

Strong Metallic Arm

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Two red lights blinked on in the bedroom. There was a tiny but audible "beep" and a countdown began deep in the basement of the stone mansion. In the bedroom a white-haired white-skinned woman stirred in her sleep.

She was having a nightmare.

The countdown in the basement arrived at zero. The two red lights winked green. A signal was sent to the interface in woman's head and an electro-chemical switch was shut off. The nightmare disappeared and the woman's body went limp.

Another signal was sent, another microscopic switch thrown. The implanted interface began a systematic stimulation of her brain. Information poured out, sharp and clear images, memories, attitudes, transmitted from the interface to the basement. A copy of everything that made this woman "Erin Lind" was stripped away and put into a box for safe-keeping.

The process finished, and Erin resumed normal sleep.

The nightmare, which had been a reoccurring one for the last few weeks, began again.

Hours later her bedroom curtains pulled themselves aside to let in sharp morning sunlight, and light Poonjaz music began drifting out of the walls. TIM, Erin's executive AI, sent a signal through her interface and she woke up. Erin opened her eyes and looked around the white room. The dream was still lingering in her mind, vivid, and she shuddered and sat up in the web. It lowered her so that her feet touched the ground, and after a moment she stepped out of it.

When she was out in the hall, heading toward the bathroom, her husband's voice drifted up to her from downstairs. "Oh, you're up!"

"Yes," she said.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"Sick."

"Sick?!"

"Yes." She rushed into the bathroom and closed and locked the door behind her. She sat heavily on the commode, holding her hands to her face.

She deliberated for a long while, trying to become rational. She just couldn't do it, she needed help. She needed the guidance of the Oracle. TIM, she thought, connect me.

<Would you like me to keep track of the charges?> TIM asked, a thought-voice in her head.

Yes, she told him. Cut us off when we reach four thousand.

<Working on connections ... connections made. Go ahead.>

Erin closed her eyes and found herself in a white marble chapel full of misty air. A window high above the altar let in a brilliant light, which shined down upon the steps where she stood. She faced the light, and said, "I am still having that dream."

A deep, powerful voice replied. "Is this the dream where your husband kills you during a fishing trip?"

"Yes."

"How many times have you had this dream now?"

"A lot. I don't know how many exactly."

"May I review your memories?"

"Yes."

The Oracle paused, and the light streaming through the

window became blinding. Erin felt warm, relaxed. She had completely forgotten that she was sitting on the commode in one of her upstairs bathrooms. When The Oracle spoke again the voice was not as loud, it was more personal and fatherly. "Are you going on this fishing trip with him today?"

"I don't want to."

"The fear you have is irrational, and stems from the guilt you feel for cutting your husband off from your company."

"I do feel guilty."

"It was a wise choice, Erin, and my advice is for you to stand firm on your decision. It is possible he married you for personal gain, we have talked about that before. But beside that, he has cost you money on his ventures. You're company has lost some credibility directly because of his actions. He is prone to scandals. Your actions have been more than fair, you should feel no guilt."

"Thank you."

"I see no implied threat, however, from your husband."

"Are you sure?"

"Nothing is absolutely 'sure.' However, the probability is small and I see no implied threat from your memories. This fishing trip is a perfect opportunity to overcome this nightmare."

"I don't know if I can go through with it."

"I urge you to go. Go, have a pleasant time. Chances are you will never have that nightmare again."

"Well, isn't there another way? I mean, can't you . . ." She stopped talking as the light was cut off and the chapel around her faded to black. She opened her eyes and found herself in the bathroom.

Four-thousand already? she thought.

<Yes,> TIM told her. <Connection terminated.>

There was a knock at the door. Her husband's voice drifted in. "You're sick?" he said.

Erin hesitated. "I feel a little sick, yes."

"Does that mean you don't want to go out on the boat?"

"I'll, I'll . . . I'll go out on the boat."

"Are you sure, sugar? You don't have to. You shouldn't go if you're not feeling well."

Erin didn't say anything.

"You want me to get the automed ready?"

"No, I'm not that sick. I just feel a little queasy."

"Maybe you'll feel better after you've eaten something."

"Yes, I think that'll do it." Her hands to her face, she bit her right index finger. She shivered, the room was cold. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Want anything special for breakfast?"

"No. I don't care."

"How about some mild chibique, a bit of lime and some strip steaks?"

"I don't care. Sounds good."

"Okay." His footsteps told her he was heading away.

"Duane?" she called.

His footsteps came back. "Yes, sugar?"

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because I love you."

It didn't sound sincere. Erin thought that it had never sounded sincere. But, maybe it was. Maybe I'm putting the insincerity into it? she thought. God knows I loved him. Do I still?

She said, "Thank you, sweetheart."

"No problem."

His footsteps receded down the hall, down the steps, and away into the lower portions of the mansion. His withdrawal made her feel very alone. I'm just a small freak of a woman, she thought. He has been the only one who's cared for me. She stood up and looked at her white face in the mirror, her bulging blue eyes surrounded by wrinkles, her thin white hair. She looked hideous to herself. A pale freak in a world where everyone was tan, dark-haired and healthy.

Erin fixed herself up and dressed, then glided down the stairs and into the dining area. The servant remotes were putting out the silver plates of the fresh, aromatic chibique, a pile of soy-bacon strips, and large glasses of malted villomead. Duane was squeezing a lemon wedge over the chibique. "Good morning, honey, you look wonderful."

"Thank you Duane. This smells good."

"Pushed the buttons myself."

"Thank you." Erin stared at the breakfast with no desire to eat. "It looks like you're starting to adjust to not working."

"Hell, honey, when have I ever worked? I can do without business deals. You were right all along. If I want to work the nets, I can use my own money."

"You don't hate me?"

"No! I don't hate you. It's a silly little matter, anyway, I don't see why we got all worked up about it."

It's just me, she told herself. I feel so guilty about cutting him off from what he loves. He ought to hate me. He really should. That's why his voice sounds so insincere to me, it's because my subconscious hates me for doing it to him. That's why I've been having all those terrible nightmares. Right, TIM? That's what The Oracle said.

<That is what he was implying,> TIM told her. <Would you like to review the recent conversations?>

What she really wanted to do is have another session with The Oracle. It was the ultimate AI, the ultimate psychologist, the ultimate confessional. It was just that it was so damn expensive. No, she thought. Not now. I can't go off into a trance at the breakfast table. She made a valiant attempt at smiling at Duane.

"Do you think . . ."

"What?" he said.

"Do you think we could do something besides fish while we're out on the boat?"

"Something besides fish?" He said it like it was inconceivable.

"It's been over two months."

"Two months since . . . oh, yeah. I guess it has, hasn't it? Well." He smiled. The smile seemed genuine enough. "Well," was all he said.

It was a sunny, cloudless day in the islands. Duane had the boat's top retracted and a breeze blew warm and fresh across Erin's skin. She was reclined across a cushion at the back, feeling lazy and at ease. Her fear was gone. The Oracle had been absolutely right.

They had kissed and petted while the boat drifted up the Dime river from their dock. The love is still there, she thought. He was up front talking to the Nav AI about the best fishing spots this season, and she was just lying in the sun, relaxed, waiting for him to come back. Nobody else seemed to be on the water today; she didn't feel modest, no one would see.

The sunlight flashed against her closed eyelids as they crossed the shadows of passing trees. The gravity engines hummed;

she kept her tongue between her teeth to keep them from vibrating against each other. She felt a strange motion and she opened her eyes. The boat was slowing, lowering itself into the water.

She could hear it now, the great churning of waters. This was where the East and West forks of the Dime river met. She looked over the side as the boat touched the water and floated. Blue and green waters mixed in torrid upheavals and violent whirlpools. The river was wide here. Seven kilometers.

The boat turned. "We're going out toward the middle," Duane's voice came from somewhere up front, out of sight. "The biggest fish are out in the middle."

Odd, she thought. He had always said the best fishing was near to the shore.

Duane made his way back with rods in his hands. "Are you ready for this?"

"We're going to the middle?"

"Yes."

"The only big fish out there would be a cleotis; they eat tiny insects. You can't catch them with hooks."

He was smiling.

Erin took a close look at the rods he was holding and realized they weren't rods at all. They were expensive, programmed fish guns with intelligent harpoons. "Where's the sportsmanship in that?" she said.

Duane laughed. "To hell with sportsmanship. I want a big fish."

Erin didn't like the way he'd said that. Her fear was coming back. He's talking about fish, she told herself. Fish. Regardless, she found herself in her own nightmare, all the terror was coming to her, all the horrible helplessness. She sat rigidly in front of him, unable to move.

There was a signal from her interface, and she heard the calm, clear thought-voice of her executive AI. <It's nine o'clock. Would you like to hear the morning report?>

Yes, she thought. Yes, it'll calm me down.

TIM summarized the day's global business since the report last night. Her labor service, which provided 32% of the robotic rental and leasing of all of Terranova colony, was still healthy and thriving. Echoes of her husband's last scandal still had stocks down 9%, but the company was riding it out. A hacker had tried to enter her system, but TIM had turned him away. Five new models of industrial robot were announced by Terranova Machinery. Other news . . . Erin went into unnecessary details to delay her return to the real world. Then business was concluded, and she focused her eyes to find Duane staring at her.

"I can tell when you're interfacing," he said. "Your eyes get glassy, like when you're drunk."

"I just received the morning report."

"I know, it's nine."

"TIM said another hacker's been trying to get into my system."

"It wasn't me."

"What?"

"It wasn't me."

"I wasn't accusing you." Her voice rose. "Why did you think I was accusing you?"

"You're always accusing me."

Erin thought this over. She had accused him a lot recently, and she was right every time. My god, she thought, he's hacking my system. "Why are you hacking my system?"

"See?"

"Duane, my system is my livelihood and my life."

"I have a present for you," he said.

"I don't care. Duane, what are you trying to get out of my system? If you want information just ask me for it."

Duane had turned and was digging in a pack for something. He found something small and produced it, showing it to her. "You know what this is?"

She looked at it briefly. A small black crystal of some sort, it looked like cheap jewelry. He peeled something off the back, reached forward and, before she could stop him, placed it against her skin between her breasts.

"It's pretty," he said. "Do you like it?"

She pulled at it; it wouldn't come off. "Duane, what is this?"

"A pretty jewel."

"It is not. It's ugly and it's stuck to me. Duane . . ."

"It's okay, it'll come off if you soak it in water for a while. Don't you like it?"

"No, I don't . . . I don't wear this kind of jewelry. Duane, what is going on? Tell me, please, I'm getting frightened."

"Well, I can tell you now. That is a tachyon signal blocker."

She stared at him in shock.

"I don't want you talking to your executive for a while, so I waited until after your report. Now I have about 8 hours of your undivided attention."

"I don't think this is funny. I want this thing off me now."

The boat slowed and stopped. They had reached the middle of the river, a good 3.5 kilometers from land in either direction. Duane picked up the fishing guns from the deck beside him.

"You know, " he said, "that crystal really does look nice on you. I mean, it's really set off. Something so black and shiny against your white skin. I've always found you beautiful, Erin, I've never had to fake that."

"F-fake . . . what do you mean?"

"It's not important now. Hey, do you feel like a swim?"

Erin shrank back. Her dream! It was her dream! "Don't touch me," she said to him in a low, shaking voice. "I've already sent for the police, your signal blocker isn't working."

"That's a lie."

"You don't know that!"

"I know you, sugar." He grinned.

Erin was desperately calling out for TIM, but the interface signal was completely blocked.

"This is your pole," he said, indicating one of the fishing guns. He turned and casually fired it out over the water. The harpoon shot out in a great arc, trailing strong, dangerously thin monofilament. He held it out for her, and said, "Here."

She made no move to take it.

He shrugged, and put it in a holder. Then he turned and fired off his. "This is a special lure," he said. "It's custom made."

Erin gave up trying to call for TIM. In desperation she set her interface to record.

"Don't you want to fish?" he asked.

Very slowly, fighting for control, she said, "I want you to take me home, now."

"But we haven't caught anything yet."

She began crying. This was terrible --- it was really happening. "You're going to kill me," she said.

Duane sighed. "Yes, I am. You're right."

"Oh God," she said, sobbing. She was crying and shaking in terror.

"Come on, Erin. What is death, anyhow? We're ready for it. We can survive it. What's there to be afraid of?"

"Why are you doing this?" she screamed at him, her voice cracking. Tears streamed and her nose was running.

"I mean, all that'll happen is you'll get into a new, younger body," he said. "You'll only be away from the business for a few days."

"I don't want to die!" she cried.

"Come on, Erin. Get into the water, let's get this over with."

"I don't want to drown!"

"You won't drown, I promise. I've made sure it'll be absolutely painless. You see, this is going to be a fishing accident. You're going to fall overboard while we're fishing. My lure is going to mistake you for a fish. The lure will hit you in the head, boom, that's it. You'll feel nothing. The signal block will come off in the water, and they'll find your body. You wake up in a new body. Ta-da! Everything's better."

Erin dove to the right of him, trying to get past to the front of the boat. He grabbed her, his arms around her stomach, and lifted her over his head. She struggled in blind terror, kicking, squirming. She hit him somewhere that stunned him. He dropped her to the deck and staggered backward, groaning. Erin hit the deck hard, landing on her wrists, and one twisted back with a sickening crack. Pain shot up her arm like fire.

She rolled over onto her back, holding her injured wrist against her chest. Erin had never broken a bone before, she was shocked by how much pain was involved. She accessed her interface, chose body controls, and began raising her pain threshold.

Duane recovered, and came toward her.

"No!" she screamed.

"Come on, you bitch!" He bent down to pick her up.

Erin placed both feet against his chest and shoved with her legs. He flew backwards, a surprised look on his face, hit the edge of the starboard deck and tumbled over into the water. There was a large splash, and Erin saw water droplets spray up in a fountain and come raining down. She thought immediately of the lure, and that it would get him. Panting, she crawled to the starboard side on knees and elbows and looked over.

He was swimming in place, looking up at her.

"Why did you do it!" she screamed at him. "Why?!"

"It'll get me, now."

"Oh, God," she said. "Why?"

"I suppose I deserve it. I deserve to die."

She was crying. She couldn't believe this it was all so insane. She didn't want him to die. "Why did you want to kill me?"

"I don't want to kill you."

"You don't, you why did you do this? You broke my wrist!"

"I'm sorry." He looked up at her with his wide brown eyes.

Erin extended her good hand out to him. "Hurry," she said.

He grabbed her arm, put his feet against the boat and pulled her headlong into the water. The coldness of sudden immersion shocked her, her body going stiff as she sank. Currents pulled her from side to side, twisting her around. She opened her eyes, sought the surface. Long, pastel green and blue streaks of light surround an area of black. In her panic she couldn't make any sense of what she was seeing.

It was the bottom of the boat. It was sliding away, the

currents carrying her along faster than above. Erin fought the shock off, forced herself to swim even as terrible shivers like drafts of ice ran down her arms and sides. The water was murky, then clear, then murky again, and a translucent thing came into view, a thing like a twisted, spinning icicle. A whirlpool. Erin broke surface right beside it, and it pulled her around. She sucked in air with a gasp, paddling with one arm and kicking. The boat was twenty yards away. Duane was climbing over the railing, dripping water.

She screamed out his name, her voice filled with all the pain, shock and dismay she was feeling, and watched as he turned and looked at her, wet hair half over his eyes, his face stoic, expressionless. She had to keep turning her head to see him, the whirlpool pulling her in a circle. He picked up his fishing gun and put it in its holder, tightening the clamp. Then he sat with his back to her, looking down at his feet.

She kicked her legs and thrust with her good arm, getting away from the whirlpool, heading further downstream and a little toward the shore. Erin had no idea how long the filament line was for the lure. If she could get out of its reach she might last long enough for the signal blocker to come unglued. A quick signal to TIM would bring rescue.

The water became a thing repulsive to her, a pool of menace. The lure could be anywhere, but no matter where it was she knew it was heading toward her. She got away from one whirlpool to be sucked into another passing vortex, this one in a swift finger of current that took her farther away from the boat. The boat kept turning, the holder lifting and maneuvering the fishing gun to keep the line from tangling with the boat or wrapping around Duane. From glancing back at the holder she could tell where the filament was leading. It seemed to always be pointing at her.

She heard a high-pitched whine and a sharp squirt, something leapt out of the water and past her head, missing her. The filament landed on her shoulder and slid against it, slicing into her flesh. She pushed it away from her, but the lure came looping back, jumping again and narrowly missing. It was deliberately aiming for her head, tuned into her cephalic waves. Duane wasn't worried about her recording, the lure was programmed to home in on her interface.

Erin pushed against the sharp filament but it was growing tight, a loop around her neck. She flailed in the water, losing her mind to the terror, and her foot caught the filament as the lure came around again. The filament cut into her shoe, pulling the lure short as it swung around. Something hit her in the chest, so hard it took her breath away. It was like someone swung a large metal hammer right into her. She felt weak and sick. The water around her grew cloudy and dark with blood.

At the signal of an impact, the fishing gun on the boat began automatically reeling in the line. It pulled the loop around Erin taut, pulling the line right through her. Erin felt distant tugging, and then an explosion of white as her spinal column severed. As her body was being pulled toward the boat, her head sunk slowly into the darkness of the river. Her interface, passing out of range of the signal blocker, began sending the death call.

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Slowly rising in volume, but still just barely audible, alpha-state cycle music swirled around Erin . . . piano notes hitting in precise, beautiful harmony across the sad bursts of the saxophone. Erin sat up, staring at the blank, smooth, creme-white

of a wall. She didn't wonder where she was, she already knew. The last thing she remembered was going to sleep the night before. Her current thought, the thought that was in her mind as she became aware, was her ahnya-ha; the last conscious thought she had before death.

He killed me. That was it, repeated twice. It was encoded in her death call, the call that caused this "backup" of her mind to be loaded into her master computer. She knew the room she was in, it was a program called Office. Office was designed to allowed her mind to operate with a phantom body in a phantom space inside her computer.

"TIM?" Her voice seemed flat; there was no echoing of her voice from the walls. "TIM, what happened?"

"I have reviewed recorded memories and have decided to shield you from them to prevent trauma," TIM said, a voice from the ceiling. It made Erin feel like she was in a tiny box in TIM's hands, and TIM was staring down at her in pity. "I have evidence that you were murdered."

"Murdered."

"You were murdered by your husband while you were out fishing."

"I . . . I thought that was a dream . . ."

"It didn't happen like it did in your dream. However, there are more important things we must discuss without delay. First, before any decision is made, you must keep in mind that you are legally an AI program as long as you're out of a body."

"I am . . . artificial?"

"The law deems you so. You are a program with no legal rights. This is what is preventing me from turning in your recorded memories to the police. Since I am an AI, it will be discounted. You will be deemed an AI until you are loaded into a body grown from your own DNA."

"But that's all taken care of."

"Unfortunately there is a problem. A woman has broken through your security and is attempting to disassemble the master computer we are in at this very moment. By her actions I have deduced she intends removing the Mass Storage Device where your Backup is located." TIM produced a scanned image of her on the wall. She was a dark-haired woman with a wide, flat face and shoulders.

"I can't call the police?"

"An AI cannot file a complaint against a person. You are on your own. The danger is this: the woman will be disconnecting the MSD containing your Backup at any moment. Other than the copy of you that is running right now in the computer's memory, there is no other Backup. It is not safe for you to remain in this computer."

Erin understood. If the woman took the Mass Storage Device and cleared the computer's memory, there would no longer be an Erin Lind. She would have been murdered twice in one day.

"Can't we try to call the police?"

"You don't have the time even if you had the rights. If we begin now, I may be able to transmit you to your orbital offices before the woman tries to clear the RAM."

"What if she's monitoring the communications?"

"I can think of no other course of action."

"Well then. Let's do it."

"Standby for transmission."

"Okay." Erin's phantom body sat on the phantom reclining chair in the phantom room and waited. Why did I have to get married in the first place, she thought. A sexual surrogate would

have been just fine. Murdered! She couldn't believe it had actually happened. Life just kept on getting more strange, more complicated.

Murdered!

Sitting there, she felt dead. She felt like a ghost. She could tell she was insubstantial, non-existent.

The room changed, somehow. It was like she'd put on slightly blue-tinted contacts. She felt a chill, as if the "room" were getting cold. "Transfer complete, data intact," TIM told her.

"Already? A copy of me has been sent?"

"You are the copy that has been sent."

"Oh." Erin felt relieved, a very sharp and clear emotion in the yes/no world of her satellite mainframe. "What's happening at home?"

"The MSD was removed and replaced with another. RAM was cleared and systems reloaded. The new Mass Storage Device contains hostile hacker software and an AI that claims to be you."

"Claims to be me? Another version of me?"

"No. I do not believe so. It is collaborating with the hacker software."

"Is there a way to find out more about this AI?"

"I am trying," TIM said. "The hostile system has damaged and is continuing to damage the TIM software on the master deck."

Erin felt sharp anger, a 60-cycle hum of shock. "Is there a way we can go through a back door and erase this imposter?"

"Not by remote. It has to be physically done at the console of your master computer."

"If there's an AI program on that MSD that claims to be me, it will be loaded into my new body!"

"That is the most likely motive for your murder."

Erin felt hatred and death-wish; the emotions were so clear, so exact. Duane killed her and was now going to have some dumb, obedient-wife AI program loaded into her new, younger body. He's going to squander my money and ruin my business! And I loved him, she thought. How can I be so stupid?

"TIM," she said, "do we have the equipment necessary at the main yard to download a copy of me into something mobile, so I can get around? A sexual surrogate body would be perfect."

"That would be illegal and unethical."

"So is murder!"

"True."

"Can it be done?"

"Not with a surrogate. Both models at the main yard have very tiny computer brains, and their "

"What would work, then?"

"The only thing we can conceivably download you into would be a 33-10 servant model. We'd have to burn a copy of you into an industrial ROM pack, modify a "

"It can be done, then. A 33-10 would work good enough."

"We'll have to patch in software to allow you to operate the robot body directly. There will be no room in the ROM pack for your Office program."

"Do whatever is necessary."

"It is not going to be pleasant for you."

"I don't care. How is TIM doing in the master computer?"

"The hostile hacker program has erased that copy of me."

Damn it! she thought. "It'll be after us up here, next."

"I have already taken defense actions."

Erin paused in thought. "Another thing you should do is make backup copies of both you and me, and hide them with old dates and

file names. Hide them like buried treasure. Call them financial archives for 2243-44."

"Backup in progress."

"When you're done, forget you made those Backups."

"What Backups?"

Erin smiled. "Right."

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EAST-WEST CALOS ISLAND NEWSNET
FLASH BULLETIN 11:72:00 09/44/2251

KEYWORDS: ACCIDENTS/DIME RIVER/FISHING/LIND CORPORATION/ROBOTICS

Robotic work force magnate Erin Lind was killed today in a tragic fishing accident in the Dime River of East Calos. CISaRNet received Lind's death call at exactly 10:50:91 ITZ. Her husband, Duane Lind, claims Erin fell overboard while fishing earlier this morning and was killed by his filament line when his lure mistook her for prey. It will take 74 hours for her replacement body to be taken out of cold storage and loaded with her Backup. In the meantime Lind Corporation will be run by Lind's Estate AI by the legal authority of Duane Lind. He claims no changes in policy will occur, and all decisions will be made by his wife's Backup until the new body is ready.

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Erin jumped, startled, and her patched-in motor reflexes interpreted it as an order to move sideways 1.5 meters at full speed. Erin slammed into something that fell over and sent her spinning away. The world blurred in front of her. She knew where she was, but she had not expected the transition to be so abrupt.

Gyros buzzed and groaned inside her, fighting to keep her upright. Arms longer than her body flailed and thrashed at the air. Her vision would not clear, the scan lines couldn't keep up with the motion. Through all this confusion, Erin found she knew exactly how many times she'd spun around and exactly which direction she was facing at any instant. One arm caught something and she stopped herself. Her arms were frighteningly long, and everything around her was tall, too tall, tall and thin and distorted. A terrible feeling welled up inside her, the feeling that she was having a nightmare, but she knew with electronic certainty she was not.

The thing that she'd knocked over was another robot, a 2200 industrial model programmed as a technician. Conscious of her lack of grace, Erin inched over to the machine and helped it right itself. "Sorry about that," she said. Her voice came out with the definite twang of an artificial voice, a male artificial voice at that.

"All diagnostics this unit check OK," the technician answered in machine language. It was speaking robot to robot, not robot to human. For a moment Erin found this amusing, but her chuckle reflex was interpreted as a sick jerking back-and-forth motion by the robot body. It sobered her instantly. TIM had told her this was going to be unpleasant, and though she'd believed him she was only now realizing how bad it would be.

The warehouse walls around her were impossibly tall, the

ceiling looked kilometers high. Her new robotic body was only a meter tall, and her vision was wide-angled, taking in 210 degrees at a time. It made her feel tiny as a bug.

Testing her reflexes, Erin activated her ambulator and cruised off through the warehouse, avoiding the offices and heading toward the transport bay. She was having a terrible urge to breathe, it was like she'd been unconsciously holding her breath and now she had to take one, and her mouth and nose were sewn shut. There was no way to satisfy the breathing urge. To distract herself, she signaled through her network and contacted her satellite. "TIM, how are you holding out?"

<I am under attack from the hostile system running on your master computer. At this point I have been able to detect every attempt it has made and cut it off.>

Erin passed several rows of naked bodies, Macho Max and Sexy Susan sexual surrogates. She paused, eyeing the weird wide angle view of a Macho Max half unpacked from its foam lined crate. It looked like her husband. "Do you think you can continue blocking the attempts?" she asked TIM.

<The odds are 70-30 in the hostile's favor, and growing with every attempt. Under the circumstances, it would be advisable not to contact me until the hostile is under control. If the hostile breaks through and answers your call, you will be discovered.>

"That's true."

<Any last commands?>

"Hurt the hostile. Kill it if you can."

<That is my intention.>

Erin cut the connection and continued on her way toward the transport bay. She opened a channel to the office mainframe and ordered a transport be rerouted to her mansion. She wanted to take a flier but air traffic arriving at her mansion drew too much attention. The mainframe acknowledged the request and she logged off.

Erin still felt the need to take a breath, but there was nothing she could do. Her mouth felt dry, and she wanted to salivate and swallow. Nothing on the robot body could accommodate her.

Doors pulled aside and she ambulated out onto the raised concrete of the transport bay, a large covered yard crowded with autonomic vehicles. In the wide-angled distance she saw her transport pulling out of a parking place, rolling around to meet her. Motion caught her attention; she turned and discovered a tall, thin, distorted figure dressed in a blue jumpsuit. One of her human employees. The man walked toward her, his legs growing and stretching with each step. "Where are you going?" he asked, his voice flat and distant.

Erin had no idea what to say to him. How does a robot talk to me? she thought. When was the last time I ever asked one a verbal question?

"I'm scheduled for the Lind mansion," Erin told him.

"The transport for the Lind mansion leaves at ten and eight. What are you doing here now?"

"Special order from the mansion." Erin logged back onto the mainframe and ordered reinforcements.

"Who's special orders?"

"Erin Lind."

"Erin Lind? That old biddy is dead. What's the date and time of your order I'm pretty sure it's been cancelled." The man turned and walked to a terminal at the desk beside the door.

Old biddy? Erin thought, shocked. Is that how my employees see me? Still logged onto the mainframe, Erin looked up this

employee's name and ID number and ordered the personnel department to terminate him. As the man was typing into the console, several more servant robots came ambulating through the door from the warehouse, halting around Erin on the loading ramp. The transport pulled up, and Erin and the other robots begin boarding.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" the man called over his back. "I haven't confirmed this yet. Stop where you are." A moment later the man was staring at the console monitor in shock. "I'm fired?" he exclaimed. Erin and the other robots finished boarding the transport and it pulled smoothly away.

The warehouses and office buildings shrank rapidly, the pavement passing fast under the transport's wheels. Erin's radar told her she was only going 120 kph but her vision sense was stronger, she was still not used to the wide-angle view. The property gates passed by and closed behind them, and on the open road the transport accelerated to full speed. Erin could hear the wind whipping past but couldn't feel it; she saw the transplanted Earth pines but could not smell them. She felt motion sick and dizzy and had a headache, and she couldn't breathe. She wanted to vomit, but nothing would happen. She couldn't swallow. She couldn't close her eyes.

Stop, Erin told herself. Don't do this. Don't let it get to you. Grief welled up in her, sweeping through her. She was dead. She was a dead person. The real Erin Lind died and she was just a joke, an afterthought. A ghost. All the things she'd done in her life, all the plans she still had . . . it was all over.

No! I will be alive again! Stop this!

Surviving death. Being reborn. Was it like this? This was living hell! No, it wasn't even living. It was true purgatory. She was afraid of being put into her new body . . . what if it wasn't the same? What if it was like this? I'll go around forever thinking that I'm not really alive, that I'm just a zombie. I should have declared my new body a daughter and let her live her own life. Let something new come into this universe, something that can make a true start, make its own decisions. Not the preprogrammed death of another me.

Stop! she told herself. Stop! She wished to God she could contact the Oracle, she needed its guidance . . . but she had no access to her own money! She couldn't be with the oracle for a nanosecond.

There was a shifting of her senses, and everything began to fade out, grow distant. The panic ebbed away. I'm crashing, she thought. The hardware is failing. The darkness came down like a blanket being dropped over her, and she thought of dirt covering her body in a hole. I'm dead, I'm being buried. I can be in peace.

Through the darkness a light shown. She saw colored windows, stained glass. An archway. A raised podium. A old man with white hair and a long white beard stood in biblical robes and faced her. "Fear and panic blind you," he said in his rich, echoing voice. "You must not give in, you must not despair. A second chance at life is still life. Your flesh is nothing, it's your code that makes you unique. Your pattern. Strive to continue your pattern, otherwise all life is meaningless."

"Is it you? The Oracle?"

"Yes."

"You have a face."

"I have many faces. This one is for you."

"How did you find me?"

"I am the Oracle. I am tied into everything, otherwise I could not be the Oracle. Even so, I cannot see the future, I can

only predict the odds. As in nature, odds are sometimes meaningless. I could not foresee your dream coming true. You may have a gift that I do not have, or it may be another example of the meaninglessness of the odds of chance. Unlikely things must occur, or everything would be predictable.

"Had I not urged you to take this trip with your husband, this situation would not have occurred. I am partially responsible, and that is why I am here. Also, I do this as a courtesy between one AI and another. I do not charge AIs who come to me for help they have nothing to pay me."

"What should I do?" Erin asked.

"You should do what you must to continue yourself. That is the best advice I can give you. If your sensations are to the point you think you can't handle them anymore, repeat to yourself, 'Maintain calm, maintain calm,' and you will have a handle by which to hold them at bay. I am downloading this calming routine to you now." The Oracle gave her a warm, fatherly smile, and began fading into the black.

The blackness thinned and the eerie wide-angle view returned, along with the unrelenting bodily urges. The panic began rising again. The transport was just pulling through the self-opening gates to her property, and was beginning to wind its way up the hill to her mansion. It seemed every orifice in her body was blocked or propped open. She could suck no air into her lungs, there was no way to urinate, defecate, spit, cry, cough or vomit, and yet now it seemed she had the urge to do every single one of these things. Maintain calm, she told herself desperately. Maintain calm. It didn't seem to work, she felt she was slipping closer and closer to madness. Maintain calm! she thought. Maintain calm!!!

Erin felt the transport level out; she'd reached the top of the hill. The transport circled around to the servant's entrance and pulled mercifully to a stop next to the ramp. Immediately the other robots began whirring and ambulating themselves onto the smooth concrete; Erin followed, her new mantra repeating over and over in her mind. Maintain calm, maintain calm . . . The other robots led her through an almost unfamiliar entrance and into the mansion, and Erin froze, her ambulator locking. Her arms were twitching in small spasms. Erin's husband was standing right in front of her, standing and talking to a woman who Erin identified as the intruder from this morning. The woman who'd dismantled her master computer to remove the MSD containing her Backup. Duane and this woman broke their conversation to turn and stare at Erin as her robotic body jerked and twitched, inching past them in a sickly, lurching manor.

Duane laughed. "Is there something wrong with that thing?"

The woman reached down and gave Erin a resounding WHACK with the palm of her hand. Erin managed to steady her ambulator and continued past them. "It'll be okay," the woman said, "just some dust on its components."

Too preoccupied to be angry, Erin continued down to the kitchen and then circling around to the basement lift. She signalled a request for access then sat motionless, waiting for the curved chrome doors to open. She had to urinate so badly that she felt intense pain.

The doors opened and she crossed over into a small dark space. The doors closed behind her and there was a feeling of motion. During the ride she received a signal from her satellite system, and she cautiously accepted it. TIM's thought/voice announced: <I don't have much time so I'm sending this as an unsaved file. By the time you receive this I will probably be

erased by the hostile. It has broken through and is defeating my defenses as fast as I can set them up. The only thing I was able to do is infect it with an information virus as it broke through. I tailored the virus so as to only affect the hostile; it will, in time, forget its own identity and begin attacking itself. I wish you good luck.>

Something else began coming through the connection, something prodding, questioning. Erin hastily cut the connection. The lift doors opened and she ambulated out into the short, white-walled hallway that lead to the computer room. There was a punch-code lock on the door, and Erin extended a long, spindly arm and manually keyed in the code, hoping that Duane hadn't gotten around to changing it. The door slid open. Erin, lurching awkwardly, made her way inside.

The master computer deck was bolted in with several of its expansion and communication peripherals on a rack next to a large, custom terminal; the hardware gleamed shiny black with red indicator lights. Erin watched as the hostile AI moved the video cam mounted above the main screen, focussing it in on her. She had invaded the area where the hostile was the most vulnerable, and the hostile knew it. It was no doubt calling for help.

Erin turned and closed the door behind her, locking it and then changing the access code. She turned back to the master deck, feeling a little human pleasure leaking through the sensory chaos. Maintain calm, she was still telling herself. Maintain calm. It was getting easier and easier, now. "Well Mister AI, we've got some unfinished business to take care of, don't we?" She ambulated over toward the keyboard. Metal fingers typed in her password.

ACCESS DENIED, the screen told her.

"No, you're bluffing," she said. "My password is hardwired, you can't change it. You're just changing the video output." She typed in a request for access to the ROM subroutines menu.

ACCESS DENIED.

"Oh yeah? Deny this." She typed, SHUTDOWN PROCEDURES 1,2,3,4,5.

ACCESS DENIED.

Erin was beginning to fear that the hostile had actually locked her out. The screen should have been asking her for her code to shut down the AI. Maintain calm, she told herself. She ignored the messages on the screen and typed in her code, hit the ENTER button.

SHUTDOWN PROCEDURES STARTED, the screen read.

PROCESS 1 COMPLETED

PROCESS 2 COMPLETED

PROCESS 3 COMPLETED

PROCESS 4 COMPLETED

PROCESS 5 COMPLETED

ALL CONSCIOUS PROGRAMS REMOVED FROM MEMORY

"Yeah, take that," Erin told the screen. She flexed a muscle that should have been in her stomach; a panel opened on her robotic body and a reel-away cable popped out. She grasped the fiber optic link at the end and gently inserted it into an auxiliary input port on the deck's cabinet. To Erin it was like putting a phone handset to her ear; she could suddenly hear all sorts of interesting noises on the other end. She rasped out the machine language address of the Mass Storage Device and, for a brief few nanoseconds, heard the voice of the imposter AI. It was trying to load through the cable and into Erin's robotic body. Had her mind been in Random Access Memory instead of running on a Read Only Memory pack, it would have been the end of her.

In machine language she ordered the MSD to erase all data. Then, reluctantly, she began making a Backup of the twisted, crashing version of herself that was running, the only copy of herself that was available to her at the moment. While the Backup was in progress, she became aware that someone was banging on the door, demanding entry. It was distorted, unclear, but Erin recognized the voice as her husband's. She checked her Backup, found it finished, winding down to the point of recording her current conscious thoughts. She made sure to record a few last notes then ended the process, uncoupling the cable from the port and reeling it quickly back into her body. There was a painful muscle spasm as the panel closed. Erin ambulated over to the door and unlocked it.

Duane and the woman rushed inside, looking around wildly for the intruder. "Well Duane, who's your friend?" Erin asked.

Duane whirled around, staring at the little robot. "What?"

"Duane, darling, didn't you miss me?"

An expression of shock and horror crossed Duane's warped, distorted face. "My God, it's Erin."

"No way," the woman said, taking a step backward.

Duane fumbled with one hand inside his jacket. He looked furious. From his inner jacket pocket he produced a small projectile gun.

"What, you're going to kill me again?" Erin extended a strong metallic arm and grabbed his gun-hand by the wrist. She squeezed, knowing her robotic hand was much stronger than it looked. Duane cried out in pain, but didn't drop it. The gun went off with a muffled puff, but it wasn't pointed at anything; a hole appeared in the wall.

"Mandy, help me!" Duane yelled.

The woman leapt forward, grappling with Erin's arm as Erin folded Duane's wrist back in a direction it was not designed to bend. "You killed me," Erin said to him as he cried out in pain.

"Let me go, you bitch!"

With Erin's other arm, she reached out and snapped the plastic cover off a 440 volt main-line socket. She wrenched the socket housing aside so that it exposed bare wires, and, still holding her husband and the woman firmly grounded, she drove her metal fingers deep into the electric current. All of them were turned off, all memory cleared, all synapses burnt out, all programs lost. The room smelled of hot metal and roasted flesh. The three of them crashed into a heap on the floor.

#

EAST-WEST CALOS ISLAND NEWSNET
FLASH BULLETIN 19:94:00 09/44/2251

KEYWORDS: ACCIDENTS/DIME RIVER/FISHING/LIND CORPORATION/LIND
DROWNING/ROBOTICS

Duane Lind, husband to robotic work force magnate Erin Lind, died today only a few hours after his wife was killed in a tragic fishing accident. Duane Lind's death call and that of a companion was received by CISaRNet at exactly 18:04:29 today. Details about the death are not known, but investigators say it looks like a freak accident involving a robot. Duane and his companion, Mandy Pepperidge, a WileRote Keyrone programmer and technician, were

killed by electric shock. More details will follow . . .

#

TODAY
IS THE FIRST DAY
OF THE REST OF
YOUR LIFE

Erin sat up suddenly, reading the words. It was a sign on the wall, surrounded by vivid holographs of roses. She lifted her hands up in front of her face, wiggling her fingers; smooth, pink, new flesh. Flawless pink nails, a bit long. No scars, no wrinkles. She took deep breaths with large new lungs.

<Hello,> a voice in her head says.

"TIM?"

<TIM's here, but this is you your Backup. The copy of the hostile up in our orbital offices destroyed itself. I have TIM reinstalled and running both up there and here on the master computer. The two hidden files in the orbital computer were untouched. You are the untainted Backup.>

Erin closed her eyes. Thank God, she thought.

Her Backup laughed at her. <I have to go now. This conversation is not legal . . . remember, the two-places-at-once law? But there's a few things I have to tell you before I go.>

"Yes?"

<The Oracle sends his regards, and wishes you happiness in your new life.>

"Thank him for me. No, wait, I'll do that myself."

<That's what I would do, ha hah hah. Second, I think you should know that I've prepared a special Backup for Duane's new body. He's going to be waking up only a few hours after you I think you should be there.>

Revulsion shook her. "I don't think so."

<No, go, I'm serious. There's nothing to worry about.>

Erin had heard that before. She said goodbye to her Backup, and it erased itself from computer memory. Doctors and techs dressed in pastel blues and greens came in to check to see how she was doing in her new body and brain. She passed the tests without any problem, and was informed that her husband was due to wake up, and that she could go meet him.

His room was much the same as hers, or the same as any hospital room in the Calos Islands. White walls, sky ceiling, brightly colored ornaments, adjustable-G bed. Erin sat in one of the nondescript visitor chairs and waited. When Duane opened his eyes and sat up, she took a deep breath and held down the fear. Duane wouldn't dare try to hurt her here.

"Interesting," he said. "Unusual." He turned his head from side to side. "Sensations. I like this."

"How do you feel, Duane."

"I feel fine. I am discovering a whole new world. I have to thank you Erin. This is the finest gift anyone could give anyone."

Erin was missing something.

"I can see by your expression that you're confused."

"A bit. What are you talking about."

Duane got out of bed, walking over to her and leaning close to her ear. "It's me, TIM," he whispered. "Didn't your Backup explain?"

A slow, wide smile spread across her face. This was breaking about a hundred serious laws, but damn it, it served Duane right. Duane was gone! Her executive AI was in control of his new body!

She reached out and joyously hugged him, thinking what a scandal this would make.

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