

A BLESSING OF UNICORNS

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Police Sub-Inspector Ferron jerked her sandaled foot away from the floor with a muffled shriek, wishing she had worn boots, despite the weather. She balanced on the other leg and cradled her injured extremity in both hands. She was momentarily heedless of the danger to her remaining, still earthbound, toes.

At least all that time spent on kalari payat helped her keep her balance. Falling over would have involved a lot more stab wounds.

"Mother Muppet!" she snarled as she hopped back. It was the closest thing to an outright imprecation she'd utter with her duty electronics recording every word. Even in modern Bengaluru, a double standard for professional women remained.

Her partner, Senior Constable Indrapramit (who was wearing boots), grinned at her. "I thought those things were supposed to be kind to spinsters and unmarried maidens. Is there something you've been hiding from me, Guv?"

Around Ferron's foot clustered a dozen or so jewel-hued, cat-sized, bioprinted synthetic unicorns, stomping their cloven hooves and tossing their rapier-like horns. It was the sharp edge of one small hoof that had laid her flesh open. Now the toe was bleeding copiously, as foot injuries often do.

"Don't just stand there. Bring me the first aid kit."

Gingerly, Ferron set her sandal down. Blood slimed between her sole and the shoe. The most ferocious of the miniature animals, a sparkly, butterscotch-colored stallion, snorted and arched his neck. He defecated a marble-sized poop to let everyone know he was the boss of everything.

Ferron, who had never had much to do with farm animals, even tiny ones, did not find this charming.

Indrapramit picked his way around the tiny horse turds half-hidden in the engineered grass of the carpet. He produced a can of wound sealant and crouched by Ferron's foot. "This will sting."

"I'm getting DNA all over the crime scene," she complained, distracting herself from the icy burst of accelerant and the pulling sensation as the sealant took hold. She arched her toes up to keep them from sticking to the sandal.

"Assuming it's even a crime scene. No sign of a body—"

"Missing person, at least," she said.

Indrapramit tilted his head and raised his shoulders in a gesture of nonpartisanship. He stood, folding the first aid kit away. Unicorns scattered away from his swinging boot. The butterscotch stallion reared and tossed his porcelain-fine head, lashing out with hooves like pencil erasers.

Razor-edged pencil erasers.

Ferron hopped back again. "I hope people don't print these things for children!" As Indrapramit removed himself from the stallion's reaction radius, the creature returned to stereotyped behavior, strutting around the milling mares. The mares seemed to have been programmed to ignore his antics unless they were directed at them specifically. They cropped steadfastly at the carpet, comically large blades of grass poking from their mouths when they raised their heads to chew. Ferron supposed their rabbit-like poops fertilized the carpet in turn, but she didn't want to walk on it barefoot. Much less sit on it to dine, or read, or—

Maybe bioprint poop was sterile.

She braced herself with her good foot and watched. Each unicorn displayed a unique but fairly limited action loop, though the interactions of a dozen or so created a decent illusion of real herd dynamics. When the approach of a human or another bioprint displaced one from its grazing behavior, each unicornlet reacted predictably: some with curiosity or friendliness; some skittish or menacing. Each in accordance with its program.

It was very like the virtual games Ferron's mother was addicted to. The attractions of an orderly and predictable universe were not to be underestimated.

Returning an upheaved life to predictability could be a motive, Ferron thought. *Assuming, of course, that there had been any crime.* Which, as her partner had pointed out, remained a big assumption.

Indrapramit dusted his hands. "I mean, overall, what do we know?"

"We know she's missing." Ferron checked herself. "We know that somebody asked for a welfare check, and the patrol officer who performed it found the door unlocked and no sign of the occupant, a trendy lifestyle designer who goes by the name Beli Handi. We also know that Ms. Beli Handi's virtual and media accounts, which are the source of her employment, have been uncharacteristically quiet for about thirty-six hours."

"That's not unu—" Indrapramit said.

"She's barely ever offline." Ferron looked significantly at Indrapramit. "When was the last time you took a whole day off?"

His mouth did a wry thing. "Okay. I accept the hypothesis that she is probably missing. Are you satisfied?"

"Exquisitely." They grinned at each other briefly before remembering the gravity of the situation and simultaneously looking away. Ferron cleared her throat. "Let's search, and leave a perimeter around the, er, aggressive bioprints for now."

"You don't think *they* could have harmed Beli Handi?"

"We'll leave the hypothesis open—" Ferron stopped speaking as Indrapramit froze, a fingertip at his ear.

He said, "Ops has located an emergency aid request related to this call. Well . . . it's not exactly an emergency aid request—"

"Don't tell me what it isn't."

"Sharing," he said. "There's some context I'll give you after."

It was a useful warning, because Ferron minimized all her feeds and skins when interacting with a crime scene and relied on Indrapramit for non-emergency coms. A red light flashed one warning in the corner of her heads-up feed, and a moment later she was dropped sidelong into a virtual overlay.

The overlay maintained a certain legally mandated quality of unreality, with objects softly haloed and the whole image constructed with a plasticky translucence that let Ferron focus through it on the real, solid meatspace objects and obstacles lying behind—if she concentrated.

The constant bruised condition of many heavy AR users' shins was a testament to how effective that particular safety feature could be if the content were sufficiently distracting. Ferron, concerned with inadvertently walking through a pointy herd of bioprints (again), rested one hand on the wall to ground herself. She focused on her breathing: pranayama, to quiet the mind.

Something that had played out a week before repeated itself for her and Indrapramit's inspection. She recognized the interior of Bengaluru's small, centralized physical police headquarters. Most policing being distributed, Ferron visited the station only occasionally, but the little beige room with its several kiosks and workstations and the police seal on the wall was unmistakable.

It was also, in the overlay, empty.

Not unusual. Ferron thought she probably spent more time there than most of her fellow officers, because if she tried to do paperwork at home, her mother drove her to outrage by inches, and you couldn't spend your whole life in cafés and hope to keep wearing the same size uniform. She was used to seeing every other workstation unoccupied when she settled herself in the silent, musty coworking space, stylus in her hand.

It was a great way to avoid distractions.

Dispatchers, Lab, and Ops required infrastructure. Officers and detectives ranged about, staying in constant contact through feeds and overlays like this one. With modern efficiency, she and her colleagues did most of their work by remote, investigations carrying them wherever the caseload required. Most of their necessary socializing, networking, information sharing, and relationship building happened in virtual environments.

Ferron could perform the bulk of her job as well on a park bench or a city bus as sitting behind a desk in a building whose maintenance had to be paid for with taxes. Better, in fact: a cop on a bus or bench was a visible crime deterrent.

Ferron was thinking about how peaceful the cramped space looked when the file changed, and a woman—barely older than a girl—walked in. She was very pretty, and was elaborately styled and dressed for daytime. Camera-ready, with flawlessly made-up skin. Her features seemed vaguely familiar, as if those of somebody Ferron might have gone to school with.

She was carrying a gun.

* * *

The police station's virtual assistant resolved. With the awkward wrench of a bad AR transition, Ferron found herself inhabiting its point of view. She could feel Indrapramit in the environment beside her, part of the same delayed telepresence, his sensations more apparent through their shared filespace now that she wasn't suppressing all her feeds.

It was like holding a friend's hand in a dark room.

The woman did not point the weapon at Ferron—or rather, at the virtual assistant avatar. She held it down by her side, half-hidden in the folds of her expensive sari, in a manner that might have seemed relaxed if she hadn't been trembling. Bengaluru City Police did not go armed as a matter of course, but Ferron had the requisite training and kept her skill up to date. She noticed that the safety was on, which was

good because the girl's trigger discipline was abysmal.

"Hello," the virtual assistant said cheerfully. Ferron did not spend enough time playing games in AR to be accustomed to the sensation of her own avatar speaking words that she did not control. "Welcome to the Bengaluru City Police. How may I serve you?"

"I think somebody's trying to kill me," the young woman said, very calmly. She took two steps forward, coming up beside the counter from which the virtual assistant projected itself. On the third step, the woman's smooth, made-up expression cracked. Rattled by ugly sobs, she sank down in the visitor's chair.

The virtual assistant operated on a fairly sophisticated AI, and it had control over the station house functions. The assistant used a robotic tea trolley to make the woman a cup of the terrible station house tea remotely. It laid a stale biscuit on the saucer. The gun did not track the movement as the trolley rolled from its corner. Clattering adorably, it trundled to the visitor and set the teacup on the edge of the counter beside her chair. The woman lifted her head and stared at the cup as if she had never seen tea and a biscuit before.

Perhaps, Ferron thought, she simply had enough taste to recognize the horridness of the tea from its acrid aroma. The sari was certainly excellent—

She realized, with a start, from where she had almost recognized the young woman's face. Even she, who was not particularly young and definitely not particularly alert to the nuances of virtual celebrity culture, had seen this woman before—in advertisements, in pushes around the edge of her feed. In all, the sort of things she was so used to ignoring when they got past her blockers that their impact was mostly subliminal.

The woman lifted her left hand to reach for the tea, not seeming to realize that her right hand still clutched the gun. She had almost stopped sobbing. She stopped the reach in midair and looked around for a tissue.

The tea trolley handed her one, then ejected its compost bin to receive the waste.

The girl found the tea and buried her face in the cup. Milk and sugar seemed to steady her. It usually did, in Ferron's experience.

Although she knew better, Ferron found herself sliding into identification with the scene. In the real world, she tucked a few stray ends of hair back into her bun, the sensation of moving in different ways from the avatar grounding her.

"An AR assistant is available in headspace for filling out reports at any time. Would you like some assistance accessing those functions?" the virtual assistant asked.

"No!" Tea slopped into the saucer. The young woman looked down and set the cup very carefully in the saucer. It rattled.

She took a deep breath. "I don't dare get online. That's where they're trying to murder me. I need to file a report in person."

That's why I'm here, her expression said. It was tinged with self-importance.

"This unit can assist you," the virtual assistant said, its AI having identified the salient words. It switched to a secured and notarized encrypted recording mode, date-stamped the record, code-locked it, and said, "With your permission, I—the Bengaluru City Police virtual assistant—am going to record this conversation for evidence," as was legally mandated.

The girl nodded.

The assistant said, "Please agree verbally."

"I agree to the recording of this conversation as future evidence."

"Thank you," the assistant said. "Please state your registered name."

"Beli Handi."

"Will you tell me your age, Ms. Beli Handi?"

"I am eighteen."

An adult then. But a child, really. Ferron's heart ached, looking at her. She might

have had a daughter like this, if her life had gone a different way.

“You can’t contact my family. I don’t talk to my family.” Beli Handi’s fear seemed to have subsided. Now she wore the expression of someone caught in a bottomless customer service AI tree, just trying to find one human operator. But the assistant had a script, and was following it.

“A moment before we began recording for evidence, you said you were in fear for your life. Would you restate what you told me, please?” Supposedly, civilians were more comfortable interacting with bots that sounded like bots—a little formal and awkward. It reminded them that the assistant was not human, and could not be expected to *act* human.

It was a small means of setting expectations.

“I said . . .” Beli Handi swallowed, wiped her eyes. Her makeup didn’t smear; it must be the good stuff. Nanoprogrammable.

She leaned forward to gulp the last of her tea from a cup that dripped from the bottom rim. She kept it over the saucer. Ferron itched to put a napkin down.

The woman gathered herself. “I said that somebody was trying to kill me online.”

“Do you know who is trying to kill you?”

“Nnnnooo . . .” Beli Handi said. “Maybe.”

The virtual assistant correctly identified that as an ambiguous answer, and set a reminder to come back to the question later. “I have locked down the police station. No traffic may enter except authorized officers. May I request that you surrender your weapon?”

The girl jumped in her seat so vigorously that if the gun still in her right hand had not been safetied, she would have shot the wall, the desk, or herself.

The weapon thumped sideways into the counter. She looked down at it, a frown drawn between her eyebrows, as if releasing the weapon were an interesting technical problem, about which she was not sure how to proceed. She extended her arm, hand cocked gingerly.

The virtual assistant—or, from Ferron’s point of view, Ferron—used the delivery bot already waiting beside the chair to gently take the woman’s hand in its manipulators. The woman did not resist as her fingers were unwound from the butt of the antique pistol. The weapon was so old it didn’t even have a palm lock, not to mention smart targeting interrupts or any other safety measures.

The tea trolley opened a drawer in its chassis and tucked the gun away inside.

“I shall give you a receipt,” the assistant said formally. “Do you know that to possess such a weapon is illegal?”

“I . . . oh!” Beli Handi said. “I downloaded a skin on how to use it. It’s an antique.”

Ferron, trapped in unalterable virtual history, wanted to say dryly: *I see that*. She knew that if it had been her at the station, and not the virtual assistant, she would have been biting her lips to keep from opining on the effectiveness of whatever skin Beli Handi might be using.

She would have said, *You shouldn’t put your finger inside the trigger guard like that until you have decided to shoot somebody*.

“It made me feel safer,” Beli Handi said. “But if the police can protect me, I won’t need it.”

Ferron, trapped ineffectually in the future, felt the empty flat around her like a pressure on her skin.

The police had made Beli Handi feel safer. Like a teddy bear. And had been about as useful.

The tea trolley scanned the gun for identifying marks. The weapon was so old it had no RFID chip, but a serial number was engraved on the barrel.

The virtual assistant made a note of the number, issued a receipt under the young

woman's name, printed the chit out, and sent a waldo to go and fetch it from the office's only printer, which was down the long hall. Normally, the assistant would have merely shared the receipt, but with Beli Handi being determinedly offline. . . .

"Thank you for turning in this illegal weapon that you found," the assistant said, for the benefit of the record. Ferron found herself admiring the wit and foresight of whoever had programmed it. The assistant handed over the chit.

Beli Handi clutched it as uselessly as she had clutched the gun, her hand returning to rest in the folds of her garment. "I guess it's silly to think a gun could protect me from somebody who wants to murder me in AR."

"How would it be possible to murder somebody in virtual?"

"Track them through their connection," Beli Handi said. "Arrange a drone accident. Spoof a traffic signal. Overload the microwave."

"Those devices all have safety interlocks."

"Sure. Those can be spoofed, too." She shook her head and clasped her hands together. "I need to go into protective custody. You need to hide me. I plead with you."

"We will see what we can do," the assistant promised. "What led you to the conclusion that someone meant to murder you?"

Beli Handi leaned forward. She had been staring at the assistant, but Ferron could feel the pleading from where she sat. "I am not the first, you see. And I can tell you where the body is. But you have to keep me safe."

The assistant had already been taking steps in that direction, Ferron knew. It had checked the station monitors to make sure its systems and firewalls were secure; contacted the cybersecurity team to let them know that somebody might be hunting a person who had come to the police for protection with details of a murder; and sent a request for a human team to come and take custody of the person requesting assistance.

Having received a confirmation ping, the assistant said, "I've called for people to come take custody of you and keep you safe. Now, you say that somebody has already been killed? Can you give me their details, please?"

"My m-mate," the girl stammered, her eyes overflowing as her face dropped toward her knees. "We're mutuals, and in some of the same networks, and . . . she just dropped off the net about five weeks ago."

"Her name, please?"

"Muluhi. She . . ." The girl's voice failed. Her expression slipped toward horror.

She looked down.

Ferron felt her own face grow still. A coincidence in registered names, for sure . . . no, not a coincidence. That girl was also an AR personality, somebody who made her living providing a personal contact high with fame for her followers, selling an image and lifestyle most of them couldn't aspire to, parlaying that influence into sponsorships.

And she'd vanished, too.

Muluhi's disappearance some six weeks before was not Ferron and Indrapramit's case, but it had been in the morning briefings. And Ferron had a good memory for names.

She shrank the AR feed down to a window so she could look her partner in the face. "Wait, now we have *two* missing social media divas? Why isn't this girl still in protective custody?"

"She left," he sighed. "Before the officers arrived."

Ferron pressed her fingertips against her eyes, briefly smearing the feeds from her contacts. She blinked them back into place, and refocused on the memory of Beli Handi. The girl twisted the receipt chit between her hands. Back and forth and back again. Spindling the paper. Her face had changed: the fear was a kind of grim blankness now.

She laid the receipt on the desk beside the virtual assistant station. There was something on the back.

Ferron squinted. Blue ink. Handwriting. “What’s that?” she said out loud to Indrapramit.

“Scroll back,” he said. They watched Beli Handi slip an antique pen from her garment and drop that hand into her lap with the paper, out of range of the recording. When she left the twisted paper on the counter, it was marked.

Then she turned and walked away. Also out of range of the recording. The AR glitched for an instant, so Ferron did not see the moment she actually left the frame.

Indrapramit’s voice came incongruously out of the AR projection. “Wait, she left a note. Like a physical, handwritten note? Why on Earth—?”

Ferron had a more immediate concern. “Is it *still there*?”

* * *

She wanted to dive for the door and hail the next autotaxi down to the station. But that would be an irresponsible use of her own time and city resources, and that was one expense report that would never be approved. So she white-knuckled her wilder impulses back under control and said, “Can we get somebody meticulous to go to the station house and search for it? It could be a vital piece of evidence. Check the recycling and compost bins as well, in case it got tidied away.”

“Ops is on it,” Indrapramit reported, even as a confirmation light blinked on in Ferron’s own feed. “Let’s finish up here, shall we, and . . . oh, that’s not good at all.”

His voice had risen to a squeak. Ferron cleared the virtual recording from her visual field and hurried to his side.

He stared, aghast, at a long huddle of cloth on the floor in the corner, where it had lain concealed behind the bioprinter. His hand had come up in a vulnerable gesture. He put it down again.

Ferron rolled her eyes at her own surge of protective feelings. Her partner was a grown man, a professional, and a capable officer. He was, in fact, a hero, having successfully intervened in an attempted mass murder. She would not hover over him as if he were a child.

“It’s all right,” he said, a moment later. “I think it’s only a pile of clothes.”

It was, untidily dumped. Ferron crouched and bent sideways to examine the heap at eye level. She did not touch anything, but made a note for the Forensics team.

Salwar kameez, women’s underwear, and a long silk scarf, tossed on top of a bolster and a couple of cushions. The pile had provided the clothes with the semblance of a collapsed human form. That was all.

Adrenaline subsiding, she looked up at Indrapramit, who remained standing. Between her and the unicorns, she noted with amusement. She wasn’t the only one who could be protective of their partner.

“We probably shouldn’t reset the apartment for bedtime before Forensics gets a look, but let’s go see if there’s anything in the kitchen cabinets,” she said.

“No snacking,” Indrapramit said.

* * *

Nothing within surprised them. There was no sign of a struggle or of a planned departure: clothes and toiletries were all in their places. The small kitchen held perishable food.

It was the home of an unusually affluent young woman who—equally unusually—lived alone. This aptblock was intended for singles and couples, and what would have been common areas in a kinship block, such as the one Ferron lived in, were used to jam in still more private units such as this. This kitchen was more extensive than Ferron’s own tiny space, meant for storing snacks and pet food and boiling water for tea.

Ferron messaged a reminder to Indrapramit, asking him to get any details he could of the Muluhi disappearance earlier that year.

He confirmed and said, “I don’t think there’s anything else we can do here except

clear out and see what Forensics turns up. Unless you want to take home a unicorn.”

Ferron's foot throbbed. “My fox would eat it.”

“All the more reason, if you ask me.” But he fed a request to Properties to have them come along with the Forensics team and take the bioprints into evidence. “They're going to love us for that one.”

Ferron and Indrapramit exited into the street. At first Ferron thought it was already daytime, and was disoriented, given the time they'd arrived at Beli Handi's flat. But of course the sun had not yet come up. It was not quite 4:00 A.M., and the brilliant white light rendering everything in stark relief was from the rising nova.

* * *

The rains had not come, and the night was hot and humid. The streets should, by rights, have been eerily empty. Even a city that never sleeps puts its feet up occasionally.

Instead, they were eerily crowded.

The star woke people at odd hours, altered their schedules in strange ways. Brought the night owls *and* the larks out unseasonably to cross paths in its weird, stark shine.

Ferron had heard that people in the far north and south went crazy around the summer solstice, going without sleep in the bright nights, staying up for days on end. She'd always thought it was an old wives' tale, that even people strange enough to live in the dark and cold must have more sense than that. But the nova was making her rethink her prejudices.

The night was bright as day, and the people of Bengaluru seemed willing to experiment.

A star doesn't die all at once. Things that large rarely do. And low on the horizon, a star was dying brilliantly. The stark white pinpoint cast laser-sharp shadows from buildings and trees and vehicles and pedestrians on the pavement below. Even the suntrees in each aptblock courtyard, confused, unfurled their leaves to soak up the light of this ancient swansong.

The star had changed everything and nothing at all. Its death had been presaged by the only communication from another intelligent, technological species that Earth had ever received. A species that was dead now, that had died almost as soon as humans had learned they existed.

That had been dead for millions of years, in actuality, though the evidence of their existence—and their destruction—had only now reached Earth. The supernova that cut the street below with light and shadows like razors had killed them all.

* * *

Ferron went home. She didn't necessarily *want* to go home, but she didn't have anywhere else to go, and it was possible she might make it into her small flat in the family compound without attracting the attention of the aunts—or her mother. Anyway, her pets needed to eat, and she needed to sleep before her next shift.

She could have upped her brain chemistry. It wouldn't be the first time she'd bulled through a case on engineered hypomania. But an intuition told her that she might need those reserves later, and it was a terrible idea to live forever in a state of hypomania. For once in her overworked life, she actually didn't have a heap of work to do.

She was out of excuses.

The bus was low on batteries, but full of passengers, so pedaling wasn't onerous—and it met her obligation for daily exercise. Ferron used the bus ride to gird her loins and firm her resolve, and when it let her off down the street from home, she marched along firmly, trying not to limp and draw attention to her injured foot. It would be bad enough when the aunts noticed the bandage. She'd have to fend them off by claiming it wasn't bad and didn't hurt, or else they'd insist on re-disinfecting and dressing the wound and clucking over her.

Maybe she'd be lucky and they'd all be sleeping. Even her middle-aged insomniac mausi, Preeti. Even her up-all-night mother.

Ferron knew it was a pipe dream, unfortunately. And there was no hope that her mother would be immersed in her virtual escapes. Well, she might; she might be playing actively. But she wouldn't be poring over her attabytes of saved memories, reliving cherished moments—because only a few weeks before, Ferron had finally forced the long-delayed intervention conversation about not being able to afford the luxury fees for that level of archiving anymore.

Her mother hadn't directly acknowledged her existence since. No light escaped.

A mixed blessing.

The aunties *wouldn't* insist Ferron stay off her feet and relax, of course. That would be a bridge too far.

Her family's aptblock was cloaked in a flourishing green wall, shaded by suntrees enjoying an unaccustomed late-night snack. Lights burned in some of the windows, including her mother's, and faint music drifted from the courtyard. Ferron stealthily opened the side door closest to her own quarters, thinking about unicorns.

They were alive, after a fashion. Not alive like an engineered and cloned parrot-cat such as her own Chairman Miaow. But alive in the sense that they had biological processes, converted food into energy and growth, and decomposed if those processes failed.

But they didn't have personalities. They had algorithms.

A biological determinist would say the same thing about her, but having watched the butterscotch stallion chase the same shimmering star-ruby-colored mare in the same desultory circle for the third time—accompanied by the same sequence of snorts and squeals—she sincerely hoped there was a difference.

She made it to her flat unspotted, took her bloody sandals off, and brought them inside to clean them. She wanted a bath and dinner. But she was met at the door by two hungry, fluffy carnivores and the scent of a litterbox that needed attention.

Smoke, a silver-and-charcoal-agouti domestic fox, sat up from his cushion in the corner and yipped excitedly. Chairman Miaow shook out her bright blue tail and wound between Ferron's legs, leaving a silky fluff of hyacinth and sunshine-yellow fur on Ferron's uniform trousers. She babbled excitedly in her high, cartoonish voice: "You're home you're home I'm starrrrring and nobody has ever fed me not even once—"

"Hush, sweetie," Ferron said. "Dinner is coming."

Technically it was probably breakfast at this point, but Ferron had long since stopped keeping score. She reached down and scooped the cat up with the hand that wasn't holding sandals. Chairman purred extravagantly and headbutted her chin so hard she bit her tongue.

"Ow."

She could never have afforded a trendy pet such as a parrot-cat, even a so-two-years-ago model like Chairman. Chairman was *technically* evidence in a murder case, but she'd accidentally imprinted on Ferron in the course of the investigation, so here she was. Ferron fed her and the fox, making the usual semi-futile attempts to segregate their meals from one another.

She opened the sink and changed their water, then sponged out her shoe.

One of the aunties had left a covered dish on the shelf in the kitchen, keeping warm on battery power. It was a kind gesture, and even kinder that the food within was idli and sambar, nothing that would be made nasty by sitting for a few hours. It must have been Sandhya or Preeti, because Ferron's mother would probably have made dosa specially, just to be as passive-aggressive as possible.

Ferron ate gratefully, then made herself tea. She took two aspirin with the first sip. While it worked, she untwisted her straggling hair from the remains of its usual

smooth bun. As she ran a brush through her hip-length, rippling hair, her headache eased immediately. Perhaps she should cut it, her only real vanity other than a few rings and other jewels. Was it ridiculous for an unmarried professional woman to dye the gray at her temples and otherwise expend so much care on an ornament no one outside her family saw?

But . . . no. Nobody but her family, and very occasionally her partner, ever saw the classical Greek and Roman knickknacks in her room, either. But they gave *her* joy, and that was enough of a purpose.

The flat was still set for sleeping from the last time she'd been home long enough to fall into bed. Sunrise was beginning to wash the nova light from the sky, but it would still be a half hour or so before the solar disc broke the horizon. And now that she had eaten, Ferron was no longer the least bit sleepy. She found herself, instead, in that state of tiredness that left one restless and contented all at once, drifting like the fluffy seed of some plant through the haunted, liminal space of just-before-dawn.

She took the pets and her tea out to the deck at the back of her flat. She needed to get some emotional distance from Beli Handi's anxiety so she could think.

There was a risk involved in having to be social. Of the family, only Ferron, two aunts, and one cousin were employed, so the rest tended to keep whatever schedule appealed to them—or was convenient to their freelancing, if they did any. They might just be out in the courtyard on a warm, bright night, since nobody seemed to have heard her come in. That would be all right now; she was ready to face them.

From the green wall by Ferron's door, herbs and edible plants in profusion scented the air—cooling the block, sequestering carbon, and doing their own small part to make Bengaluru a more fruitful, green, and pleasant place to live.

Chairman and Smoke, released from captivity, took immediate advantage of the limited freedom of the courtyard. They zoomed down the stairs to ground level. Two fluffy tails vanished between tree trunks, and Ferron hoped the monkeys and parrots who sheltered in her kinblock at night had taken high perches. No doubt they would be fine; they were savvy to the existence of nocturnal predators.

Ferron balanced her tea and picked her way over artfully uneven paving-blocks toward the faint music and conversation.

The nova lay too low to shine inside the walls, and the sun was only just beginning to lighten the sky. Biolume globes, strung on cords through the pergola that covered a central patio, glowed blue-green from within. The colored light made Preeti mausi, Bijli mausi, and—unexpectedly—Ferron's mother appear corpse-like. They could have gotten globes with a warmer golden light, but those would not have been bright enough to read by.

Ferron had never seen any member of her family reading by the turquoise ones, so it mildly surprised her to see her mother and aunts bent together over an omni. They didn't look up as Ferron approached, which made her worry about what they might be reading or looking at. She settled herself on a cushion across the low table and set her tea down with a clink.

At once, Preeti glanced over and gave Ferron a quick wink. Mausi probably intended the gesture as reassuring. Instead, it sent a spike of anxiety through Ferron's gut.

Bad enough that seeing her mother out of bed and interacting—sitting propped on bolsters with no sign of a virtual interface, crutches, or her wheelchair nearby—didn't make Ferron hopeful. Instead, she worried over what plans were being hatched, and in what manner they would ruin her peace of mind.

She wished her sisters—she had three, who were married, and no brothers—were here, but they worked for themselves or raised children or both, and they would have drawn blackout curtains and hidden away in order to get some rest.

Ferron's mother's name was Madhuvanthi, and Ferron was used to seeing her only

in virtual space, or as a body dressed in a black immersion suit, reclining on a chaise. Ferron would never say it, but her mother was bedridden not because of illness, but because of self-neglect. She needed—had needed for years—treatment for depression, anxiety, and withdrawal syndrome. She obsessively archived her virtual memories, racking up huge storage bills that Ferron had, until recently, bankrupted herself to pay.

Ferron had long ago given up trying to talk her mother into treatment, and she had no leverage with which to force the issue. Her sisters pleaded poverty and unemployment, though Ferron knew at least two of them did pretty well on the gray market. The truth was, nobody really wanted to deal with Mom.

Madhuvanathi did not look at Ferron as Preeti pulled the omni away. Ferron made her tone exquisitely polite. “Hello, Amma. Hello, Preeti mausiji, Bijli mausiji. It’s good to see you out of bed, Amma.”

Madhuvanathi kept her face averted, and her hand went to the skinpet adhered just below her collarbone. Velvety fur rippled as she stroked it, her touch followed by the rumble of a purr.

“But look at this, Ferron,” Preeti said. “Look what we have done for you!”

The past tense increased Ferron’s apprehension to outright dread. She knew better than to say anything. She braced herself and accepted the omni.

It was a matrimonial ad, and Ferron was horrified to realize that it wasn’t some man that her family was going to try to force her to write to—or worse, had already written to on her behalf. This was an ad for *her*, seeking a groom. And it wasn’t a draft, either. It had already been posted.

Even with her honed professional skills, Ferron struggled to keep her face blank. She handed the tablet back to Preeti and said blandly, “Employed, you got that part right at least. Educated, yes. And slim, though you’re the one who keeps telling me I’m too skinny. But I’m taller than five foot six, I’m older than twenty-nine, and I am definitely *not* fair-complected. Also, it doesn’t matter what a bridegroom’s horoscope is, or if I’m Manglik or not, because I am old enough that it’s *anceled*, because astrology is nonsense, and because I am not getting married.”

As the words left her mouth, she wanted to clap her hand across it. She’d never said as much so bluntly, but outrage and betrayal at her family had pushed her far past her ability to remain polite. She allowed herself to feel triumphant that she had kept her voice from rising into a shriek, and that she hadn’t leapt to her feet and overturned the table. People were, after all, sleeping.

Without turning her head, Ferron’s mother said, “What have I done to deserve such an unfilial daughter?” Her voice was low, inflectionless, as if she were speaking to herself or to the absent gods.

“You have three married daughters, Mother, and they all live here in this kinblock with you and their spouses and children.” Ferron did not point out that that was unusual, that her two sisters who had married men should by rights have moved in with their husbands’ families. But one of her brothers-in-law—Charu’s husband—was an orphan, and the other—Bulbul’s husband—hated his family.

Having met his family at the wedding, Ferron could not have agreed more with his decision. She gathered that there was still a lot of bad blood because he had moved in with his wife’s kingroup, but he never brought it up, so Ferron didn’t, either. Possibly if she had been home for family dinners more often, she’d know the details.

Maybe her mother was right, and she was a terrible daughter.

Bijli mausi said, “You don’t want to die a spinster, surely, and you don’t have that much time before you ‘lose your freshness’—”

“I do,” Ferron said. “I *do* want to die a spinster. I have every intention of dying a spinster. Any further questions?”

Two of them stared at her and one stared away. Preeti's lips parted ominously. Madhuvanathi's jaw tightened, even more ominously. From among the shadows of the garden there came a shriek and a flapping noise, then the cartoonish inflections of Chairman Miaow: "Bad fox! Bad boy!"

Ferron jerked to her feet, upsetting her teacup with the force of her relief for an excuse to escape.

"Pardon me," she said over her shoulder as she fled the table. "The pets are fighting!"

* * *

She was back in her own room, with two unrepentant pets, when she began to admit to herself that it was all a little bit funny. "There is no honor under the bus," she muttered to herself. At least nobody had noticed her foot.

She went to make herself tea before remembering that she'd left her teacup on the patio. She was certainly not going back out there to get it! She could print another . . . no, what she needed was to go to bed.

In an ideal world, sleeping was what she was supposed to be doing. Right now. Because that afternoon she had to testify at the arraignment for a murder suspect, and she'd rather not try to do that while full of hypomania-inducing brain chemicals or while constantly yawning.

She looked through her kit until she found a six-hour sleep patch. She changed into pajamas, put the patch on behind her ear, and settled down in bed to practice pranayama. It had a tendency to send her to sleep when she *wanted* to stay awake. Maybe she could soothe her family-jangled nerves, and use that to her advantage.

* * *

When she awoke, she bathed, dressed, and sneaked out of the kinblock like a fugitive. She left by the back door, without even checking in to the common room to say good morning (or rather, good afternoon) and grab some lunch, because that would have required seeing her family. She made her way down to the corner, where a bus was just due. She missed it by thirty seconds; the route data in her omni was apparently mistimed.

Sighing, she walked another hundred meters to a share stand and used her official card to check out an e-bike. The only one left on the stand was old, wobbly, and smelled like pee. Ferron hoped it was only the tires and was nevertheless glad of her uniform gloves as she climbed on board.

It was going to be one of those days. Traffic was a hideous snarl even by Bengaluru standards. By the time she made it through the ancient, meandering streets to the courthouse, she was so thoroughly soaked in sweat that even the conditioned fabric of her uniform was having a hard time wicking it away. How could it be this humid without raining? Was there such a thing as a super-saturated atmosphere?

But the sun still glared down from a blue, transparent sky.

The courthouse was a masterpiece of modern architecture, fleshing the bones of ancient tradition. The red-stone structure of the old courthouse now stood under a bower of solar hypertrees, five times taller than ordinary suntrees. Freestanding green walls surrounded the building in a labyrinth designed for equal parts cooling, contemplation, and anti-terrorism. Once Ferron passed between them and under the shade of the trees, the sweat cooled from her brow, and the fabric of her uniform began unsticking itself from the crevices of her body. The fabric tech stood a fighting chance now. She swigged water from her chiller bottle and felt lightheaded from the cold and remedial hydration.

Indrapramit met her at the courthouse doors. Solar glass a good two stories tall, the doors swiveled at the center, granting access to the centuries-old façade they enclosed. They protected not just from heat, but from ultraviolet light, acid rain, and other hazards of an ever-changing environment.

He wiped a hand across his brow and flicked it dramatically, as if to discard beads

of sweat. “Phew.”

“I thought carbon values were meant to be dropping,” Ferron said.

“Weather is not climate,” he recited primly, then frowned at her. “You look terrible.”

“Just my old pain in the family flaring up again.” She stepped past and went into the cool shade of the interior. “Any news on our missing person?”

It was a conversational opener. If something really dramatic—such as a corpse—had turned up, she would have been informed.

“They haven’t found the note. The recycling hadn’t been collected, so we know it wasn’t in there. Where it is, however . . . has not yet been determined. But Forensics turned up Beli Handi’s login to this very exclusive social media site for effectualizers. Secret and invite-only. Apparently it’s where the cool kids hang out.”

Her pulse quickened. “Did they scrape it?”

“It’s set up so that no archiving is possible. Real-time interaction and messaging only.”

“My mom would hate that.”

“She would,” Indrapramit agreed. “But if you have a bunch of high-powered clients who want to feel safe so they can complain about their fan base or whatever, and never have to worry about recordings of that interaction being released where fans can find them . . .”

“Oh,” said Ferron. “Then I guess I need to go in.”

“Why you?”

“Why not me?” They moved down a long, pale corridor filled with quiet people as likely to be paying attention to their feeds or their internal turmoil as they were to other occupants of physical, rather than virtual, reality. Ferron stayed ready to sidestep.

“You’re not exactly plugged in to the hottest virtual trends,” Indrapramit said.

“I’ve got a lot of research ahead of me,” she agreed. “We’ve got a lot of legwork in general.”

“It’s only three weeks since our previous vanishing person, Dexter Coffin! This hardly seems fair.”

“Welcome to police work in the twenty-first century. It’s our dharma,” she said. Police work in the earlier part of the century, she reflected, would have been very different. Bengaluru had been a rough town then, with hundreds of murders and uncounted assaults per year. Things were quieter now; the economy more stable, economic inequality less oppressive. The city no longer experienced a huge influx of money and privilege that left too many of its long-term residents with a sense that their only option to flourish was to turn to crime.

Murder now tended to be more of a bespoke business. Or sometimes wholesale. She looked guiltily at her partner, hoping he did not read the reflexive worry in her expression. He was doing fine. Nobody should have to go through what he had gone through—witnessing a mass murder in progress and intervening with lethal force to stop it—but he seemed to be weathering it well.

The unwitting object of her examination rubbed his neck. “At least we’re rested this time.”

“We won’t be,” Ferron predicted gloomily. “I’ve got to figure out how to impersonate a teenage web celebrity.”

Indrapramit raised a finger at her, then shook his head and grinned, mostly on the left side of his face. He brought his hand down again and opened the courtroom door.

The arraignment was brief and routine. The suspect chose to ignore the existence of Indrapramit and Ferron, who preferred that to glares.

As they left, Indrapramit asked, “What now?”

Ferron rolled her shoulders. “I guess I find a coworking space and start on my homework, unless we catch another case. Were you tuned in for morning briefing?”

"I opted for evening," he said. "After being up all night, I was asleep. You were too?"

"No, unfortunately. My family kept me up until all hours." That was not precisely fair. Nobody had followed her back to her room . . . at least in person. Their expectations, however . . .

She gestured dismissively. She didn't feel like going over it right now.

Her partner frowned at her appraisingly. "Have you eaten lunch?"

"Honestly? I haven't even eaten breakfast yet."

* * *

Indrapramit leaned back and folded his hands across his belly. "Well, it's about time they modernized the court system. It's silly to make us drag ourselves all the way downtown on somebody else's shift schedule when we could avatar in."

"The accused still have the right to face their accusers," Ferron reminded gently. With two cups of masala tea inside her and most of a potato dosa, she was feeling much more at home in the universe. "We're monitoring her logins, right? Just in case she turns up using them?"

Or in case somebody else had stolen them, and gotten Beli Handi out of the way in order to do so. Her accounts were a valuable property, and money was one of the classic motivations for kidnapping *and* murder.

Ferron had to keep reminding herself not to assume that Beli Handi was dead. Her fear in the recording had been so palpable. Why had she run? Why had she gone to all the trouble to make her way to the police station, and then vanished before the help she sought had arrived?

Ferron linked her partner to her feed and queried Conan, one of the department's expert systems. *Did anybody follow up on the Beli Handi threat report?*

Apparently the answer was yes. There was a follow-up filed the next day: an officer had visited the effectualizer's flat and been turned away. Beli Handi no longer wished to file a report. It had all been a misunderstanding.

"Somebody got to her," Indrapramit said. "Somebody got to her while she was at the police station, theoretically disconnected from her feed because she was in hiding."

Ferron nodded. "The theory suits the evidence." A bite of food was forgotten in her hand. She stopped speaking then, because she was concentrating on delimiting more search parameters for Conan. He excelled at ferreting out and sorting the kind of interactions that it would take a human investigator weeks or months to pick through.

While she waited for Conan to come back with his results, Ferron ordered another tea and started her own research—the sort she couldn't just outsource to an expert system—painstakingly going through the feeds of a glittery teenage celebrity to get a sense of her personality and motivations. It was exactly the sort of thing that Ferron, reveling in the stodgy meticulousness of her own nature as a frustrated academic, usually strove to avoid.

She didn't immerse to access the feeds—she'd learned a few months ago that the with-it term was *cascade*, which made her feel as if she knew something useful already—so she had some insulation from the jangle of animations, shimmery pop-ups, and other attention-demanding tactics. The feed—the cascade—was typical of its breed, as far as Ferron could see: a handsome young person, expensively dressed, with a combination of selfies and point-of-view posts designed to immerse the observer in the diva's perfect world, no matter how imaginary that world might actually turn out to be.

There were a lot of shots of scenic locations—expensive, resource-consuming travel that most people would never manage, given the demands of carbon offsets and social responsibility. She found images of Beli Handi and her programmed avatar—a disturbingly sexy cartoon hedgehog—posed among the Hogenakkal Falls, against the pale moonscapes of Leh, dancing over the painted slopes of the Valley of Flowers.

There were also shots of coffee and teashops (quirky), restaurants (chic), hotels (glam), and boutiques (exclusive).

There were many posts showing the interior of Beli Handi's flat in a variety of stylish and probably expensive, nonstandard configurations. Some of them featured the bioprinter, which was also expensive and nonstandard. Beli Handi had apparently used it to bioprint a living replica of her sexy cartoon hedgehog avatar, a lapse of judgment that Ferron was afraid she would never be able to unsee.

After a half hour, Ferron found herself flipping through the cascade of endlessly smiling, perfectly made-up faces; perfectly composed shots of landscapes and cafés and food; and close-ups of manicures with a growing sense of pity. This was not a real life, with good days and bad days and respiratory infections and pets that love you, even though you smell bad and didn't get the right kind of cat food. This was a life perfectly composed, with a pause for documentation before every act. This was a life that probably required staff, and a lot of trips to the hairdresser.

Beli Handi was either a pretty good graphic designer, or she paid somebody to do it.

Possibly paid in "exposure," Ferron thought bitterly. That was probably unfair, but she was still traumatized by the hedgehog.

"Huh," she said, and realized that she had spoken out loud when Indrapramit looked up at her from across the table, popped out of his own deep dive into virtual archaeology. He tilted his head in a question.

"Do you see any unicorns in Beli Handi's cascade?" she asked, proud of herself for using the word right.

"Her story, you mean?" He grinned at her.

She almost flicked a lump of potato at him. "Is that what the cool kids are calling it these days? Slang goes out of date so fast."

Indrapramit frowned, unfocused. She assumed he was backscrolling. "Nope. Do you think she had just printed them? And never got around to using them as props?"

People *would* log in for footage of tiny, adorable multicolor unicorns. Pets—especially exotic and expensive pets—were always an attention economy winner. However complicated Ferron's feelings about bioprints were. "That indicates plans, doesn't it?" she said. "Something other than cutting a runner?"

"We should check with her staff, if she had staff. Cleaners, at least. Probably a personal assistant. Hairdresser, makeup artist. I suppose that's all my assignment?"

"You can check in with her family too," Ferron said.

"She was alienated from her family." He sighed, and nodded belated agreement. "All right, that might be a lead."

"If you want the plum jobs, study hard and get promoted," Ferron said. "You could be spending all day immersed in the inner life of an eighteen-year-old who apparently doesn't have one."

* * *

She knew that what she'd said had been unfair. She knew that this young woman—emancipated from her family, probably in fear for her life—was not merely taking the guaranteed income. She was making her own way in the world, experiencing success in a difficult career—entertainment—that required her to maintain and constantly service a public façade and persona. Ferron found it challenging enough to keep her uniform clean and pressed and her hair tidy and her face made up to the right standard of enough but not too much every single day. She'd be completely at sea trying to keep up appearances on the scale required to participate meaningfully in the attention economy.

And the more time she spent immersed in the details of Beli Handi's life, the more she started to appreciate just how much work it really was to present that seamless, flawless appearance to the world. Even the relatable early-morning dishevelment

and the images of disarray accompanying the even-more relatable screeds about how she just couldn't get it together were artfully lit, carefully composed, and full of clever touches. And her lipstick was always perfect. It might have been tattooed on, except the tint and gloss changed. Maybe it was something new?

Ferron made a note to herself to check. Unsmudgeable lipstick that always matched your outfit seemed like a pipe dream, and it was probably way out of her price range. Buuuut . . .

Mind on your job, Sub-Inspector, she thought.

Her attention was drawn to a video blog from a few months before about being sick on the couch. It was all recorded from Beli Handi's feed—the optics in her contacts were incredible—and contained a most artfully composed point-of-view pan of fluffy cushions and crumpled tissues ready for the composter, angles on a reader and an omni in designer cases, and a glimpse of a bigger screen in the background with the manufacturer's logo just visible. The coffee table showcased trendy clutter—hand-blown glass animals in fashionable colors. A candle in a transparent cup. Another cup with a curl of steam arising off the surface of the tea within. Some vintage pens and a real paper notebook, open to a rather decent sketch. "Desirable" objects arranged in a flattering way, with just a hint of real-world dishevelment.

No, Ferron wouldn't want to do that much work with a cold. *Showering* was enough work when you had a cold.

And then there were the people who appeared with Beli Handi in her cascade. There were no family members, only a select few friends at any given time. They all seemed to also be virtual-famous, judging from the comments and crosslinks. The rate of recurrence with which one or another appeared seemed to change over time.

Was it just the natural propensity of people to befriend others in their own line of work? Did Beli Handi have unbranded social media accounts somewhere that she used to keep track of her real friends? Did she just not do anything that wasn't part of Being An Effectualizer?

Ferron generated a quick frequency map of secondary characters in the feed to check her hunch, and sent it off to Conan to check against the identities and popularities of the various other effectualizers he'd been tracking for her.

Meanwhile, she kept digging, flipping through posts and watching the tiresomely perky videos. Forcing herself to pay attention when her mind wanted to wander. Ordering more tea on the pad and drinking it slowly when the server brought it. Indrapramit waved a plate of biscuits under her hand without making eye contact, and she ate one absently.

Maybe the sugar helped her think, but she realized that she was abruptly looking at a lot of posts that contained Muluhi, the other missing girl. The one who had disappeared some weeks previously. She and Beli Handi gave every appearance of being the best of friends—embracing each other's shoulders, standing up to their ankles in the surf of a reclaimed-sand beach as the sun blazed down on their glossy heads, laughing and dancing in some late-night club, arms twined drinking cocktails.

Living their best lives. Or giving the appearance of it, and was there any difference between being and seeming in this modern world?

And if so, what was the difference between seeming . . . and dreaming? Being one of the millions of followers who enjoyed these images, fantasized about them, made up stories for themselves of how happy they would be if their own lives were only that photogenic? Providing the advertising and subscription and merchandising rupees that sustained this lifestyle, so they could buy face cream or a pair of jeans or a cheongsam, and fantasize about it the more?

The girls had gone to Delhi together, it seemed. Images of the Red Fort, the Lotus Temple, the New Towers, the Qutb Minar—all envy-inducing. Ferron bit her lip and

reminded herself that it was designed to be, that that was the marketing ploy.

Ferron stopped to examine one short loop of Muluhi and Beli Handi reflected together in the mirrored pool in front of the Taj Mahal. You could see the white face of the empty tomb behind them, rippled by the water, like their faces. Beli Handi must have looped the image from her contacts, because there was no omni visible in the shot. Ferron dropped the post out of her feed and into her own omni, to study it at better resolution.

She thought again, with mild envy, that Beli Handi could afford expensive contacts, to capture a resolution like that. Even Ferron's police-issue contacts—suitable for recording evidence, outfitted with infrared and ultraviolet and magnification and a couple of other useful tricks—couldn't capture so much detail. Was the brand noted in the metadata?

It was, along with the serial number. She told herself not to covet, and sent the number along to Conan. He could scan the internet for posts made by the same contacts, and find out if Beli Handi was (or had been) posting under some other identity. Or if her gear had turned up on the black market and was in use by somebody else.

The girls looked happy. Pretty. Vital, skinny, with clear, fair skin . . . and very young. They were alive, their hair very black, their eyes glittering. No ripple disturbed the sharpness of the outlines that their bright, fashionable designer clothing cut against the stark white exterior of the empty tomb. Ferron wondered abstractly if it were possible to get a picture of the reflection of the temple and the reflection of your own face at the same time, or if the angles were impossible, and some photo-editing magic had been used to manufacture the striking image.

The clothes were printed from patterns licensed out of Paris, Beijing, and Hong Kong, which Ferron knew because the designers were all tagged in the loop's metadata. Jewelry as well, and some of it was hand-forged metal, not printed.

The empty tomb.

It gave Ferron one more frisson, sharper than the last one. Following a hunch, she clicked on Muluhi's page.

It was still up, still active. The last post was dated six weeks previous. She opened the comments, something she never did in her private life. She scrolled through.

Comments were still open. At first, there had been the usual chatter ("Your hair looks amazing!" "Please tell us about your skin care routine!"), but the more recent ones were about 60 percent concern ("Please check in, Muluhi, we miss you!" "You're a beautiful soul! I hope you're okay!") and the kind of violence you only find in forums where the poster could expect to remain anonymous ("Bitch you owe us, how can you leave us like this?" "Guess she got too good for her fans!! I hope somebody fucks her up!!").

That last person, Ferron thought, *needed an adjustment to their right-minding*. She read a few more-recent posts, and thought they seemed strained. Posturing, as if something were going on in the subtext. A picture of a dog running along a beach at sunrise with the caption *Be here now* shouldn't necessarily have seemed sinister. But wasn't it the sort of thing people told themselves when feeling oppressed by external forces, things that were out of their own control?

She started skipping back, not really sure what she was looking for. Letting her brain seek out patterns and make connections, if there were any there to be made. This feed seemed much of a piece with Beli Handi's. Muluhi was more prone to photos of beautiful sunsets and sunrises and slightly sweaty, glowing selfies after yoga practice, often coupled with the kind of glib philosophy that seemed deeply meaningful when you were nineteen or twenty.

Ferron was wincing so hard, she realized, because Muluhi reminded her of herself

at that age. Prettier, certainly. Much more fashionable. And interested in the Hindu classics, with a sensible degree in computer science, rather than having wasted years of academia on the Greek and Roman classics. But very earnest, from a hard-working family of strained resources, and trying very, very hard to be spiritual.

"Desperate to feel like an old soul," was how Ferron had described her younger self as she matured, and came to know herself, and grew out of the passionate need to front who she thought she ought to be. It was just as well that she'd reacted so strongly against her mother's AR addiction that she'd barely bothered with a social media account, even when she was younger. She'd be mortified to think what she, now, would feel about the online legacy of her own very earnest, very clueless larval stage.

She wondered how the class difference between Muluhi and Beli Handi had felt to Muluhi. It's one thing to walk away from family money when you're making a pile of your own. It's another never to have had much and to start earning it for yourself.

However differently they'd started off, Muluhi and Beli Handi seemed to have wound up in similar places: with entirely more money—or at least sponsor support—than was healthy. Ferron noticed similarities in their household furnishings, such as elaborate coffee tables by the same rarified Beijing designer (Ferron had to look him up). Muluhi also had a live-turf carpet in her flat, though hers was a carpet of tiny gold and purple flowers on some engineered plant that looked exquisitely soft.

I could covet that rug, Ferron thought and laughed at herself again. She was supposed to.

Muluhi had better taste in bioprinted pets than Beli Handi. No cartoonishly sexy bipedal hedgehog from the depths of the uncanny valley here, at least, thank all the gods of several religions. Muluhi had printed herself a baby flying fox, which waddled around adorably on its folded wings, squeaking for bites of fruit. It seemed to spend a lot of time swaddled in a hand towel, so it didn't matter that its program of stereotyped behaviors was a fairly short loop.

Those posts garnered almost as much engagement as the yoga selfies. Apparently the flying fox—a kind of fruit bat—was a hit with everybody. Ferron, who had met sugar gliders once and had to work very hard not to slip any of them under her tunic and out of that house, was not immune to its charm. Baby foxes and kittens that would never grow up seemed more acceptable to her hindbrain than full-grown sexy hedgehogs or a herd of programmable tiny unicorns.

Conan provided a report on the follower counts of both cascades and obtained a history of Beli Handi's account, and one of Muluhi's. It looked like both had experienced a spike when they started spending time together, and that this generally happened when two such people began focusing their accounts on a mutual relationship. A few people would leave, but a percentage of the followers of each would start following both accounts. So the stepladder progression by which people spent time with effectualizers just a little bit more internet-famous than they were, then moved on to a slightly different but overlapping circle of people, made sense.

It was career development.

Muluhi had looked like a genuine friend, though. And Beli Handi had been pretty broken up about her. Beli Handi had, at least, continued to remain friends with the other young woman, even though Beli Handi's follower counts had been on a steep rise, while Muluhi's had first leveled off, and then—in the weeks before her disappearance—began dropping.

On a hunch, Ferron compared Muluhi's follower count to her cascade. The posts that seemed desperate to her, and a little sad, all came after the downward trajectory of her follower numbers.

"Indrapramit?"

He looked up. “We should order more tea?”

Paying rent on the table was the time-honored cost of working in teashops. “Probably, but what I was about to say was that I’d appreciate it if you’d track down what happened to Muluhi’s bioprint fruit bat after she vanished. Did a friend or family member take it in hand? Did it wind up as evidence? Is it still in the property room, eating fruit from people’s lunches? Was it disassembled?”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this—”

“Neither am I.” She shook her head as if a fly was buzzing near her. “It’s just an angle both cases have in common. Bioprints.”

“It looks like nobody is *really* actively working the Muluhi case. Do you want me to request it?” he said.

By rights, they probably shouldn’t be *really* actively working the Beli Handi case, either. People changed identities, swapped faces, changed careers. People got sick of one life and took off for another. But Beli Handi had been scared, and Beli Handi had mentioned her missing friend. And now there were two girls missing. Two girls who had known each other. Who had worked in the same industry. Who had been, if Ferron was reading the follower counts right, on-the-make strivers. Rising stars, or at least moderately successful, teetering back and forth at the brink of a real breakout. Or a collapse.

Two girls who had probably shared a lot of the same acquaintances and friends.

It niggled.

Things that niggled often turned out to be the loose thread that, if you picked at it enough, unraveled the whole crime.

“Yes,” Ferron said slowly.

“Sure, boss,” he said. “I can do that. What are you going to be doing?”

“I’m going to be playing auntie.” When he frowned, puzzled, she smiled and elaborated. “I’m going to find out which of the other girls in Beli Handi’s pics have more followers than she does, and which ones she started hanging out with recently. Hopefully all of them are still alive and have not vanished.”

“Well.” The tea Indrapramit had ordered arrived. He thanked the server and said, “If any of them are not alive, or *have* vanished, that will tell us something.”

* * *

They were still at the teashop for evening briefing, though they’d moved on to conducting remote interviews with Beli Handi’s friends and associates, and had ordered more snacks and sweets in lieu of tiffin. Her family *had* been notified of the disappearance, as she hadn’t specified another emergency contact. They’d wanted to move in immediately and claim Beli Handi’s flat and personal possessions. They’d been aggressive enough about it that Ferron had been forced to involve a police solicitor to make legal threats about what would happen if they interfered materially with an ongoing investigation. Or claimed property that was not, legally, theirs.

“Even if she’s found to be dead, whatever she left behind will be distributed according to her will,” the solicitor said. His image, skinned in Ferron’s contacts, folded its arms. “They can’t just come *take* it. I’ll make sure there’s a police bot guarding the door, and that the premises are sealed by judicial order.”

“How long before she can be declared dead by her heirs? Or presumed heirs?” Ferron said.

“It’s shorter than it used to be.” The solicitor scratched the bridge of his fleshy nose with the pads of two fingers. “Three years, from legislation passed in 2042. Those were the Bad Years.”

Ferron was not old enough to remember, but she had heard. People *had* just vanished a lot in those days. Some had died; some had relocated. Some had walked into the mountains or the sea and never walked out again. It had seemed as if the whole world was likely to be on fire, under water, or baked to the stone before long, and what

central authorities remained had had bigger problems than keeping track of people.

Authoritarian governments on the Chinese model had encouraged cultural hegemony through investment and trade. Authoritarian governments on the American model sacrificed economic power and standing on the world stage in order to isolate themselves in fear. It hadn't been a population bottleneck, but it hadn't been a good time for the human species, either.

Ferron had been born in the years after, when the population was recovering, when new standards of living and technology and polite social behavior were emerging. She'd grown up in a time of hope for returning stability and careful management of the health and welfare of the planet and of the human race. Now, she was coming to realize that it was a cycle that might never be broken. Struggle, plenty, entitlement, collapse.

She supposed she couldn't really blame her mother for her desire to hide herself in a virtual realm. The Bad Years had left a mark of trauma on everybody who survived them. Ferron and her sisters had never had much luck getting their mother to seek treatment.

How hard, she wondered, had they really tried? Had there been ways in which they could have tried harder?

Something clicked in her head. "*Did* either of the two missing women leave a will?"

A brief pause on the solicitor's end. "Both of them, it looks like. We'd need a court order to access those."

"Is that unusual for eighteen-, nineteen-year-olds?"

The solicitor—Mephit by name—nodded slowly in Ferron's feed. "Ye-es. And something else that's not typical—"

"What?"

"Both of them had their liquid assets in a kind of complicated trust. Put there not long before they vanished. Both trusts are managed by a nonprofit I haven't been able to find out much about. It seems to serve a lot of people in their industry."

"Huh," Ferron said.

"Careers aren't long, apparently. The ones that earn anything, they earn a lot and then have to live on it for the rest of their lives. Or rely on just the guaranteed income."

"Rough, once you've got a taste for travel and bioprinted pets," Ferron said.

"Oh, that's another interesting thing. Most of the stuff in their flats?"

"Stolen goods?" Ferron said hopefully.

"Sponsorships," said Mephit. "They didn't buy those bioprinters. The bioprinter manufacturer gave them to them on loan, for the advertising. They've already contacted us—the legal department, I mean—asking for their property back."

"It's evidence," Ferron said automatically.

Mephit smiled wider. "That's what I told them."

* * *

Ferron made her excuses and went home, for a change, at a reasonable hour. The drawback to this was that it was also a peak travel period, and traffic was even heavier than usual.

Ferron pedaled away on the packed bus, feeling a bit like a Roman galley slave. Although the slaves hadn't had audiobooks. She watched traffic out the window, the streams of sharecars and bicycles and pedestrians and so forth, thinking about what it must have been like in the teeming city when the streets were dirty and full of careening animals. Or when they were full of rickshaws and gasoline cars, and people who were employed had to go someplace to do their job almost all the time, rather than working in their homes.

So many people needing to get from one point to another. So many people not pleased to be dealing with other people while they were doing it.

She approached the front door this evening, rather than sneaking around to the back. She gathered her courage while pretending to pause and enjoy the cool of twilight.

She had nothing to hide. She was a valuable and contributing member of this family. She owed her mother and aunts and sisters and cousins a duty: she owed them loyalty and support and love. But it seemed to her that it was reasonable—more than reasonable—to want something for herself as well. To want to serve the family in her own way, and not by fulfilling a role as a wife and mother that she had no desire for.

Surely there was room in this modern world for her to be dutiful in her own way?

Ferron left her sandals with the line outside the door. The dressing on her foot was smudged with dust after the long day. Maybe nobody would notice it.

She wished she were wearing a skirt, or a sari, so she could hide her foot under it when she sat. But there was no time now to go to her flat and change. She would have to make do with her uniform.

She took a deep breath and walked into the big front room.

It was packed, her family gathering and jostling for position, a cloth spread on the floor for dinner and platters being carried in from the kitchen. The food smelled delicious, and the aroma made Ferron faintly sick. Her stomach roiled with too many sweets and too much sweet tea.

You did it to yourself, she told herself firmly. She went to wash her hands, and when she came back, her sister Bulbul and her cousin Aditi had edged apart so she could squeeze in between. The offered spot was diplomatically far from Ferron's mother, presenting another dilemma. She could accept it, and the implied refusal to acknowledge the argument—Ferron would not call it a rift—or she could cause a scene by asking relatives closer to Madhuvanathi to push over.

She wanted to talk to her mother. Cantankerous with frustration and narcissistic with addiction as Madhuvanathi was, she was still Ferron's mother. And Ferron's emotions formed a complicated twist at the sight of her up and about, interacting with people, no longer waiting in her room for a tray that she might or might not consume.

Ferron eyed her mother, who was chatting with Preeti mausi, ignoring Ferron. *She might*, Ferron thought, *be in slightly better flesh*. Her color was *definitely* better. Even without the archive, though, Ferron would have expected her to spend her time in the digital spaces she had inhabited since the death of Ferron's father, decades before.

Ferron herself barely remembered him. She felt his absence as the aching lack of something ill-defined that ought to be there—like not having found one's purpose in life. Like never having gotten to meet the beings who had sent one a last, desperate message before their world was sterilized by the radiation of a dying star. And she suspected that a certain amount of that emotion derived from the expectations she'd been raised with, as much as actually missing somebody she'd barely known.

She was fortunate that her family—large and noisy and brawling—had taken her and her mother back in after they were bereaved. She knew as a police officer that some—many—would not, especially when Madhuvanathi had been ruined by grief, gone Atavistic, withdrawn into the shell of her imaginings. Living a make-believe life in a pretend ancient world.

But her aunts had raised her and her older sisters. She'd never wanted for anything, including a useless but thrilling education that had led to no job in academia, and left her entirely overqualified to be police. She'd been surprised at how much she loved being police.

So many complicated emotions. So much tangled up in a family. So much loss and love, so many unadmitted conflicts, so many unsatisfied desires. She was glad that Indrapramit was handling the interviews with Beli Handi's people. She didn't even really want to review them, but that would be dereliction of duty.

As she looked at her family, she was reminded of how unusual it was. So many

women; so few men and boys. But *her* family, and perfect in all its catastrophic lunacy.

She sat down where she was welcomed, between Bulbul and Aditi, and took a napkin from the stack.

Sandhya mausi was serving, plates filling and zooming down the table with an efficiency that would have shamed an automated assembly line. When Ferron arrived, the table was heaped with enough biriyani to make her regret every delicious banana fritter she'd consumed. Sandhya was eyeing her, though, and she'd never offend the woman who fed her pets while she worked—and who cooked so deliciously and made sure she never went hungry as well.

A notification blinked at the edge of her vision. A message from Indrapramit. Scooping rice with her spoon, she opened it.

DON'T MOST PEOPLE WHO BUY THOSE BIOPRINTERS USE THEM TO PRINT SEX TOYS?

She shuddered and hoped Sandhya didn't think it was the food. Just in case her aunt had noticed, she rapidly ate another bite, fixing an expression of bliss on her face. It wasn't hard; the food was good enough to take away the unpleasant taste of her partner's question.

Chewing, she responded, IF YOU DID, WOULD YOU PUT THAT IN YOUR STORY?

THERE'S A FEED FOR EVERYONE, he answered.

She drank water rapidly to keep from choking on the rice with laughter. She was composing a suitably scathing reply when her mother's voice, vague and strained and meant to be overheard, reached her across the general babble of conversation: "Look at Tamanna, not even paying attention to her dinner when Sandhya slaved over a hot stove making this delicious food for us all."

The general babble of conversations died. Ferron was aware of a dozen or so family members all avoiding looking at her.

She swallowed the mouthful of rice and wished she had the time to adjust her brain chemistry. If she had any sense, she'd just wear a GABA precursor patch the entire time she was at home.

Nothing in her stressful, occasionally horrifying job gave her as much anxiety as dealing with her mother. She knew what this was: part of her ongoing punishment for cutting her mother off financially. Just like the matrimonial ad. There would be a dozen other small punishments before the month was out. If Madhuvanathi was forced to deal with the real world, she would entertain—or revenge—herself by making that world as unpleasant as possible for her youngest daughter.

Ferron drank water, composed her expression, and took her time in answering. Any strain in her voice, any sign of anger or reactivity, would only be exploited to create further upset and drama.

Gently, she said, "I go by Ferron now, Amma."

"The name I gave you isn't good enough for you?"

Ferron was extremely proud of herself for not pointing out that Madhuvanathi was not the name her grandmother had given her mother, either.

It didn't matter. None of this was about Ferron's stated, ostensible failings. All of it was about Madhuvanathi scrabbling to find some way to exert power over her again. To get some sense of control back. There was no way for Ferron to win this encounter if she engaged. And it was too late; she had already engaged.

Sandhya mausi, who was actually a great-aunt, placed a restraining hand on her niece's arm. "Madhu," she said.

Madhuvanathi suffered the restraint. Sandhya might have been the only person in the family with the authority to pull that off.

"Mausiji." Ferron plied her spoon again. "I meant no disrespect. I saw a message from work and wanted to make sure it was not urgent. The biriyani is delicious."

It was. She didn't mind stuffing a mouthful of rice and egg and spices into her face to illustrate.

Madhuvanathi didn't quite dare shake Sandhya's hand off her arm, but she did put the other palm to her forehead. "Darlings, I'm sorry, I don't feel well. Charu and Mara, will you help me to my room?"

With a sidelong glance at Ferron, hiding her eyeroll behind her hair, Mara turned away from her wife and got to her feet. Ferron held the gaze for a moment, offering sisterly support in the same silent language they had all learned since childhood. Charu, who had been scooping up rice for her younger son, took a moment longer. "Coming, Amma."

She winked at Bulbul and Ferron as she levered herself to her feet.

They all knew an intentional slight when they heard one. Ferron was ignored by the fact of being Ferron; Bulbul because she had made space for her sister.

Ferron pasted an expression of filial concern over her exasperation and watched politely as her sisters each took one of Madhuvanathi's arms and helped up the older woman, who was only sixty or so. Madhuvanathi leaned heavily on her daughters, but stood. Ferron found herself observing with compressed lips and made her jaw relax. How much malingering had she fallen for, over the years?

Depression is not malingering, she reminded herself, feeling ashamed. But she didn't return to her food until Madhuvanathi was out of sight, and when she did, it didn't taste as delicious. She finished it anyway, because Sandhya deserved no less.

She left to tend her altar and care for her pets. Then, in order to ease the burden of double-tiffin plus dinner, she spent some time in the playroom and garden with nieces and nephews and young cousins, playing hide-and-go-seek and a peculiar ball game of the kids' own invention, which seemed to have very strict rules that no grownup was competent to understand. Ferron suspected that it was actually a complicated hazing ritual.

When bedtimes started to roll around, she said good night to the family members still lingering in the common areas, took herself back to her flat, folded all the furniture away, and practiced her neglected martial arts for an hour with extensive help from the parrot-cat. The fox watched in amused condescension.

"A pity you don't solve murders like the cats in stories," Ferron said to Chairman Miaow. The cat purred at her and complained that her fingers smelled too spicy.

"I can fix that," Ferron said.

She climbed into the shower, and then—after one last potty break for the fox—opened her bed and got in it. She did not manage to complete her usual five minutes of relaxation and mindful breathing before the warm, dark gulf of sleep yawned wide and claimed her.

* * *

She awakened before dawn, niggled by something, the room so bright she thought she had slept through her alarm.

It was a cold brightness, though, and after a moment she realized that it was the star, shining beneath the open shade on her window. Chairman was curled on top of the cover and between Ferron's knees, her indigo plume draped daintily over her face. Smoke lay sprawled at the foot of the bed, beside rather than on top of the blanket that Ferron had spread there for him.

He was snoring faintly.

She drew the shade remotely and composed herself again for sleep. Despite the purring warmth of the cat, however, sleep did not come—even when she relaxed every part of her body in sequence, starting with the crown of her head and ending with her toes.

There were melatonin patches in her kit, but the kit was out of reach across the

room, and she didn't want to disturb the cat. All civilization might fall, but the gods forbend one disturb a cat.

She didn't have her contacts in. They were in the bathroom, soaking in disinfectant. But her omni lay within reach, if she snaked an arm out from under the covers. When she moved, Chairman *murred* in protest and snuggled deeper.

"I'm not going anywhere," Ferron assured her. She turned her omni on and squinted from the glare. It auto-dimmed in the dark, but it never auto-dimmed enough.

There were no messages from people, but Conan's reports had come in. She skimmed them, noticing that they mostly confirmed her hunches: there were definite spikes in the presumed victims' relationships with other effectualizers, and they followed a predictable pattern. They met, there was a flurry of posts, and then both participants moved on to other relationships, and the posts tapered off. Occasionally, there was some playful beefing. Occasionally, there was an apparent real rupture.

The report on the serial numbers of Beli Handi's gear was more edifying. Those exceptionally high-res contacts were a Chinese model. And if Beli Handi had vanished a few days before, her contacts hadn't.

A day later, somebody calling herself WhiteRabbit had begun posting using the exact same pair of contacts.

Ferron blinked at the report, feeling the thrill of the chase. The thrill of resolution, in fact. Had Beli Handi just changed IDs? Maybe gotten a little facial restructuring? You could do that in a day; it wasn't like a full rebuild, which took a week or so plus recovery time.

She rapidly had to abandon her theory once she checked WhiteRabbit's cascade . . . her "story." Her presence was long-established, and the woman behind it looked to be a little older than either Beli Handi or Muluhi. Mid-twenties, perhaps. In any case, her presence online as an adult was traceable to when the other girls would have been in their early teens.

Scrolling through the posts, Ferron felt a stab of despair. It all looked so samey. Fewer manicures and teashops in this one; more gardens and landmarks. The earlier posts were lower-resolution; the last day or so were the scarily crisp, high-definition ones that Ferron had grown accustomed to from the feeds of the missing girls.

She flipped through until she found the most recent selfie of Ms. WhiteRabbit. A good-looking woman—anybody who wanted to be and didn't mind paying could be a good-looking woman in this day and age—with jet-black hair and the requisite fair complexion. She wore long nails, a bindi, and swags of traditional gold in her ears and nose, on her neck and wrists. She looked . . . a little retro, honestly, with a welcoming smile full of artificially white teeth. That took a lot of maintenance if you ever drank coffee or tea.

Maybe that was why her cascade was devoid of teashops.

Ferron reached down with her free hand to stroke the cat, while staring at the face on her omni. So was WhiteRabbit a murderer?

She didn't know.

The woman had appeared once or twice, peripherally, in both Beli Handi's and Muluhi's cascades. She had commented occasionally on their posts. She had a comparable audience to both of theirs. She had not, however, engaged in the kind of like-swapping, audience-growing behavior with them that so many others had—that they had with each other—and it seemed like there wasn't much overlap between her audience and theirs, though Ferron didn't understand why not. They all looked pretty much alike to her.

Maybe it was the age difference. Ferron could not, immediately, find a motive for WhiteRabbit to have made a colleague who wasn't even exactly a professional rival disappear.

I don't know, Ferron thought. But if I can get in touch with her, maybe she can tell me where she got those eyes.

* * *

Ferron devoted as much time as she could over the course of the next few days to research, somewhat to the detriment of her other cases. She and Indrapramit did visit the station house and search it themselves, by hand, for the missing note. Which was nowhere to be found.

"You don't think one of us is involved?" he asked.

Ferron shrugged expressively. How well did you really know colleagues you mostly only met virtually, and then only when the job demanded it?

A notification popped into her feed, the telltale informing her that it related to the Muluhi case. She must have opened it at the same time as Indrapramit, because his eyes met hers significantly a moment later.

"No fruit bat recovered from Muluhi's flat," Indrapramit said.

Ferron nodded. "Just a dozen tiny unicorns."

* * *

The unicorns had been impounded, and were being held at animal control along with Beli Handi's flock. Herd? What was the collective noun for unicorns?

Based on her reflexive, offhand check of search results, the net seemed to think that the appropriate term of ventry was a "blessing." Ferron also learned something that she had not previously known, which was that the majority of such company terms in English dated back to *The Boke of Seynt Albans*, a 1486 AD compilation on hunting, angling, hawking, and so forth, written—or at least collected and translated—by a female scholar named Juliana Berners.

Nobody seemed to know who she was or where she came from, though romantic theories abounded. The most prevalent theory was that she might have been a Benedictine prioress in England. But actual records of her existence beyond her book were hard to find.

Here's to women scholars, Ferron thought, with a pang that wasn't as bad as it might have been ten years previously. *You can write a book that stays in print for six hundred years and add an entire category of humor to a world language, and does the canon remember you?*

The internet didn't seem to know offhand if unicorns were included in Berners's book, or if the term *blessing* was a later addition to the list. Ferron thought it would take longer to set a parameter for Conan to check it than it would to just download the book and read the relevant section herself. Which she would do *later*, she told herself firmly. Around the same time when she checked out the validity of the search result that claimed the iconography of unicorns originated in the Indus Valley.

She was familiar with the species from her own classically focused education. But she hadn't encountered that particular item of information linking them to Hindu mythology before, and made a note to herself to research it.

After she and Indrapramit solved these missing-persons cases. It was far too easy to fall down a hole in research and never get out. She hadn't gotten through graduate school without learning how to avoid that. Well, mostly.

Fortunately, animal control was only a twenty-minute walk from headquarters—a walk that would take a reasonable chunk out of Ferron's exercise requirement for the day. She enjoyed multitasking. It made her feel smug.

The city dog pound (it also handled goats, horses, pigs, foxes, cats, jackals, and—when necessary—pet leopards and the very occasional water buffalo) had been a shiny new building thirty years ago, in the flush of one of Bengaluru's many waves of modernization and the carbon-negative rebirth. Once the city had been overrun with feral dogs. Animal birth control, pay-to-spay, and human education programs

had reduced the problem to the point where the vast majority of the city's animal denizens were actual wild animals, drawn back by the re-greening of urban spaces. Mumbai, Ferron had heard, encouraged its urban leopard population as a means of keeping feral dogs and hogs under control.

But wild jungle cats, slow lorises, and wild monkeys and jackals were not sent to the pound. Only the animals that had been raised to rely on humans for food and shelter, and whose trust had gone unrewarded.

The shininess and newness were long fled, and what was left behind was a green building wilted with under-watering. Ferron felt thirsty just looking at it.

"Is it ever going to rain?" Indrapramit asked.

She laughed, and he stared at her.

"Just thinking that we were on the same page." Her toe ached sympathetically from the proximity to murderous bioprints. "Let's go investigate some tiny unicorns."

The assistant at the desk wasn't programmed to look at them dubiously when Indrapramit presented his credentials and said, "We're here to interview the unicorns." Ferron couldn't help but feel that that was a missed opportunity, and an oversight.

Nevertheless, it directed them back into the bowels of the impound, past sad dogs and pacing dogs and worried dogs. That was bad enough, but the cat room was next. Ferron kept her eyes front to reduce the desire to rescue them all, every one of them, and bring them home with her. Chairman and Smoke would *not* appreciate it, and neither would her family. She was already a terrible, negligent pet owner who wasn't home nearly enough. It was a good thing Smoke and Chairman had each other for companionship—

Stop it, she told the part of her brain that was about to rationalize asking about the very tidy little black tuxedo cat that was staring at her with enormous orange eyes. She hustled forward instead and let her partner fall in behind her as she followed signs to the "exotic pets" section.

Exotic, indeed. Sugar gliders—*no, the fox would eat them*, she thought—and a coati. Hedgehogs, chinchillas, a bat, a tarantula, lizards and pythons ("Snakes are *not* a pet!" Indrapramit said with conviction and a faint edge in his voice), the above-mentioned jackals, and a variety of engineered or bioprinted pets as well. They walked past an American alligator in a tank and past a draggled-looking cockatoo.

Ferron felt a fury rising inside her. Murder was bad enough, but she was used to it, and with the exception of domestic violence and sexual homicide victims, the vast majority of people who got killed had done something to get themselves into that position in the first place. She put murderers away as a vocation, but she no longer felt much outrage about it.

On the other hand, people who didn't take care of their pets—that could still make her angry.

Somebody had apparently put some thought into housing the bioprints, because they were contained in a pair of large terrariums that had been set to have banked bottoms connecting to the sides. The herds—*blessings?*—of miniature unicorns startled as she and Indrapramit approached. They had been standing knee-deep in dried cut grass, munching it with programmed relish. As the police entered their reactivity range, they spooked, snorted, and bolted.

Running did not get them far. They sloshed back and forth in their tanks, first galloping to one end of the enclosure to a tinny thunder of minuscule hooves, then curving against the steep embankment that kept them from running into the tank wall before galloping back down into the valley in the middle and up the other side. Their back-and-forth was as hypnotic as waves coming in their endless ranks against the shore.

Watching the bioprints, Ferron's initial sense of fascination gave way to horror, and

then a resigned sense of inevitability.

Infinitely tired, she said, “I think I know where the bodies are.”

Indrapramit stared at her, then grabbed her by the elbow and turned her away from the tanks—as if he thought the unicorns could hear her and be offended. He was processing his reaction quickly, though, because the first thing out of his mouth was a sensible procedural question: “What do you think happened exactly?”

“I think—” Ferron swallowed. “I think the biomass from Muluhi and from Beli Handi got fed into their bioprinters and used as raw material for those little guys.” She gestured, more vaguely than would have made her feel like she was holding it together. “I think that’s how the killer got rid of the bodies.”

“Hm,” said Indrapramit.

“Can you think of any other logical reason for two young women to be missing and for each of their flats to contain about fifty kilos of unicorns?” Her voice sounded tight, and she hated it.

She loved Indrapramit for ignoring her unprofessionally emotional response. “How do we even tell? How do we prove it? Can you check their DNA?” he said.

“I have no idea.” She hadn’t recovered as quickly as he had. She was still staring at the lovely, brightly colored, delicate little unicorns as if somebody had handed her a bowl full of maggots. “I guess we can try?”

“Right,” he said. She saw the flicker of colors across his contacts as he made the connection and filed the report. “Let’s get some lab work done. And I’ll get Conan pulling some paperwork. Maybe if we can find out who arranged for them to get those printers, we’ll be that much closer to the killer.”

* * *

It turned out bioprints didn’t have DNA, not being expected to reproduce. People often used trash to feed the machines. Spoiled meat, old bones—anything could be used, as long as it had the right minerals and amino acids and there was enough of it. And as a safety measure, a bioprinter wouldn’t take pieces more than twenty centimeters on a side.

“That’s a lot of cutting somebody up and not leaving blood residue all over the place,” Indrapramit said.

“Maybe they froze them and used a chipper on the body parts.”

Ferron knew she was being cutting, but she couldn’t seem to stop. She was sickeningly confident about her conclusion, but she had no way to prove it and no way to move past it unless she did prove it.

“Beli Handi, at least, thought she was being hunted through virtual space. Can net people chop you up and feed you into a bioprinter? Distance-murder style?” Indrapramit said.

“I don’t know,” Ferron said. “But somebody wound up wearing her contacts. And somebody left a pile of her clothes lying empty on the floor.”

* * *

Indrapramit wanted to pull WhiteRabbit in immediately for questioning. Ferron suggested that this was a flawed idea, and might tip their hand to the real criminals. She didn’t think WhiteRabbit was a perpetrator; she thought she was likely being groomed as the next victim. Which meant they had to hurry.

Ferron needed to get to work seriously on impersonating her victim. Well, not *her* victim, the person whose disappearance she was investigating.

She tried to talk to her mother, with predictable results. When she tentatively asked Madhuvanathi for advice on how to seem like a native of a digital space, her mother’s response left . . . something to be desired.

“Really, Tamanna. If you’d wanted my advice on virtual living, perhaps you shouldn’t have deleted my memories.”

Ferron resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose. She likewise resisted the urge to argue with her mother's somewhat contrafactual version of events. She had known her mother's response would be to bust out the guilt cannons. Her own duty, to herself and to her job, was not to rise to the bait and get drawn into a shouting match. Or a bout of sniper warfare, either.

"I'm just wondering about the best way to convincingly impersonate someone," she said. "You're the most skilled roleplay expert I know."

Madhuvanathi was not the originator of the philosophy that when one had lost control of the argument, the most effective strategy was to change the subject and attack. But she was a committed partisan. "Why don't you want to get married?"

Ferron almost fell for it. She had her mouth open to snap back, "Why are you so determined that I have to? There won't be any money then either." But if she did so, then it would have been on.

"I'm not going to bribe you, Amma," she said quietly. "You can have the AR time you can afford. It is good to see you on your feet again."

"It just goes to show how much you even notice me," her mother said bitterly. "I haven't been in AR in two weeks. There's no point without the memories. It doesn't distract me."

Her hand flew in front of her mouth, as if shocked by her own revelation. And Ferron felt a tremendous welling of sympathy and pity.

"I'm sorry, Amma," she said. She put a hand on her mother's arm. Her mother flinched but did not pull away.

"You ought to be sorry," she said nastily. "You ruined my life."

"No," Ferron said. "I mean, I also miss Bapu."

* * *

Afterward, when she walked—each step carefully measured, and the door closed lightly—out of her mother's flat and into the biggest living room, her sister Mara was waiting with a very large beer, which she placed in Ferron's hand without comment or ceremony.

It turned out to be a winning strategy. Ferron took the beer out to the garden and realized halfway through consuming it that while she wanted her mother's acknowledgment and help, she didn't need it.

She interviewed her younger cousins instead.

* * *

Ferron studied the language that effectualizers used; she'd bought a roleplay simulator online and, with Indrapramit's help, programmed it with the persona she meant to use as Beli Handi Mark 2. She had a small panic attack that she would never be ready, that she should have allowed somebody else to take this role, that it was too late now and if she backed down she would look like a coward and a failure to her colleagues and supervisors.

She talked herself down and went back to studying Beli Handi's videos. At least she wouldn't have to replicate the woman's mannerisms live. With or without the help of a skin, that likely would have been impossible to pull off. In artificial reality, the roleplay program would help.

Nevertheless, it took two more days of practice before she felt confident enough in her material to try logging in as Beli Handi. She would perform the insertion from her own flat and just lock the door and set privacy and the sound dampers, in case her mother decided to ignore that. She could have gone to a café, but she needed to concentrate without distractions. At the last moment, though, Ferron decided to review the material about Beli Handi's biography one more time.

She realized partway through this process that she was stalling. It was hard to move from preparation to actualization, but whether she felt ready or not, she needed

to be unstuck more than she needed to be letter-perfect. Somebody's life might be on the line.

The stakes were higher for a cop than for an academic, although the academy didn't like to admit it. Everybody thinks their own field is most critical to the functioning of a civilized society.

Stop it, she told herself. She pasted on an anxiety patch, checked her software to make sure it was firing, and texted Indrapramit to let him know she was going in and to get him linked up on her backchannel. She'd be recording, but it didn't hurt to have somebody else observing in real time. And she did trust her partner's advice.

She navigated to the access link for the social media service. The site name was a random-looking collection of letters and numbers that might have been generated by Chairman walking across a keyboard.

HERE GOES NOTHING, she texted her partner. AR ANTI-HACKING COUNTERMEASURES CAN'T ACTUALLY KILL YOU, RIGHT?

AS FAR AS I KNOW ANY SUCH POSSIBLE MURDER IS UNDOCUMENTED, he replied.

Ferron sobbed a laugh and logged in to the mystery web service as *Beli Handi*.

* * *

The interface dropped her into a new world with the familiar wrench of perspective. She blinked through the moment of disorientation, trying not to gawk. She was *Beli Handi*, and *Beli Handi* was comfortable here. *Beli Handi* knew her way around. *Beli Handi* didn't find anything in this space worthy of gawking at—not the scenery, not the sprinkling of celebrities walking around in their virtual selves, unskinned and not in hiding.

She assumed they were celebrities, anyway. Nobody was wearing an ID tag, which was a problem. How was she supposed to greet people that *Beli Handi* knew? How was she even supposed to identify who might be *Beli Handi*'s friend and who might be her enemy?

Both could be suspects, for different reasons.

She was surprised at first by how simple and low-key the interface was. She would have expected something so exclusive and geared toward people used to luxury to be luxurious. But this was just a beach scene. A blue sky with some cumulus clouds scattered across it. A smiling cartoon sun, fractal waves shushing on fractal sand. Umbrellas at angles, with clusters of people on blankets or around picnic tables under them. A virtual ice cream stand, and a virtual cocktail bar.

I'M AT A LOSS, she admitted to Indrapramit—reluctantly, as her words would be part of the indelible case file. Copping to personal weakness was only one step down from copping to murder as an admission that could derail a career in law enforcement.

ZOOM IN, he suggested.

So as not to be utterly obvious, she walked down to the water's edge and did. She was only wearing a web and an AR headset, not the full-immersion skinsuit her mother preferred, but it was enough when combined with the visuals, audio, and simulated smell of a simulated sea to half convince her that she felt real sensations as she waded into the surf.

Upon magnification, she began to see what was so special about this place. Her own equipment wasn't good enough to pick it up unless she zoomed in, but if she'd been running the resolution that *Beli Handi* had been able to afford or borrow, she would have realized much faster how finely the landscape was rendered. Every grain of sand was there, and every bubble foaming on a receding wave.

THIS MIGHT NOT GET US ANYTHING, she said, glancing up and down the beach. The lack of archives thwarted her, and she had no idea where to begin an investigation. Normally, she would have started questioning people, looking for somebody who had known *Beli Handi*, getting lists of associates and friends. But she wasn't normally

working undercover, wearing a missing woman's avatar.

WALK AROUND. SEE IF ANYBODY REACTS STRANGELY. SEE IF ANYBODY STARTS A CONVERSATION WITH YOU. WE KNEW THIS WAS A LONG SHOT.

Indrapramit, as always, was full of solid advice.

Trying not to think about the terrariums full of bioprinted unicorns, feeling a little like a Venus on the half-shell, Ferron walked back out of the sea and texted: TRAWLING.

WE'LL SEE IF YOU COME BACK WITH A . . . NET RESULT, Indrapramit replied.

* * *

At first, everyone ignored her. Not in an unfriendly fashion, but as if they didn't recognize her borrowed avatar, or they were engaged in other conversations and not paying attention to the wider simulation. She both dreaded somebody reaching out to her and longed for it. At least a crisis of personal contact would reduce the monotony.

She kept walking along the infinite beach (it was a loop, as she figured out the third time she passed a distinctive red and orange umbrella propped at an equally distinctive jaunty angle). She tried to look lost in thought, so nobody Beli Handi knew would be offended if she didn't catch their eye and wave in passing.

That problem solved itself when somebody else caught *her* eye and waved. "Beli!"

It was a man, wearing an Anglo skin, but when she paused and waved back he greeted her in a flood of flawless Kannada. "It's so good to see you! You've been away for a while! Laying low on your stories?"

Fortunately for Ferron, the roleplay simulator knew that Beli Handi spoke Kannada, so there was no fumbling moment when she tried to recall if she was supposed to understand him at all.

She still must have stared at him, bewildered, for a moment too long, because he said, "Josh," helpfully and held out his virtual hand.

JOSH JASPER, Indrapramit clarified. HE'S A POP MUSICIAN.

He too, she realized, looked vaguely familiar—just like all the other beautiful people whose images she had been staring at for the past few days. So saturated was she in social media that she wasn't sure if she'd seen him in an advertisement somewhere, or if he'd appeared as a supporting character in somebody else's feed.

Before she could even shape the wondering into words, Indrapramit texted, I'M ON IT.

Ferron stuck Beli Handi's hand out in turn and grasped Josh's. "Josh Jasper, of course. I'm sorry, my resolution isn't as good as it should be for some reason." She tapped the side of her virtual forehead. "Technical difficulties."

There, that would cover her if she failed to notice some fine detail in the setting, or something else that might give her away. She thought her roleplaying package was doing a good job of duplicating Beli Handi's tone and phrasing.

He gave her back her hand and grinned. "Well, I'm glad you're feeling better."

He had, she realized, blithely assumed that she had been ill. She did not contradict him, but fell into step beside him and allowed him to squire her down the beach. They stopped and chatted with several groups of people. She met a hot young mystery writer so famous even she had heard of him. He used an old-fashioned name, V. S. Ishaan, which also made him stand out.

"Maybe we should all go back to traditional names to be more unique," she told him, which made him laugh. And made Josh look at her funny, which reminded her that clever banter was not part of the brand of the person she was pretending to be.

She relaxed then and started to get into the swing of things. She found herself chatting with one of the system operators, who used the name Metasequoia, and whose avatar was tall enough to make Ferron wonder if he was compensating for something. He didn't say much beyond pleasantries, and his assessing gaze had Ferron playing her own cards close to her chest. The whole thing was rather like a really boring cocktail party, in which she was forced to pretend to be somebody with no

perceivable internal life, surrounded by a hundred or so other people who were also pretending to have no perceivable internal life.

Or perhaps not pretending.

Still, she thought she was doing okay until Josh left the chat, and she followed Metasequoia into another group. He introduced her around, and she filed two names away for later before she heard the third one: "WhiteRabbit."

"We've met," Ferron said glibly to Metasequoia, and WhiteRabbit's eyes widened and she took a step back.

"I have to go." She spun on her virtual heel and zoomed off.

Ferron looked around herself, memorizing faces and trying to look like she was apologizing. "Oh, dear. I'd better go see what I need to apologize for."

She strode off after WhiteRabbit before anybody else could comment. Behind her, she heard somebody's nervous giggle, and somebody else's cruelly amused guffaw.

"I bet it's a man," a tenor voice commented.

Wouldn't you be surprised to find out it's a girl? Ferron thought, and then she stepped over the terminus of the conversation bubble and could no longer overhear.

She didn't quite sprint after WhiteRabbit, just strode purposefully. WhiteRabbit, in turn, also didn't break out of a hurried walk. Because they were in virtual, their speeds should have been precisely matched. But Ferron was running a cop interface and tuned her exchanges up 15 percent. It wouldn't look weird to an observer, but it let her catch the other woman in a few dozen strides.

"Hey," she said. They were far enough down the beach that there were no umbrellas nearby. They should be in their own conversation bubble. All she could hear was the noise of the waves. "HEY!"

WhiteRabbit stopped. She turned. She left, Ferron saw, perfect footprints in the sand.

How much did a membership at this beach cost, anyway? she thought.

WhiteRabbit squared herself like a pugilist. "You're not Beli."

Ferron tipped her head, listening, observing. She softened her voice. "Why would you say that?"

WhiteRabbit glanced sidelong and did not answer.

"Do you know something about an illness?"

The woman laughed cuttingly. "That kind of illness you don't recover from."

Ferron nodded slowly and dropped her voice. "You know you're wearing her contacts? Where did you get them?"

WhiteRabbit's face went greenish. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ferron crossed her arms. "The contacts. In your eyes. I checked the metadata on your story and hers, and the ones you're using belonged to her."

WhiteRabbit's hand flew to her mouth.

Part of Ferron's police training was on how to be merciless. "So either you had something to do with Beli Handi's disappearance or you know who did."

"You're a cop," WhiteRabbit said. "I have to go." She started to shimmer at the edges, de-rezzing.

"Wait!" Ferron said.

The shimmer stabilized. WhiteRabbit stared at her.

Ferron said, "Do you have a bioprinter?"

WhiteRabbit blinked. "Why do you care?"

"You might want to get rid of it," Ferron said. "For your own safety."

By the time she got the last word out, WhiteRabbit was gone, popped out of the sim. In her own flat, Ferron rolled her head back on her neck and stared at the ceiling.

In AR, her avatar rolled her head back and stared up at the grinning cartoon sun.

"Oops," she said to its moronic smirk. "Would you look at the time?"

* * *

"She knows Beli Handi is dead," Ferron said, while tearing off a chunk of garlic naan and scooping up chana with it. "But I don't think she's the killer."

Indrapramit turned his teacup with his fingertips. His hands looked steady, and Ferron told herself to stop fussing. Fussing at somebody never made them more emotionally stable. "Because she was surprised about the contacts?" he said.

"Horrorified. I won't be shocked if she goes home and flushes them down the recycler."

"She'll get a fine if she does." He grinned so impishly that Ferron had to laugh, no matter how on-edge she was feeling.

Ferron swallowed and washed the naan down with tea. "Pity this isn't wine."

"Shocking," her partner opined.

"If anything would drive me to day drinking, this case would be it. Did you check out the nonprofit that holds our missing women's assets in trust?"

"Yeah," he said. "It doesn't do much other than support that virtual habitat you just visited and a couple of makerspaces. I don't think anybody gets murdered for a loaner jigsaw or 3D printer."

"Hm," Ferron said. "Worth looking into anyway. The trustees have to be registered, right?"

"Yep." He fed her a list. "Looks like a couple of old friends and a manager."

"Did we look at the manager?"

He shrugged. "She's in New Zealand. It's all remote work apparently. Besides, goose, golden egg, et cetera. And she has dozens of clients that make her more than Beli Handi does. Did, I mean."

Their eyes met and they both sighed. *Unless you were losing touch with morality, you never got so hardened that murder stopped being depressing*, Ferron thought.

"Who's behind the AR habitat?" she said.

"Owned by a co-op. Apparently when you're asked to join you have to buy in."

"And buying in isn't cheap," she said.

"Bingo. But it gets you a guaranteed income for life, doesn't it?"

"Hmm." She fiddled with her water glass. "That explains the trust funds. Is everybody who participates orphaned or estranged from their family? No, that doesn't work, Muluhi had family. I mean, I guess . . . what are the criteria for membership?"

"Being wealthy and famous," Indrapramit said. "But not wealthy and famous enough not to care about networking with the C-list."

"So cynical," Ferron said. "You got a warrant for the wills?"

"They both left their trust funds to the co-op."

Ferron put the bread in her hand back down on her plate. "That makes sense for Beli Handi."

"Not for Muluhi," Indrapramit agreed. "Her family could use that money."

"Hmm. That might free them from suspicion."

"What would they want by harming a stranger?" he said.

Ferron kissed her teeth and said nothing.

"You're going to make me grovel through the missing women's back messages, aren't you?" he said.

"Get Conan to do it." She waved a hand.

"That's only easier if somebody else programs the parameters."

She laughed. "Somebody else is. And don't you dare throw any food at me. I'm still your superior officer."

* * *

There was little enough comfort to be had in that role when someone pounded on Ferron's flat door at one the next morning. She rolled over in the dark, fumbling for she knew not what, and managed to poke a disgruntled fox in the snout. Smoke got up

and left, huffing his displeasure. Ferron sat up and said, “Low lights,” because voice commands were her only option. She didn’t have her contacts in.

The pounding came again. She swore and yelled, “You’ll wake the whole house up!” loud enough to wake half of it herself. Whatever. She hadn’t started it. “Come in,” she muttered, when the pounding faltered.

The door slid open; Chairman Miaow vacated the bed to hide herself from the interloper. Ferron blinked her eyes at her brother-in-law.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she snapped.

“I’m not the one with a guest in the middle of the night,” he snapped back. “While the children are sleeping.”

He’d done more to wake them than she had. In fact, a wail could thinly be heard from down the corridor. His own complicity would not, of course, be counted as a foul in the scoring of the family game.

She sighed. “I’ll go. Just stop thumping on things and shouting.”

She swung her legs out of bed and stuffed her feet into her slippers. Her head fuzzed with sleep. She wondered if the unanticipated visitor was an assassin.

If it was, at least she wouldn’t have to listen to the aunties read her the riot act tomorrow for rousing the house.

She padded down the hall—Charu’s husband evaporated in the meantime—and found her guest waiting just inside the front door. As far from her own flat as it was possible to be and still be inside the kinblock, unfortunately.

The second surprise, after there being a guest at all, was who the guest was. The person waiting on the cushions was a less polished, less filtered, but still gorgeous version of WhiteRabbit, who looked as if she’d had several bad hours in a row, unpunctuated by any good ones.

“Hey,” Ferron said, standing in front of her. She held out her hand, but WhiteRabbit stood without taking it. She braced herself and looked Ferron directly in the eye.

Ferron, not really prone to intimidation, stared right back.

WhiteRabbit’s bracelets jangled when she crossed her arms. “You’re the one that came to the beach club today.”

Yesterday, technically, Ferron thought, but did not say it. “How did you know?”

“I messaged the City Police and asked who was working on the Beli Handi disappearance. They asked if I wanted to leave a tip.”

“Did you?”

WhiteRabbit smiled tightly. “Not with the police virtual assistant, no.”

“But with me?”

WhiteRabbit’s eyes fixed past Ferron’s shoulder. “Can I come all the way in?”

“Sure,” Ferron said. “Do you want to go out to the garden?”

WhiteRabbit shuddered. “Drone strikes.”

Ferron pulled her inside and bolted the riot door, a layer of protection that was a relic of the Bad Years. Usually, Ferron found it laughable. Today, she was grateful for the reassurance and the extra armor between her—and her guest—and the outside world.

She closed and locked the inside door, too. Perhaps she was catching WhiteRabbit’s flinchy paranoia. On the other hand, Beli Handi’s paranoia had turned out to be well justified.

“Come on.” Ferron led her guest past curious teenaged cousins who never seemed to sleep except through breakfast. At least a few of them appeared to recognize WhiteRabbit. She stopped her niece Amala from rising and rushing over by deploying a flat Responsible Adult sort of stare. There would be hell to pay at the dinner table.

Down the hall, up the stairs, she unlocked the door to her flat. It was still set for sleeping. “Please excuse the mess and the pets,” she said.

“I am perfect,” Chairman Miaow said with a sniff. She was perched on a ledge that

was supposed to hold books or keepsakes. The surviving books and keepsakes had been packed away. "You do not need to apologize for me!"

WhiteRabbit giggled. "She's a smart one."

"Bred to be," Ferron agreed, though it was as much engineering as breeding.

The visitor extended a fingertip to the cat, who deigned to sniff it. Smoke was sneaking up behind her, brush and nose lowered to the floor, ready to sniff or pounce away backward. "I think it's so kind of you not to recycle your pets when they get dated."

"They're not bioprints," Ferron said, struggling to keep her tone level. "They're living animals."

WhiteRabbit looked at her with an expression of concentration, as if she were genuinely trying to understand. Parrot-cats were, after all, so *very* last season. Maybe two seasons ago. One had to care about fashion enough to keep track.

Ferron decided not to mention that she'd only had Chairman for three weeks or so.

It already felt as if they had been life partners forever.

Once she had locked the door and keyed in a code to reset the furniture to a sitting room, she reached out and scratched behind the cat's ear with one finger.

Chairman purred in delight. Ferron washed her hands and put in her contacts, logging herself on to the police network. Indrapramit, she saw, was already online. He sent her a ping, and she opened her feed to him.

"Please, sit," Ferron said, when the furniture had finished rearranging itself. "I'm going to record this conversation."

"Of course. You're police."

"This is Sub-Inspector Ferron of the Bengaluru City Police interviewing WhiteRabbit as evidence in connection with the disappearance of Beli Handi. Do I have your permission? Please agree verbally."

"I agree to the recording of this conversation."

"Thank you," Ferron said. "Please state your registered name."

"WhiteRabbit."

"Will you tell me your age, Ms. WhiteRabbit?"

"I am twenty-nine."

She did not look it. But maintaining that youthful freshness was part of her job.

Ferron asked, "Do you want masala tea?"

"I always want masala tea," WhiteRabbit said as Ferron moved toward the kitchen. "What did you mean when you said the thing about a bioprinter?"

Ferron looked at her across the top of the electric kettle. "I can't prove it."

"I'm listening."

"I think that's how they're disposing of the bodies."

"They?"

"You?" Ferron asked, watching WhiteRabbit's face.

SUBTLE, Indrapramit texted her.

"I'm not a killer," the young woman said.

"Where'd you get the contacts?"

"They came in the mail. Original packaging. Sealed. I thought they were a sponsorship gift from the manufacturer." Her airy handwave suggested that extremely expensive hardware just showed up in her mailbox daily.

Ferron thought about the bioprinters. Well, maybe hardware *did* just show up in WhiteRabbit's mailbox daily.

"Can you prove that, about the printers? It's like"—WhiteRabbit shuddered—"It's like the woodchipper murders last century."

"Woodchippers don't denature the DNA."

"Oh," said WhiteRabbit. "That's why you can't prove it."

Ferron put a cup of masala chai and the sugar bowl on the low table that had

peeled itself out of the floor. She made a second trip for the teapot and her own cup. "You're safe here."

"I'm not safe anywhere." WhiteRabbit picked up the tea and drank it without adding sugar. "Anywhere the net reaches. They can follow me through it."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure."

Ferron was struck by how differently WhiteRabbit dealt with the stress of feeling hunted, as compared to how Beli Handi had. This woman was a little ruthless and utterly pragmatic. If she had a weapon on her person, it wouldn't be a slightly rusty antique pistol without even a palm lock to keep it safe. And she wouldn't succumb to hysterics, Ferron guessed.

Especially not as long as she had a fortifying cup of tea.

Ferron served herself and sat down across from WhiteRabbit as she drank tea.

The other woman said, "I should never have signed that paperwork."

"What paperwork?"

"The trust." She sighed. "It was meant to be a tax shelter. The beach club is a non-profit, and we're all paid . . . a portion."

"I see," said Ferron, who was only beginning to. Like many employed people—and even more people who were reliant on the guaranteed income—she wasn't very comfortable with the phrase "tax shelter." Or the intention behind it. "So they have access to your money."

"Some of it," the woman said. "The principal is protected. They can use the income, that which isn't earmarked for me."

"Hmm," said Ferron, a noise meant to be encouraging. When it didn't get a response, she added, "So if you vanished, they would have access to more income."

"It's all supposed to be invested!"

Ferron decided not to point out that embezzlement was an ancient and dishonorable craft, still widely practiced. "And you've been getting death threats?"

WhiteRabbit nodded.

"Out loud for the record, please?"

"I've been getting death threats," WhiteRabbit agreed. "Telling me that the net is going to kill me if I log into it. I don't think that's possible. Black ICE is just an urban myth, right? But if somebody has hacked my logins and is stalking me, then they know where I am most of the time. And if I don't plug in . . . I can't do my job, can I?"

"Now?"

"I'm plugged out now." WhiteRabbit shook her head. "Being plugged out itself is going to make them suspicious—"

"Not if they think they're getting to you, WhiteRabbit."

"Call me Rabbit," the woman said absently. "Huh. I hadn't thought about that. Anyway, it also makes it hard not to spend my life on the guarantee."

Ferron nodded, feeling a small twist of sorrow and sympathy.

Rabbit asked, "Did they really get eaten by their bioprinters? Is that something that can happen?"

"No," said Ferron. She looked down at her palms. "And you're right, people don't die from coming into contact with security measures. The net didn't reach out into their homes and kill them; I am professionally confident in that. But somebody else could use their stories to track them, and hunt them down that way."

"And talk them into climbing into a bioprinter?"

"People," Ferron said, measuring her words carefully, "don't *fit* into a bioprinter intake. Not . . . whole people, anyway."

Rabbit's hand covered her mouth. "Oh. Oh, no. So they couldn't have . . . been forced to do it themselves."

"I'm afraid not."

"That's a little bit better, somehow."

"Who talked you into signing the trust paperwork?"

"Actually, Beli Handi."

"Online or in person?"

Rabbit's hand rose from her mouth to her forehead. She took a startled breath. "Online."

"Are you sure it was her?" Ferron asked.

Rabbit shook her head. "Somebody could have been using her accounts, couldn't they? Like you did?"

"I'm afraid so," Ferron said. "I can offer you protective custody."

"No," Rabbit said. "No."

* * *

Ferron showed the woman to the door and watched her walk away down the street. An autocar pulled up next to her after a hundred meters or so, and she got in.

Ferron could have arrested her. She probably *should* have arrested her. But Rabbit had trusted her, or had simulated it convincingly. And Rabbit—unless she was the murderer—was taking a risk to help.

Ferron almost jumped out of her skin when Sandhya mausi spoke from behind her: "She's pretty."

"That's her job," Ferron said distractedly. She turned, and read her auntie's speculative tone and expression a little more attentively. "Oh, mausiji, she's a witness in a murder investigation."

Sandhya mausi opened the door wider, letting Ferron pass within. "That is a new level of bringing work home, even for you."

Ferron laughed. "Why is everybody in this family suddenly so eager to get me settled and moved out?"

Sandhya's expression firmed in a manner that Ferron had learned to treat with respect, as it always presaged some calculated truth-telling. Auntie took a breath and said, "You don't need to stay here forever out of duty to your mother, sweetheart. We all know how much you've sacrificed for her. But she has other children, and we won't let anything happen to her."

Ferron opened her mouth to protest. It had taken Ferron's desperation, and her own inability to support her mother's habit, for anyone to intervene in Madhuvan-thi's addiction.

Oh. The heat of a flush rose in her face as she realized: *she* was the one who had enabled her mother's behavior. Not her sisters; not her aunts. That's why the behavior had persisted until Ferron stopped supporting it, and not longer.

No wonder it was only her that her mother was punishing.

With the dizziness of sudden comprehension, Ferron understood the matrimonial ad in a different light. Her family had seen her breaking her mother's control, seen her mother emerging from her self-imposed shell, and they were giving Ferron a way out. A way out that her mother wouldn't oppose, because her mother was motivated by spite.

Well, perhaps not *entirely* by spite. But currently it was definitely a contributing factor. Oh.

And here was Ferron, looking down to meet Mausiji's kind, wry gaze. Not having any idea at all how to tell her that she didn't want to leave the family; she wanted to leave her mother. The *family*, she would do anything to keep.

Sandhya mausi shut the door. "You know we would love you the same if you don't want a . . . traditional marriage."

Ferron knew. She put a hand on Sandhya's arm in love. "I just don't want to get married. I want to live here and work."

Sandhya cocked her head at Ferron, that sharp birdlike gesture that older women seemed to master.

“Really,” Ferron said. “Don’t I contribute?”

“Sweetheart,” her auntie said, “this is your family. You do not have to buy your way in.”

* * *

The carpet in Muluhi’s apartment was soft underfoot. Ferron noticed, because she couldn’t stop pacing. She and Indrapramit had found nothing suspicious in the place, despite a repeated visit. It was exactly as innocent-seeming and yet ominous as Beli Handi’s. There was no abandoned food in the refrigerator of this apartment—all the cabinets were spotlessly clean, and perhaps Muluhi just did not keep food around. But other than that, it seemed as if the owner had just . . . teleported out one day. As if she had de-rezzed from life as easily as de-rezzing from artificial reality. There was an extremely expensive AR rig with massively overclocked computational power in the corner, the sort of thing that Bengaluru City Police’s anti-hacking division (or Ferron’s mother) would have given their eyeteeth for. There was that pretty turf and that pricy furniture.

Indrapramit stood beside the door and rubbed his nose. “I am still trying to figure out why, exactly, these women are being . . . vanished.”

“The perps are con artists,” Ferron said, watching Indrapramit’s face for his reaction.

“But the victims already have their assets in trust. The perpetrators can do whatever they want with them.”

“Sure, and a living victim might notice that somebody is siphoning off the value. And if they turn up dead, the assets go to their heirs. But if they vanish . . . the trustees have free rein for years before anybody can do anything about it. And the trustees . . . well, I can guarantee that they’re not using a traceable identity.”

“So you’re not any closer to figuring out who ‘they’ are?”

“It could be literally anybody involved in that nameless celebrity beach.”

“So when we know which ones, we’ll have solved the murders.”

Apparently, like Ferron, Indrapramit no longer harbored any doubt that there had been murders. Proving it to a court when the corpses had been so thoroughly disposed of might be an insurmountable problem, however.

She said, “We’d better figure it out fast, or take WhiteRabbit into protective custody whether she wants to come or not.”

“She could still be the killer.”

“I had Conan pull her financial records. She gave me permission so I didn’t need a warrant. She *has* put her assets into the same kind of trust as the other women. So she could be the killer. But she might also be a victim.”

“She’s probably a victim,” Indrapramit said grumpily. “It’s never actually the obvious answer, is it?”

“Oh, don’t be spoiled. About 90 percent of the time, it—” Ferron stopped short.

“What is it?”

She turned to her partner with a wolfish grin stretching her face. “Come on. We’re going downtown.”

“What?”

“I have an idea about where Beli Handi’s note is.”

“Let’s go!” Indrapramit said.

Ferron was already rising to her feet when a message notification froze her mid-gesture. “It’s from Rabbit.” She forwarded it immediately to Indrapramit so they could open it together. Sure, it might be a virus, but the police had good countermeasures.

A brief scan of the contents left Ferron and Indrapramit staring at one another. “Is that everything?” he asked, brows drawing together.

“All her archived logs from the private forum?” Ferron turned one hand in the air. “Who knows? I’m sending it on to Conan, though.”

"Good." Indrapramit finished standing. "He can work at it while we're down at the station house looking for that letter."

* * *

Somebody had been there before them, and Ferron couldn't, for the life of her, figure out how they had created so much destruction without help being summoned. The cameras appeared unharmed, the alarms had not been triggered. But desks were overturned, trash was strewn everywhere, and the console containing the virtual assistant had been taken to pieces with some tool—probably a powered screwdriver. Clutter and pieces of machinery heaped the floor indiscriminately. Ferron picked her way delicately between them, half to preserve evidence and half to preserve her feet from screws or other sharp edges.

"How," Indrapramit asked, "did this not trigger an alarm?"

"Because they hacked the system," Ferron said. "They hacked the police system. Somehow. Maybe a worm rode Beli Handi inside. Maybe . . ."

She was moving toward the tea trolley when a voice from near the door stopped her. "You figured it out, didn't you?"

Ferron shot a sidelong glance at her partner. Indrapramit stood frozen, one hand very near his taser. *Not*, she thought, *probably near enough*.

She reached out into the police feed and found . . . nothing. No contact at all.

Whatever jammer had prevented the alarms from sounding kept her, and presumably Indrapramit, from reaching Dispatch. Or each other. There would be no calling for help, then.

Slowly, she turned, and found herself face to face with a dead woman.

"Hello, Muluhi," she said. "We've been expecting you."

This gun was nothing like the antique that Beli Handi had come in with. It was a modern, illegally 3D printed piece, and from the look of the grip it held a significant quantity of ammunition.

Muluhi did not raise her head from the sight. She covered Ferron, apparently dismissing Indrapramit as a threat. That was a mistake, though Muluhi had no way to know it.

Ferron sat down easily in the closest chair. The gun wavered, then dropped to follow her.

"Did you find the note?" Ferron asked.

The pretty face blanched. "What note?"

Ferron gestured around. "The one you trashed this place looking for."

Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, Indrapramit was turning to face Muluhi. He kept his hands out from his sides in what seemed to be a nonthreatening posture, if you hadn't seen a lot of antique American Westerns. Ferron only watched him out of the corner of her eye.

Ferron thought of Muluhi's apparently unused computer science degree, and the powerful system left behind in her flat. "So tell me," she said, "how did you keep the system from recording your presence here? Was it just computer magic?"

"*Just*," Muluhi quoted mockingly. "You ought to be ashamed of your cybercrimes division."

"I would be." Ferron's level voice belied the cold sweat on her palms. "But I am glad to report that they're not my responsibility."

"Pity you have to die because of their incompetence, then."

Indrapramit was still too far away from Muluhi to tase her, even if he could deploy his weapon fast enough to keep Muluhi from shooting both Ferron and himself.

Ferron said, "When did you decide to become a serial killer?"

Muluhi's face tightened. The gun wavered. She took a stiff step toward Ferron.

Ferron kept talking. "Was it before you faked your own death and started embezzling from the co-op? Or *after* you faked your own death and started embezzling from

the trust fund you convinced your friend to set up? *After* you killed her and found out how easy it was to line up the next victim?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Muluhi snarled. "She was *so* awful. So thoughtless—"

"And Rabbit? Is she thoughtless too?"

"Rabbit doesn't need all that money," Muluhi scoffed. "And I didn't kill anybody. Yet. You can be the first."

"So you drove Beli Handi to suicide because she thought she couldn't get away from you? And then you . . . cut up her body and fed it and, oh, maybe a compostable tarpaulin, into the bioprinter?"

"Shut up."

Ferron's bowels had apparently converted to a kind of heavy, sloshy liquid. Such as mercury. She kept talking. "The police station was the last straw, wasn't it? That you made her feel like she wasn't even safe in here? Did you hack into the system then, to send her more threats? That glitch in the recording: that was you taking control of the system, wasn't it?"

"Shut up."

"Did you enjoy making her miserable? You were so jealous of her follower count, you never even thought about how terrible her family was."

"She *never* had to go without!" Muluhi angled the gun down. "Pick up that stylus. You're going to write a suicide note."

"Nobody is going to believe that Indrapramit and I were involved in a suicide pact," Ferron warned. She picked the stylus up, though.

"People will believe all sorts of things if it looks more interesting than the truth. Your professionalism was compromised by the tragedy of you becoming lovers—"

Indrapramit, despite himself, guffawed.

Ferron said dryly, "My. You really are young, aren't you? So melodramatic."

"You. Write. On that e-pad."

Without getting up from her chair, without making any threatening moves, Ferron—who hated confrontations—laid the stylus down.

Muluhi started to yell at her, but Ferron cleared her throat and said, "I know where the note is. If you kill me, somebody will find it eventually. There must be something in it that gives you away, mustn't there?"

"Shut up and write."

"What did she realize at the last minute? That you weren't dead after all? You sent her another threat, and something about the phrasing or content gave you away? Or was it just your ability to hack into the isolated police system and harass her, despite all her precautions? She thought you were a friend. Did you cut her up yourself, Muluhi?"

Ferron yelped and almost knocked her chair over as a bullet glanced off the desk in front of her and ricocheted away. It struck the bulletproof glass of a window with an unmistakable flat thud.

"Shut up," Muluhi said. "Give me the note."

Ferron, mouth dry, nodded to the tea trolley. "It's in that drawer."

Indrapramit stepped toward Muluhi. Muluhi swung to cover him with the gun. "Get it," Muluhi said out of the corner of her mouth, to Ferron.

Ferron said, "It's inside the tea trolley."

Her ears rang from Muluhi's gunshot. Her hands were shaking so hard it took her three tries to enter the override code. Somehow, it was much easier to be calm when the gun was pointing at her, not her subordinate.

Her hand went inside the drawer. It found the butt of Beli Handi's ancient firearm. Her thumb made sure the safety was off.

"Here it is," she said brightly, and as Muluhi was turning back to her, when the gun was pointed at the wall between herself and Indrapramit, she lifted the gun from the drawer and shot Muluhi in the center of her chest.

Muluhi fell without drama, dropping in her tracks with the abrupt cessation of muscular control. Indrapramit, who had taken two steps toward her, his taser in his hand, stopped.

He looked at Ferron. "You okay?"

"I should be asking you that. Get her gun."

He did, lifting it from her relaxed fingers.

Ferron blew her breath out sharply once he'd secured it. "Well, that went better than I expected."

She was aware that Indrapramit gave her a sharp look, searching for irony. She betrayed none, just gently slid Beli Handi's gun back into the drawer. As she did, her hand brushed a piece of paper. She pulled it out.

It said, MULUHI IS ALIVE. SHE'S BEHIND IT ALL. In crude and rapid handwriting.

"Huh," Ferron said. "It was in the drawer."

She closed the drawer and let it lock again. Then she picked up the emergency handset, the one on the old-fashioned, dedicated landline. She called for medical assistance.

Muluhi wasn't dead yet. The blood was still coming.

* * *

When they had finished the debriefing, it was nearly morning. Muluhi would live to stand trial.

Ferron found herself sitting with Indrapramit, drinking terrible tea from the tea trolley.

A different tea trolley, thankfully.

She was telling him about the fight with her mother.

"People can't be who we need them to be," Ferron said. "They can only be who they are, and who they are is usually a disappointment. But they're real, and I don't know, maybe we can learn to love them anyway. My mother loved my father, I think. Maybe a little too much. I'm not sure she had . . . enough identity of her own to weather being widowed."

"Try to think of it as encouragement to be emotionally sufficient in ourselves," Indrapramit said. "Then we can be there for other people."

A little smile curled the corner of her mouth as she looked at him. "Is that working out for you?"

He smiled back. "Intermittently."

She relaxed into her chair. They understood each other, he traumatized and alone in the world, she traumatized and trying to deal with her family. They both had a lot in common with the young women who had been victimized by the trust fund thief. Those victims had been selected, groomed, scammed, and in one case murdered, through their need to belong to something, even if that something was just an "exclusive" forum.

Was there an argument to be made about free will? About whether people made choices, or just reacted to their circumstances based on some deep need baked into their bones?

Ferron had been wrong in thinking that she didn't have much outrage left in her. She apparently had rather a lot. And she had no idea at whom she needed to aim it.

She said goodnight to Indrapramit and went outside. The star in the morning sky seemed less visible. Was the nova fading already?

Or was it just that summer was coming, and the sun was rising a little earlier every day?