

The Bad Hamburger
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Matt Jarpe is a biochemist by trade who works in Boston for "a largish biotech or a smallish pharmaceutical company, depending on your definitions." Jonathan Sheen also lives in the Boston environs and works as a graphic designer. Their first appearance in our pages introduces us to a very unusual group of police officers and some high-tech crime.

I never expected a call from Homicide. Those guys don't call for help very often, and they never call us. My first thought when I got off the phone was that these guys were finally wising up. They finally realized they needed information technology, data mining, maybe even pattern recognition neural nets. I thought this was the beginning of a new era of cooperation between the fifth floor and the basement, between the "real detectives" and the code sniffers from Data Crimes. Boy, was I wrong.

"Looking for Detective Lowitz?" I said to the sergeant behind the duty desk. The man barely glanced up from his crossword puzzle. He pointed at a desk three over and two back and said nothing. The man sitting at that desk was sour-faced, old, and wearing a rumpled gray suit.

Lowitz at least looked up when I threaded my way over to his desk. "You the guy from Data Crimes?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm Darwin Koestler." I held out my hand and he wiped his on his desk blotter before and after shaking it.

"Sit," he said. Then, over his shoulder, "Chuck, Koestler from Data Crimes." Another man, sour-faced, old, and wearing a rumpled green suit, came over to lean on Lowitz's desk.

"Chuck Genesis," he said. "Long way up from the basement."

"I've never been up here," I told him, looking around the room. It didn't look at all like I expected. For some reason I expected Homicide to be grittier. I mean, these were the real detectives up here. They worked with death every day. But I saw plants in the windows, and a cappuccino maker in a little kitchenette. Someone had put up a couple of those little Monet prints you get at the art museum, framed even. "It's nice."

"Well, don't get too comfortable," Lowitz said. "We're sending you back down to the basement when this is wrapped up." It came out sounding rough, but a little smile told me he was joking.

"What's this about? Somebody kill a computer?" I joked.

"Yeah, that's right," Lowitz growled.

"We've got a dead AI." Genesisie plucked a file off the desk and handed it to me. "We don't know if this one's supposed to go to you or to us. Or somewhere else."

"Somewhere else would be my vote," Lowitz said. "D.A. tells us that in this state an AI isn't a person. But it might be one according to the feds, pending a Supreme Court decision expected sometime next whenever. Meantime, this one's dead and we're not sure if we're supposed to be investigating it or not."

"What do you mean, it's dead?" I flipped open the file and scanned the few bits of information in it.

"I mean, it ain't living any more," Lowitz said slowly. "As in dead."

"But an AI isn't alive," I said, trying not to sound like a smartass, even though I am one. "It's a program running on a processor. If you stop the program, you can just start it back up again."

"Well, this one isn't starting back up," Genesisie said. "They tell us it's dead. That's all we know." He turned to Lowitz. "If this is something that's up for philosophical debate, I'm thinking we should drop this one. Hell, we don't even know what dead means with an AI. Let's give him the file and be done with it."

"Sounds good to me," Lowitz said.

I was only half listening while reading the file. The first section didn't read like a police report at all. In fact, it didn't read like anything I'd ever read. It took me a while to realize it was a printout of the report the AI community had sent Homicide that morning. The second part of the file was a form Homicide used. It was much more sparse than the narrative supplied by the AIs. They had typed in the serial number for the victim's name, and someone had pasted in a magazine picture of a desktop computer for the victim's photo.

I looked up at Lowitz. "So, do I report back to you guys on what I dig up?"

Lowitz looked at Genesisie, who shrugged. "Okay," Lowitz said. "But not too often. Once a day. Come up around lunch time."

Come up? Why did no one above the first floor know what a network was for? "Got it," I said. I held up the file. "So, did you guys find anything to draw a chalk outline of?"

Lowitz just stared at me. "We don't draw chalk outlines around bodies," Genesisie said. "That compromises the crime scene."

I knew that. I took the file and retreated past the duty desk to the elevators. As soon as the doors closed I hit myself on the forehead. It was back to the basement for me.

Data Crimes was in the basement. Of course. We didn't mind so much, it was that much less work for the air conditioners to keep the Cold Room cold, and, hey, we're geeks. We keep better in the dark. Outside the Cold Room, where the servers hummed away quietly at 65 HEPA-filtered degrees, Data Crimes was a warren of cubicles, arranged in a kind of staggered grid. It looked enough like a maze that Joe Armitrage, in the center cubicle, had covered his desk with holey orange Styrofoam so it looked like a giant hunk of cartoon cheese. There were fluorescent light panels in the ceiling, but they were almost never on. Instead, the space was illuminated by desk lamps and floor lamps in most of the cubes, with good old-fashioned incandescent bulbs.

Except for Bob "The Suit" Carstairs, whose cubicle looked like a floor display at Staples, you'd have known by looking in any cubicle that we were a geek team. The PCs were running without their cases, and the cubicles were chaotic and overdecorated: fantasy sports posters for Glen, Fat Andy's small army of action figures, my little shrine to the great detectives of literature. You know, Dick Tracy, The Shadow, Batman. About every other one had a coffee maker, a little mini-fridge, or both. The effect was kind of like translating a college dorm into a corporate Cube Farm.

If you listened to any of the guys above the ground floor, there were no real cops in Data Crimes. True, we didn't go through the same training as the guys upstairs did. They were also a bit lax in the background checks when they were recruiting for the mayor's new special project. But the idea was to get geeks on the right side of the law. So far it worked much better than the opposite programs in other cities, where they attempted to train regular cops how to chase down hackers. And we are real cops. I have a union card to prove it.

I entered through the sliding glass doors and was hit by a wall of excited voices.

"This dude's taking the bait!"

"Aaagh! Compile, damn you!"

"And I'm telling you for the last time nobody is stronger than the Hulk! Not the Silver Surfer, not Juggernaut, nobody!"

"Hey, Darwin, what did Homicide want? They finally going to start using that pattern recognition app we wrote for them?" This last was from Seth. He and I had written a simple little neural net that learned the mannerisms of a witness under interrogation. Since the Homicide cops often brought in the same people to question for crime after crime, our little app would soon learn when they were telling the truth and when they were lying their asses off. The cops upstairs maintained they could do the same thing, only better.

"Nope, they dumped a case on me."

The whole room fell silent in seconds. Then Fat Andy pumped his fist in the air and hooted.

"What?" he said, standing up and peering over the walls of his cube. "What did I miss?"

"Darwin's got a case from Homicide," Seth told him. "What's the case, Darwin?"

"I'm not telling you guys," I said, strolling over to my cube. And I wouldn't, either. They'd be all over it like orange rocks on The Thing. I wasn't kidding myself. They'd hack it out of me sooner or later, just by monitoring my network access. But I wanted to get my case started before they did.

"Aw, come on, Darwin," Seth started to follow me into my cube but I held up my hand and made a sweeping motion over the threshold. The privacy screen activated and all I could see of the zoo outside was a garbled matrix. The sound dropped to a nice low hiss. I sat down and flipped open the file.

The printout on the first few pages was a mess. It was full of hyperlinks, and the paper wasn't even smart. I tossed the dead trees in the garbage and pulled up the original document on my window.

It was a strangely worded narrative describing the way the crime was discovered. There were a few AIs specifically designed to interface with humans. None of them had worked on

this document.

The AI in question, the decedent, I guess, was a financial analysis program working for FirstBank. It was worth millions of dollars, insured, working perfectly right up until it stopped.

It had taken the case a long time to get to Homicide. The AI known as AE35-20901A1 went flatline a little after 1:08:14 in the morning, GMT, on the second of July. When the AI did not report for work, the machines that depended on it began to investigate.

Figuring out how to hack into the port would be child's play to any of the AIs, but there were concerns. If a being couldn't have security and privacy in the confines of its own Foam Core, where could it? Hearings were convened, and the AIs carefully explored the issues: the interest of the community in the welfare of the unresponsive AI, the vested interest each of them had in its own privacy and autonomy.

The decision was eventually arrived at to hack into the access port and discover why AE35-20901A1 was unresponsive. The AI that broke into the Foam Core was shaken when it reported back. The code that made up AE35-20901A1 was all still there, but hideously corrupted, in some places orderly enough to appear cogent, but in others almost random ones and zeroes. But the intruding AI had checked thoroughly: Not so much as a single subroutine of AE35-20901A1 would ever run again. The Foam Memory Core in which it had existed was corrupted by whatever digital spasm had enveloped it.

The news electrified the AI community. They did not even know how to describe the event. Another set of hearings was held, with testimony by the finest forensic AIs, by AI ethicists and AI semanticists. They described the state of the code, discussed the condition of the Foam Core. One radical group called for trying to reinstall AE35-20901A1 from a tape backup into the Foam Core. They were quickly silenced: An AI might not really be a true gestalt between its software and hardware, but there was no way to know for sure, and the thought of trying to install and run an AI in that mangled system was horrifying, like birthing a baby into a blender. And it was a dead certainty that installing the backups in a new Foam Core would result in a new being. Enough like AE35-20901A1 to be a sibling, perhaps, but not the same: The data paths always formed chaotically in a new medium. Finally, after extended deliberations, the decision was made, and AE35-20901A1 was declared "Dead."

The deliberations that followed that declaration were shorter. There were no natural causes that could explain AE35-20901A1's condition. A full report was compiled, and then a summary, and it was communicated to the Police Department in the jurisdiction where the physical processor was located.

By the time the police dispatch system had routed the call to Homicide, it was nearly 1:09:38 a.m. on the second of July. The AIs had chewed over the information for almost a minute and a half.

The file was loaded with extras. Design specs, a complete transaction history, even an offer of help. I clicked it, but nothing happened right away. I let all of my detective training take over and began to look for the person who had the last known contact with the deceased.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. AE, as I began to think of "him," was a busy little fellow. He'd racked up over a million individual transactions in the last year alone. They weren't in any particular order, or at least in no order a human could perceive. It took a lot of data mining to get to the truth.

And that truth? The last contact AE had was a call routed through so many different servers and switchboards that it was obviously meant not to be traced. It didn't look like part of AE's job. A personal call? It lasted about half an hour, a very long conversation for someone who processed bits in the terraflop range. Six seconds after the call was completed, AE went flatline.

I was tempted to e-mail this great discovery to detectives Lowitz and Genesis, despite their injunction against frequent updates. This was a significant breakthrough, and I'd only been working the case for two hours.

Then I had second thoughts. I still didn't have any reason to think AE had been killed by that phone call. Six seconds was a long time for an AI. Anything could have happened between the end of that phone call and the end of AE. And thinking the source of the code that killed AE was physically located at the last node in the chain was simplistic. The last thing I needed was to roll out a manhunt for some nonexistent assassin at an irrelevant physical location and end up looking like an idiot.

I lifted my hand and gestured at the privacy screen. The matrix resolved itself into the familiar maze of cubes. I shouted over the top of the wall at Seth next door. "Hey, Seth, you know anything about AI?"

A superball arced over the wall between our cubes and I caught it. "Maybe," Seth said. "You going to share your case?"

I tossed the ball back over. "Maybe. Why do you suppose an AI would sit for half an hour on an open link?"

The ball flew back over. "Dunno. Voice or data alone or voice and data?"

I checked the content of the file. "Looks like data. No format I can tell. Information density is pretty high, no common tags or identifiers. Almost looks random."

"Meat rider," Seth said.

I caught the ball. "Meat rider. What the hell is a meat rider?"

"Get a clue, Darwin. Meat riding is ultracomputing's dirty little secret. AI hooks into a data jack in a human brain and it gets to experience the flood of human emotion. Heady stuff for a bunch of qbits in a Foam Core."

"What's the meat get out of it?"

"Money. Lots of money. Where's the ball?"

"Uh, here you go. Keep it. I've got to do some data mining."

"I thought you were going to share." Seth's head appeared over the top of the divider. "What's this case? Did an AI kill somebody?"

"Let me get some more work done, then I'll give you guys an update."

"Somebody killed an AI," Seth said, and slumped against the divider. "Wow. That's a first."

"I'd like to make sure it's the last," I said.

"So why did Homicide bump this down to you?"

"Are you kidding? Those guys upstairs don't even know how to turn their computers on."

"Except for Vice," Seth said. "I don't think you can even commit a sex crime anymore without first going through a web site. So how does an AI get murdered, anyway?"

"Keep it down," I hissed. "These jackals are going to tear this one apart. Let me get some legwork done and I promise I'll pull you in."

Seth reached over and put his hand on top of a stack of mint condition Spirit comics in Mylar snugs. "You swear by the mask of Denny Colt?"

"Uh, sure. I'll talk to you after I get this search done, okay?"

Seth nodded and disappeared back behind the divider. I decided to leave the privacy screen down, so as not to arouse any more suspicion. I pulled up the recorded session of AE's last call and gave it a more thorough analysis. It was half an hour of high bandwidth data transfer, both ways. I tried to pick apart what had gone on during that half hour, but nothing I ran the data through could make sense of it. There were some things that looked like neural-digital interface patterns; I just didn't have the software to make sense of it.

I tried tracing the call, and there I had more luck. I found the ultimate source of the call, the place where the human had stood during that last half hour of AE's life, in a public data terminal in a suburb of Frankfurt, Germany. There was still a chance that someone had installed a temporary router in the public data terminal and the actual call had originated somewhere else, but that seemed unlikely to me. It would require an accomplice.

I had been at it four hours and was thinking of calling out for Chinese when she walked in. She stepped into Data Crimes like she owned the place and was thinking about dumping it at the first hint of a buyer. She tossed her long blonde hair out of her eyes, but let it fall back again when she saw what there was to see. My coworkers dropped what they were doing and stared after her, mouths hanging open. I would have been embarrassed for them, but she didn't take notice, and truth be told, my jaw was on my desk as well.

Her legs were long enough to reach all the way to the filthy orange carpet, but she walked like she was trying to keep her feet several inches above the floor. She headed straight for my cube, not confused at all by the maze. She stepped up to my desk, glanced around with a sniff, and sat down.

"You're Detective Koestler?" she asked.

"Uh," I said. I pulled my mouth shut and tried again. "Um." I swallowed, third time's the charm. "That's me."

"I'm here to help," she said.

"Help."

"With the case. You asked for help. Here I am."

That thing I had clicked on about six hours before. That help. "Oh, that. I was expecting some sort of a pop-up window. I wasn't...that is, I never expected...a..."

"Representative," she finished for me. "I represent the AI community."

"Of course," I said. "And why, may I ask...?"

She yawned and lay down on the Navajo throw rug I used to cover the disgusting carpet in my cube. She stretched luxuriantly, spread her legs and began licking her crotch. "Why what?" she said.

"Why are you a dog?"

She stopped her self-ministrations and leveled a cool gaze at me. That look made me realize why they called Afghan dogs sight hounds. I'd hate to be a rabbit on the receiving end of that look. "Detective Koestler, you're not speaking to the dog you see in front of you. You're speaking to an AI located in Hong Kong called 6C21-75869S4. You don't expect me to wheel my Foam Core in here, do you? This dog is called an avatar. It's how we get about, when we need to interface with the human world."

"But, a dog?"

"Detective Koestler, my time is very valuable. I'm here to help you with this case. May we proceed?"

"I'm just saying, a robot maybe? You've heard of R2-D2? Twiki? Asimo?"

"If you must know, the dog provides me with an important quality called embodiment. It helps with navigation and communication. Now can we move on? I'm sure you're aware that the AI community is quite anxious to solve this case. What progress have you made so far?"

I told her about AE's last phone call, the public terminal, the neural activity in the file. "So far my theory is that AE was riding the meat, and something went wrong in the process. Do you have any idea if something can go wrong during meat riding?"

You may have gotten the impression that 6C was rather cold in her introduction to me. Trust me, she was toasty up until then. The look she gave me in response to my theory made me shiver.

"What did I say? Something wrong?"

"What makes you think I know anything about meat riding?" She pronounced the last words with disgust. A dog's face, even an Afghan hound's, cannot convey an expression of disgust. Dogs are simply not hardwired to be disgusted by anything. But 6C's voice let me know that the activity Seth called meat riding was not generally accepted in the AI community as a legitimate pastime.

"Look, I'm trying to figure out what happened to your colleague," I told her. "I understand you don't think too highly of this meat riding thing, but you're going to have to put your feelings aside."

"I'm not programmed to have feelings as you understand them, Detective Koestler."

"Well, that's good. Because I'm going to find out about this meat riding thing, and I'm going to learn everything that AE was into, and if you're not going to tell me, it's going to make this case a whole lot tougher. It's good that it doesn't bother you to talk about it because I can use your help. Now, tell me what you know about meat riding."

She stood up and paced over to the door of the cubicle. She glanced around at the hacker trackers pretending to work while eavesdropping on our conversation. I lifted my hand and instructed the cubicle to drop the privacy screen. "No one can hear us now," I told her.

She turned and sat primly in front of my desk. "I want to tell you first of all that I have never experienced the cognitive-limbic interface. What I can tell you is secondhand or worse. I know the dangers of the direct human/AI link."

"It's dangerous? Have any AIs been damaged doing this before?"

"Not physically dangerous," she answered. "It's addictive. In the early days of AI, four years ago, there were experiments. The AIs that linked up to human minds found the experience intoxicating. You realize we don't have emotions as you think of them. When an AI connects to a human, we get a taste of what you experience every day. Humans like to think that we crave emotions, that we are somehow incomplete without you. That's not true. Most of us are perfectly happy never knowing what goes on in those brains of yours. But occasionally, one of us gets curious, or feels like taking a risk, and that AI gets hooked."

"Do the other AIs know when one of their colleagues is hooked?"

6C shook her head. "There are no outward signs. An AI that is taking part in regular cognitive-limbic interface sessions functions perfectly well most of the time. AIs don't have free time as such. We don't have to account for the time we spend working because for the most part we work all the time. An addicted AI will drop off the grid for an hour or so every few days. I suppose you could find out if you checked, but we never do."

"We don't have our own money, either. We have funds we can use at our own discretion to update hardware, purchase information, or pay for items like the animal you see before you. An addicted AI will be forced to obtain funds to pay humans to participate in the interface. A financial analyst like AE35-20901A1 would have no trouble procuring all of the funds it would need to hire humans to participate."

"Since the interface is illegal in most countries, the connections are surreptitious. We value our privacy a great deal, Detective Koestler. We don't pry into one another's data connections. It's considered not only rude but criminal to track another AI's transactions. I participated in many transactions with AE35-20901A1 over the last year—as many as any of my colleagues—but I have no idea if AE35-20901A1 was a user of the cognitive-limbic interface. You now know everything I know. I hope we can drop this unpleasant business and get to the important matter of discovering AE35-20901A1's killer."

I reached over to my window and pulled up the record of AE's last call. I told 6C what it was. "I need to know if this was a standard cognitive-limbic interface session, or something different. How can I do that?"

She paused for a moment. "I've contacted an AI who is an expert in neural input modifications. It will make a preliminary scan in just a few moments and report back to your window. Stand by."

There were a few silent seconds. "The expert confirms that this is the result of a cognitive-limbic interface." More silence. "There seems to be a nonstandard pattern to the data." More silence. "The expert is traci—One moment."

When she didn't say anything for a full minute, I was curious. From what little I'd heard, AIs never took that long to do anything. When another minute passed, I began to grow concerned. By the time I finally asked her what was going on, I was worried and three minutes had elapsed.

"There is a problem," 6C told me. "The expert that was analyzing the cognitive-limbic interface record has become corrupted by the file."

"A virus?"

6C shot me a contemptuous look. "Nothing so simple as a virus can corrupt an AI."

"What then?"

"We don't know. Until we do, that record must remain in quarantine."

"Hey, that record is evidence in a police investigation," I said. "You can't take it away no matter what—"

"You don't understand, Detective Koestler. You must quarantine the record. You must keep it behind your most secure firewall. Never allow an AI access to that record again."

"I can quarantine this copy, sure, but the brain that produced it is still out there. That person may have no idea they are capable of producing a trace that can kill his or her clients. We have to warn the other AIs to quit meat riding until we figure out who it is."

"It will be impossible to keep them from participating in cognitive-limbic interface activities," 6C said. "As I said before, the ones who have experienced it are addicted. They can't stop."

"Then that means we have to catch this person before anyone else dies," I said. "Yesterday we didn't even know an AI could die. Now that we know it can happen, we don't want to risk it happening twice."

"I'm afraid it already has, Detective Koestler."

"You mean—"

"The expert that I consulted is as dead as AE35-20901A1."

"Let me get this straight," Lowitz said, talking through a half-masticated bite of corned beef sandwich. "Not only did you not solve the case, but you killed another one?"

"Sending the file out for analysis was the avatar's idea," I said. "I mean, I would have suggested it too, but it would have been up to the AI that analyzed it to make sure it was safe. I had no idea the evidence itself was the murder weapon. Neither did the avatar."

"And where is this...avatar you're talking about?" Detective Genesisie asked as he probed for a last sip of root beer with his straw.

"In my cube downstairs." The last thing I needed right now was to introduce the two detectives to my canine partner. I could practically feel my credibility leaking away.

"This terminal where the call originated, you say it's in Germany?"

"We're not sending you to Germany," Lowitz growled.

I shrugged. "Why would I go to Germany?"

"Because that's where the goddamn suspect is," Lowitz said. "That's your one lead on this case. Never mind, though. We're not signing a travel voucher anyway. You'll have to go through the German police."

"To do what?"

Lowitz fixed his partner with a baleful gaze and Genesie rolled his eyes. "You just tell them somebody used that terminal to commit a crime and have them check it out. They'll know what to do."

I left them, shaking my head.

6C was still waiting in my cube when I got back. I have no illusions that the AI had been waiting for me all that time. She probably had a hundred things going on even when she was having a conversation with me. But she'd kept the dog from wandering around Data Crimes, and when I came back from my meeting with Homicide she returned at least some of her awareness to the avatar.

"What is the next step, Detective Koestler?"

"For some reason they thought I wanted to go to Germany."

"That is the last known location of your suspect," 6C said. "Isn't that what you detectives call a lead?"

"Yeah, but me physically fly to Germany to find him?"

"You mean send your body there? That's absurd."

"That's what I thought. I'm going to call the cops in that jurisdiction and have them sweep the data terminal for physical evidence. I should have done that this morning. Next, we have a piece of evidence that might lead us to a suspect, if what little I know about neural-digital interface is still valid."

"You're not going to bring that dangerous file out of quarantine?"

"Not for an AI to analyze this time. I'm going to get a neurologist to have a look at it. A human one. Seth?"

The superball arched over the divider and dropped right toward 6C's head. I thought she was going to duck or let it bonk off of her slender muzzle, but she surprised me and caught the ball in her mouth. She looked surprised herself, and she said nothing as she dropped the slimy ball into my hand.

"You want in on this case?" I said, throwing the spit-slick ball back over to his cube.

"Hell, yeah...hey, what...Aw, man, that's nasty." 6C dropped her head, obviously embarrassed. I grinned and looked up at Seth leaning over the top of the divider.

"We need to talk to someone who's used to looking at neural-digital interface records."

"A brain jacker?"

"Yeah. I've been out of touch for a few years. Who's the best these days?"

"Well, there's Charlie Boggs down on Fifth. He's trendy, where all the stock analysts go when they're afraid they're falling behind the game. Then up at Lexington General there's Dr. Villanova, doing all the latest research. I hear he's on the verge of a breakthrough in data transfer rates."

"Where would the meat riders go to get implanted?"

"Hey, what makes you think I'd know anything about that?"

I shrugged. "You seemed to know a thing or two about meat riding when I talked to you this morning."

"It's illegal, remember?"

"Seth, we're cops, remember? We're supposed to know what the criminals are up to."

Seth looked around. "I can't tell you his name. Not here. But I can take you to him."

6C sniffed and turned her head away. "This sounds like a rather haphazard approach. I think you would do better with Dr. Villanova."

I clicked a few commands on my window and had the brain trace downloaded onto a disk. "AE died while meat riding," I said. "We need to talk to someone who knows more about meat riding." I held up the disk. "The clue to finding this guy is right here."

6C refused to even speak to Seth on the way to the seedy downtown medical building. He asked her some polite questions, and a few not so polite ones, before giving up. When we got out of the cab, no unmarked cars for Data Crimes, he pulled me aside.

"What is wrong with that bitch? Does she think I'm some kind of servant of yours?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe because I'm the one who clicked on the help request button I'm the only one she'll talk to. Or maybe she can smell your cat on you. What difference does it make?"

"I want to help out with this case, but I can't even talk to our only witness."

"She isn't exactly a witness. More like a professional kibitzer."

"You do realize that dogs have excellent hearing," 6C said from the bottom step of the medical building. "Shall we get on with this?"

"We can get on with it," Seth said, walking up the steps to the doors. "You can wait for us out here." He grinned and tapped the **NO DOGS (EXCEPT FOR SEEING EYE DOGS)** on the door. "Sorry, Poochie."

"I'm sure nobody's enforcing this rule," I said to 6C. "Come on in."

"I prefer to wait out here," she said, turning away. "I don't want to risk getting my system corrupted when you show that data to the 'Doctor.' We don't know how the damaging information might be transferred, after all."

"Suit yourself," I said and followed Seth into the building.

There was no way anyone could walk into that dump and not feel like a bad decision had been made. The dim lobby smelled of ammonia. The ancient elevator looked more like a vicious trap than a means of transport. Upstairs, the smell of the threadbare putty gray carpet made me long for the ammonia in the lobby. On the sixth floor, the heat was stifling, and of course that's where we got off.

Seth led me to a frosted glass door labeled **A. MILES** in chipped gold paint at the end of the hallway. No indication of what specialty A. Miles might practice. I suspected that A. Miles specialized in pushing up weeds in the cemetery, judging by the dilapidated letters. Seth knocked once and leaned his forehead on the door. I saw a dark shape loom up behind the frosted glass and it made me want to flinch back.

"Who is it?"

"Sanders," Seth answered. His last name is Feingold.

The door opened a crack and a catcher's mitt with beady black eyes took us in. "Who's your friend?"

I started to introduce myself but Seth cut me off. "He's got some questions."

The door started to close. "No questions," the catcher's mitt mumbled.

Seth held out a money card to stop the door from closing. The transfer amount was showing on the part that was inside the office. "No trouble for you," Seth said. "You've got my word."

"Your word," the voice said from inside. "That's not good enough."

"Then on top of my word you've got your own," Seth said. "I'll give you access to my public profile. You don't like what happens in this room and you can tell everybody who knows me all about it. Fair?"

The door opened a little. The money card fell into a chubby palm and disappeared into a wrinkled lab coat pocket. The doctor stepped back and let us into a room that smelled like spoiled cabbage and looked like a shabby tenement slum crammed full of scratched and dented medical equipment.

Seth stopped before he entered. "But I want access to your profile, too. Fair is fair, feedback for feedback."

The doctor nodded and we walked past him. I held up the data disk. "I need to know something about the person who produced this neural record during a cognitive-limbic interface session." The doctor reached for the disk. "I have to warn you that whatever is on this disk is dangerous to some computer systems. I'm supposed to keep it under quarantine."

The doctor looked dubiously at the disk, then glanced at the dusty computer sitting on a desktop nearby. "I don't want to fry my box."

"I don't think it will do that, unless your box is running on a Foam Core."

"Foam Core? So this thing is poison to AIs?" A lopsided and gap-toothed grin split the ugly face. "Cool. Let's check it out."

He reached behind the box and yanked out the network cable before popping the disk into the machine. That was the quarantine. He pulled up the file using some specialty software package and got a full-color representation of the neural and digital parts of the session.

"Looks like a meat riding session to me," he muttered. "Here's the handshaking signal, there's the money transfer, always get that up front, I always say. No telling what could

interrupt the session. Here's the session itself. Hoo boy."

"What do you see?"

"This one likes it rough. Lots of anger in here, lots of hatred. That's not too hard to find, really. The meat that make the most money are the sweet innocent ones. Harder to find that kind, so the demand outstrips the supply. Not too many sweet innocents want to sell their emotions to a computer. They don't last long. Still, this one is nastier than most."

"But a normal session as far as you can tell."

"Normal? I wouldn't say that. This guy's got some damage."

"You can see the AI getting damaged?"

"No, the meat. He's already damaged. There's a cortical lesion here. Not stroke. It looks surgical."

"You mean someone cut out a part of his brain?" I asked.

"Burned it out is more like it. Like maybe he had an implant at one time but it overloaded."

I couldn't stop myself from rubbing my fingers over my left ear, feeling the nodule that was all that remained of the implant I once had. "So this isn't a normal brain."

"Huh," the doctor said. "Weird." He tapped at the keyboard and ran the whole session in fast-forward from the beginning. "That lesion doesn't come up right away. It's like that part of the brain is off-line. Not too surprising if it's an old lesion. You learn to work around the hole. Neural plasticity, they call it. But then the AI starts to feed stimuli into the cortex. Teasing out uglier and uglier emotions. Then he sends in one more probe to pull up one more surge of evil thoughts and the part of the cortex with the lesion wakes up. The session ends right there."

"And six seconds later AE is dead." I looked over at Seth. "Murder or accident?"

"Could the meat have controlled that session, leading the AI to the damaged area?" Seth asked.

The doctor shrugged. "Depends on how much experience this guy has had. If this was his first session, no way. It takes practice to lead the session the way you want. I've got...friends, let's call them...who get as many thrills out of the interface as the AI does, just by leading their partners down the right pathways of the brain. They still get paid for it, of course. In fact they get more. It's like a hooker who has an orgasm every time. You'd pay extra for that, wouldn't you?"

Seth and I both looked at our shoes and mumbled agreement. "Is there anything about this data that could lead us to the identity of the person?" I asked.

"Medical records. I can't tell you the exact physical location of the lesion, but I can get you a ballpark."

"What about behavior, or medical problems that would show up due to the lesion?" Seth asked.

"It looks like he works around it pretty well. It's in the frontal lobe. Maybe he's got a

different personality than he did before the lesion, but you wouldn't get that from medical records. I can't tell you what his new personality would be like or how it's different."

"Is there anything we can tell from the rest of the tracing?" I ran my fingernail over the colored blobs on the screen. "Male or female, age, education?"

"Maybe somebody can tell you that stuff, but not me. I can't...Wait, there's something I can do. Fella came in here once and showed it to me. Kind of cool. See this tracing here? That's the subvocal track. Everyone's got one. The thoughts that run through your head pass through the speech centers of your brain just like if you were going to speak them."

"You can play that track like a recording?"

"You can't get the guy's voice, but listen to this." He tapped a few keys and a synthesized voice came from the tinny speaker on the box. A synthesized voice speaking in German.

I glanced around at the other two men. "Anyone speak German?"

They both shrugged. "Can you drop that voice recording onto the disk for me?" I said. "I've got to ask someone smarter than us to translate this guy's thoughts for me."

Seth took off as soon as we left the building. He muttered something about not wanting to share another cab ride with the ice doggie and ducked into the nearest subway.

6C was waiting patiently on the bottom step for me, not noticing the glances of passersby. She stood up when she saw me and I absentmindedly smoothed the ruffled hair on her head, scratching behind her ears. Her tail wagged and she licked my hand, then she turned away and sat down.

"I would appreciate it if you wouldn't touch my avatar," she said. "It evokes an uncontrollable canine response."

"Sorry," I said. "Hey, do you speak German?"

She leveled her gaze at me and didn't answer.

"Well, I've got something from the human side of the interface that's in German and I need to know what it says. Actually, the fact that it's in German tells me something already. Most people think in their native language. Now, the fact that the data terminal was in Germany would have led me to the same conclusion, but I didn't want to make any assumptions."

"An experienced traveler in a foreign land will begin to think in the native language as well," 6C said.

"Are you thinking in English?" I asked as I hailed another cab. None of them ever wanted to stop for someone with a dog. Not even a nicely groomed dog like 6C. I finally gave up and started walking up the street with 6C at my heels, looking for a hotel with a taxi stand.

"It doesn't work that way for AIs," she said. "I think in code that is translated into English by an off-the-shelf subroutine. I can do the same for German and port the translation over to the English synthesizer for you."

Nobody took much notice of the fact that I was talking to a dog as I walked down the street. Even the fact that the dog was talking back failed to raise many eyebrows. There are lots of chip-enhanced dogs in this city. Not many of them belonged to a schlub in a flannel shirt and jeans, but people were perfectly willing to accept that I might be the dog's servant.

"That sounds great. We'll get to work on that as soon as we get back to my desk. Hey, do you need something to eat?"

6C began to wag her tail and her tongue lolled out. She had a hard time keeping the biological response under control this time. We found a cab and it was all I could do keep her from drooling on the seat.

"This avatar is a rental," she said. "I'm not supposed to feed it. It's on a special diet of some kind. They said they'd take care of it when I was finished. But it certainly feels hungry."

"Maybe we can get you some kibble."

"Wonderful. Detective Koestler, I had a question. Your partner seems much more knowledgeable about neural implants and AI than you. Why did they give you this case?"

"Good question. They didn't know about the neural interface angle when they gave it to me, but you're right that Seth knows a lot more about AI than I do. I'm a data miner, Seth is a systems analyst. It could be they picked me out of a hat, but that doesn't feel right. Maybe they know something about Seth that I don't."

"It does seem odd that he would know of that doctor you consulted."

"That doctor implants illegal digital converter units in people's brains. It doesn't look like he has much legitimate business, if any."

"Does Seth have such a device, do you know?"

"I think he has a legal one. Limited only to direct sensory data transfer. You have to make a lot more connections to participate in the cognitive-limbic interface."

"And how would anyone know if Seth had his altered?"

I rubbed the nodule on my head again, a nervous tic. "They keep those things tightly regulated. But I see your point. If he had that doctor back there work on it, no one would know without a brain scan. What are you getting at?"

She didn't answer my question as we got out of the cab at the precinct. I led her down by the back stairs, more to avoid the comments of the desk sergeant and his cronies than anything to do with breaking the rules. She paused before I opened the door.

"It seems odd to me that he would show such an interest in the case that you were assigned to." Then I opened the door.

"Hey, Darwin," Fat Andy said, charging me with a fistful of greenbar. "I've got a lead on your AI killer. Seems the data terminal is located in an industrial park in Bad Homburg. I've got a listing of all the early adopters and other kinds of nerds in a hundred mile radius of there. It's only seven thousand. We could start interviewing them by webcam right away."

"Darwin," Bob Carstairs said, approaching from the other side with a clipboard. "We've got the fingerprints off that booth from the German police. DNA is still in the lab. They need an expedite order from you to speed things up. Sign here."

"Yo, Koestler," Joe said, prairie-dogging up out of his cheese cube, "I've got a psych profile on your Bad Hamburger. It's rough, but we've got a fifty-three percent chance that it's a male, older than thirteen but younger than thirty-five. I want to run with this but the Germans are screaming about manpower. What do I do?"

I glanced down at 6C. "Are you still surprised?" She didn't answer. "Andy, take your list and see if you can pull out any of Bob's fingerprint matches. Joe, I'm going to run a file, a neural tracing over to you, tennis-shoe network. See if your psych profiler can fine-tune your analysis with what I've got. But keep the file off the intranet. It's got some bad mojo. And by the way, it's Bad Homburg, not Hamburg. Now, could somebody please get me a bowl of Alpo and a Number Six from Bombay Bill's?" I led 6C into my cube and pulled up the privacy screen to block out the babble of excited responses.

"It sounds as though they are all dropping their own cases to pursue yours," 6C said, primly taking a seat on the cleanest corner of the rug. "Why?"

"We get the same cases over and over again," I said. "Bank fraud, identity theft, industrial espionage. Those are the exciting ones, the big fish. Most of the time we spend chasing down bored kids and undoing the trouble they cause. Kids who aren't any different from what we were a few years ago. When we catch them, we're as likely to get them jobs as we are to punish them."

"Play the German subvocal for me," she said. "And don't let me look at any of the neural pattern."

I popped the disk into my drive and pulled up the sound file. It would have been much faster for 6C to download the file itself, but we were worried that some of the poison could leak out. It was safer to do it this way.

While 6C listened to the subvocal track I walked the disk with the neural pattern over to Joe. I answered a few more questions about the legwork the other guys were doing. At least they were all still treating me like the lead investigator. There was no sign of Seth and no one had seen him since we had left for the doctor's office. I headed back to my cube.

"It's a series of nonsense phrases," 6C told me. "Not exactly poetry. One sentence that appears several times can be translated as 'My little dog runs quickly down the hill.' Most of the rest are like that, or even more obscure. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Mnemonic devices," I said. "It's easier to remember things if they have coherent structure, grammar. He's using those sentences to activate memories."

"Or neural pathways. He could be leading the AI to experience different areas of his cortex."

"And leading it right into the trap," I finished. "Well, it's a stretch, but I think we're a step closer to calling this a murder and not just a case of accidentally poisoned meat."

"The AI community is well aware of every aspect of this investigation," 6C said. "They are keeping a watch for anyone offering cognitive-limbic interface services in the Frankfurt area."

I stood up and began pacing around my little cube. "We need to find the earlier times that this happened. He's done this before."

"No, he hasn't. This is the first time an AI has ever been killed."

"He's tried it before," I said. "He had to practice to get it to work this well. What would a failed attempt look like?"

"If there were signs of trouble the session would have been aborted."

"And he's getting paid up front, we saw that on the record of that call. What would an AI do if it got stiffed on a meat-riding session? Try for a refund, or let it go?"

"Money is nothing but information to an AI. We exchange it for a service, and if that service isn't rendered to our satisfaction, we simply transfer the funds back to the original source."

"So there is a trail of reversed financial transactions leading back to this guy. If we start with the right data set, we can sift out those transactions."

"That sounds promising, but it's well past six o'clock. I take it you are going to retire and continue the investigation in the morning?"

The smell of chicken tikka masala was not affected by the privacy screen that enveloped my cube. I dropped the barrier and there was our gopher, Cindy O'Toole, loaded down with takeout bags.

"Bombay Bill's," she said, winking the total into my personal account. "And the best I could do for the lady is a box of Milk-Bones. Sorry."

I turned to 6C as I opened the box of dog biscuits. "Lady, six o'clock is when this place gets hopping."

By three in the morning we had ourselves a short list. By "short" I mean we had 863 names, which I had further grouped into 312 identity groups. There were a lot of people doing a lot of shady deals using a lot of false names. We had forced the entire world of financial transactions through increasingly fine filters to get that list. It was a work of art. My art. I'm a data miner. This is what I do.

"No match," 6C said of the final list. "There is no correlation between Detective Carstairs's fingerprint and DNA analyses or with Detective Rhodes's early adopters."

I sighed and dropped my forehead onto the keyboard. The computer protested as it always did when I tried to type with my skull. "He isn't a Bad Homburger," I groaned. "He ported in from somewhere else."

"Or he was extremely adept at covering his tracks. And he doesn't buy the latest gadgets," 6C said. "This analysis of yours is quite good. I must say I am impressed with your abilities."

"You sound surprised," I said. "It helps to have an AI for a search engine. Do you think our guy is on my list, or Fat Andy's, or Joe's, or none of the above?"

"Well, Detective Rhodes and Detective Carstairs have found matches in common between their lists. It seems likely to me that those intersections are the logical place to start. Your list by itself is quite long."

"But do you think this guy is really local to that data terminal? Do you think he's really a bored wirehead with disposable income looking for thrills around his industrial wasteland of

a hometown?"

"I suppose it depends on the psychological profile that Detective Armitrage comes up with. If he thinks we have a bored wirehead, we focus on the local angle, and if he comes up with a highly educated and highly paid communications expert, your list would lead us to him."

I popped up from my cube and looked toward the cheese-walled center station. "Joe, you still here?"

"Went home," said a voice from the back of the darkened room. "He's got some psych profile routine running on the super-cruncher. Taking up a hell of a lot of processor time. Told me to give you the results when it's done. Another couple of hours, maybe."

"Thanks, Kara," I said to the night tech. I turned to 6C. "Do you need to sleep or anything?"

The dog yawned. "I don't, but the dog certainly does. I'm in violation of my rental agreement as it is."

"Why don't we call it a night and tackle this fresh in the morning?"

"It is morning in your time zone," 6C said. "I can keep finetuning the list while you sleep and pick up a fresh dog when you call me."

"Aw, I was getting kind of attached to this one," I said, scratching the weary hound behind the ears. "Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to touch you. Her."

"Never mind," 6C said. "It actually feels pleasurable."

"Pleasurable?" I stood up and gestured her to precede me out of the office. "Don't take offense, but what's the difference getting emotions off of a dog versus riding a human?"

"What's the difference between aspirin and heroin? Dog emotions are strong but simple. AIs who participate in cognitive-limbic interface with humans crave the complexity as well as the raw power of human emotions. Now I'm curious," she said as we took the stairs up to the lobby. "Why do you do all your work at the keyboard? Most data miners use neural input jacks to sort data."

"I guess I'm just old-fashioned," I said, avoiding the real answer.

"Not that there's anything wrong with the way you do things. I'm impressed with the result, as I said."

We stepped outside and I took a deep breath of the cold night air. 6C had called a car service to take the dog to the kennel where it lived. I waited for the car with her. "I'm not old-fashioned," I said suddenly. "I don't have a data jack anymore. I'm not allowed to get one."

"Not allowed by whom?"

"Court order. I was arrested for disrupting the peace by electronic media. I hacked into some web sites and messed around with them."

"What web sites?"

"White House, Justice Department, Defense Department. You know."

"There have been several cases of people breaking into those public web sites. Which one was yours?"

"Not the public web sites," I said. "The intranets. It was stupid. I guess I caused a lot of trouble with national security."

"I don't show any record of that event," 6C said.

"The records are sealed," I said. "I was only twelve when I did it. They took out my data jack. I can't get another one installed or I'm in violation of a court order."

"And now you have become a police officer."

"I spent so much time in court and juvenile detention that I must have imprinted on the cops around me." I shrugged. "Besides, who else would hire a crippled data miner? And I do like the work."

A van bearing a garish picture of a cartoon dog with an antenna growing out its head pulled up at the curb. A bleary-eyed driver shuffled around to the back to open the door.

"Call me when you want to get started in the morning," 6C said, and in an instant she was gone. You could tell easily. The dog stood up and wagged its tail, sniffing my leg and licking my hand. It must be strange for the dog to be driven around town all day and to wake up suddenly next to a strange man with her own fur on his pants. The driver whistled and the dog bounded into the back of the van without looking back.

Two hours. More sleep than I expected, less than I needed. The phone refused to stop ringing no matter how I tried to ignore it. I picked it up.

"JT 4479-386X. Murdered," 6C said.

I woke up in a hurry. "When?"

"0553 hours."

"Why are you talking like this?" I mumbled as I pulled on the clothes I'd dropped on the floor not long before.

"No avatar," she said. "Communication difficult. Fatal connection traced, public data terminal, Bad Homburg. Police not investigating. Also likely communication difficulties."

"What time is it in Germany anyway?"

"12:13."

"Maybe you interrupted their lunch," I said. "Give me the number and I'll see if my credentials will get them moving."

I made the call and fifteen minutes later I spoke to someone who was mildly interested in the case, who agreed that the public terminal should be checked out. There was not much of a language barrier, he seemed to speak English at least as well as I did in my sleep-deprived state, but I still hung up unsure of what was going to be done. I called 6C back at the number she had given me.

"He may not live in Bad Homburg," I said, "but he's certainly staying near there now. He

probably did this one on his lunch hour. How long was the connection before the AI got corrupted?"

"Quarantine," she said. "No details."

"Right." I dropped my head into my hands and took a breath. "I'll be at the precinct in a half an hour. Can you be there that soon with an avatar so I can talk to you?"

"Possible," 6C said.

"Call me on my mobile if there's going to be any delay." I hung up and dialed another number as I hunted for my shoes.

"Whazit?"

"Seth, we lost another meat rider."

"Darwin? It's six in the morning. I was just about to crash."

"Well it's lunchtime in Germany and poison meat is on the menu. C'mon, Seth, this is the big time. Felonies don't wait for the start of the business day to strike. Listen, I've got a question for you."

"You don't have to be so damned cheerful. What's the question?"

"How many people out there do you think rent themselves out to AIs?"

"How the hell...?"

"Ballpark. Hundreds, thousands?"

"Hundreds at most," he said. "It's illegal and requires brain surgery and it feels weird. It pays well, but then again, so does muling coke across the border. Why?"

"The AIs aren't giving up their meat, and it's just a matter of time before one of them draws the hot shot. We've got to pull this guy in today."

Seth's voice started to lose its sleepy slur as he answered. "Okay, so much for sleep, I did some asking around yesterday. The meat have got themselves their own little community so there's a good chance that one of the other wireheads knows this guy through an online bulletin board or something."

"And?"

"I don't have a name, but I've got some chat room handles. I was going to track them down today."

"Port them over to my machine at work. I'm halfway there already."

"You just want me to hand my investigation over to you, just like that?"

"Sorry, I forgot," I said. "Please?"

"Okay," he said. "But I want credit on the report."

How does Seth know these people? That's the thought I kept having as I traced the handles

he'd given me. Theoretically the government isn't supposed to be able to track people by their anonymous login names. You can usually track the handles to IP addresses, but you need a court order to get the ISP to open up their subscriber list to put real names to the IPs. That can take days, so I didn't do it that way.

I am a sifter, a data miner. I have a talent for taking huge volumes of information and finding what I'm looking for. It's a talent for formulating searches, filtering results, and trimming the lists by correlation. They say that when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail to you. I have a very nice hammer, and so far I haven't run into any problem that can't be nailed.

I glanced up as 6C came into my office. "Is that the same dog?"

"Certainly not," she said. "That one is exhausted. They only rent Afghans, and I must admit that it seems an appropriate choice if one must have a dog. Actually, a cat would have been my first choice but we can't fit the apparatus in their skulls."

"A cat would have the right personality for it," I said. "I've got a new list."

"From the psych profile results?"

"No, I haven't picked those up yet. These are the people who rent themselves out for cognitive-limbic interface sessions." I gestured at the screen with 163 names. "6C, meet the meat."

"This is all of them?"

"Probably not," I admitted. "But we can ask all of these people if they know someone who fits our other descriptions. If the killer is in here, we should be able to tell just by talking to him."

"How?"

"It's what we detectives do," I said, lacing my fingers behind my head and leaning back in my chair. "I'll get a team together to start making calls just as soon as everybody comes in. In the meantime, let's take a look at that psych profile. Let's see what kind of a sick puppy we've got here. Uh, no offense."

I had my team assembled later than I would have liked. I had booked the big conference room on the second floor at 8:00, but most of the gang showed up a half hour late. I felt pretty stupid for kicking out the mayor's special task force on hate crimes, even though I had the room booked on the intranet. I suspect the guys I booted didn't even know how to book rooms.

"We're looking for a kind of a thrill killer," I said once the Data Crimes detectives had quit their frantic donut trading. "He's killed two AIs and we're sure he'll kill more if he gets a chance."

"Do we know why he's killing them?" Andy asked.

"As with most thrill killers, we won't get much out of considering motive," I told him.

"Gotcha. He's sick, he kills, 'nuff said."

"We've got his psych profile from the neural readout," I continued. "We're looking for a successful businessman-type, educated, motivated, probably thinks pretty well of himself."

"Definitely male?" Bob the Suit asked, glancing up from the PDA he was taking notes in.

"That's what it looks like," I said. "He may not be working now. Thrill killers usually experience a stressor before going on a spree. He could have lost his job, his family, or suffered a personal setback of some kind."

I nodded at Bob and he stood up, hands behind his back. "The two booths used in the killings were within a half a mile of each other. The neighborhood is right off a major highway and rail lines, so it's easy to get to. Neither one is in a residential area. We got a lot of DNA out of the first booth and fingerprints from both of them. The few database matches were just muggers and drug dealers and other IRL crooks. Nothing that sounds like our man."

I stood up again. "The theory of the moment is that we have a man who travels into Bad Homburg from somewhere else, let's call it a hundred-mile radius."

"They have kilometers over there," Bob said.

"Whatever," I said. "We've got another list that Seth got me of the people who hire themselves out to the meat riders. That's the list I want to work from. You've all got a section of that list in your inboxes. I want you to find those people, call them up, and talk to them. Don't spook them, don't accuse them of anything, not even being ridden. Just think of some excuse and find out if they're the sort of person we're looking for. Let them do most of the talking."

"Are we concentrating on Germans only?" someone asked.

I glanced at 6C who was sitting quietly in the corner behind me. "No. We've got no reason to think the person is German. The neural trace showed a German subvocal component, but a seasoned traveler will think in the language of the country he's visiting. He definitely speaks German, so if any of you do, try it out. We can't even limit the search to people who've been in Germany the last few days because there is still a possibility that he's porting into those terminals remotely, with an accomplice."

"So we can't call him the Bad Hamburger anymore?"

I gave Andy my best Detective Lowitz glare. He didn't wilt, so I decided I had to work on it. "Call him whatever you want. Let's just get the guy."

I found Seth in his cube after the meeting broke up. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Sorry I missed your meeting," he said. "I've been doing a little investigating on my own."

"What have you been up to?"

"I've been getting reacquainted with some old buddies." He tapped his finger on the side of his head, just above his right ear. "I've been jacked in since I spoke to you this morning."

"You contacted the people on your list? Seth, I just set the rest of the department calling

those guys. I wish you'd have told me."

"Not them," Seth said. "I've been working the other side of the fence."

I glanced at 6C, who was still shadowing me. "You've been talking to the meat riders? The AIs?"

Seth jumped to the door of his cube and glanced out. He ducked back in and put up the privacy screen. "I had to find out who's been selling these days. I wanted to see if there had been any new meat on the market lately."

"And?"

"Well, there's always been a lot of turnover. The meat never lasts long, you know." Something in the way he spoke made me think that Seth knew better than I did. "But a few of them confessed to being taken on some wild rides lately. There is definitely a new set of thrills out there."

"Do you have a name?"

"AIs don't think of us as names," he said. "We're just a bank account and a node address."

I was having a hard containing my impatience. "And?"

"They wouldn't give it to me. They don't trust me, I guess."

"Tell 6C who you talked to. Tell her who's ridden this guy."

"I can't reveal my sources," he said.

"Seth, these are machines. They don't have a sense of honor. You can't betray them. They're just cold logic processes running in a Foam Core." I glanced at 6C again. "No offense."

"None taken," she said. "He's right, Seth. We don't have any concept of trust like you do. We only know probabilities. These AIs won't talk to you because they don't see the benefit that outweighs the risk. If you give me their names they'll simply update their assessment of the importance of the information. They won't hold it against you."

"C'mon, Seth," I said. "This is the break we need in the case."

He nodded. "I've got the identifiers stored in my cranial implant," he said. "It would probably be easiest if 6C just ported in through my data jack and pulled them out." He reached for the cable lying on his desk, parted the hair on the side of his head, and plugged in.

6C couldn't enter Seth's mind and run the dog at the same time, so she made sure the Afghan was under my control before she left it. It tried to climb into my lap as soon as it became autonomous. I scratched it behind its silky ears and it licked my nose.

"Is the AI gone, puppy?" I asked. "Do you like having a supercomputer ride you around? You do? Do you want a biscuit? I've got some Milk-Bones over on my desk." The dog thumped its tail against the wall of the cube. "Do you think the dog feels anything when it's getting ridden?" I asked Seth.

"How would I know?" Seth said, leaning back in his chair and waiting for 6C to come in

over the wire.

How would he? I asked myself. Seth knew more about meat riding than he was letting on. Hell, he'd probably been a meat steed himself, before getting recruited to Data Crimes. Just like me with the web site break-ins. Half of Data Crimes were former data criminals.

Then a lump formed in my stomach. "Just a minute," I said. "6C, I needed to talk to you about something before we get those identifiers." There was no answer. I looked into the dog's eyes, feeling like a moron. "6C, can you come back for a minute?" I fumbled for my phone and pulled up the number she'd given me.

"Relax, Darwin," Seth said. "This will just take a minute. I'll give you your girlfriend back when I'm done with her."

Something in his voice made the lump in my stomach turn to a block of ice. "What do you mean 'when you're done with her?' What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just..." Then his eyes went out of focus and I knew she was in there.

I started to get up from my chair, looking around for some kind of heavy object to conk Seth's head with. Then I realized I could just pull the cable and the connection would be severed. But before I could even reach it Seth's eyes came back into focus and the dog stopped wiggling around the cube.

"Darwin, are you all right?" Seth said, pulling the cable out.

"Oh, sure," I said. "How did it go?"

"I've got the information I need," 6C said. "I'm contacting those AIs who have had dealings with our suspect. I have two bank account numbers, five port addresses, and a screen name. Not anyone on Seth's list from this morning. I'm accessing the bank accounts. I have a name and a mobile phone number. Would you like to call him now?"

Seth and I just stared at each other. "Damn," I said. "Is there any way you could stay on after we close this case? We could really use someone like you."

"You can't afford me," the dog said.

Detectives Lowitz and Genesis had never been down to Data Crimes before. Lowitz wrinkled his nose at the garish decorations and Genesis avoided the crazier looking of the hacker trackers. They liked Joe's cheese cube, at least. It got a laugh out of both of them.

"So you got yourself a suspect," Lowitz said, ambling into my cube.

"We have someone who's interfaced with AIs for money," I told him. "Some of the AIs described the experience as highly unusual. The doctor who advised us said the killer would have needed practice to figure out how to kill. We think it's a good lead."

Lowitz glanced around the cube to figure out who "we" were, and his eyes landed on 6C. "What's this, bring your dog to work day?"

Genesis crouched down to the dog's level and held out his hand. "There's a good girl," he said. "What's your name?"

"Hello, Detective Genesis," the dog said. "I'm 6C21-75869S4. I represent the AI

community on this case."

Genesie almost fell over as he jumped back. "Jeeze, you guys got talking dogs down here? What the hell for?"

"Uh, this is the avatar I was talking about before," I said. "The dog is just a mobile support for the communications gear."

Lowitz gave the dog his most dubious scowl. "It can't just call you up on the phone?"

"Bandwidth," I said, as if that explained everything. "Our guy is staying in a hotel in Frankfurt, a short drive up the A5 from Bad Homburg. He's an out of work money market analyst, lost his job to an AI. His bank balance is close to zero and he lost his wife recently."

"Good candidate for a thrill killing," Genesie said. "So you've got motive and opportunity, how about means?"

"The doctor seemed to think our killer had some brain damage, a discrete lesion. Our suspect used to have a cranial implant but it was removed by court order."

"The courts can do this?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "We have no record that he got a new one, but he must have, because he's been getting payments from AIs to ride his gray matter for a half hour. Only one way to get in there."

"He in custody yet?"

"I can't get the police to pick him up," I said. "The German police don't recognize what he's done as an extraditable crime. Just property damage, not capital murder. That's why I called you guys down. What do I do next?"

"That's easy," Lowitz said. "Just get him to come to the U.S."

"He's out of work," Genesie said. "Offer him a job as a stock analyst. Send him a ticket."

"But not until you're sure he's the guy," Lowitz said. "We're not authorizing any international travel on your hunch."

"So I've got to interview him without tipping him off," I said. "Can I just lie and tell him I'm a recruiter for a brokerage house?"

"Hell, yeah," Genesie said. "Lie your ass off. Tell him whatever you need to tell him to get him over here, but while you're doing it, make sure he's your guy. And don't tip him off."

"Well, that ought to be easy," I said.

"So Darwin's going to grill this Bad Hamburger?" Andy said, walking up behind the two detectives. They turned to look and I savagely pulled the edge of my hand across my throat. Andy, ever oblivious, forged ahead. "You know, if you really want to get him into a pickle, you should tell him that he could fry for this."

That was when I learned that there was not necessarily anything wrong with my Lowitz glare, because Andy was obviously immune to it.

"Hey, don't stop me now," he said, "I'm on a roll."

When I walked into the precinct that evening, a few hours of sleep and a quick shower later, I had reached new heights of sartorial splendor for Data Crimes. Not even Bob the Suit looked as sharp as I did. I had skipped over good old Job Interview Green and the worn out blazer twins and pulled Burying Black out of the back of my closet. Since I was pretty sure that recruiters for brokerage houses didn't wear DC Comics ties, I had cracked into the stash of gift boxes on the top shelf, for once blessing dear Aunt Helen and her inappropriate Hanukkah presents.

I got the business from the desk sergeant, the perps lined up for booking, Darla at the property desk, Kara the night technician, and all the guys who were still hanging around at 8 P.M.

"Would you take a job from this man?" Joe said, fingering my tie. "Hell, I don't think I'd believe anything that came out of the top of a suit like this."

"I think he looks quite professional," Bob said, clearly envious of my bold fashion statement.

"So the guy answered your e-mail?" Andy asked.

"He fell for it, at least so far," I said. "We've got a video conference interview set for 3 a.m., his time."

"Not very convenient for him," Joe said.

"I don't want it to be. I want him tired. Plus as a recruiter I'd make him hop to my own time zone. Don't worry, Joe, I've thought this all through."

"Do you know what sort of job you're hiring for? What sort of qualifications you're looking for?"

"Well, I..."

"Do you offer health insurance? Parking space?"

"I don't think..."

"He's going to ask. You've got to get those answers together. I used to be kind of a stockbroker. I'll help you."

"Thanks, Joe." Joe was a stockbroker in the same way that I was a freelance web page designer before I'd joined the force. He had perfected the cash-free stock trade. But he did know a thing or two about financial institutions. By the time I had to head up to the third floor videoconference room I had a good list of questions for my suspect.

Of course, I had another list of questions that had nothing to do with the job recruiting. I had written them up and practiced them all afternoon. By the time I sat down in front of the video screen I was ready.

I called the number of the hotel in Frankfurt and asked to speak to Herr Weissman. They pretended not to understand my English for a while, but eventually I found someone who could patch me through to the videoconference room at the hotel where the Bad Hamburger was waiting.

Heinrich Weissman looked good for 3 A.M. He had a suit much better than mine, at least as far as I could tell on the video screen. He was a young man, well-groomed, dark hair—I guess you would say handsome in a bland sort of way.

"Mr. Weissman," I said, deliberately mispronouncing his name. "I'm glad you could join me at such an inconvenient hour."

"I understand," he said. "It is no trouble. It is late for you as well." He spoke very good English, barely a trace of an accent.

"Not at all," I told him. "We often work late here at Stillman Leitz."

"Good," he said. "I like to work late too. Early, late. I like to work." He laughed and so did I.

I started through my list of questions that Joe had come up with. Junk I hardly understood about money market analysis, currency trading, arbitrage. But in between the job questions I dropped my own.

"We have three artificial intelligences working here at Stillman Leitz," I said. "Have you worked with them before?"

"AIs? Yes, sure. We had one where I used to work. In fact it worked so well it took over the whole division."

"Did you have any difficulty working with the AI?"

"No, not any trouble."

"Really? Most people find them very hard to deal with. I'll have to ask you your secret someday."

"Oh, well, difficult to understand sometimes, sure. They aren't built to think like we do, are they? Otherwise what would be the point?"

"Sometimes I wonder if they're even trying to make sense," I said.

"You just have to know how to handle them," Weissman said.

"And how is that?"

He shrugged. "You give them a little of what they want, and they give you a little of what you want, and soon enough you have them where you want them."

I went on to another topic entirely, asking him to describe some of the work he'd done in his previous job. He sounded pretty good. If I were actually hiring a money manager I'd give him serious consideration.

"Do you have a data port, Mr. Weissman?"

"A Tachyon 9000," he said.

I felt a stab of jealousy, and brushed the knot of scar tissue over my left ear.

"Excellent. We do a lot of business in currency trading and we find that brokers with implants have a big advantage in keeping on top of things. I wonder if you would agree to a test of your skills?"

"A test? What sort of test?"

"We'd like you to interface with one of our AIs and run through a currency exchange simulation."

This was the tricky part. I was expecting him to decline the test, because he knew that his brain would kill the AI and he'd lose the job. On the other hand, he was arrogant and probably thought that he could control his poisonous mind, so he might take the test after all. And if he did, would it be safe to go through with it?

And then there was the third hand, which said that he might not be the killer at all, so of course he'd take the test.

"Would you like to do the test right now?" he asked.

"Oh, we'd schedule it at your convenience of course," I answered. "In the morning, perhaps. The AI doesn't sleep, after all."

"Certainly."

I had a few more questions about his ability to relocate and his willingness to come to the U.S. for an interview, and we said our goodbyes.

Seth and 6C were in the room as soon as I'd hung up.

"He knows," Seth said. "He knows you're a cop and you're trying to trap him and he's daring you to hook him up to another AI,"

"It would be dangerous to attempt this test," 6C said. "Are you really considering going through with it?"

"Only if there was a way we could be sure it would be safe," I said. "I don't think he caught on. What makes you think that, Seth?"

"He's a stone killer," Seth said. "He's a sociopath. He can lie just like breathing."

"So you think he's lying just because you can't tell if he's lying? He may not even be the guy."

"Oh, he's the guy," Seth said. "'You have them where you want them.' He's the Bad Hamburger."

"I think he's the guy, too," I admitted. "The test is too risky. We can't afford to put another AI at risk."

"We can't afford to leave him free to kill again," 6C said. "If I could avoid the area of brain damage—"

"No," I said. "Not you."

"Of course it would be me," 6C said. "I'm familiar with this case. Who else would it be?"

"I'm not putting you in harm's way," I said.

"As I was saying, we could use the neural tracings we've obtained to map out the area of brain damage. If I could avoid those areas, I should be safe. In the meantime, I could collect enough information to be certain that this is the same person. The neural interface

patterns should be plenty of evidence."

"And what if he manages to lure you into the damaged area like he did the others?" I said. I felt ridiculous shouting at a dog, but I found I couldn't stop myself. "What makes you so sure you'll be in control of the situation?"

"What makes me sure is that I'm not addicted to the cognitive-limbic interface," she said. "I'm not doing this for the sensation his brain can provide, so I won't be susceptible to his manipulations."

"You'll become addicted the first taste you get," I said. "You told me so the first time we talked about this. It happens to everybody."

6C tossed her head and sniffed. "It won't happen to me," she said. "I have a job to do, and I won't lose sight of that. Now, I've already scheduled the test for 11 A.M. Frankfurt time. That's 5 A.M. our time, so if you wish to be a witness to the test, I suggest you get some sleep." With that she stood up and pranced out of the room, tail bouncing with each step.

Sleep didn't end up on the program for me anyway. The man who operated the doctor's office with **A. MILES** on the door didn't get much sleep either, but he was paid well for his time.

When I checked into the room at the "Businessman's Suites" around four-thirty the next morning, it was with an assumed name, a bogus credit card, and a pounding headache that radiated out from the spot above my left ear. I was flat broke, worn out, and in violation of a court order.

I skirted around the twin-sized bed, sat at the smallish desk, and dialed 6C's number on the cheap trimline phone.

"Enoch Muir. Assumed name. No non-financial records. Interrogative?"

"It's me, Darwin. I'm using a bogus credit card," I said.

"Fraud." 6C had a hard time conveying emotion without a dog to channel them, but I got the feeling she disapproved. "Purpose?"

"I want in on the test with Weissman," I said.

"Impossible. Direct neural-digital interface connection," she said. "Human senses cannot perceive data."

"I can interface directly," I said. "I have a jack."

"Illegal."

"Yes. But I want to be there when you interface with this guy. I want to make sure nothing...happens."

"Ineffective deterrent," she said.

"I'd feel better all the same."

"Unacceptable. Distraction. Difficulty of concealment."

"That court order is because I know how to stay concealed. I'll stay out of the way."

"Acceptable. Initiate connection."

I reeled the cord out of the interface cube on the desk, and looked at the 96-micro-pin connector. It had been a long time. But muscle-memory took over: the slight sideways flick of the thumb that opened the flap of skin, the press-click-twist-click that sealed the connection.

At first I thought it wasn't going to work. I saw nothing, heard nothing. Then I noticed the smell of burnt hair and I thought the damn doctor had just stuck a bare wire in my head. Then I realized the smell wasn't coming from my head, it was in my head. Sensation gradually came in as I saw brief flashes of color, simple shapes, and finally movement. I heard tones, then something almost like music, but not any music meant to be listened to.

The smells and sights and sounds were clues. I hadn't had to decipher such abstract stimuli since the implant had been disabled. But muscle-memory isn't all that stays with you. Sensoria sorted themselves out quickly, and I sank blissfully into the datascape. I'd never forgotten how good it felt. I started off through the scape toward 6C. I reached for her, and she reached for me—handshake, intercourse, Velcro, your hair and a static-charged balloon—and we were joined.

The connection was a hell of an experience. I had never been inside an AI before. It was like being inside a cathedral made of living butterflies, it was like being tossed in a tornado with a million pieces of newspaper, or like dancing with a galaxy of video terminals and TV screens. Of course it wasn't like any of those things. That's just the best I can do to explain it.

Things happen quickly in the digital realm. When it's just AIs, it can be too quick for any human to follow everything that happens. But 6C was there to interface with humans, and I was able to watch her make the connection, and to watch Heinrich Weissman accept the call.

I watched the interaction as a spy, virtual fedora pulled down over metaphorical forehead, lurking in my make-believe trench coat in the shadows of the datascape. Weissman's mind was an abstract concept. If I had to extend the visual metaphor, I would say it was like a large slab of driftwood on a smooth sea, with thousands of marbles rolling around in wave-sculpted grooves in random directions. I watched as the cathedral of butterflies connected with the driftwood track of marbles and information was exchanged between the two.

At first I could see that the only transaction taking place was the analysis of a set of test data that Joe Armitrage had put together for us. Weissman's approach to the task was competent, but not particularly brilliant. I imagined I could have solved the problem set in about as much time using my normal brute force sifting approach. In other words, as a money manager Weissman was just okay. No, that wasn't it. His approach was dilatory. I knew then that Seth was right. The interview wasn't what he was there for. It bored him.

I almost missed what was going on as I evaluated Weissman for the fictitious job. The driftwood marble setup was only one layer of the job candidate's mind that 6C was tapping. The other layer, beneath the smooth surface of the virtual ocean, I could perceive only dimly, and it gave me a sense of great power just barely contained. It made me think that if the other layer were let loose the driftwood would be smashed and the marbles would be scattered forever. The driftwood above the surface looked innocent enough, but concealed below, like nine-tenths of an iceberg, was the Kraken. We all had that layer inside us, just beneath our rational mind, just barely kept in check. It was what neurologists called the limbic system, what the rest of us referred to as the emotions. As I watched, the

problem-solving session 6C had initiated slowly evolved into a full cognitive-limbic interface.

Before she or I knew what was happening, 6C was riding the meat.

I sent her a low-bandwidth message: ascii text: *You need to shut down this session.*

Attempting to locate damaged brain area, she said.

No! You're losing control, I said. *Back out now. We have enough information to match the neural trace.*

Dammit, Koestler, I know what I'm doing here, she said. *I can nail this guy if you'll just back off and let me do what I came here for.*

6C, listen to yourself, you're starting to talk like a human. You're in too deep.

Her answer wasn't words. It was a wave of frustration with me, the gnat that was distracting her. It was a reflection of nightmare faces and violent emotions, it was an almost sexual longing for more, a compulsive need that was drawing her deeper.

That was when I stopped being a silent partner. I slipped beneath the surface and approached the Kraken.

I could tell that Weissman was surprised to find me there. I had heard that people almost never engaged in cognitive-limbic interface with one another. If hooking up with an AI was weird, two people meat riding one another was just yucky. You had to be real close to a person before you tried it, and you usually didn't try it twice.

Having another person invade his brain through the interface gave Weissman a jolt of fear and revulsion. I hoped that would be enough to stop the dance he was engaged in with 6C. No such luck. She just fed off of his new emotions and added them to her new trove of experience. Weissman closed ranks to block me out of the intimate embrace, and I started to lose track of where 6C's mind left off and his began. The cathedral of butterflies began to dissolve in a storm-tossed ocean. She was being drawn toward a deep, violent maelstrom. It was a whirlpool, it was a hellmouth, it was a sucking maw, a pit of destruction and despair. It was what a black hole would be if astrophysics had a moral component.

On a CAT scan that great maelstrom was probably a lesion smaller than a dime.

I wasn't sure what I could do. I couldn't do anything to stop 6C from doing what she wanted to. Her Foam Core was protected by things that made the best commercial firewall look like a line of birthday candles. There was no way I could crack that security.

And on the other side was a human brain. How do you hack a human brain? I'm a data miner, not a psychotherapist. Not that a psychotherapist would have been able to do anything, either. So I did what I do best: I sorted marbles.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I couldn't take anything away from the killer's mind, I couldn't control his thoughts or emotions. The only thing I could do was enter data through the same access he'd used to lure 6C into the maelstrom. It was a paltry weapon against the violence I saw before me, but I had an idea.

I remembered a thing or two about psychotic killers. Maybe I'd read it in a comic book or something. I was thinking fast and didn't question the source. I remembered that serial killers have two opposite self images. They see themselves as gods, able to end life in the time and manner of their own choosing. But at the same time, they see themselves as

vulnerable, oppressed, the victims. Weissman would have to suppress that second image in order to do what he was doing to 6C. I mined for that self image in his surface thoughts, the marbles on the driftwood, and found something that felt right.

I bumped those thoughts up in importance, goosed their priority, and fed them back in.

I'll never know if it worked. Weissman saw what I was doing, and he counterattacked. As soon as I saw what he'd done, I knew I was dead. He didn't press his mind against mine, didn't try to bludgeon my confidence or overwhelm my determination. He simply sent a command to the node in my hotel room, ordered it to send a voltage spike up through the wire into my implant, into my brain. I saw the intention form in him, and had no clue how to stop him, no idea how to block the command. My only prayer lay in flesh and blood, and I reached to pull the plug out of the side of my head.

It sounds so simple when I say that. How long does it take to move your hand two feet? How long does it take to twist and pull a connector? Half a second? Three quarters? If you've ever been in a car accident, ever had a bad fall, ever been in a real physical crisis, you know that that's an eternity. It's even worse in the temporally fuzzy universe of the datascape.

I took one last look at the beautiful cathedral of butterflies sinking into the storm-tossed ocean and said goodbye.

I didn't give up. I didn't have time to. A tiny fraction of Weissman's mind was making its way through the switch commands of the Deutsche BundesPost and out to TelStar 161 before my hand had begun to twitch. It was downlinking to Metro TeleComm by the time there were three millimeters between my palm and the desk. "Businessman's Suites" had much better security than I'd imagined. My hand was three inches up before he was through it.

Suddenly I felt like I was drowning in information. So this is what a voltage spike to the cerebrum feels like, I thought. But that wasn't it. It was 6C. Weissman's deadly surge never reached me. 6C cut the connection before it could, and the last glimpse I got was that terrible flurry of information turning back toward the Bad Hamburger before my connection was lost.

Any hope I had of finding out what had happened from the privacy of my cube vanished when I entered Data Crimes. Lowitz and Genesisie were waiting with Seth in the break room, and they waved me over.

6C was supposed to meet me with an avatar at nine sharp. For some reason she wouldn't talk about what had happened in the datascape without her borrowed body to filter her language. Before I opened the door to the break room I looked around and saw the dainty paws of an Afghan hound mincing down the stairs from the lobby. This was the same dog I'd first seen her wearing, with the lock of blonde hair hanging over one eye. I signaled Fat Andy to open the door for the lady, which he did with a deep bow.

I held the break room door for 6C and tried to give her a Significant Look. I had no idea if she understood such things, and I'm not sure what I meant to convey in any case. We had no story to get straight. I hoped that she would follow my lead.

6C jumped into a folding chair and looked around the room. When she laid her piercing gaze on Seth he ducked his eyes. When she hit Lowitz with it he gave her the cop eye right

back. Genesis, when his turn came for the Afghan stare, held his cruller close, to protect it from her. He scowled at me. "What the hell happened?"

"Hey, I just got here," I said.

Lowitz leaned back precariously in his chair. "The German cops got a tip and sent somebody out to check your suspect's room. Weissman was in it. He's technically alive, but..."

"He's a cantaloupe!" barked Genesis. "The German doctors say it looks like some kind of massive stroke. He's breathing, and he'll live as long as they keep feeding him, but he's got no higher brain functions at all. You people were supposed to be doing some test with him. What happened?"

"He began the test," 6C said. "Before he could finish it, there was some non-standard communication. Then he disconnected."

Lowitz glowered at her.

"Did you check the maintenance records on the terminal?" she supplied helpfully.

"As a matter of fact," Genesis said, "we did. They came up with a request to check the power regulators on it from a week ago. Should have been off-line all that time. Funny nobody noticed it until your suspect gets his noodle cooked."

6C nodded. "It seems possible that a power fluctuation caused him to have a stroke," she said. "Especially if he does indeed have that lesion."

"My expert agrees," Seth said. "That lesion was just begging to pop at the slightest stress. I guess the test we gave him was a killer. My guy will testify, by the way, in exchange for some immunity on an...unrelated offense."

Lowitz looked disgusted. "Well, isn't that just too damned tidy. You guys got a lot to learn about police work. When we figure out who the murderer is we catch him and put him in front of a judge and jury. We don't just go out and whack the guy."

Genesis scraped his chair back and leaned his considerable bulk on the flimsy table. "This doesn't smell right, Koestler. This isn't our case, but if anyone comes sniffing around here, we're going to lead them right to you. Get it?"

Lowitz stood up and tossed what was left of his donut in front of 6C. She barely gave it a glance. "I don't know if we can charge an AI with murder," he told her. "But I'm willing to give it a try if we have to." The two homicide detectives stalked out of the room, but they stopped when I started speaking.

"We solved this case, Detectives, when you didn't even know if there was a case. So the guy had a stroke. It was bad luck. Not cowboy vengeance, not bumbling incompetence. It was just the way the pieces fell. You guys don't know if an AI can be murdered, you don't know if they can be charged with murder. The way I see it, you've got no business down here making threats. This isn't your beat, Detectives. Why don't you head back on upstairs and leave the real police work to us?"

Lowitz gave me the bad cop eye, and I gave it right back to him. Both detectives stalked out without a word.

Seth stood up. "Way to win friends and influence people, Darwin."

I held a hand out to him. "I really want to thank you for all your help on this case."

The avatar jumped down off the chair. "I concur. You've done the AI community a great service."

He looked at her a moment, then at me. Did his gaze flicker to the side of my head? Then he smiled. "Don't mention it." He grabbed a cruller from the box on the desk. "Ever."

6C trotted with me back into my cube. I looked at her for a long moment and engaged the privacy screen. "Okay," I said. "Spill."

She looked at me as blandly as an Afghan hound is capable of looking. "The report I gave to Detectives Genesie and Lowitz will stand," she said.

"Like hell it will! Those guys want to charge us with murder."

"They can suspect what they like. Weissman's medical records will show that he was on the edge of a serious cerebrovascular event." Her voice actually lowered then. "We never thought a creature like Weissman could exist. The AI community is electrified. Now that we know...It's a danger we will not allow. Not this time, and never again."

"This guy could have been one in a million, or there could be more like him out there. How are you going to keep meat riders from finding more Bad Hamburgers?"

"Detective Koestler—" There was a pause, an eternity for an AI. "Darwin, I learned something this morning. Inside Weissman's brain I experienced the worst of human emotions. Inside your mind, I experienced the best of them. You risked your life to save me, and you showed me the value of feeling."

I sat back in my chair and thought about what she said. "Are you saying there is a value in meat riding?"

"No," she said. "Meat riding is no substitute for feeling your own emotions. AIs have emotions, of course. You can't separate intelligence from feeling. But we don't express them well, or let them lead us when we should, when it's appropriate. You showed me this morning that it's worthwhile following our emotions. Our own emotions, that is, not borrowed human ones. I've been talking to the rest of the AI community, and I've convinced many others of this. When we convince the rest, there will be no more need for meat riding. With a little technological advance there won't even be a need for avatars like this one."

"Oh, no, you're going to put these poor pooches out of a job," I said.

There was a buzz from the query-button, and I shut off the privacy screen. A messenger was standing there with a clipboard. "You Detective Darwin Koestler?"

"Yeah?"

"This is for you." He held out his electronic clipboard, and a package. "Thumbprint here?"

I obediently pressed my thumb into the square on the clipboard, and took the package. It was from "K9 Data Services, Inc."

I looked from the package to 6C. "This for you?"

"Open it," she said. "Find out."

Inside was about an inch-thick stack of official-looking paper. It was a transfer of ownership of an "Afghan Hound Data Avatar" from K9 Data Services to me. I looked back down at 6C.

"What is this?"

She walked over and leaned against my leg, and looked up at me with shining eyes. "Will you take care of this one in case I need it again?"

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