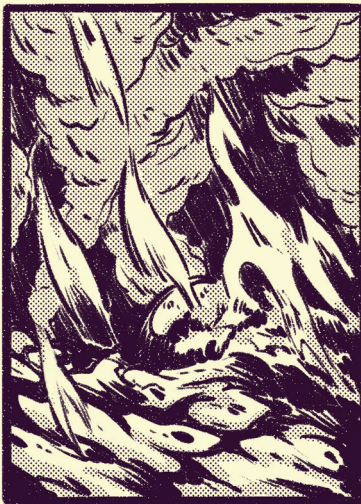
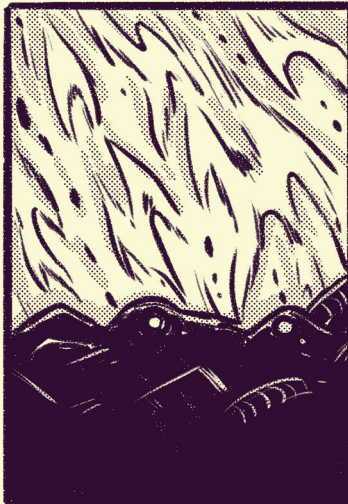


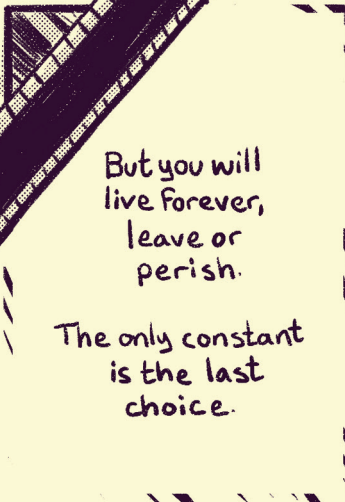
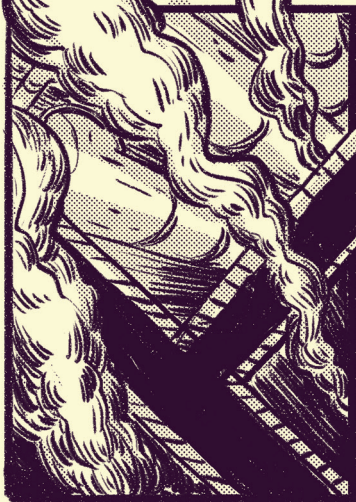
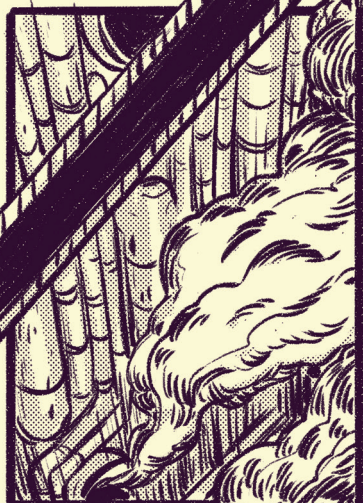
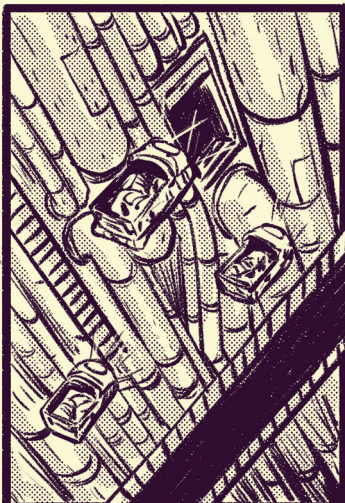
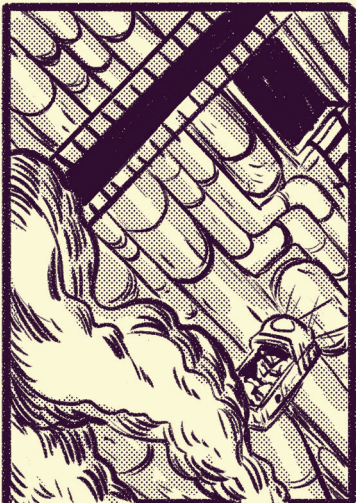
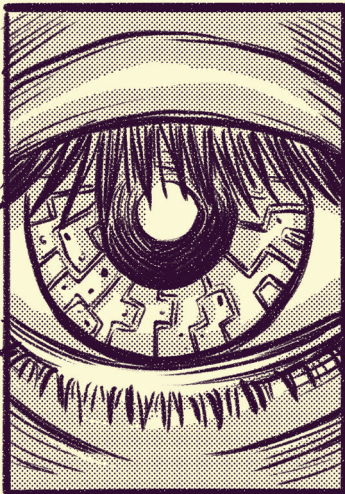
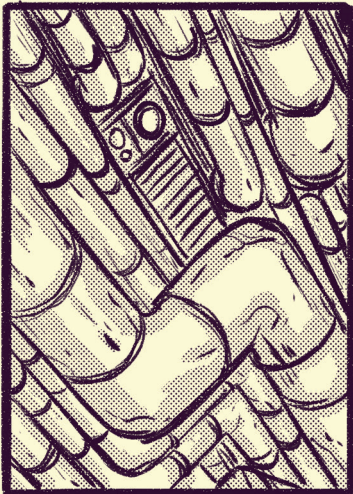


The city is
architecture,
infrastructure.

Breathing, blinking,
over and over.

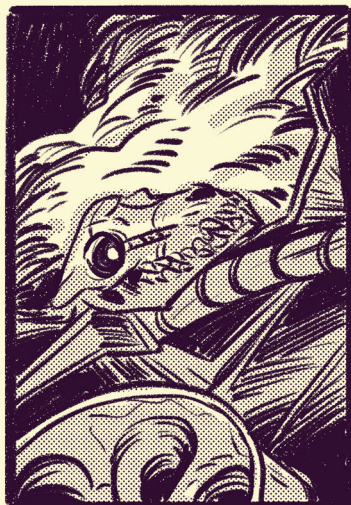
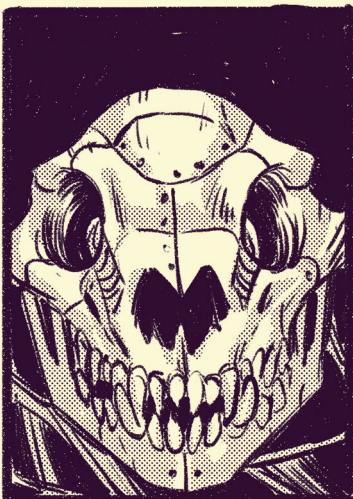
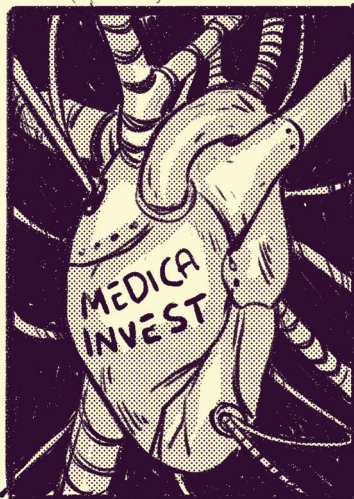
Pulsating until
the planet melts
or cracks.



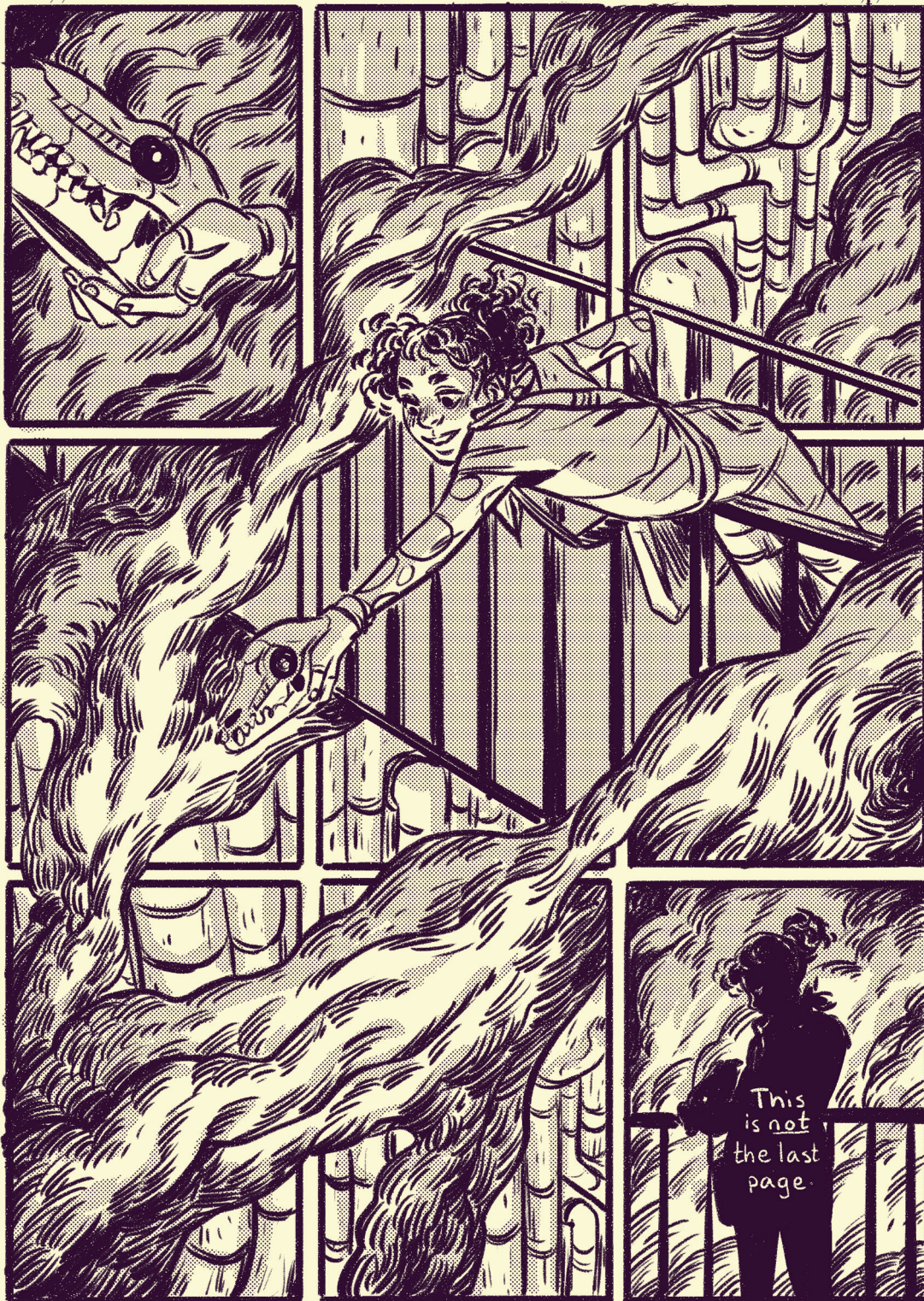


But you will
live forever,
leave or
perish.

The only constant
is the last
choice.



This is not
the last
page.



SUNRISE

Another morning in Metropo. The sun danced through the smog, pulsing through slits of the architecture, blinking bright between the Babelonian towers stretching to the sky, casting its warmth on the millions up early, in staccato, clawing its way down into the lowest tiers but ultimately unable to conquer the manmade maze that was the city. Stuck to the upper rooftops and facades, to the wealthy on the highest tiers. Another morning with decent weather in the city that kept expanding in every possible direction, outward and inward, stretching taller here and there. The city that kept filling with thousands by the day, seawater or drought, violence or deserts, pushing the huddled masses to their new home, their new world.

Far down, Atena sat outside her window, or rather, the patched up hatch that worked as an escape route in case of fire. The crazed plastic glass, too dirty to wash clean and too brittle to polish back into clarity, was now covered with a sharpie-scrawled blueprint of the apartment complex in which it resided. Beside her sat a small potted flower, biowired to a fungusoid battery for extra energy, stretching into the morning, its face desperate to catch a glimpse of sunlight. Atena's feet were dangling off the little outcropped roof outside her bed corner, a roof that had been added later, like most things down here on the third tier. The waved tin roof was cold from the night. She was dressed in her favourite shirt, which she had pressed herself with an ornate symbol she had seen on the net long ago that had stuck to her mind like some parasitic meme. Her trousers were just as much a patchwork as the buildings around her. Thirteen knee patches and two sewn-on pockets had been added since she first found them, and they were now the perfect utility for her scavenging hunts into the plumes and shadows of the tiers below. Her

foster mother, Ziyi, had always warned her not to go down to the ‘rabble and scum’ below, and Atena had always nodded and smiled—body language lies—before she’d slipped away from the unit in some proposed errand.

The mix of morning moist tangled with rust and the reek from the waste canals far below swelled around her. The food stand down on the walkway where people streamed by like a river in both directions had just fired up the stove and the odor swirled upwards. Atena thought little of it. During her nine years she’d smelled all the odors of the lower parts of Metropo and none had bothered her. She herself smelled pretty bad, of old sweat and stinging powder soap. Not because Ziyi was neglecting her hygiene, but because Atena wasn’t keen on taking a shower when they did have water rations to do so. Atena, unlike most organisms, wasn’t a friend of water. She could drink it, but that was about it. Her curly dark hair was semi-kempt thanks to Ziyi’s demands that she comb through some dry conditioner now and then. Whatever she smelled, Atena didn’t give much of a thought to it. Her mind was occupied with the millions of complex systems and nifty details of the world around her. She was an explorer. Be it the walkways stretching out kilometres from her home, the patterns the drop-off drones followed, or the crevasses in the hundred year old skin on Mako’s face, the bugfood dealer just down from their unit.

She had a drawing of his face on a file somewhere that looked more like a cracked desert landscape than a man’s face.

Her eyes scanned the stream of shoes and feet she saw through the steel-grated walkway 20 meters above for a moment, then the stream of heads on the walkway below. She counted the downcast faces that passed Mako’s bugfood stand and stopped at one hundred and tried to understand why they were downcast, their eyes unwilling to travel, when the world around them had so many details waiting to be inspected. Ziyi had told her many people were sad and that was why they showed little interest in the world. She herself had her moments.

Atena didn’t quite comprehend what sadness was, though.

The sun flickered on her face while it passed through a slit between the tall scrapers where traffic was heavy. A rare and welcoming greeting from the indistinct glowing orb in the sky. Atena turned the flower towards the light and hoped for another flicker.

She sat for a moment longer before she got up. Pulled her bag of

oddities on her shoulder and checked her modified wristcom. It wasn't stolen, but it wasn't bought either. Neither was it connected to the vast net with her true identity. Only a few people close to her actually knew her name. It wasn't paranoia that had made her tinker with the wristcom's systems until she was outside of the law. Simply curiosity. If she could do it, why not try it. Big M, the bar owner with the rainbow beard, had helped her navigate through the upper back alleys of the device when she was seven. She figured out the rest on her own.

She pulled up the blueprint of a recently sold lens factory turned cockroach farm in the neighbouring sector. She had not exactly stolen the blueprint, but she was not meant to have it if you asked either a SecForce officer or a Babylon Security officer patrolling the walkways nearby. Two security firms fighting over territory based on the property areas claimed by their mother corporations. In this sector, where Atena lived, they had come to some kind of stalemate and rumours on the walkways told of liquidations on officers done by rival officers as well as the classic Romeo and Juliet tales between close-stationed rivals. Anonymous voices and some unafraid activists asked what the difference between the security companies and the criminal cartels were. There were no proper answers.

Atena strapped her board, her own prototype, to her back and got ready to climb down the external piping and head towards the former lens factory when her foster mother called from inside.

'Atena?'

She answered with a groan, though it bore no ill meaning.

'Come eat with me before I head out.'

Atena rummaged in her bag. 'I'm good. I've got a synthsmoothie and some crackers.'

She had.

'Come eat.'

//

Their little rented unit was clad in once-bright yellow now-tainted plastic, all walls lined with compartments and shelves. Their beds sprung into the wall, but a third bed had been turned into a table where they both ate and Atena drew and tinkered. This gave them a little bit of free floor near the one large

window—which you could actually see through—and Ziyi used the space to do her dragonfly falun dafa.

Ziyi carried two bowls from the kitchen corner near the unit door and placed them on the bed-turned-table.

‘Move your sheet.’

Atena put her digisheet, the ultra-thin and slightly cracked tablet she always tinkered with, filled with memorized blueprints and high-detailed observations from the outside world, inside a wall compartment.

The bowl of cockroach milk porridge was sprinkled with green sweetener. Atena’s portion wasn’t large.

‘I know you’re not hungry. I just wanted to have you eat with me before I go, to keep me company.’

‘Okay.’ Atena did that trick Ziyi had taught her, a smile.

She ate a few spoonfuls and waited for her foster mother to say something.

‘So what have you planned for the day?’

Atena lied and didn’t mention the old lens factory. Instead, she claimed she was going to help clean Roxy’s trinket shop up on the corner by the next scraper, across from the stone slab temple.

‘Okay, that’s good... don’t go any further out, okay?’

Atena nodded and smiled.

‘He giving you some credits for the help, then?’

‘Sure. He started on thirty, but I got him up to fifty.’

Ziyi smiled her usual broad smile, the greasecoffee she chugged at the nursing home had made her teeth yellow a long time ago. Atena noticed they matched the walls.

Atena stared, waiting patiently for the next question.

‘Look... I just want to say I’m sorry that you can’t enroll in some v-classes. Even the subscription at The Worker’s School of Apprenticeship has become dagger steep.’

‘Don’t think about it. I know the courses on the WSA.’

She had run through them via a backdoor long ago. All twenty of them.

Ziyi chuckled but as always there was a confound expression beneath her eyes that didn’t know how Atena pulled off all her clever tricks. And she knew there was no point in asking, because the moment Atena started using

technical terms Ziyi was lost.

‘Of course you do...’

Her smile persisted, but her serious tone returned fast.

‘It’s more the meet-ups after exams I’m concerned you’ll be missing, darling.’

Atena shrugged and ate some porridge again.

‘Unless you want to work with the sick, the old or the dying, it’s near impossible to find proper work these days.’

Atena nodded but was already planning how she’d slip through the ventilation system at the abandoned level of the old factory.

Suddenly, a square of sunlight, rarely seen in the apartment, fell on the table and slowly slid along and caught both Ziyi and Atena’s hands.

The box of sunlight warmed their skin gently and stopped them in their thought-tracks.

‘Oh...’ Ziyi smiled and savored the warmth.

Atena noticed her reaction and it made her smile and she calculated the size of the square and put her head down to the table surface, to see how the sunlight had managed to get in here.

‘They’re swapping some facade plates up on the Trillion scraper.’

The sun warmed her cheek and Atena was about to lift her face from the table when Ziyi caressed her skin and made her linger. The three of them, Atena, her foster mother and the sun, had what Atena perceived as a moment.

The sun filled her mind. All the maths and the physics of the solar object she knew. But its true nature, its symbolic strength, its being, she realized she had never exactly beheld it. She’d never seen it. Properly. Fully.

So intense was this rush of thoughts that when the square of sunlight slid away and vanished—a new facade plate had probably been attached—a tear rolled along Atena’s nose.

Ziyi wiped the teardrop away gently and put her head down next to her foster daughter and whispered.

‘What is it, darling?’

‘Have you ever seen the sun?’

‘Uh, sure... yeah, like now.’

‘I don’t mean like now. I mean, the whole sun... all of it.’

Ziyi first realized she’d never seen more than a glitch now and then

at the care home, then, to her surprise, realized she'd never seen more than flickers here and there. For as long as she'd lived.

'I've seen it in that planetary show.'

'No, that's just aerial drone footage, or space footage. You haven't seen it with your eyes?'

The 'no' hung unsaid in the air. It was a silence that carried little comfort.

'I think I'm sad...' Atena said after some time.

'Don't be...' Ziyi tried to hide the fact that she was also sad. Not so much that she hadn't properly seen the sun all her life, but because Atena hadn't.

After the bowls of porridge were put back in the kitchen corner and Ziyi had gotten her jacket out of the compartment next to the door, Atena was still silent by the table. Her mind racing. Trying to focus on the problem at hand, that she hadn't seen the full sun, but instead it kept leaping from concept to concept regarding the sun and its intimate relationship with all of humanity's history. Everything Atena had read or seen or heard about the sun were bubbling inside her now, about to explode through her silent and mute exterior. Supernova.

Ziyi had seen her like this several times. She buried her worry, knowing she had to go to work.

'Please don't think about it too much. Okay, darling?' She supplemented with a smile to take the edge of the serious worry that came through her voice. 'We'll talk tonight.'

She spun around as the door slid open.

'Before I forget, could you order up some supplies? I left a list on my pad.'

'Soy beans. Crefter. Roach milk. Squeezejuice. Slices.' Atena's voice like an auto-reply bot.

'Yes... you've seen it. Of course... Goodbye, darling. We'll talk tonight.'

The promise lingered as Ziyi left the apartment. A promise she'd given many a time, but which had the tendency to often be broken, as Ziyi was simply too tired most nights. Work took too much of her. The cheap drugs she could afford didn't have much invigorating effect. Stealing stronger stuff from the care home had crossed her mind several times, but Ziyi was too good a

person to fall for the temptation.

The sun contains 99.86% of the mass of the solar system.

Atena's brain buzzed, but the overload was slowing down. She blinked and looked out the window at the Trillion building. Towering skywards. An ominous behemoth. A beacon of hope. A challenge.

//

Atena was surfing her way through the crowd gathered at a bustling market two scrapers east from their yellow home.

She had ordered the supplies Ziyi wanted as she'd passed Mako and his droning hellos and goodbyes. She had read up on the Trillion scraper on her glasses as she glided along in the river of people heading to work, or to a place where they could forget the unending upward climb in the ladder of life. All with dreams and hopes of the upper city. Atena too, but for a different reason.

The Trillion scraper's history was a digital ghost. No matter how deep Atena dug in old records and blueprints she could not figure out when it had been erected. Even in the digiage things were a mess. The metadata as contradictory as an offkey human brain. What she could glean were simple facts. The Trillion was the 3rd tallest of all the towers in the sector. Raging 900 meters above the waste canals. Filled with production facilities in the lower three tiers: aluminium factory, plastic recycling facility, ammunition stockpile ward now abandoned, low security prison, possibly the largest gin brewery in Metropo, a vintage clock workshop, two server parks. A mix of accommodation and commercial spaces followed in the next two tiers, including the largest fashion mall in the sector, the *Yours*. The 6th tier was a luxury hotel called *Astuary Rain*. The contents of the 7th tier—which wasn't really an official tier, but since it was higher than the surrounding official 6th tier of the Sector even formal digital files called it the seventh tier—was undisclosed in the database. A footbyte claiming it was confidential under Metropo law.

It hadn't taken long for Atena to bypass other registries on the Trillion to find property contracts, an escort call registry, entertainment system support call logs and ventilation blueprints. The mysterious 7th tier was, as most upper tier sections in the scrapers of Metropo, a den of luxury homes and immense wealth. Scrolling through one of the support call logs the name Iona

Hyber stuck out. The first non-cybernetic person to have walked on Mars and actually returned, unharmed. Back in '69. A hero of Earth, but someone Atena had assumed would be able to fix the entertainment system on her own. The fact money equals a convenience to never have to fix anything yourself had never crossed Atena's mind. She loved fixing things and no money in the world would make her stop trying to fix anything broken, to explore the hidden layers and understand how everything fit together.

She hurried along on the walkway, keeping one eye on the research, one on the maze of people and robots ahead of her. The walkway weaved in and out of bright commercial spaces, littered with holograms and ads, and drabber units and apartment facades. Most of the time, going through the more crowded places of the sector, it was hard to tell if one was actually outside or inside.

Pulsing arrows led Atena up to the next tier, then the next. The colours became brighter around her. Not because the facades and materials in the lower tiers had less colour, but up here there was money to clean them. The Trillion crept slowly closer. Dwarfing the nearby scrapers as Atena made her way towards the fashion mall, one of the gigantic entrances into the behemoth scraper.

A crowd had gathered by the first fashion hologram, a woman speaking about superior artificial intelligence. How it was kept from them, this enormously benevolent force, kept offline and used by the elite, only to enhance their wealth. Chants and murmurs from the crowd as she shouted out her last line.

'This god belongs to us all!'

Digital pamphlets were swiped out to all nearby wristcoms and the crowd was urged to join the *Evolutis* and their cause.

If Atena had stayed and watched she'd witness a group of robed Union of the Red Blood monks arrive—one of them a teenage girl with the future in her eyes—to chase off the speaker and her crew, before SecForce officers would forced them all to scatter in every direction. Atena, however, her mind focused on one thing, had already hovered past the last couple of holograms before the swirling audacious entrance to Yours and the Trillion structure.

The core of the sun burns with fifteen million degrees Celsius.

Her mind was in a tunnel, but now shouts pushed against the tunnel

walls.

A gloved hand grabbed Atena's arm, immediately shaking off her focus.

'I'm talking to you, kid!'

A huge, bulging woman in SecForce gear almost lifted her up to her face.

'What are you doing here? What you up to?'

Atena didn't answer. A strategy she often found worked when she wanted no attention.

'You can't speak, huh?'

She tapped her wristcom and it forced the ID to display on Atena's. The bulging officer with equally bulging eyes stared at Atena's wristcom, then at Atena's expressionless face, then back at the wristcom. *Jane Zhāng*.

'You're kidding? Your parents must have had high hopes. And you turned out to have no voice!?'

The officer gurgled a chuckle. Atena just nodded.

'Sixteen, eh?' The officer leaned in as if the answer lay in Atena's pores.

'I think we'll do a blood snap.' She pulled out a small blood analysis tool.

Atena was about to object when a soft but authoritarian voice broke in.

'Let the kid go, Kelsie. She's here to look at clothes and skin, like any other teen.'

Another officer came up to them. A pretty face beneath heavy gear. Freckled. Her eyes deep green.

Officer Kelsie scoffed. 'Look is all she'll be doing, yeah.' She scanned the patchwork of clothes Atena wore with still-suspicious eyes and added, 'don't get any ideas, girl.'

Atena said nothing and the burly officer let go of her arm. She kept her eye on Atena as she moved back to her spot. The green-eyed SecForce officer smiled at Atena and tipped her head to say she could go.

'Go on.'

Behind the kindness of her expression there was a longing in the officer's eyes Atena couldn't place. She'd seen burdening yearning in many an eye down on her own tier, but what she saw in these green eyes wasn't the

same, it wasn't the longing for a break, some luck, for a better life. It was something else, and it bothered Atena that she couldn't tell.

'Thanks...'

She stood and watched the officer for a moment and the officer watched her. The air between them filled with anticipation that either of them would speak some meaningful words any moment, would offer some profound question or advice. Neither could think of something and a skinny, milky-white SecForce officer called the green-eyed officer over and she nodded to Atena and disappeared between holograms and people.

Atena stood for a second before she stepped back on the board. The sun travels at 220 kilometres per second.

She spun around and headed for the entrance, catching the bulging SecForce lady point two fingers at her eyes then point them at Atena. *I'm watching you.*

\\

Five thousand people were passing through Yours. Some to get to the hotel complex above, some to buy clothes, some to sniff out expensive trends and bring them to the lower tiers, some to steal design ideas for their own brand, some to report on the several collections presented on catwalks, some to ask for work—and mostly be offered unpaid engagements for exposure or experience—some to meet friends, some to steal, some to hack cams and sell undressed vids, some to repair malfunctioned shop assistant androids, some to hunt rats in the automated ventilation system, some to sabotage the stores showcasing the last remnants of real fur, and one to get to the absolute top of Trillion.

Atena hovered into the circular main hall and took it all in. The fountains threw water across the spiralling gap in the centre where Atena could see tens of stories up and down. The whole fashion mall was one floor that circled its way upwards, a swirl of shops and customers, climbing ever so slowly as one passed storefront after storefront, neatly clad roboquin after neatly clad roboquin. In the middle of the spiralling space hung orbs of restaurants.

Atena had never been there before and it took her several minutes to soak in the immense map of details surrounding her. When she had digested it, the movement of people were predictable patterns and the shifting colours

of ads and infomercials were all clockwork. The locations of holograms by the storefronts came as rhythmic intervals as she hovered the circular floor upwards. Weaving astutely between shoppers and drifters and staff, careful not to get too close to the storefronts and the queues and even more careful not to get too close to the inner bannister and the fountain jets of water.

Dronebags on leashes, adorning the latest hottest brand logo, flew ahead of the most fervent shoppers. Insane stilettos click-clacked everywhere. A kid was crying over candyfloss that had fallen to the floor. Teenagers hung by stores with dark and black clothes constantly shifting patterns, their eyes playful and dangerous. Models walked with entourages. Drones and bots and unpaid interns snapped photos and film for the next 30 minutes of social media content and contests. A tattoo studio boomed with music, next to a spray-paint shop for augmented limbs. Near translucent jackets hung on handsome androids without heads, posing on the stages in a store called *See(Thru)Me*.

Atena drifted further and further up the levels. The higher she got the weirder the clothes. The SecForce uniforms even changed as she drew close to the hotel level. Slicker, lighter, more like the suits of the upper class people crowding these upper parts of the Yours.

The hotel entrance loomed over catwalks buzzing with blitz and a seemingly inanimate crowd. Sunlight trickled in through a kaleidoscope of glass arrays on the outer facade. Astuary Rain was written in pulsing light through water drops, making it seem as if the water lingered in the air. An objection of gravity. Atena immediately made a mental note on how the frequency of the pulsing light matched the falling speed of the droplets, thus forming a seemingly still image. This was how the world worked.

By the revolving doors stood high, thin robots, folding and dancing, like origami, while scanning anyone entering. Atena knew there was no point in trying. She kicked her board up and checked her wristcom. After some searches she had found a couple of nearby ventilation extermination services, and after hacking into the cloudbase of the most prominent one she had found some old blueprints of the area she was in. There was a hatch in the floor somewhere not far off to the left from the hotel entrance, and this hatch would lead to a maintenance shaft, leading all the way up to the apartments above the hotel.

Atena could see the hatch. The only problem was that it sat directly below a few seats in the back of the fashion show. A few seats where a group

of drunk selfiesnappers sat huddled with deep cleavages and wild hair. Atena snuck up behind them and sat down to pick up any stray signals from one of their wristcoms. One of them was bound to have forgotten to switch off wireless access or TigerTooth. She set up a fake virtual router and caught two of their wristcoms. Once they were connected, thinking it was a familiar accesspoint, it was a walk in the park, as the old saying went.

Atena did a quick search to find out which fashion icon had the most eHearts—it was Mertvamoda—then she personalized a message from a fashion vlogger called Oluf these selfiesnappers all had in common on their friend list. The message proclaimed, with great enthusiasm, that Mertvamoda was at a store opening party further down in Yours and that they should come down right now, because he was making her a Mind Bender and telling her vintage world war jokes.

Seconds later one of them stood up and showed her wristcom's holomessage to the others. They all rushed off in a hurry, desperate to mingle with Mertvamoda, bound for disappointment.

Atena watched them leave and dislodged two of the chairs and twisted the hatch open. A few people turned and noticed her small frame slipping down into the darkness of the hatch, but did nothing. Fashion was more important.

\\

Her eyes quickly adjusted to the lush darkness inside, lined with faint LEDs that came on as she moved forward. The tunnel pushed into the belly of the hotel, wirework and maintenance gauges and control panels came in intervals. The controls to the glass facade of the Trillion outside the hotel, the adorned watery entrance, the robotic operation fields by the doors, the air flow in the lobby. If Atena wanted to increase the stress level of the one human concierge in the lobby, she could easily do it from here.

There was a more important matter at hand, though. She hurried ahead and passed several pathways crisscrossing away from the main tunnel and eventually reached the shaft that rose vertically. Red lights dotted the ladder, vanishing in the hazy red soup that was condensed air high up in the shaft. There were several slits in the wall where one could attach maintenance bots for various tasks. Climbing fifty meters on a ladder wasn't what Atena

had in mind, and after a few meters she remembered the board on her back. She pulled it out of its strap and squeezed the on-button, clinging to the ladder with one arm. The board hovered by her and she pulled her body on top of it. With the help of the ladder she steadied herself and stepped on the field that indicated elevation thrust. A board from a legit manufacturer wouldn't allow much more than a few feet elevation thrust, but since this was Atena's own prototype—cobbled together throughout several hours of hunting parts and fusing them together at the Hackheim workshop—there was no cap.

She rose carefully for the first 20 meters, steadying herself against the narrow walls now and then, but got bolder once she got the hang of it. The air soon tightened into a red haze and she couldn't see far ahead.

Looking up while trying to balance wasn't all that easy either.

Suddenly she bumped her head. Hard. So hard that nausea came in a rush, and she slid off the board. She grabbed both board and ladder with quick reflexes, but the board powered down and slipped out of her grip and fell. She watched it vanish in the red haze and some moments later the sound of a hundred parts scattering echoed up the narrow shaft. The fragmented sound of hours of work.

When the echo died Atena let out her sigh and closed her eyes to battle the nausea. Eventually it faded.

Above her head, which still hurt, was a hatch, clearly installed at some later point. Its smooth-surfaced grating in stark difference to the rough near-rusted shaft walls and ladder. Hanging on with one arm, Atena touched the lines and indents on the hatch surface and found a slider. Beneath was a panel. Twelve non-labelled touch buttons. Atena studied it for a bit, but did not touch it. She slid the panel shut and began the boring climb down.

She jumped down at the bottom of the shaft and landed with a crunch. Most of the parts from the board were damaged beyond even Atena's repair, but she picked up twelve components and stuck them in her bag.

Her arms were sore as she climbed out of the hatch by the catwalks and hotel entrance. The crowd was gone, the seats empty, only a few people came and went through the hotel doors. The origami robots still danced and one million Earths can fit inside the sun.

Atena waited for three hours outside the care home for Ziyi to finish her shift. She was tired and too drugged to be mad at Atena.

‘What have you done today, then?’

‘A trillion things.’

Ziyi could only muster a smile. Laughter was too tiresome.

‘I ordered the stuff.’

She took Ziyi’s hand and they walked the four kilometres home to their small apartment.

Back home Ziyi was asleep after five minutes, the food Atena had ordered was in the flip-hatch compartment by the door.

She ate Crefters alone on the little roof outside her window. Drank some roach milk. Watched the stream of people coming home from work, many drunk, many drugged, all tired.

She pulled the curtain around her little bunk and tried to sleep, but her plan with the panel churned in her mind and the diameter of the sun is 1.3914 million kilometres.

\\

It was getting dark in the sky, but that only meant more light surrounding Atena as she snuck her way through a narrow grated walkway to a suspended courtyard only ten minutes from her apartment. She was going to see the sun rise and here she would find those that could help her.

The bar slash workshop slash cryptofarm was the only establishment in the courtyard that didn’t flash with a hundred colours to attract the thirsty and fun-loving, loud-cackling river of people that swept in and out of the *Playground*, as the courtyard was called. A SecForce drone hung silently above. If it was making sure no one stepped out of line, or if it was ignoring most of the illegalities in the yard, no one knew.

Atena waited in line at the entrance to the bar. The men and women around her watched curiously, but those few that whistled at her or spoke to her only got silence. Not even a look. The bouncer just bent down and fist-bumped her and she walked in.

Inside was the pling-plong of old arcade machines, howling laughter from the gaming wall where a group of older ladies had gathered, a screeching fake and crude monkey, and clinks and cheers from a party in the corner

under the homemade vintage movie memorabilia of some man cast in car-bonite. Atena had never seen a movie. She did not have time, or rather; her mind did not have the patience.

The old robot bartender, adorned with stickers, vodka and synthetic juice in its two shoulder canisters—the usual content—poured drinks and served beer with a frequency slightly higher than a human. Newer and pricier bartending bots could of course work ten times as fast, but Old Andy was reliable. And mildly sarcastic. A programming trait the customers at *WorkWork* seemed to enjoy when they were served their classic Mind Bender cocktails.

Atena made her way past the bar and to a door with a blinking sign that said ‘nice ppl only’ and pushed through.

In the back room a group of teenage girls were welding together some contraption and a few burly men were singing karaoke to ancient 8-bit game music. The girls watched as Atena came in. She didn’t say anything and they all waited for her to speak. It didn’t happen.

‘What do you want?’

‘Is Big M here?’

‘Upstairs.’

‘Thanks.’

Atena opened the barrier to the stairs with her wristcom when one of the girls called out to her. The girl with the bald head.

‘Hey, what’s your name?’

‘Jane.’

‘I like your curls, Jane.’

‘Thanks.’

The girls all smiled and after a moment so did Atena. She took a few steps up the stairs, then turned.

‘Have any of you seen the sun?’

‘Huh?’

‘Of course,’ said one of them.

‘Like... the sun in the sky?’ asked the bald girl.

Atena nodded. ‘The whole of it... like, all of it,’ she added.

The girls looked at each other. The sometimes tonal, always rugged voices from the karaoke corner filled the air. The bald girl smiled up at Atena.

‘No... when you put it like that... no. Have you?’

‘I’m going to.’

The girls nodded, not sure how to respond, not sure if this was an extraordinary claim or if it simply was something they had never considered.

‘Good... I hope you do.’

The bald girl nodded a ‘see you later’ nod and kept her smile on Atena as she continued up the stairs.

Big M, his straight beard striped in shifting rainbow hues, stood by the window screen either looking at the crowd down in the bar or at the shopping suggestions for artificial fish and aquarium inventory. His girlfriend hung in VR harness, swimming in the fabled Mariana Trench. Chugging industrial rock painted the air, as if time was ticking down. And for Atena, it was. Dawn was fast approaching.

‘Hey.’

The moment she spoke the close-range sound system quieted down.

Big M’s mood shifted when he saw Atena.

‘Nah, look who’s back! The curly genius!’

He ruffled her hair and she let out a squeaky ‘ouch’ as he felt the bump on her head.

‘Oh, sorry! What happened to your head?’

‘I met an obstacle. That’s why I’m here. I need to borrow a microbiome tracker. Do you have one?’

‘That’s some advanced gear you’re after,’ Big M smiled. ‘Can I ask why you need it?’

‘I’m gonna see the sun. I have two hours and thirteen minutes to do it.’

‘You’re gonna see the sun?’

‘HOLY SHIT THAT SCARED THE WRECKSHIT OUT ME!’

Abigail panic-laughed and swam as fast as she could away from something unseen out in Atena and Big’s reality. Both had been startled and were chuckling together now.

‘You don’t have to scare the wreckshit out of us!’

He took Atena over to the wall of lockers.

‘You’re gonna see the sun with a microbiome tracker... Okay. I should probably not ask, should I? I’ll end up on more lists that SecForce are trawling, right?’

‘I’m going to the top of the Trillion scraper, to see the sun rise. Have you seen the sun?’

The question made Big stop unlocking the locker for a moment. He hadn't really, and he had never thought about it. His voice suddenly carried an unmistakable sadness.

'Eh, I've caught a glimpse, like the rest of us. But... not the whole thing.'

'Do you want to come with me?'

'How are you getting to the top of the scraper? Unlicensed fliers might get shot down, you know.'

'I'm climbing.'

'Climbing?'

'A maintenance shaft. From the Yours and up.'

Big M whistled, genuinely impressed. 'Damn. That's a stretch...'

'It's fine. I like going alone.'

He laughed. 'I bet you do, curly.'

He had rummaged around in the locker for a while, but did not find the MBT.

'I was sure I had one extra...'

'Extra?'

'I have one that's been reserved.'

'I'll bring it back right after dawn.'

He eyed her, but couldn't muster his usual sceptical look. 'Yeah, okay. Promise then.'

'Promise.'

He opened the locker labelled 'reserved' and dug out a small box. A microbiome tracker with multiple accessories. She packed it neatly into her bag and was already headed downstairs.

'Be careful with that thing. And your head.'

Atena pulled out a faux-titanium dog cranium she had scavenged a few days earlier from the melting plant down in the abyss, as they called it. She stuck it on her head and knocked it demonstrably. Big M laughed and gave her a thumbs up and the sun is 4.6 billion years old.

//

She made her way to the Yours fashion mall, looking like a macabre carnival attendee. Despite it being in the middle of the night, it was still crowded, and

ironically she fit in quite well as she made her way up the winding causeway of the mall, for there were collection launch parties scattered about and a masquerade that night.

She was nearing the top level of the mall, with the entrance to the Astuary Rain hotel, when she heard a wail and a plea for help. A woman was cradling a man who must have fallen. They sat in the doorway to one of the shops, an alternative scarf boutique. The shopkeeper rolled over and squawked with its electric voice.

‘Do you need assistance, ma’am?’

‘Something happened to him! I must call the number...’

She fiddled with her wristcom, trying to find a caller ID she vaguely remembered.

‘Where the hell is it!?’

‘Do you need assistance, ma’am?’ the shopbot repeated.

‘No! Do not call security!’

She knew that would be the end of it. No trial. Straight to incineration.

Atena couldn’t help but be drawn closer. She saw there was something off with the man. He was young, half the age of the woman, his mother perhaps, but his mouth kept gaping and closing. When she got near them she knew. It wasn’t a man, but a Loved One model. A particularly well-made one.

The woman found the number and waited for it to connect.

‘I can’t lose him... I can’t lose him...’ she mumbled, not having registered the dog-skulled girl’s presence between her tears.

It didn’t connect.

She looked up with desperation in her eyes. Half of Atena wanted to walk away, but curiously enough, thanks to the mask slash helmet she wore, half of her was braver than usual.

‘Maybe I can fix him?’

‘Huh?’ The woman was surprised the being in front of her spoke.

Atena lifted the skull a bit and the woman saw her face.

‘Maybe I can try to fix him for you?’

The woman just nodded and started fumbling to get the body turned.

‘Yes... yes... please! I think the panel opens in the back...’

Atena knelt down as the woman eased away the latest fashion of the month from the neck and back of her Loved One android. Atena traced the

subtle lines in the skin mesh on the machine and quickly found the indent that would open the latch. She took out a tool from her bag and managed to flip it open. Inside—under fluid that resembled blood but with such a thick consistency it didn't drip—were intricate biowires and a gorgeous graphene battery, and what Atena was really after, a maintenance interface.

The woman looked away.

Atena pulled a retractable biowire out from the interface and hooked it into her own wristcom. A standard model wristcom wouldn't understand squat by the information given, but Atena's wristcom wasn't standard. She put the android in standby and the repeating gaping stopped. This made the woman let out a worried gasp, but Atena ignored her. She found the output log and let her wristcom scan it to locate any errors.

'Will Joe be okay?' The woman stole a glance but looked away again.

Atena didn't answer but her wristcom gave off a beep. An error below a bionode in the neck. Atena dug in with both hands going from the latch opening and towards the neck, under the skin, and felt the bionode. Blind, her fingers could tell the biowires weren't all attached to the node. She searched millimeter by millimeter in the thick liquid and found the stray wire and managed to slip it into the node. She pulled her hands out with a slurp, the liquid made so not to stick on anything.

'Oh... Joe...'

Atena ran the output log again and the error wasn't there. She fired Joe up.

'...I just do,' came from the Loved One model as Atena pulled out her wristcom and shut the latch. He smiled.

The woman hugged him tight and Atena stood back.

'What did you say, honey?'

'I said. I don't know why I love you, mom. I just do.'

'I love you too. More than anything.'

The android looked around quizzically.

'Why are we sitting on the floor?'

The woman looked at Atena with tears.

'Thank you...'

Atena didn't answer, just lowered her cranium helmet and walked away and the sun is a glowing sphere of hot gas.

\\

Atena passed the SecForce checkpoint. A boyish officer stood watching along with some drones and one robot unit. He looked at the figure with the dog skull that walked by, but didn't bother stopping her. It wasn't an unusual sight here at Yours.

Up by the hotel only a few guests came and went. The catwalks and rows of chairs were abandoned and the whole plaza was eerily quiet apart from the soft whirrs from the dancing origami doorkeepers in their glittering chrome.

Atena crawled between the chairs and found the hatch and slipped inside.

Twenty minutes later, and out of breath and arms aching, she hung by the grated hatch in the shaft, carefully fishing up the tracker from her bag. She fixed the magnetic feet accessories onto the microbiome tracker itself, which looked like an ancient camera, and placed it on the panel. It stuck.

After a long minute the tracker was ready and displayed its results. Only three of the buttons had solid remnants from a human finger, plus the one down in the corner, which Atena assumed was the enabler button. She also assumed the code was only four digits long, since humans were lazy. That meant there were only 81 different combinations. Atena put the microbiome tracker back in her bag and began.

When she was about halfway through her mental list of combinations the panel lit green and the hatch sighed and slid open.

\\

Atena's arms were burning when she crawled out of the maintenance shaft ten minutes later. She sat by the edge and looked down. A red unending hazy pit, like a vague memory of a dream. Around her, instruments and valves blinked in the deserted control room. Several maintenance tunnels stretched outward from the room, but the thing that caught Atena's interest was the regular door on the left wall. A door that led into the first floor of the peak of Trillion and the mysterious 7th tier.

Atena's heart sank when she first peered into the hallway adorned in glass. Water ran down the windows and she thought for a moment that it

was raining heavily outside and that no sun would be visible come morning, but luckily it was just ornamental rain, running down the outside of the glass to make the light dance inside the grand, minimalist hallway. Atena moved quietly across the carpet, skull helmet still on, and headed for the stairs some apartments ahead.

Wide stairs took her two flights up before she froze. A sound came from the floor above. She peered around the corner and could see a figure sitting outside of an apartment door. Singing. Or mumbling. Hoarsely.

‘Fungi foe, fungi friend... you have toppled me... again.’

The lady snickered to herself and tried to sit up by the frosted glass wall framing her door. The rest of the lush hallway was empty.

The lady shushed herself and laughed even louder. The time displayed in the upper right corner of Atena’s glasses made her curse inside. The sun was about to rise. She peered back at the staircase and the huge window wall. Light was growing. The colourfully illuminated darkness was giving way to the grey morning haze.

Atena stepped out into the hallway. She had to get to the roof asap.

‘Lady. Tell me how I can get to the roof.’

The high woman, in her eighties, looked up and was startled just as much as she laughed.

‘Dear god! Haha! Dear ancient god. How are you this evening?’

‘How can I get to the roof?’

The woman peered into the skull sockets and saw Atena’s innocent eyes.

‘Wow... you are a girl, you are here... why are you here?’

‘I’m here to see the sun... to see the sun rise.’

The laughing smile vanished in a blink and a bittersweet sadness welled up in the woman’s face.

‘I’ve seen the sun, my dear... the Great Star... the destroyer, the light-bringer.’

She steadied herself and stood, but she was wobbly. Atena reached out to help her.

‘The voice recognition can’t recognise my voice.’

She laughed again. Atena looked at the door panel, which also clearly could use fingerprints.

‘Use your fingerprint then.’

As if by lightning, the same idea hit the woman. The lady chuckled.

‘Of course, of course, of course! Why didn’t I think of that?!’

She put her finger on the panel and with a whoosh, the door opened.

A warm and welcoming glow fell on them both.

‘You’ve been to Mars, haven’t you?’

The woman steadied herself in the doorway before she leaned down to Atena.

‘I have.’

Her eyes seemed to tear up.

‘...outside... that first morning there... that was the moment I truly... felt alive.’

Atena’s eyes glowed, brimming with anticipation.

The old lady grabbed her shoulders and with a grandmotherly demeanor and smile, spoke in the most sober voice:

‘The sun looked like the end of the tunnel on Mars...’ she winked and continued. ‘End of the hallway and to the left, there’s a door that leads to the roof terrace. Code is zero-zero-zero-zero.’

‘Thank you, Iona.’ Atena offered her the cranium helmet.

‘Thank you, ancient one,’ Iona smiled and took the offering as if it was the most sacred of things. ‘Hurry now, or you’ll miss it.’

Atena ran, and the sun will one day consume them all.

\\

Atena nearly flew up the flight of stairs behind the door at the end of the hallway. Up through the climbing terrace, which was more like a park. Had she not been in a hurry she would have found marvels there. Insects, amphibians and even birds. All real. She skipped across a pond, ignoring the water, her disgust suppressed to the back of her mind. She darted up the wall on one of the many greenhouses and climbed further on the huge antennae stretching skywards.

Atena was nearly there. Nearly at the top of the world. Nearly at the sight that would instil a sensation inside her she could never truly articulate. She heaved her way up the last bulk of the antennae and stood up. Her whole body pulsating.

The sun is all these things, but it is also...



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METROPO

eight stories from the unending city
by magnus aspli



data mining

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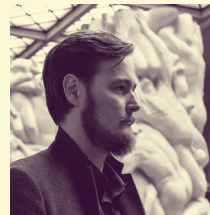
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Over a decade, Magnus has built worlds and written stories. *METROPO eight stories from the unending city* is his latest world and his first short story collection. In the past, he has written several short stories and comics, the horror graphic novel *The Vessel of Terror*, the neo-noir comic book *Spiral*, and been lead writer on *Earthlock* for Snowcastle Games. Magnus has studied in Brisbane and London, but now lives in Trondheim with the love of his life, raising kids and raising hell. In the future (but way before 2085), he hopes to bring to life a novel and a TV series set in Metropo, among other things.

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What future(s) do you see?

[illegible]

