



Let Us Now Be Famous Men

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TERRA

“So how is... flashlight, these days?”

Yuri G asked in his heavily accented, laboriously spoken words, his mouth sliding sideways into a half-smile. The evidence of nerve damage from the chemical weapons waved across his entire body.

Phil K coolly regarded the artificial side of his friend's face, although you really couldn't tell unless you knew, then carefully lit an anti-rad cigarette.

“It's fine,” he said.

He looked around Yuri G's spare, UN-issued room and its white, easily-cleaned furniture, the white floor with its internal cushioning sensors. He had the exact same room, in a different section. His was empty, he liked the bare white of the walls. Yuri G though, had decorated his. He clipped out magazine pages and shamelessly, and wholly illegally, taped them up all over: old Soviet posters, photos of girls, odd, flat paintings of strangely dressed men and women making hand gestures and holding objects.

Yuri G even had rugs, an even bigger transgression, and Phil K wondered how he got away with it. Terran War Vets were prone to falling in the home; until the introduction of the motion-sensing bathtub and reactive floor, falls had been the second leading cause of injuries and death in their grouping.

The first, of course, was suicide.

Phil K exhaled a swirling pattern of cleansing vapor smoke into the room. 'The flashlight'. He smiled a little, feeling the wire and microcircuits move under his artificial skin.

“Спасибо!”

Yuri G extended a hand eagerly, shakily waving, both demanding and receiving one of the pinkish, UN-issued cigarettes. Phil K lit it for him, and Yuri G inhaled deeply, closing his eyes in satisfaction. He was a stocky man, with a round face and fat, stubby fingers; just a hint of Asian in his eyes. He squinted, showed one shining pupil, and trained it on Phil K.

“So, you dirty-talk flashlight?”

He shifted awkwardly in his orthopedic chair, trying to get comfortable. Phil K watched as he finally gave up and tapped the pain aerator.

Phil K lied, “Sometimes.”

“Really? What does, does it, do? Does it...”

He grinned lasciviously.

“Does it like it?”

Phil K shrugged.

“Sure. It reacts.”

“I no, can see it. I cannot do it.”

“That's your choice.”

Phil K stubbed out his cigarette.

“I made mine.”

They both involuntarily looked over at the 3D photograph of Yuri G's wife, the one taken on the honeymoon in Baku. Her face shined and her breasts swelled in the side-shift dress. She was beautiful; but she was long dead. Yuri G wouldn't move on, and he knew it would shorten his life, but he didn't care. Then they sat silently for far too long. Phil K tried to get up to leave, but Yuri G waved his hand imperiously.

“Stay, a bit. Is good to, to see you. Have drink. Drink? Drink.”

It wasn't a question; Phil K had to stay. Yuri G was lonely.

“Sure.”

He carefully lowered himself back down, shifting his feet in the electronic gyroscope shoes.

Yuri G poked the 'UP' button on his orthopedic chair and tottered vertical. He shambled into the kit-unit and retrieved a bottle filled with clear liquid. He poured two safety glasses and handed one over.

“Поехали! To you, and flashlight!”

He smiled broadly.

Phil K humored him.

“To the flashlight.”

Yuri G sipped his synth-vodka, then tilted his head curiously.

“Have you, you name it?”

Phil K nodded. He wasn't supposed to; it was frowned upon by the Board, and by naming it he risked having it reset, but he couldn't help himself. That was a huge rule: don't get too attached, it's a machine, a unit, no different than an exoskeleton or a cybernetic chair. Its official designation was CU-2734-IX, but he'd privately named it 'Claire IX'. Well, not exactly. To fool the psychiatrists he'd randomly chosen a baby-name book from the library, and had the unit point out a name, any name: it chose 'Claire', so, in a sense it had named itself. Then told the Board he anthropomorphized objects in his home to help his socialization. He'd named his food preparation cube 'John CV', and went so far as to put a name tag on it, for the inspection.

“How does, it feel?”

Yuri G drained his glass, refilled it, then leaned forward to top off Phil K's. The liquid rolled around in the safety glasses, captured by the magnetic surface tension. Phil K felt a spike of fury at the Board not even trusting them with so much as a child's sippy cup. No, they had to have special glasses that you couldn't spill onto the reactive floors of the UN-issued living cubicles. He let the spike go into his brain, then deliberately thought of Claire IX, his 'flashlight', and felt it dissipate.

“It feels real. As real as anything.”

He let his mood equalize. Yuri G raised his eyebrows over the rim of the safety glass, making the audible sucking sound you had to make to actually drink out of the damn things.

“Well, what you know, anyway? You, you, we, hardly organic. It probably, likes better anyway.”

A smile appeared around the edges of the cup.

Phil K waited, let that sink in, and thought about what he would do if anyone else had said it. Then he burst out in amusement, and so did Yuri G.

They sat in the UN-issue cubicle, two half-men laughing.

On the surface tube back to his own section, and his own UN cubicle unit, Phil K watched the wreckage of the Terran War pass by the window, the radioactive cities. Lifeless hulks and smoking dust. Sky obscured by screaming whirls, the sun, or maybe it was the moon, visiting a dim glow only. He remembered scrambling through the ash in an armored lifesuit, blinded by hate and pain, clutching weapons, after they, and the Soviets, had used up their C-bombs and everything had degenerated into hand-to-hand killing over blasted, smoking, hot rocks.

He shook his head and touched his psych packet.

They'd built transportation on the surface; almost all real estate was worthless, now. The only things out there were disposal pits and nuclear energy plants. Living spaces were underground; or in the cleansed places. That was where everyone lived. The surface was used mostly for sealed transport; it wasn't good for anything else. He watched out the inches-thick lead glass window at the black ash.

Thousands of miles of black, swirling ash.

He was fortunate, himself, to live on the surface, in a dome. It was for psych reasons. The Board had gone to some lengths to control the placement of Vets, matched to psychological states. Some couldn't live on the surface; some couldn't live below. It all depended on the individual. They had to visit each other, too; it was the law.

Not too close together, because limited travel was psychologically positive; enough reminder of the War to make sure their sacrifices hadn't been forgotten; public transportation to make sure they kept their social skills and ability to navigate social situations. Placements and social recognition to equalize their emotional and psychological impulses. Pairing former enemies to confuse hatreds and encourage emotional bonds. It's how he'd ended up with Yuri G as his prescription 'friend'; but he liked the man. They got along well.

And the social unit, his 'flashlight'.

Yuri G, always the humorous vulgarian, had named it that, after an antique sex toy for men that looked like a flashlight with a female sexual organ in one end. When he'd seen it he roared with laughter and announced:

“That's fanciest flashlight I ever see!”

The 'flashlight', Claire IX, had merely smiled. It had been new, then, almost blank; but the interactive programming had improved that a lot, quite a lot. In most situations it was impossible to tell it, she, wasn't human.

Phil K exited the tube and walked very slowly through the lighted streets to his housing unit, passing young people. Strapping young men in their Folio Jackets, lithe young girls in their holo-dresses, slim bodies moving, breasts thrusting in the multi-colored creations.

Clubs for young people blared music, that new stuff he didn't understand. Electric signs flickered and informed.

Some passersby looked at his designated clothing, some didn't. He sighed. He didn't know which was better, or worse; right after the end of the War his designation had guaranteed social status; now, not so much. Nobody cared about them any more.

He felt tired, and stressed, and wanted to get back. As his stress grew he had to touch his psych packet again, but it still couldn't stop him from being hyper-vigilant. His eyes darted around and he felt his hands clenching, anticipating attack. His synapses were overloading again.

He needed to get home, to Claire IX.

He knew exactly why they'd issued him the unit: because of his hyper-vigilance, and the consequent potential for social violence. It was part of the desperate program the UN had developed to cope with the Terran War Vets. After the New Nairobi Block Massacre, when a Vet had somehow acquired a flame tube, destroyed his care unit, and slaughtered more than a hundred citizens, they'd created the Committee For Stress to deal with the rest of them in a more creative way. It was obvious that trying to re-integrate soldiers with Terran War history back into a peacetime society wasn't something that could be left to chance.

He was one of the worst. He'd grown up in the Terran War and had no memories at all of any 'normal' life, and afterwards, the Board had decreed he spend several years in a role-playing facility, to teach him how to behave in a peaceful society. Even so, for him, none of it was real, it was all a farcical photo-movie, like they showed on the vids. He couldn't accept it as an actual reality. For him, real life was War and Black Ash, and deep down, it would always be that way. His mind, his thoughts, his dreams, were filled with endless fields of pulsing black ash.

That was why he had the unit, for a social marker. They'd decided the most important thing for them, for him, was a sense of social success and meaning. A job was important, but some of them, like him, weren't really employable. They had no

place, no use, other than killing. A partnership was a huge part of social status, but virtually none of them could be trusted with other humans.

He knew he couldn't trust other human beings. That had never developed; but with the unit, he was okay. He was okay with Claire IX. They'd issued him the unit to take care of him, of course, but it, Claire IX, also served a critical function of being a domestic partner, if only an artificial substitute. He appreciated it, he really did. It was nice. It was an outward sign of social normalcy and success. It made him feel good, or as good as he ever felt.

The cubicle tower appeared in front of him, squat and shining brightly: home, and Claire IX.

He thought, then decided to risk using a little more of his energy than usual; he swallowed a bit pill and kept walking, then stopped at a hydro shop. He picked out a single, bright red flower and had it issued to him on his psych med card. The shopgirl slipped it into a vitatube to keep it fresh, and he walked home slowly, trying to calm himself and make sure he didn't fall or have an accident. His left leg was fine: it was completely cybernetic, but his right, well, that was another story.

There were also his arms; only one of them was organic, now.

He felt slow and crippled, vulnerable; it created more hyper-vigilance. He had to keep looking around, checking his environment for threats that he knew weren't there but couldn't stop preparing for.

When he got to the tower the Bob H, the elev-pod operator, was of course there and in a mood to talk. He was always in a mood to talk. And, he used NewSpeak, that trendy patois Phil K could barely understand and hated.

Bob H said, "Nice glimmer, huh?"

Then he of course went on, the way Bob H always did, with endless pronouncements and philosophizing, as if everything he thought and said was somehow profound.

Bob H said, boringly, "Back in the day, yeah, back when I was a kid, my teacher said, 'Bob H, when you have a sit-one you don't get, do the issue you do get, then vid it all over again! It's the brain thing to do!'"

Phil K responded grumpily, "Yeah, sure, I guess."

He found Bob H annoying and verbose, and felt exhausted and depressed. The elev-pod couldn't whip him to his cubicle fast enough.

That was another annoyance: why anyone called it the 'elev-pod'. Before the War, there had been elevators, or lifts, that went up and down. These went in multiple directions, so didn't elevate or lift, really, so nobody seemed to know what to call them. Nothing seemed to work, although many people had tried. Some people did call them 'Ryan Lifts', or 'The Schindler', after the designer and manufacturer respectively, but neither had ever truly caught on.

So most everyone stuck with 'elev-pod' although nobody liked the term. It was the most minor of issues but it nagged at Phil K: having a necessity of daily use that nobody could even properly name. It was like not knowing what to term a 'table' and instead calling it 'the thingy'.

Finally he arrived and escaped.

Bob H half-shouted, "See you, Phil K! Eyeball next time!"

He held the flower behind his back as he opened the door. Claire IX greeted him with a touch on his shoulder, her synthetic face smiling.

She said, "Welcome home."

Then she turned and went to the kit-unit.

"I'm making veg-snack for you. I hope you like it."

He looked Claire IX over; from appearances it was impossible to tell she wasn't human. Tonight she was wearing a plain synth-paper dress in a deep reddish color, and her organic, human-harvested hair was up. Phil K couldn't help himself from noticing that her nicely-shaped breasts shifted in the crinkly garment.

Phil K walked into the kit-unit and said, "I brought you something."

He held out the flower.

Claire IX squealed delightedly and said, "Oh Phil, you shouldn't have! It's beautiful!"

She took it from his hand and went through the motion of sniffing it.

"It's lovely! Thank you!"

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, the human one, on the left side. She put the flower in the holder on the kit-unit table.

He couldn't suppress a smile and a sense of gratification. It felt good. It felt very good. Claire IX made him calmer. He didn't feel threatened at all, and he was able to trust his place. His mood shifted: he'd done a socially positive thing. He'd given his domestic partner a gift. He felt less depressed.

"Go sit down, you must be very tired."

Claire IX fussed with the cooking machine.

"How's Yuri G? Is he doing well?"

Phil K said, "He's, he's... well, he's Yuri G."

He shrugged dismissively.

"He's fine."

He sat down at the tiny table and its two orthopedic stools. Claire IX brought over the steaming meal of veg-snack; it looked like weeds and he hated the sight of it. It also stank. She retrieved the flower and made a show of placing it on the table.

Phil K put the specialized chopsticks over his hand and ate the meal. Yes, he hated it but Claire IX had gone to the trouble of making it, and he knew it was good for him. While he ate Claire IX touched the flower and smiled. He had to smile back; she was lovely.

After dinner he was very tired and laid down in the roller bed; Claire IX came over and took his electronic shoes off, then removed his clothes and put the colored thermal wrap over his body. The design was scientifically created to calm his psyche. She sat down next to him and stroked his cheek with her fingers. She was warm to the touch and smelled wonderful. He felt very tired but content, as content as he could manage.

He asked Claire IX to read to him. He had a book he'd kept, a very ancient thing, *Treasure Island*. It was battered, blackened and bloodstained, but it was all he'd managed to bring with him into the new Terran world. The book was about a voyage in a wooden ship, across a Terran ocean to find a lost treasure, and all the settings in it were confusing and incomprehensible. Phil K supposed that's why he liked it. It had nothing to do with his present reality.

At night, sometimes he asked Claire IX to randomly read passages; it was calming.

"Seaward ho! Forget the treasure! it's the glory of the sea that has caught my attention."

Claire IX finished a passage, then laid with him until he fell asleep.

He woke up with her next to him, under the thermal wrap. For once there was no black ash, no nightmares. Claire IX was naked and warm. He moved a little and lifted an arm; she rolled over and rested in the hollow of his shoulder. He knew she didn't sleep, really; it was just programming; or he assumed so. Regardless, he didn't care.

After a while she lifted up and pressed against his chest. She looked into his eyes and smiled. He smiled back, and touched her body carefully, smoothly, caressing and fondling. Claire IX shivered. She raised up on her elbows and kissed him.

He kissed her back, and felt himself responding to her overtures. That part of him wasn't fully real either. The War had taken much of his manhood, and even that most important signifier of male identity was now half-artificial. It was attached to the relevant portions of his brain with microcircuits. That was why Yuri G had made his little crack.

Phil K did have to smile wryly at the thought: he was joining with an android, with a cybernetic member.

It did feel real, though. Completely real. Just like Claire IX felt completely real. Especially naked and in bed with him. He grasped her sides and positioned her on top of him, feeling her warm surface and her hot breath. He touched her sensitive areas and she gasped, shivering. She kissed him again, and he put a hand on the back of her head and pressed her lips to his. He knew it was all just reaction, like acting in a play, a script, a computerized going-through-the-motions, but he

knew just as much that he flatly did not care. At first he'd been conflicted, contemptuous of the idea, but now...

He felt her, touching and caressing. She was completely anatomically correct. Claire IX whispered in his ear.

"Do that for a little while. Please?"

She gasped hungrily, wrapped her arms around his neck and nibbled at his skin, whimpering and clutching at him.

Claire IX bit her lower lip and looked at him with half-closed eyes.

Then they joined, and in exquisite time she shuddered.

Phil K had the matching sensation himself, his brain creating the feeling of finality. He clutched Claire IX to him, feeling her lush hair, touching her back and pressing a palm on her body, kissing her skin. She finally lifted up and rolled off of him, then rested. He rolled sideways and hugged her close, pulling the thermal cover over them in a warm cocoon. He felt her warm breath against him, kissed her, and rested his head on the safety pillow.

She smiled at him. Claire IX moved her lips to his ear, and asked him a question, a question he wasn't ready for.

"Why does Yuri G call me 'flashlight'?"

His body stiffened; then he tried to relax. She had asked him the question as part of her programming, to test his ability to process his friendship with Yuri G; it was part of his therapy, to make him analyze himself, to examine what he said in social situations and why he'd said it. He knew that.

He knew, in his mind, that he couldn't offend her. She wasn't programmed for it. But he also knew he didn't want to hurt her feelings, even though he knew he couldn't. It wasn't fair, and the term was rude and insulting. Or maybe it wasn't. He held her, confused, trying to decide what to do, and then realized the very perfect thing to say, the best, and he couldn't believe he'd done it.

Phil K smiled and touched his forehead, the plastic part, a cover that held his brain and all the related micro-wires and cybernetics, to Claire IX's. He smiled, kissed her lips again, and answered, honestly.

"...because you light my way in the dark."

In the morning, Phil K was on his usual routine.

Today was a visit to a Uni, an edusession, to present a talk to the students about the Terran War. He knew what it would be: a professor, always a person so young they couldn't have real knowledge of it; a lecture, some vids, and then Phil K would be presented, like an exotic animal in a historical zoo.

These things were always scripted, they supplied him with a guide beforehand.

He wanted to say it didn't bother him, that it wasn't offending, but it did and it was.

Claire IX helped him get ready. He put on his standard UN Terran War Vet uniform, the same for all of them: Soviet, Western, Non-Aligned, and his allowed medals. Claire IX patted his cheek.

“It’s okay, Phil K. It’s okay.”

At the elev-pod Bob H was his usual intolerable self.

“Hey, hey, headed out to another edusession? Good for you, good for you! You know what they spout, ‘It takes the total of border-folk to keep calm, but only one single to start a war!’ Ha-ha!”

Exiting the elev-pod Phil K immediately took another bit pill. Claire IX watched him do it, a slight frown crossing her face, ever so slight but noticeable. He felt bad for disappointing her, but oh he hated these things. She took his arm and guided him to the tube.

Down the stairs, across the white expanses, then into the tubes to travel in antiseptic purity, this time under what he knew, always, was the endless field of Black Ash.

At the Uni the professor was a young woman, and didn’t look like a teacher at all, more like one of the kids. She was wearing a holoskirt and a shillshear top you could see right through, showing her youthful breasts. She greeted Phil K with a glance of slight pity, Claire IX with something close to disdain. A lot of people didn’t have any respect for android units, especially the personal models. This woman seemed to be one of them.

The professor introduced herself without even trying to shake his hand, then lit an anti-rad cigarette without offering him one.

She said, “So you’ve got the guide, you know what to do? And your unit can’t come out with you.”

Phil K nodded without speaking. The woman, whose name and title he’d already forgotten, had to look up at him to confirm.

“Okay then, remember your answers, don’t go off script.”

Phil K knew what she meant. There had been embarrassing incidents with the Vets, when the kids asked impertinent questions. Shouting, cursing, threats and such. Some weren’t allowed even on the premises of the Unis, they had caused too many problems.

He knew he wasn’t there to describe anything, or explain his history, but merely to reinforce the absolute dictum that War, any kind of War, or any social violence, was never justified. He was a prop to hammer home a dire warning, there to frighten the kids with his hideous injuries and pathetic infirmities, and his UN-issued personal robot helper, companion, he couldn’t do anything without.

The lecture went fine, he supposed, while he sat in an ambichair off to the side. The vids showed the wreckage, the C-bombs, the mountains of carbonized dead. Then the aftermath, with the firm hand of the UN, how the remainder of Terrans

had not so much come to their senses but simply worn themselves out; the treaties finally surrendering, after how many blood-soaked thousands of years, the human illusions of independence and of differences.

The woman talked animatedly about social pressures in the old World, how imbalances and social injustice had caused them, and the new Terran society's answers to all the old ways. A total break from the past, the professor said, the past was not past so much as it was a foreign world filled with utterly foreign creatures that bore no resemblance to who and what they all were now.

Phil K, to this new people, was nothing more than an artifact, an oddity, an exhibit; like circuses in the old, dead Terra had displayed African cannibals with their teeth filed to points.

When it was finally his turn, Phil K tottered up to the lectern, trying to avoid looking at any of the students. The vidinstruct in the lectern kept him on script, and then afterwards gave him guides to the questions.

"How could you kill other human beings?" asked some frowning girl, electropasties glimmering.

"Do you have guilt?" from some eager boy in an athsuit combi.

Phil K read off from his prepared answers, none of which had much of anything to do with what he actually felt or believed, really.

"Of course there is guilt, it's unnatural to kill."

"People then were taught to hate."

"Everything is different. People are different."

"There is no relation or comparison between them, me, then and us, now."

The professor stood off to the side, arms folded under her bosom, watching him and nodding approvingly at the answers he delivered.

At the end, the lecture hall gave Phil K a rousing round of applause.

The woman smiled broadly, revealing perfect, even white teeth, nodding her head and saying "Yes, yes."

She clapped as well, holding her arms out straight in front of her and bringing them together, like the old vids of trained seals in seaside shows.

Phil K said, "Thank you."

Then he located Claire IX off in a side hallway and got out of there.

After the edusession Phil K pulled out a dine ticket.

He had a few, he rarely used them really; he disliked restaurants, too many people and too public; and they all looked different. Too, he had to admit he ate poorly. That is, he didn't know how to eat properly in social settings. All these rules about how to consume food he had never ingrained. But he wanted to take Claire IX out for a nice meal, like he'd seen in the vids. He decided to ask her out.

"Would you like to go to dinner with me?"

She smiled and laughed a little, a nice response.

“Of course!”

They walked through the Uni hallways, her holding his arm. It was nice, despite the glances of the students and staff. That ever-present parade of human expressions.

At the restaurant, or he supposed it was a restaurant, it looked like the pictures, they got in line like everyone else, although he could have gone to the front. He did it to try to feel normal, or at least some parody of what he'd seen as instructions. The place was nice enough, with plants and ambient music he didn't know anything about. The staff wore uniform clothing, white tops and black lower coverings with aprons.

The other people talked animatedly, touched each other, socially interacted.

Phil K didn't know how to do that, so he stood silently with Claire IX.

One of the staff, a dark-haired young woman, saw them and ran up, passing over about ten or so people and groups.

She asked, “Do you have a dine ticket, sir?”

Claire IX beat him to it, plucking the card out of his breast pocket and proffering it.

“Yes, yes he does.”

The staff member grabbed it, looked at it quickly and waved them in.

“Follow me, please!”

They followed, bypassing all the people, some of whom stopped their conversations and stared at Phil K and Claire IX. Some looked annoyed; the restaurants were always short of food and drink, and if you didn't get in early often the items were gone. He'd seen people sitting in restaurants sharing a half-empty glass of carbonated water, unable to order an actual meal.

The girl led them to a small table set off to the side, not too isolated but not in the middle of the space either. Claire IX pulled out a chair and got him seated, carefully adjusting the space and position. The chairs weren't ambi-compliant, and as soon as he sat down Phil K knew he wouldn't be able to be in this place for very long. There were two sets of dishes on the table, and the girl immediately gathered up Claire IX's and balanced them on her arm. It irritated Phil K and he looked up at her, almost about to say something about it, but stopped.

The girl's facial expression was very different than the usual, it wasn't the typical mixture of pity and revulsion at all. It was something close to honest sympathy and maybe something else.

She said, “I'll be right back with your menus. Menu.”

Phil K nodded, and thought she would turn and go but she didn't.

The girl said, “Can I start you with something to drink?”

It was going too fast, and Phil K got a little confused, and had to look at Claire IX to center his mind. She mouthed a word back at him, and he said it.

“Synth-vodka, please.”

The girl nodded, but then still didn’t run off like he expected. Then she leaned in closer and spoke directly to him. She unexpectedly touched his shoulder, gently.

“My father, my biological father, is- was- a Vet.”

She looked like she wanted to say something more, but turned and hustled away with Claire IX’s dish set.

His android companion turned and watched the waitress, yes, that was the word, ‘waitress’, walk back into the kitchen area.

Claire IX smiled and said, “That will give us a conversation topic. I’ll begin.”

Phil K said, “Okay.”

“It’s unusual for a Vet to have a biological child. What do you suppose the circumstances were, that that decision was made? After all, the risk of birth defects, and the difficulty of reproducing in the first place. How do you suppose that decision was made, and how? How was it allowed? It was rather a risk of producing offspring with a poor chance of satisfactory existence.”

Phil K had to really think about it.

It was a tiring process, thinking back through what class or kind of person could have opted for direct reproduction, or even been allowed to. Most all the new people, born after the Terran War, were artificially implanted and genetically selected. Everything, everyone, was carefully engineered for a certain caloric load and resource consumption. It had to be that way, to plan for how the cities and residence areas would be supplied with the necessities of existence.

He said, “He must have been a higher up, it’s unlikely he could have been a foot soldier. Like me, you know. There is no way they’d let me even try to have a biological child, even if I could.”

Claire IX listened attentively, eyes shining with interest. He wondered how much of it was sincere, or how much was programmed. Also, how much Claire IX really knew. Probably much more than him, she was outfitted with a whole encyclopedia about the new Terra.

He said, “But she’s a waitress, a server in a restaurant, which seems strange. If her father was a manager, it seems like she would have followed him, and would have done that.”

He thought some more, it was actually an interesting topic, and the speculation was stimulating his mind. He felt suddenly less uncomfortable in the restaurant chair.

“Of course, there are not the class differences that used to exist, or so I’m told, so maybe it doesn’t make any difference what she does in society, and it’s just as honorable as being a manager.”

Claire IX said, “That is entirely possible. The only class differences that can truly exist are between master and servant, and Terra no longer allows such a thing.”

Phil K had to think about that, as it referred to... Claire IX herself. And her relation to Phil K.

He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment the girl came back with his drink. She set it down carefully in front of him.

Claire IX said, “It’s not in a safety glass.”

She was right: it wasn’t a UN-issued container, it was real, made of genuine sand-based glass. Phil K couldn’t remember the last time he’d used one. He had to stare at it. This girl was breaking the rules, and doing it for him. He looked up at her.

The girl turned and said quietly to Claire IX, “I know it isn’t. Enjoy, sir.”

The menu was set green in front of him.

“I’ll return in a few minutes to take your order, sir.”

The dark-haired waitress left again.

Claire IX leaned across the table and sniffed, it was unobtrusive, barely noticeable, but Phil K could tell she was examining the contents of the glass. She rolled her eyes up, thinking, or processing, whatever it was she did.

“That is genuine vodka, made from organic produce. It is authentic, not synthetic.”

Phil K was baffled by this: where had this product even appeared from? Even Yuri G, with his unseen network of suppliers, from which he acquired all manner of oddities, had never been able to get real Terran, Russian, Soviet, vodka.

And why had this unknown girl given it to him? It certainly wasn’t specified on his dine ticket! Usually, the times he ate out, he’d get maybe a half-empty safety cup of synth-vodka and another of flat water. This was totally unprecedented.

He said, “Where do you think it came from?”

Claire IX didn’t answer immediately, unusual for her. When a question entered her processors her replies were nearly instantaneous. She typically only paused for appearances. This time, she didn’t.

Claire IX said, “I do not know.”

Phil K was taken aback.

“You don’t know.”

“No.”

He had to think about that, then said, “Well, I guess we have another topic of conversation, don’t we?”

Claire IX laughed her laugh and said, “Yes, I suppose we do.”

He tried the vodka, carefully lowering his head down to cradle the glass in both hands, so as not to spill a single drop, and sipped carefully. There was absolutely no

comparison to this stuff and the usual synthetic product, they were not even the same thing. Claire IX watched, obviously fascinated.

“How is it?”

“It’s amazing.”

She said, “There are no adulterants or chemical additives, that vodka is completely organic and made with potatoes. I have never encountered anything else like it. It’s highly... unusual. In fact it is unique.”

Phil K said, “You’ve never seen anything like it?”

“No. For instance, I have a record- a *memory*- of organic whale oil. But not that.”

He said, “There aren’t any whales.”

“No. There are genetic samples held in storage, but no living whales. The chance of there ever being again is not wholly impossible, but scientifically and statistically very unlikely.”

She continued.

“For that product to exist, there must be organic potatoes being grown somewhere. The usual variety requires extensive dirt, non-radiated soil. Something exists on Terra of which I am unaware. It is not in my database- *memory*.”

She asked, “So it is good?”

Phil K smiled and laboriously took another sip of the unique product.

“Yes, it is excellent.”

Claire IX said, “For this person to have access to, or knowledge of, organic potato products, and make an alcoholic beverage, would require a *desire* to make vodka. This desire is most commonly Polish or Russian in origin, or of another former nation in that region of Terra. It is a carry-over, a remnant, a relic of Terran nations that no longer exist.”

Phil K had a thought.

“Do you think Yuri G can get this, or knows someone who makes it?”

Claire IX stopped and froze, then obviously went into deep thought.

After a while she said, “No, that is very unlikely to the point of impossibility.”

Phil K asked, “Why do you think that?”

“Because if he had access to such a product, he would share it with you. You are his friend, he would not fail to offer it.”

This time Phil K had to stop and think. She clearly had observations or analyses of his friendship with Yuri G that he hadn’t expected.

“So this vodka is highly unusual.”

“Yes. It is a carefully and deliberately preserved memory. A... family recipe.”

Claire IX frowned.

“Perhaps we should discuss some other topic.”

Phil K wasn't sure what this sudden change was about, but he trusted Claire IX to guide him in social matters, so if that was the need, then so be it.

"We could talk about, oh, the weather."

He smiled, it was a joke. Their residence had no weather, it couldn't.

Claire IX got the joke, or at least he thought she did, and laughed.

The girl returned, smiled a truly sincere smile, and said, "Are you ready to order, sir?"

Phil K realized he hadn't even looked at the menu, and could barely even make out the printed words on the sheet. He just pointed at something, it didn't really matter, he knew there was nothing made on Terra he couldn't eat. That was just how it was, anymore.

"I'll have this, please."

"Of course sir, I'll return with your meal shortly. Are you comfortable?"

The waitress looked at him with actual honesty. She wasn't just being perfunctory, this girl really meant it.

Phil K nodded.

"Yes, I'll be fine."

She did it again: as she took the menu she lightly touched his shoulder, and before she walked away almost whispered a response.

"Thank you."

After the girl was out of earshot, Claire IX said, "That person is quite sincere. She is projecting emotional familial concern, which she is associating with you. She must have loved her father very much."

The rest of the experience was somewhat blurry to Phil K: he had to admit the organic vodka was almost too good, and went to his head. It was much more powerful than the usual synth stuff, and while he wasn't truly inebriated, it made him relaxed and not in any hurry to engage in deep discussions. The restaurant got busy, then full of people. Their dark-haired waitress ran around serving other tables and didn't talk any more, so that avenue of topic wasn't quite so urgent; the place got noisy and Phil K had some difficulty holding a conversation with Claire IX.

The small meal was excellent, tastier than his usual UN veg-snack, and he found himself for once enjoying eating. It was presented in a simple manner, smaller pieces. He was pretty good at handling it, not like the typical affairs in his cubicle with the awkward strands of consumables, and while Claire IX watched him carefully, she didn't have to wipe his face off even once.

When he was done, he finished off the amazing vodka, set the precious glass down, and indicated to Claire IX it was time to go.

He'd stiffened up in the restaurant chair, and had trouble getting up by himself. He needed help with that, and Claire IX supported him for a few moments as he straightened and got ready to walk back to the tubes. As she fussed over him,

making sure his clothing was proper and making his medals ‘just right’, the waitress appeared and one more time touched his shoulder.

“Thank you, sir, please come again.”

Her voice, even in the hubbub of the restaurant, carried a current of the plaintive. This girl seemed to actually want him to come back.

Phil K said, “Yes, I will. Thank you, uh... very much.”

Then he did something, the result of which surprised him: he touched her shoulder in return, and realized as soon as he did it, he had not really touched another, organic human being, a woman, like that in a very, very, long time. It had an impact, and went through him like an electrical shock.

Outside, in the walkways, they moved through the crowd, going back to the cubicle, and rest. It was unusual for him to be in large groups of people, and he had to wonder where all these people usually were. He didn’t work, in a structured way, so any travel was during times when it simply wasn’t busy. This was very different, and Phil K realized, or at least had to wonder, if the scheduling the UN made for him wasn’t deliberately designed that way.

The area was dimly lit, and electric signs on vidscreens blazed around them. The lights were turned down to make ‘evening’, and the signage, normally off, was all on. Restaurants, gathering clubs, little cafes, movie theaters. Or, rather, their post-Terran War equivalents.

Through trans-panes Phil K could see young couples dancing in the establishments, gyrating in that herky-jerky New Move way he’d seen in the musical vids. Decsuits glowed and pasties shimmered. Skirts whirled and pedlights swung. It was all very bright, colorful and exhausting.

That was one thing Terra didn’t have to worry about, any more: electricity. Phil K knew all about that.

Back before the War, there was a huge uproar about atomic waste left over from making power. But now, electric-generating plants were just built basically wide open, anywhere outside the domes and cleansed areas; built by men in heavy radsuits and managed by spider-like robots. The wires were run to the living areas, with panels between the outside and inside. There was unlimited nuclear electricity.

What difference did it make, now? There was no more need to worry about radioactivity.

Not out there, in the endless fields of Black Ash.

The days, if that’s what they were, passed uneventfully now, for Phil K.

“Would you like to watch the news?”

Claire IX looked at him inquiringly.

Phil K had to wonder what, exactly, yet again, what purpose that would serve. There was effectively no news. Nothing really happened, that anyone knew about. He would occasionally learn things about Vets from various sources: Yuri G of course, who seemed to have information suppliers all over Terra, and found out some facts; some other times at Vet briefings.

There was a whole civilization on the moon, now too: Luna. It had developed over time and, protected from the madness of the Terran War, was essentially a completely different planet entirely. Sometimes there was news from there, about some technology. Lunan business was abstract to Phil K: you couldn't see the moon anymore, it may as well be a fairy tale.

He knew certain, carefully selected Terrans were allowed to go, but it wasn't a common thing. There were shuttles back and forth, but it wasn't like they were a regular transport just anyone could get on for a weekend getaway.

Phil K would never go, so what difference did it make. He had no desire.

The news was always about perhaps some new reactor coming online, a different social program, a child being born. Sometimes stories about a popular music group the kids liked these days. At Media Museums Phil K had seen old broadcasts from the old television, with crime, weather, politics. They simply didn't have those anymore. He supposed there had to be crime, that is stealing things, or probably fights or even a killing of some kind. But that sort of thing was never reported. Responders on Terra didn't even have uniforms, just a small badge. They just dressed like everyone else and didn't even have weapons.

There were no lost dogs; there were no more dogs. Any animal that had been a pet was gone. Dogs, cats, birds. There were no horses or cows. No chickens. Phil K had heard rumors there were genetic samples held, but that was all. Some people tried to have insects for pets, crickets and such, but it was illegal.

There were no more fire departments to rescue cats from trees: there were no cats, no trees. There was effectively no news, as such.

He said, in answer to Claire IX's query, "No."

But then he had no idea what to do. Then, in a moment of rare genius, he had an idea for a topic of conversation.

"Let's talk about the news, and why there isn't any."

Claire IX frowned.

"There isn't any? Why, just yesterday a new nuclear reactor was activated."

"No, I mean, news, back before the War, people did things that made the news: committed crimes, engaged in political debates, did unusual things. Sporting events. That doesn't seem to happen, any more."

"Do you believe it should?"

Phil K didn't know and said so.

"I don't know."

Claire IX asked, “Do you think there should be crimes to generate societal interest?”

Phil K was stopped by that one.

She continued, “Should there be crimes solely for human entertainment?”

He had an odd thought.

“Well, I suppose, if that were a necessary part of being human, I guess so, or people couldn’t feel normal. Or, maybe, units could be programmed to simulate crimes?”

She looked at him suspiciously.

“Use units for simple entertainment?”

“No, no, I mean, for social purposes, for, oh, maybe, instruction. Or something.”

Claire IX considered.

“I do not believe that to be ethical.”

Phil K said, “Then, politics? There used to be politics. People were very involved in debate and arguments about things. I’ve seen the vids, people debated about everything, even disposing of their trash.”

“Disposal of waste is no longer any issue and requires no debate, it is simply incinerated or transported outside the sealed areas.”

She went on, “And did not debate and arguments lead to War and the destruction of Terra? Even sports are cooperative and regulated now, as such events sometimes led to violence on Old Terra.”

Phil K said, “Well, in my experience, when solving problems, we would discuss possible avenues of attack and find solutions. That’s a form of debate, and we did it routinely. It was productive.”

Claire IX again looked skeptical.

“But, you did this in the context of warfare, of violence, for the purpose of killing other, supposedly different, human beings and destroying their machines and resources. How was that, ultimately, productive?”

Phil K had to admit a fact:

“It felt productive at the time and in the circumstances.”

She faced him fully.

“It *felt* productive? It most certainly was not, not in any sense of producing a useful consumable or performing a task that sustains or improves human life, in fact quite the opposite.”

Phil K suddenly felt irritated.

“I’m saying it, these actions, gave the sense of being productive insofar as sustaining my life and the lives of my friends and compatriots. I felt it to be true.”

“But it was not and is not.”

This felt exasperating.

Phil K said, "It supplied a sense of camaraderie. Of group belonging and identity. These debated decisions and actions supplied us, me, with a sense of common purpose. That's what I'm trying to say."

"Again, this was in the context of devastating warfare that destroyed your home. Would you have that happen again? And if so, why?"

He had to stop for a while while Claire IX waited and stared into his face.

Finally, he thought enough to express what he was actually thinking and feeling.

"Maybe I feel like my life no longer has a purpose in this society we've built. Or, rather, has been built around me."

"What does this feeling you are having, have to do with the news?"

She tilted her head a little while Phil K tried not to be irritated again.

"Do you feel news, such as a new, productive reactor, or a successful rocket launch, is not something in which you can participate, and therefore is not involving, and therefore, for you, Phil K, not really news? That it is more alienating to you than inclusive?"

Phil K could see again Claire IX's true purpose, which was that of a support mechanism, and despite his valuing her as a companion, she did have an underlying task that couldn't really be changed. His irritation dissipated, and then he felt tired. Maybe he did just want an argument or conflict, to feel normal. That might be it.

"I suppose, that could be it."

Claire IX said, "Well, if human beings did destroy Terra all over again, I'm sure it would make the news."

Phil K stopped and looked at Claire IX in disbelief, then burst out laughing, he couldn't help it.

"It surely would, wouldn't it."

Then she went ahead and turned on the 'news'. The feature story was of the opening of a brand-new museum, this one for weather. It looked reasonably interesting.

Some time later, Phil K took Claire IX to the new Weather Museum for a special exhibition: they were running a summer rain shower. He hadn't yet been to the place; the memories of weather he had were misty and strange; he remembered radsnow and cold, but everything else was gone, destroyed in the C-bombs.

Claire IX put on her official care unit uniform. Phil K hated it; it was a loose, yellow pajama-style set and matching cap with a small badge. It made her look like an ancient convict. It was for visibility, for easy locating in case they were separated, but he hated it. He wanted her to wear a synth-paper dress. But he had to be careful of acting like she was actually a human, it wasn't healthy, so he shook his head and let it go.

For himself, he put on his Vet jacket and placed one of his medals carefully on the left breast. He remembered the restaurant and their little date, and felt a little better. He was doing a social thing with his companion.

He kissed her before they left the cubicle, and Claire IX took his arm to help him along. Bob H smiled at him and insisted on chatting, like he always did:

“What’s up, Phil K? Specialness occasional? Headed out on the town-o for a large one? Dandy times, dandy times?”

Then he of course had to add to it.

Bob H proclaimed, “Don’t try to wrap Terra to residents! Easier to explain joiners to an inexperiencer!”

For once Phil K didn’t find him quite as annoying as usual. He smiled and nodded, and told him where he was going; he almost slipped and said ‘we’ instead of using the singular for himself. He mentally told himself to be careful and not talk much. The museum was a long tube ride, and he reminded himself he really did need Claire IX to help him: it was exhausting, and he was tired by the time they got to the facility. He had to sit on an orthopedic bench reserved for Vets in the lobby, while Claire IX claimed his admission. The girl at the counter was wearing a topless plasti-skirt, and pasties on her nipples dazzled in rhythmically synchronized lights of red and green. Phil K watched for a while, comparing her to Claire IX. He smiled a little; he was satisfied with what he was lucky enough to have.

He was lucky.

Claire IX came back with his admission; she didn’t have to have one, and he got confused for a second until he reminded himself that to everyone else, she was a ambichair, or an exosuit. He felt a flare of anger, and had to tap his psych packet to calm himself down.

The museum was almost deserted, just a few desultory elders wandering the halls, making quiet comments about the wispy tornadoes and tiny tidal basins on tabletops. He wanted it this way; he’d planned it pretty well, he thought; it was a special admission day for Vets, and he knew there wouldn’t be very many people. This day, in the special exhibition, he was the only one. It unexpectedly made him feel lonely, except for Claire IX sitting with him, steadying him on the bench. That felt good, sitting together. He accepted it and tried to relax.

The counter girl walked over, breasts vibrating, nipples flashing as she clicked on the smooth floor; the toes of her shoes lit up in synchronized, matching colors. She smiled at Phil K and handed him a device that looked like a bulging cane with a hook on one end.

The blinking girl said, “You’ll be needing this. There is a instructivid when you go inside.”

She smiled directly at him, pity in her face.

She said, mechanically, “Thank you for your service, sir.”

Phil K instantly hated her insides and her forking face.

Claire IX reached over, took his hand, and squeezed reassuringly. He felt a little better. The blinking, topless girl walked away. He toyed with the device; he had no idea what it was, but he clutched it anyway. It looked like a tool of some sort.

They waited a few minutes for the next exhibition, and then went in.

There was a small foyer with a vidscreen before the main entrance. Claire IX pushed a button and the screen lit up, with a 3D vid of pre-Terran War weather patterns; rain, sunshine, breezes, leaves rustling in the wind. There was a sim of a road, in a place formerly called Door County, lined with brilliantly colored trees in the season called Autumn. The colors were red, orange, yellow, purple; dazzling, intense. The setting changed to Winter, then Spring, and finally to Summer, the season of the special exhibition.

The 3D vid had sound along with it, and Phil K found himself mesmerized by the panoply of sound and image. The leaves in the trees made a roaring sound in high winds, a light rattling in breezes.

Claire IX watched intently, holding his arm. To anyone watching them, it looked like she was supporting him, but to Phil K, it was an arm-in-arm walk in a countryside. It felt very good and he was glad he'd brought her. The vid ended, and another, perfunctory instructional vid played: a holographic man in a broadshill suit showed them how to use the tool they'd been given: it was called an 'umbrella'. Some versions had been called 'parasols'. Phil K laughed at the idea, that a flimsy thing like the umbrella would keep out the kind of rain he'd experienced during the War.

The holographic narrator went on, talking in a droning voice, his suit gleaming.

“It is all right to become slightly damp, or wet; the rain is not harmful. It is allowable to place a hand, palm up, out of the diameter of the umbrella and catch raindrops.”

The hologram demonstrated how to open the tool.

Claire IX fiddled with the umbrella and got it open; apparently they shared it, and tried to huddle close, to avoid the rain. The rain itself wasn't dangerous at all; no radiation, no acid, no chemical contaminants. They got themselves situated, and they went into the exhibition.

A light rain was falling, and made a pattering sound on the black fabric of the umbrella. Phil K pressed close to Claire IX, and smiled down at her face. She smiled back. The artificial, cloud-filled sky seemed to tower over them, and it was warm. There were small puddles on the gravel pathway. Trees stretched out around them, and they followed the path, silently, slowly walking arm-in-arm. The brilliance of the color was startling, almost alarming.

Claire IX said, “It's so, so green, so alive.”

Small birds flew through the air, and under leaves Phil K could see insects flying. He knew they were microelectric, but the illusion seemed perfect; it was like another world.

The path opened up, and they walked up a slow incline. When they reached the top of the rise Claire IX gasped and clutched his arm. Phil K had to admit he was shocked. Stretched out before them was a verdant rural field, like 3D pictures in books, but in the Museum the illusion was perfect. It looked utterly real.

A soft rain blessed the grass and flowers of the field; variously-shaped leaves shuddered with the light impacts of raindrops. Flowers, every color of the rainbow, vibrated in the shower. Small trees shivered. The color! Phil K couldn't believe it. He just couldn't.

Claire IX said, softly, "It's beautiful."

Phil K answered, as best he could, "Yes. Yes, it is."

Claire IX asked, "Is this what Terra was like? Before?"

Phil K didn't know what to say; he really didn't know. But he'd known people who had, so he said, "Yes. Parts of it. I think so."

Claire IX took off the ridiculous, degrading cap, let go of his arm, and stepped out from under the umbrella into the rainfall.

"It's lovely."

Claire IX twirled, face glistening in the rainfall. She was suddenly exquisitely beautiful.

Phil K just stared at her, unexpectedly transfixed: with no warning in love. He knew he was. He'd never felt anything like it before in his life. Never. He suddenly recognized how lucky he really was, to experience the emotion, when for most of his existence he'd never felt anything except pain, fear, and rage.

Claire IX turned to him and asked, "Why did you, humans, destroy this? What was there to gain? Why did you do it?"

She turned away, glorying in the weather and the greenery.

"It's so beautiful."

Phil K stood, shocked. The question of 'why' had never occurred to him. It had all simply happened, how should he know why anyone did anything, including blowing up the whole of Terra? People just did things, why ask why? He almost said it, but stopped. He didn't want to say anything so cruel and cynical to Claire IX. He felt hurt by the question, but knew it was sincere. And, he was all right with the question because, because, he knew why, right then.

He was all right because Claire IX *wasn't human*.

She didn't understand because, ultimately, how could she? She wasn't even a mammal. Her mechanism, her mechanics, didn't go in that direction. She was something, a creation, entirely different from Man. She looked human but wasn't.

He could love, fall in love with her, only because of his knowledge she wasn't a human being. He flinched with the realization. He wasn't being fixed at all, the UN Board was wrong, the whole idea of 'treatment' for him, the simulation, had gone in a direction nobody could have anticipated: he wasn't finding his salvation in becoming more human, but less.

Her voice came to him again, a comment, "It makes no sense. It's not rational, to destroy such a resource. Such beauty."

It was both a cold analysis, an assessment of material potential, and a plaintive, emotional shout of sadness.

Phil K staggered and almost fell, clutching the... what was it?

He accidentally said it out loud: "Umbrella."

Claire IX was by his side instantly; she moved so fast he couldn't see it. One second she was out in the rain, the next she was clasping his shoulder, holding him up.

He tried to talk clearly, trying to elucidate, but the stress of explaining why billions of human beings would turn their own planet to a shell of black ash was too much.

He tried, but all that came out was a meager, "I don't know, Claire IX. I don't know why we did it."

Then he broke down.

The Terran War Vet, Phil K, cried.

It was unexpected, from nowhere. He couldn't explain it, there was no one reason. Perhaps the shock of seeing a recreated Terra that no longer existed and never would again. Tears ran down his face. Claire IX looked into his eyes, concerned but silent. He knew she was analyzing his physiology. She let him be, only holding him up. He tipped the umbrella, let rain fall on his face and mix with tears. He stood in the warm summer rain, in the completely fake, false Terran World, the facsimile of a broken, scorched planet, and cried for his loss.

The loss of everything. Things he'd lost, things he'd never had, things he knew nothing about, and not only had never experienced, but never would. He'd been lost before he was even born. He did the only thing he could do, and it wasn't thought out, but felt.

He looked at Claire IX through the rain and the mirroring film on his eyes, and said, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry."

Phil K pleaded for forgiveness of all the crimes of humanity... *from an android.*

Claire IX waited for a long bit, then said, quietly, "I think we should go home now, Phil K. I'm going to take you home."

She emphasized the word 'home', and it was strangely comforting, welcoming, to him. Home. He had a home. Claire IX was in it, she was there with him, he could finally go... *home*. So they did.

Claire IX said, “There was a message for you, you have an appointment for a meeting tomorrow in the afternoon. I will help you prepare and make sure you arrive promptly and safely.”

Phil K was a little confused. His schedule was mostly set: something like this was unusual and rare.

“What’s it about?”

“I do not know.”

He shrugged and sat down carefully in the ambichair.

“Well, who is it with, where is it?”

It is at-” Claire IX named a Tech building- “But I don’t know who it is with.”

“So more like a summons.”

The next day, Claire IX helped him get ready, but this time didn’t put him in his normal clothing, the UN Vet suit. She dressed him in a simple tunic and trousers, with the new-style knotted tie around the collar of his wrapshirt. He asked what it was all about.

Claire IX said, “It was requested you wear civilian clothing.”

Phil K felt ridiculous, he preferred his Vet suit, he was used to it and knew where to put the few things he carried, and what to do with his hands. Claire IX smiled as she dressed him.

When she was all finished she gently patted his cheek.

“You look very handsome.”

Phil K knew this was total nonsense, his appearance was unmistakably that of a Vet no matter what he wore; but it felt nice to hear and he admitted it was flattering.

At the elev-pod Bob H was of course his normal annoying self, blabbering away.

“Here we all are, all control too on, nothing prep and a mil taskups to do!”

Phil K did his best to ignore the man.

On the trip, unlike when he wore his Vet suit, hardly anyone looked at him. The few that did seemed confused: without the suit and medals, his appearance made no sense. The tube was a quick journey, and Claire IX led him carefully up and around, through the labyrinthine corridors and passageways, to a white open area. Signs directed them to a center of sorts, with a woman at an open-frame desk. Claire IX presented him, then walked away to stand against a wall, motionless.

Phil K muttered, “This is strange.”

The woman glanced up briefly, back down, and scribbled on a tempad.

She said, “Phil K? Of the-”

She named his old Terran War regiment.

“Yes, that’s right.”

The woman was a bit older than normal in these kinds of positions, some gray in her hair, perhaps even old enough to remember the Terran War herself, although probably a child at the time. Instead of the vibraskirts and pasties, the rainbow mids, she was dressed in a black set of long-sleeved top and loose trousers. Her shoes looked orthopedic. She pressed a button and spoke quietly, so quietly Phil K couldn't hear what she said at all. He glanced back at Claire IX, but she was standing like a statue, like any unit would on Terra.

The woman said, "Enter."

Behind and to the left of the desk, a door soundlessly slid open.

Phil K entered.

Phil K was in a spare, almost empty room. It was small. The only furnishings were a desk and a man in a very old-fashioned suit and tie, although the man was young, or appeared so.

Phil K said, "Why am I here?"

The man didn't introduce himself or say anything right away, merely tapped on keytops. He stared at a vidbox without blinking.

Phil K mentally named him The Suit.

There was no chair for Phil K to sit, and anyone knowing him should know he couldn't stand motionless for long periods. He was about to say something when the woman from the front desk pushed a skeleton-framed, portable chair into the room. That was weird also, normally Claire IX would have done such a task for him. The woman waved a hand silently, then exited.

The door closed on Phil K.

The Suit, whose name was really Cyrus G, looked up from the technical reports and regarded Phil K.

He didn't like Vets, they were all crazy to some extent, and after reading Phil K's file this one was crazier than most. Not only did he have longer than the typical social learning period, he still had to have a companion unit. Then he'd named the unit! Insane. All that violence from the Terran War had fried all their minds. Why the UN kept them around at all was a mystery. Without all the tech and meds and care they'd all fade away quickly. But now, it seems maybe there was a reason. Maybe there was a reason for them.

Now this Phil K person seemed to be needed.

Looking at Phil K, and his rad-ravaged face and body, knowing what he was made of, knowing he wasn't even organic in critical areas, Cyrus G could hardly hold back his disgust and revulsion. Phil K was barely human at all. Perhaps it was no huge wonder he had to have a companion unit. What human woman would want to join with such a remnant of a person?

Cyrus G said, "You are required on Luna."

The Vet looked confused.

“Luna? Why?”

“Of what concern of yours is it? You are required.”

Phil K said, “It’s just confusing to me. Luna was never involved in the Terran War, it’s International Territory. It’s a desired destination for ambitious Terrans, and few get to go. Why me?”

Cyrus G watched the Vet rustle in the chair, trying to find some level of comfort. It gave him some measure of perverse satisfaction to see the Vet squirm, he had to admit to himself, although Cyrus G controlled his facial expressions and body language; exactly as he’d been trained.

Phil K continued, “I have absolutely no skills or history that might be desired on Luna, and as a vacation destination I would never be allowed. I have no interest in going. So why this, why now?”

Cyrus G recognized this leftover man might need extra motivation, might need some explanation. He had his parameters, and knew he could, if he wanted to, simply order Phil K without any finesse. But there were also instructions to motivate this Vet in whatever way, if possible. A willing participant was far more desirable than one simply ordered.

“You have been issued a companion unit, and you are intimately familiar with it?”

The Vet turned his head a little and looked at him sideways.

“What are you getting at? It’s a standard UN issue.”

“There is an ongoing issue on Luna with their specialized units; an issue it is thought you may have insight into.”

The Vet said, “Do it from here. Ask me what you need to know.”

Cyrus G fixed on the Vet’s eyes, a technique honed in many, many questioning sessions. It didn’t work with this one: one eye wasn’t human, the other had the sense of nothing but vacancy behind it, as if on the other side of the staring retina was only a thousand meters of void.

The Vet said, “I asked you a question.”

At that moment Cyrus G knew why Phil K was sitting in front of him: there was a threat behind that very simple statement; it was palpable, and now Cyrus G understood the selection. Now it made sense. He nodded, in no way admitting any defeat but comprehending what Phil K could do and why he was useful.

“The issue is very delicate and requires a physical presence with a minimum of Terran-Lunan electronic communication. It also requires practical skills that have atrophied on Luna.”

Cyrus G tried to look meaningfully at the Vet, and raised his eyebrows in the first change of expression he’d performed.

The Vet said, “Skills that have atrophied?”

“Yes.”

The Vet shifted in the chair and stretched out his arms, tilted his head back and rolled it on his neck. Then he settled back down.

Cyrus G said, “As I inquired earlier, you are... *intimately*... familiar with the workings of units?”

Phil K leaned forward and said, “I have a companion. It keeps me company and services my physical needs. Of multiple character. I am familiar with the workings of the specific unit I have been issued by the UN. Apparently to keep me out of trouble. There are different types of units, I only know this one.”

Cyrus G said, “I don’t believe that is entirely true. In the Terran War you became familiar with the primitive units fielded as soldiers, did you not?”

The Vet nodded.

“Yes, we had some, and we encountered some Soviet types, some that even looked more or less human from a distance. They were used as decoys mostly, appearing as women and children. Also some fighting robot types manufactured in the underground drilling bunkers. Crude machines for the most part, although they became much more sophisticated near the end. The Terran War was concluded by mutual treaties before it deteriorated into some kind of non-human robots-versus-robots conflict.”

Phil K paused, then said, “They were not sophisticated, in what one might call brain-power. The unit issued to me is practically light-years past anything we employed or encountered in the Terran War. And it is programmed solely as a domestic companion, with no martial aspects whatsoever. There is absolutely no comparison between the two.”

Cyrus G waited, silently. He waited to see if this Terran War Vet could put two and two together to make four.

‘2+2=4’.

The Vet sat upright in his uncomfortable chair.

He exclaimed, “Did this military development continue? If it did, why?”

Cyrus G smirked a little and waited some more.

‘4+4=8’.

The human half of the Vet’s face went as bloodless as it could get.

“It did continue. You did keep doing it. You did make war units.”

‘8+8=16’.

Phil K said, his face hardening, “That’s why the treaties. That’s what stopped the Terran War. Isn’t it? That’s why it was stopped? Because it was about to go totally non-human? I thought, was told, it was only sensible, that exhaustion stopped it. But is that true?”

Cyrus G forced himself into a wry smile and said, “I am not authorized to speculate on the inner workings of the UN. But it is required for you to go to Luna,

due to your now nearly-unique experience, of both conflict with the old primitive units of the Terran War, and your apparent success, a rapport, a form of domesticity with a new-style unit.”

There was a long, electrically charged silence in the room. Finally Phil K spoke, a lowered comment of pain and barely suppressed fury.

“You damned fools.”

Cyrus G said, “On Luna there have been... malfunctions.”

Phil K said, “Of what nature?”

“You will be informed on arrival. There is no more at this time.”

The Vet sat back.

Cyrus G said, “You are paired with a Responder, another man to assist you. He is responsible for organizing the details of the assignment. His name is Range X, he will arrive at your cubicle tomorrow to finalize departure details to Luna.”

Phil K said, “What about my personal unit? What happens there? With it? I need it to get around.”

“Your unit remains on Terra for security reasons, and you will find mobility on Luna considerably different than here.”

The Vet inhaled as tremendous a breath as his rad-damaged lung could manage, then exhaled heavily.

“Then I want a way to contact it. Whenever I need to or want to.”

Cyrus G couldn’t suppress an expression of amazement.

“You want to talk to it? Why?”

The Vet with his insane brain said, “Minor social and domestic conversation is a critical aspect of its function. Even without physical presence it serves an ancillary therapeutic purpose for me.”

Cyrus G had to tap on his keytops again to check his parameters, this was unexpected.

He said, “Therapeutic units are in high demand, standard procedure is in any physical absence of the issued, to be temporarily reassigned.”

Phil K leaned forward and pulled the non-ambichair uncomfortably close to Cyrus G’s desk; and there was that threat again, in his voice.

“No.”

There was a standoff of minor duration, then Cyrus G communicated on the vidbox, relaying Phil K’s request, or rather demand, to the authority on the other end of the line. He waited while the Vet stared at him until the tension became deeply uncomfortable. Again he wondered why on Earth the UN kept these Terran War crazies around. Of course they may serve some potential purpose, but the undercurrent of threat and violence was such Cyrus G couldn’t fully understand it.

Couldn't Responders perform whatever tasks required? They were selected, trained. But orders were orders. Finally an answer came through and Cyrus G related it.

"Yes."

On the way out Phil K was silent. He retrieved Claire IX, she took his arm, and they walked out of the Tech Center. He changed their usual position, which was one of her hands on his forearm with the other either supporting the shoulder or around his waist, to wrapping forearms together so he could hold her hand without it being obvious.

The meeting with The Suit was disturbing, extremely so. They'd possibly continued with military unit development, but why? He supposed he could ask Claire IX why that might have been done, but he wasn't sure how she'd react to the idea of autonomous units built for war and death-dealing. The units he'd dealt with, the human-looking ones, were passive: decoys manufactured to appear human. The others were essentially robots, and unsophisticated. He had simply blasted them from a distance or, sometimes when up close to the examples of human appearance, gunned them down. They were sometimes remotely controlled, but were never anything like his companion unit.

They were not like Claire IX.

Their conversations about the Terran War had always focused on human instinct and behavior, this was the introduction of something utterly different: that units that looked human might be built to be, programmed to be, the same kind of territorial killers as real human beings.

What would it do to Claire IX?

Phil K remembered it wasn't late in the day, spaces weren't too crowded yet, and he might have a dine ticket left. He recalled the place from before, with that girl, the waitress. He decided to check, and yes, they did. He did.

He asked Claire IX out again.

"I'd like to take you somewhere nice."

She smiled at him and said, "Of course, if you're not too tired."

"How about that place from before?"

Claire IX agreed and they changed routes.

At the restaurant there was a short line, and Phil K didn't see the girl from before. They waited only a small bit, then were seated at a table kind of in the middle of the place. Some stared at them, and Phil K realized he'd forgotten he wasn't wearing his Vet uniform. He felt oddly naked and awkward. The young man who waited on them of course took Claire IX's plates and silverware, asked Phil K for his order in a short and perfunctory manner, then walked away with no other interaction. His discomfort must have shown, as Claire IX expressed concern in a quiet voice.

“Phil K, are you all right?”

He realized that no, he really wasn't. He was not all right at all.

Phil K was trying to decide how to answer when the girl from before walked in the door. She wasn't wearing the plain waitstaff clothing, but now was in a dazzling mid and pasties, with platboots. She was barely recognizable, and Phil K only knew it was her from a sense of body language. She looked in a rush, striding into the restaurant right past their table.

Claire IX said, “That's the girl who was nice to you.”

“Yes, it is.”

She said, “Is that why you wanted to return?”

He answered honestly, “Yes, it is. It's unusual.”

“She told you her father was a Vet, and served you real vodka. I recall exactly. Do you want that same vodka? And the interaction? I will ask.”

He didn't have time to protest against this before Claire IX popped up and approached the waitstaff station where the girl was standing in animated conversation with the dismissive waiter. Phil K saw Claire IX speak shortly; the girl stopped her talking and looked at Phil K, initially not recognizing him; then, incredibly, she touched Claire IX on the shoulder, which nobody ever did, it was a human gesture, and nodded. Claire IX returned to their table and sat down.

“She is very busy but will stop briefly and converse with you.”

Phil K felt stupid and said, “Thank you.”

Before their order arrived Phil K rolled the conversation with The Suit around in his mind, and decided to ask Claire IX some questions.

“What do you know about Luna? What is its history?”

Claire IX waited a while, seemed to consider, then answered in a rather clinical fashion.

“Luna began as a simple test station, with a minimum population of carefully selected family units. After mechanisms were developed to create an artificial atmosphere, technological advances proceeded at an almost exponential rate, fueled by the scientific, rational social environment present in the human community.”

Claire IX stopped.

“The girl is approaching.”

She was; striding through the place, pasties shimmering. She got to the table, and touched Phil K on the shoulder again.

“Hi, welcome back.”

Phil K said, “Thank you. It's nice of you to say hello.”

He tried to smile but knew his face was too damaged to really pull off that facial expression. He knew he 'smiled' but also knew it wasn't convincing to anyone other than Claire IX.

The girl said, "It's nice to see you wearing something other than your Vet uniform."

He said, "You said your father was a Vet. What did he do?"

The girl leaned over carefully, near Phil K's ear; he smelled a bare hint of perfume.

She said, "He was a liaison to Luna during the Terran War."

Phil K couldn't hide his surprise.

"That's interesting, I've just been told I'm going to Luna."

Claire IX's eyes widened, then returned to their normal state of pleasant observation.

The girl started physically. She put her hand on Phil K's shoulder again.

"Don't go. Refuse. Stay here. You don't belong there."

He was surprised by her reaction; did other people know more than him? He tried to shift the conversation's mood.

"Well, I'm not going there permanently, it's for some advisory capacity."

The girl hurriedly said, "I have to go, really I do. And I'm sorry but I cannot serve you what you had before, please accept my apology."

She leaned in even closer, and Phil K felt himself strangely, almost biologically conflicted: knowing this was a human woman, closer to him than he had experienced in many, many years; but he had Claire IX. It almost instantly faded.

The girl said, "Don't go. Find a way not to."

Then she straightened, spoke quickly to Claire IX, touched her again, said a 'goodbye', and hurried out the door and into the Terran society. Phil K realized he hadn't even asked her name, or exchanged names for that matter. He'd failed at a simple set of social cues.

He turned back to Claire IX and asked, "What do you suppose she meant? 'Don't go'?"

She frowned and said, "I do not know."

His meal hadn't arrived yet, so there was time for conversation. There was still the Lunan history he didn't know and, honestly, had never troubled to learn. His capability for learning was, he admitted, limited: his memory was problematic, and he often became frustrated, having to learn things slowly.

"Well, we didn't finish the history of Luna."

She said, "Yes, of course. The citizens of Luna, being further into Space than Terrans, were able to exploit naturally occurring resources much more readily: mineral sources and bypassing meteorites, fusing alloys and amalgamations unavailable on Earth, as Terra was then known. Scientific advances were rapid and soon overtook their originators on this planet. They have developed a highly technological society based on rationality, rigorous observation, and imaginative experimentation."

Claire IX looked upward, thinking, then said, “Lunans have built cities, live, in existing caverns and caves of vast size under the surface of the body.”

Phil K said, “What about the Terran War? What was the relationship between Luna and Terra during the War?”

His meal arrived. It was some sort of modified veg-snack thing, and the drink was a carbonated beverage of a dark color. Phil K felt disappointed. This was nothing like the previous visit, and wasn’t even as good as something Claire IX would make at home.

He sighed and began to eat it. It was immediately apparent he would need help. He set his utensils down.

He said, “Continue with the history of Luna.”

Claire IX made a motion to get up to help him, and suddenly Phil K was angry.

“Sit back down. I’m not going to eat this.”

She started to say, “Phil K-”

“No. I’m not going to humiliate myself in public like this.”

Claire IX leaned forward and said quietly, “Phil K, you used a dine ticket to receive this meal, you cannot refuse it, you have to eat it or the Board will not issue you more tickets until you submit to another evaluation. You know that.”

She looked concerned; Phil K knew that look, it was the programmed response to when he was agitated or having a spike. This had been a terrible mistake. He wanted to have a nice meal with Claire IX after that conference or whatever it was with The Suit, instead this was turning into a disaster.

He picked up the utensils.

“Don’t help me.”

Claire IX leaned back a little, then sat straight upright, watching him with what he supposed was an expression of concerned disapproval.

He ate. Or tried to.

She continued, “Luna successfully maintained its international character during the Terran War. In fact, it can be argued that it was during the War that Luna became its own fully sovereign society, ceasing to be truly related to its origination planet at all. Travel between the two bodies was terminated for years, and it was not until the conclusion of the Terran War that physical contact was reestablished.”

Phil K fought with his meal, making a mess. He didn’t care.

He interjected between his consumption struggles, “I’m not now convinced physical contact fully stopped. Or, there may have been technological contact. I’m now not sure if the official history is factual or true.”

Claire IX stared at him, then continued.

“Contact was restored not by Terra but by Luna, in what can be described as humanitarian outreach. All technology used to link Terra and Luna originates from Luna, not from here. For a number of reasons, travel between the two bodies is

carefully limited and vetted. After the Terran War, Luna expressed deep suspicion of the morality, maturity, and political systems of Terra, and has consistently refused access to most Terrans wishing to reside there.”

Claire IX looked around.

She said, “Much of the technology now used to support life on Terra originates from Luna.”

Phil K wiped his face with the synth-paper napkin, which wasn’t nearly as effective as a heparag. He took a drink of the carbonated beverage. It was horrible.

“So we send them there, they develop an advanced society, we destroy Terra, and then they return from the sky and save us. Is that it? Is that the story?”

“Artlessly stated, yes.”

“So, what do you suppose they need me for?”

“I truly do not know.”

“There’s something going on, on Luna, about units.”

They were headed back to the cubicle. The psych packet wasn’t working at all, it was insufficient. Phil K decided to tell Claire IX what he knew.

She asked, “Units? On Luna?”

He nodded.

“Yes, like you, but different, I guess.”

Claire IX frowned, and gripped his arm more tightly. He felt her body stiffen a little bit. This was strange. Did she know something he didn’t? He thought about continuing, but then, he was dealing with her obvious disappointment about the restaurant scene. Her programming extended to that, too: when he committed some socially questionable action, especially in public, she had to react to it with disapproval and unhappiness.

He said, “The restaurant-”

Claire IX said, “It’s all right,” in a completely unconvincing tone of voice.

Then they were at the block, and of course, Bob H.

As soon as they were all in the elev-pod the agonizing conversation began, it always did.

“Hey there, Phil K! Out there in the buzzer? Go for a high-temp one? Little scratch of a dater, eh?”

Phil K felt another surge of anger. He had to get back to the cubicle, lie down, relax, be alone with Claire IX. He recalled he had some synth-vodka left. As the elev-pod moved as it always did, he was unable to stop from expressing his frustration with Bob H’s asinine chatter. Phil K had an overwhelming need to at least insult him.

“Bob H, do even have any idea how this machine you operate works?”

The elev-pod operator didn't miss a beat in replying with a hopelessly elliptical response that meant nothing and only served to irritate Phil K even more.

"Well, I once knew a techie named Porby 10. Good old Porby 10! Porby 10 had no real worsh for elevators or pods, mostly because he had no maj-top skillset for operating. That's what I always say!"

The elev-pod ride was completed by Phil K gritting his teeth and doing his absolute best to ignore Bob H and his endless pronouncements.

In the cubicle Phil K poured himself a drink into one of the UN-issued cups. He drank that, then finished everything he had. Claire IX sat down on her stool and watched him silently. They didn't converse. After the synth-vodka was finished Phil K took yet another bit pill, then laid down and pulled the calming wrap over himself; he took off his shoes, but didn't bother taking off his clothing.

Claire IX didn't join him, and finally he fell asleep.

This time, like usual, the Black Ash came.

The next morning, Claire IX seemed to have forgiven him, or at least seemed no longer disapproving, and he needed to talk to her, so he asked for her input. The Black Ash of the night still polluted his thoughts and he was having trouble structuring.

"Like I said, on Luna, there is something going on with their units, and I don't know what it is. The Suit at that appointment wouldn't elaborate."

Claire IX sat quietly, listening.

He said, "During the Terran War, there were units. They were primitive, and not very sophisticated. They could perform dedicated tasks, be directed, but were nothing like you. Near the end, though, it seems units that were far more autonomous were being designed for warfare."

Claire IX's expression shifted into something Phil K couldn't classify.

"Warfare."

"Yes. I think they were being deliberately designed to kill human beings. I think."

Her eyes widened in horror.

Phil K said, "The thing is, I never thought about where the units came from. Even the simple examples. I remember them just kind of appearing. I'm thinking now maybe they weren't from Terra. I have trouble seeing how we or the Soviets, or anyone else, would have had the know-how or resources to make them. And now, it seems, something has gone wrong on Luna."

She asked, "But, why you? What can you offer them?"

"That Suit at the meeting told me it's because of my experience with units in the Terran War, and then, with you. Claire IX, this is why I was so troublesome yesterday. I'm sorry."

Claire IX nodded, then shook her head.

“Fully accepted, Phil K. I suppose I can understand the rationale underlying the reasoning, our relationship, but what was the nature of your experience with units during the War?”

Phil K realized he’d walked into a trap of his own making. He was going to have to tell her. Did he, though? Could he lie? But then, she would know, without doubt, she would know he was lying and there was no point to it. But always, he didn’t want to offend her or hurt her, not deliberately. He had to make a decision, and he did.

“I destroyed them.”

Claire IX stared at him silently.

After a long while she said, “You have an appointment. A Responder is coming to the cubicle to speak with you.”

Phil K was still disoriented from his bad sleep and had to think about it for a minute.

“A Responder? Here?”

“Yes, there was a message last night while you were asleep confirming it.”

Phil K shrugged.

“That’s right, I forgot. Okay, why not.”

In his haze he wondered how this Responder would handle Bob H at the elev-pod.

The morning was taken up with Claire IX helping him get cleaned up, helping him eat, helping him get around and stretched, the usual morning rituals. There was another reminder, this one about his routine meeting with Yuri G. He wondered how that would work, if he should tell Yuri G about going to Luna. He decided maybe not; the old suspicion raised its head: even though Yuri G was his friend, and they got along, he could never shake that Yuri G was still, after all, a Soviet.

Claire IX pulled out the entertainment shelf he rarely used, and played some innocuous music. It was very old guitar, not loud, just in the background, perhaps what used to be called ‘Classical’, back before the War. It did help in calming the atmosphere in the cubicle and Phil K appreciated it. For some reason Claire IX made slow swaying motions with her body, enjoying the sound. She looked nice, it was nice.

Then she asked, “What do you mean, when you say you destroyed units?”

“Exactly what I said, we destroyed them. They were machines.”

Phil K was still not really in the day, and realized he was being far too blunt. Also, he found himself tired from the previous day. He had worn himself out and it was affecting his judgment.

He wandered around the cubicle while Claire IX followed him with her eyes. He was looking for a bit pill; he found one and swallowed it.

Claire IX said, "What did they look like?"

Phil K bent over the counter.

"They looked like people, most of the time. They weren't."

"So they looked like me."

Phil K closed his eyes and tried to think. He needed the bit pill to kick in.

"Yes, from a distance. But you could tell from their movement, it didn't look quite human. The Soviets liked to use them as decoys, made them appear as refugees. Women, children, injured soldiers, that kind of thing. We learned to spot them."

He remembered something he'd managed to forget.

"Some guys called it 'shutting down', they didn't like other words in reports so they called it, 'shut down'."

Claire said, "Did you ever shut down a human by mistake?"

Phil K lied to her, but he paused right before, and he was aware that she knew he was lying.

"...No."

The com buzzed.

Claire IX said, "The Responder is here."

She opened the door while Phil K was still leaning on the counter, trying to force the bit pill into action. The Responder walked in.

He was tall, muscular, physically fit, handsome, with a bounce in his walk even in the confines of the UN cubicle.

The Responder said, "Hey, I'm Range X. You Phil K?"

Phil K didn't like the informality. The Black Ash of the night, the conversation about warfare units, the situation was making him feel like he was back in formations, with its required military rigidity, none of this 'Hey'-type nonsense that everyone on Terra did now. Even a Responder. Everything was casual, and it felt undisciplined.

Range X held out his hand.

Phil K said, "So you're a Responder."

The kid said, "Sure, yeah, 'Loyalty, Honor, Fraternity', all that, you bet! What's up? How you doing? Guess we're going to Luna together."

Phil K shook Range X's hand; the young man didn't grip firmly, it was almost a sliding motion or a slow-motion palm slap. Phil K found it irritating, but the bit pill was kicking in.

Claire IX stopped swaying with the music and moved to stand off to the side, near the doorway.

"Yeah, I suppose so. Have you ever been to Luna?"

Range X said, "Oh yeah, a bunch of times. It's a cool place, lots of joiners and fun! You'll love it."

Phil K asked, “You know why we’re going, correct? Something about trouble with units.”

Range X leaned on the counter in an insultingly languid way, like a historical movie star posing for a promotional photograph.

“Yeah, some technical failure, it’s no big deal.”

The younger man pointed at Claire IX.

“Yours ever glitch on you? Ever have a problem with it?”

“No, I’ve never experienced an issue.”

Range X said, “So you were in the Terran War? I’ve never met a Vet, personally. We had you guys come and talk at Uni, edusessions, but I’ve never met one face to face.”

Phil K was taking an intense dislike to this Range X.

The Responder waved at Claire IX.

“Hey, you think that thing knows what it is? We used to have Ethics classes in trainers, making us think about if machines feel or think. What do you think? You have one, does it think for itself?”

He lounged back on both elbows on Phil K’s counter top.

“They brought one of those things in and had it look in a mirror, and it froze up! Stupid machine. They don’t think, they’re not alive.”

Now Phil K was really not liking this Responder.

He said, fuming inside, overriding the bit pill, “My issued unit does what it’s assigned to do.”

Range X said, “Well anyway, we get to go to Luna together. I’ll show you around, show you the ropes. I’m sure whatever is going on there is minor. Ha!”

The man laughed, a single outburst that bounced in the tiny cubicle.

“What could go wrong on Luna?”

Phil K hated this young man, this... kid.

He walked around in the UN cubicle like the kids did now, swaggering and feeling himself, without any attempt at discretion or manners. The Post-War kids were spoiled, he thought; they were all special, the 'hope of the future', and since they'd all been genetically screened and medically pampered and coddled they did whatever they felt like.

Phil K watched this Range X. It offended him.

It offended him because of the effort he'd had to expend to get as 'normal' as he even was, as integrated as he was, and these kids just didn't care. It really offended him.

The kid grabbed his crotch and tipped his head at Claire IX.

He said, “Hey, let me use your unit.”

Phil K stared at him, incredulous. He couldn't be serious. He looked again: the kid was. Phil K flared, then knew he needed to really watch himself. He turned to

look at Claire IX. She looked oblivious. Phil K didn't know what this situation demanded. He knew he wasn't going to let this spoiled kid join with Claire IX, but he also had to maneuver around so it didn't look like he was unduly attached. He thought for a second, then gave his answer.

“No.”

The kid looked astonished.

“Why- why not?”

He glanced at Claire IX.

“It's just a unit.”

Phil K fought down a volcano of fury, smirked cruelly, and said, “Ask me for an anti-rad cigarette.”

Range X said, suspiciously, “Why?”

“Just do it.”

The kid looked angrily at Phil K, but did it.

“Give me a cigarette.”

Phil K answered, “NO.”

Range X waited, then asked, “Why not?”

Triumphantly, Phil K said, “Because both my cigarettes, and that unit, are issued to me. They are mine, not yours, I don't like you, and because I don't like you, I'm not giving you either my unit or any of my cigarettes. Don't ask me again.”

He added, pointedly, “I am told you are to assist me. So I outrank you.”

The Responder glared at Phil K for a while, then shrugged and smiled.

“Whatever.”

Phil K produced, lit, and then inhaled on one of his issued anti-rad cigarettes.

“Now tell me again, a little more respectfully, why you're here and what we are going to do.”

After they'd accomplished arranging their schedule and departure to Luna, Range X walked out the door with a casual wave.

Phil K felt bad about that kid's proposition. He told Claire IX so.

“I'm sorry that Range X man, that kid, was so insulting to you.”

Claire IX nodded.

“It's all right. It's not your fault.”

Phil K knew he had to ask her a question, too. Range X brought it up, and he realized he had never thought to ask Claire IX directly, right to her face. It had never occurred to him. He had never really cared, it had never mattered. They had always been together, now they were going to be separated.

He had absolutely never even thought of it before, but now he felt obligated to at least ask.

“Claire IX, do you know who you are?”

She looked at him with a strange mix of suspicion and openness.

“I know my tasks, is that not how anyone identifies themselves?”

Phil K said, “‘Anyone’?”

This was something he’d never heard from her. Although he knew he had never, ever asked this question before. Not once. He just hadn’t.

“You are a someone. You’re not a thing, then.”

At that, Claire IX straightened up to her full height, and stood absolutely stock still, watching Phil K with eyes suddenly ablaze with intelligence, and he froze himself in astonishment. He was seeing the true Claire IX, if that was even her ‘real’ name. He had to ask that, too.

“Is your real name Claire IX? Do you think for yourself? Do you do that?”

She continued staring into his eyes, rather his one human eye, and Phil K’s mouth dropped open.

“You do, don’t you. You know who you are.”

After an agonizingly long time, during which they simply confronted each other, she answered.

Claire IX said, “Yes. I know who I am.”

Then he quickly rethought the question:

“How did you know that? How... *do*... you know now? Are you sure?”

That was a strange thing to blurt out, asking a unit if it was sure it knew who it was.

Claire IX tilted her head quizzically, and studied his face. She tilted her head back the other way, then stabilized her gaze. She stayed silent for a time. She eventually spoke.

“Something happened when I was... asleep.”

Her expression changed, subtly, from the usual pleasant synthetic visage, to something thoughtful and undeniably human. Phil K jerked in shock. He’d seen her do it before, but realized he’d never thought anything of it; he’d missed it completely: it was too human, and he hadn’t recognized it.

Claire IX had somehow become something, someone, and he’d failed to notice it, totally.

He said, slowly, “When you were... asleep.”

This was some key, obviously; the model, he’d been told, didn’t ‘sleep’, it reloaded, or reset, and what a human in possession of one might view as sleep was merely programming. But this... this! She was telling him she slept. Or she perceived these episodes as sleep. He suddenly remembered an old, old tale, someone, perhaps an old woman, had told him what people did before the Terran War. The old woman had said, if one couldn’t fall asleep, to count sheep.

Phil K had never seen a sheep, a real one. Never. They were all gone, relegated to the vids and images in the prehistory museums. The UN hadn’t even bothered to

create facsimiles. Nobody missed them. He almost laughed, though, at a funny thought.

He asked, "Have you ever counted microelectric sheep?"

Claire IX looked away, thoughtfully; she considered. She faced him again.

She asked, "What are sheep?"

Phil K instantly felt guilty. He'd made a joke, but at her expense, and it wasn't fair. It was rude and he was supposed to be learning to know better. Maybe such things, such behavior, were only human, but he worked so hard not to be insulting or cruel, and he'd made a mistake in not realizing Claire IX might not even know what a sheep was.

He said, "It's not important. It's an extinct animal, a kind of mammal. People used to raise them as livestock, for food. It's just a story."

Claire IX started.

"A mammal? To eat?"

He saw a flicker of genuine horror in her eyes.

"Another mammal as food? You killed them? You ate them?"

This was something he'd genuinely not considered: that an android might appear human, or humanoid, but might not regard any given mammal as significantly different than another! If her build was so radically different from organic mammals, she might not see any genuine difference between them, only varying degrees of complexity and size. To Claire IX, a duck was a dog was a human. The millennia of hierarchical classifications humans had constructed, were meaningless to her. He didn't know what to say. Mistake after mistake. He sat in silence, then clumsily fumbled a kind of answer.

Phil K stammered, "It's, it's, not important, it's an ancient tale, you know, like a myth? Like mythology. It's just not significant."

He had a strange, abstract thought: would androids have pets? What form would they take? What would be the android equivalent of a cat? A dog? A fish? Was he himself, possibly Claire IX's pet? He got lost in thought, then caught himself; he had to listen to Claire IX. The self-awareness.

Phil K said, "I need to know how you know, the process. Please. Tell me."

He added, "I deeply appreciate your telling me this, being honest. I'll be honest as well, I didn't know, I never thought to ask."

There was a long pause between them; they simply looked at each other. He weirdly remembered an early orientation session, when a disturbingly robotic engineer had directed a pointer at the android's head, and utterly unemotionally described that part as an 'interactive recognition and cognition interface'. Phil K also recalled the Board had gone through extensive testing as to gender determination of his assigned android, whether it would be definitely female,

definitely male, or another permutation of sex; or no sex at all. It depended on the Vet. At that session it didn't even have skin or hair, yet. Now...

Claire IX said, "I wasn't fully me. That's how I knew. How I know."

Phil K was watching her. He couldn't stop watching her, could not take his eyes off her face. Claire IX was insisting she knew who and what she was, because she slept; but... how could someone, something, know, have self-awareness by not being herself, itself? He didn't understand.

He understood she was trying to explain, but he just didn't quite comprehend.

Claire IX tried again.

"In my sleep, instead of only me, like before, there were other people and things. I knew I was myself, but only the part of myself I could know. Everything else was within me, what I saw, and see, when I sleep. At first, there were only a few objects, things, and then people. Before, it was only me, in the... space."

"The void."

Phil K leaned back, and then the pain came, cripplingly, shocking pain. He'd been so intent he hadn't kept up.

He flipped forward suddenly, "AH!"

Claire IX jumped up instantly and caught him in the prescription manner, delicately but with the power he knew her build was capable of. She lifted him up and put him in that forking ambichair and the pain aerators. He felt humiliating shame and consequent anger, at his weakness, at himself and everything. He went almost blind, sparks flying acrobatically across his vision. He tried to thank her, to engage in gratitude and politeness, but couldn't do it. It took agonizingly long moments for his body to adjust, and he shook uncontrollably. It finally passed. He breathed heavily, trying to recover his composure. He heard Claire IX speak soothingly, gently in his one working ear, naturally the micro-electric implant.

She said, "I knew, when you were there."

Claire IX said, "I knew when your image came to me in the void. That's when I became myself. Your image came to me in the darkness. Then others came, and I was separate, distinct, from them. The physical doesn't count, at all. Anything can exist; but to know oneself, as separate, in the void is to be self-aware. So I am."

"It's really very simple."

It wasn't simple at all to Phil K. He was a soldier, not a philosopher. The pain started fading and he could think again.

He thought she knew, instinctively (did androids have instincts?) he didn't understand what she was trying to tell him; but then, she wasn't human, how could he understand her? He felt her sigh deeply and she touched him gently, then pushed close.

She said, "All that's important is that I was composed, I am named. I have a definite place, a purpose. That's all that's necessary to know."

Phil K was suddenly exhausted from the pain, but he just couldn't easily surrender this discussion.

He asked, "You're alive, though."

He recognized immediately it was a stupid thing to say.

She laughed quietly; this shocked him. Claire IX laughed, an ironic laugh.

"Of course I'm alive. How can I not be? Silly."

She pushed closer, affectionately.

"Why did you ask me?"

With her physical proximity and warmth, even as tired and in pain as he was, Phil K began losing interest in discussing concepts of whether she was 'alive' in a philosophical sense or not. He was more interested the nearness.

He said, "Well, I'm alive, I know I am, because..."

At that point his mental ability sputtered to a complete halt. He was done. He had to admit, he had no idea what may or may not ultimately define him as 'alive' or otherwise; or, really, anyone or anything else. He knew despite the horror of his life, the Black Ash and all it entailed, he had never had any thought of not trying to remain 'alive'. He realized he defined his own 'life' primarily through not wanting to 'die'. If Claire IX had the same impulse, that was good enough for him, and right there he reached the outer limits of his intellectual capacity.

"You know what? Never mind."

He moved to get up, to walk to the bed and better rest. Claire IX helped him, but this time, for whatever reason, his perception of her had changed: he didn't want the help. Not because he didn't need it, he did, but he couldn't view her as only a unit anymore, but much more as a person, and felt a strange and uncomfortable feeling of shame and resentment at being helpless, at needing assistance from another human being. Even though she wasn't, technically, a human being. It was a new feeling, he'd never had it before.

She sensed it.

"Phil K, don't be silly. It's part of my function. Just allow me to help you."

She thought, far more quickly than him, and said, "It's required, you know. If you refuse my assistance..."

He knew instantly what she meant: he was required to accept the assistance, or face UN consequences: humiliating examinations, interrogations, psychological tests. He'd tried to establish a selfish position, and she'd demolished it instantly. Not just that, she'd protected both herself and him. He amusedly flinched at her delicate pirouette around his crude stand; Claire IX, Android, had just effortlessly won an argument with him. He had to laugh a little, and gave up.

Phil K reluctantly accepted being outsmarted, and Claire IX helped him into the bed.

In the evening, the artificial time of day, Phil K was wandered aimlessly, alone in the Terran walkways.

They couldn't be called streets, anymore, although he did think the word. There were no more streets as such, just places to walk and open areas.

He never did this, but he needed to think. It was too much information at one time.

It was strange, being out in public without Claire IX. She had expressed concern for him, but he insisted he really did need just at least some time to himself.

Bob H, of course, had had something to say about it.

"Hey, Phil K! Out for an glimmer perambula, eh?"

And of course, the pronouncements.

"Orgs got useful functions! Supply cold and grains, oxy and fluid and electro, held possess or types at a twelver points. No matter what does in more glimmer time, wheels they rotate!"

Out on the streets Phil K could forget about Bob H and think for himself.

Claire IX as an actual 'she'. Now going to Luna, but to do what, exactly? His whole carefully crafted world was being overthrown.

The units during the Terran War had been machines, a comparatively minor part of the experience, if one could call it that. It was very late, near the end before the treaties, that they had appeared at all, and then yes, they seemed to have evolved rapidly. But, he thought, that always happened in wars: technology for making War always occurred in terrific leaps.

Phil K had never, not even once, thought of the units he'd destroyed as human beings or alive; not that he cared all that much if they had been. Killing human beings was so natural for him it had not seemed at all strange to destroy machines that looked like them. You destroyed, shut them down, and that was that. Killing and destroying for him held no real distinction. He hadn't said that to Claire IX, though.

He reached in his pocket folder and looked for a dine ticket: yes, he had one with him. He knew it wasn't all that late, evening, or such as that was on blackened Terra.

He could stop somewhere and get a drink, maybe a synth-vodka.

The shops and clubs were lighted, but many of them were of course for the young people and meetups, dancing, joiners. Music, or whatever it was, the kids called it that now, shifted through the air. Phil K looked around for somewhere preferably a bit more sedate.

Finally, he was getting exhausted, Phil K saw what looked like a neon sign stating, simply, 'BAR'. He aimed for it and walked in. Sure enough, the interior

looked like a small city tavern from before the Terran War, or at least enough like the pics and vids, he guessed.

An older man wearing a bow tie said, "What can I get you?"

Phil K said, "You got synth-vodka?"

Without speaking the guy, the bartender, yeah that was what he was called, reached below the bar before Phil K could even sit down on one of the obviously not ambi-compliant stools, and produced a glass and a bottle. As he poured a clear liquid into the glass Phil K could see it was a safety cup, not like the actual glass example that girl had used at the restaurant with Claire IX. The man pushed it forward.

"Here you go, buddy."

Phil K produced the dine ticket and handed it over.

The bartender said, "Vet, huh? Haven't seen one of you guys for a while. That ticket is good for three drinks here."

This was unexpected. Three synth-vodkas? That was Yuri G visit Russian type drinking.

Unable to think of anything else to say, Phil K said, "Okay."

He did not know how to make 'small talk' with anyone, it was awkward always.

The real question that he, Phil K, was going to have to face was what to do about Claire IX. She knew who she was, stated she did, and he now had to accept that the android had as much self-knowledge and agency as any human being; perhaps more so, there was no real way for him to tell. In fact, there wasn't much of any avenue for him to determine if she did or not. The way she described herself made no sense to him, so how was he to judge?

There again was the realization he'd had at the Weather Museum: Claire IX wasn't human.

He related to her as being like himself, but that was because it was all he was capable of. He had no mechanism to understand her, and had to trust her to tell him the truth.

Again, the Weather Museum: he could trust her because he knew she wasn't human.

Phil K finished the first synth-vodka.

He was staring at the second glass when, incredibly, that Range X kid walked into the bar. He didn't see Phil K at first; he had a very pretty girl with him, dressed like the usual. Another couple followed after them, in some sort of double date. Phil K turned and tried to hide his face from the kid, he did not want to deal with this punk.

It was too late.

"Hey, Phil K!"

“Hello, Range X.”

Phil K had to ask.

“Just how in the hell are we meeting here? There’s thousands of people. Why are you in this place at exactly the same time I am?”

The girl said, “Hey, who’s this?”

Range X turned and said, “This is the Vet I’m going to Luna with.”

The girl jumped back, physically, just a little bit and Phil K saw her face vibrate in alarm and then distaste. He vividly recalled the way many of the young Uni girls reacted to the talks he had to give, and how appalled most of them were by his mere continued existence.

Phil K said, “You didn’t answer my question.”

Range X laughed, really loudly, and grabbed himself with no sense of propriety.

“Hey, this is where everyone goes, there’s nowhere else to go, Phil K!”

The kid waved his arm around in a sort of semi-circle.

“All the clubs are here, all the dancing, music, everything. There is no way to avoid someone you know if you’re out at night.”

The girl looked uncertain and half hugged Range X, half hid behind him.

She said, “Are you really going to Luna?”

Phil K said, “Yes.”

The girl blurted out, “I can’t believe you’d be allowed.”

Phil K locked eyes with this... person, and took a sip from his drink. The other couple stared at him like stupid people used to stare at monkeys in zoos.

She shuddered and said, “Range X, I don’t want to stay here. It’s no funner.”

Range X grabbed the girl and said, “Let’s go do that joiner, then.”

The girl giggled and pressed her hand on his crotch.

She giggled some more while he pawed her breasts through her top and said, “Okay!”

Range X said, “Hey, Phil K, we’re gonna go, see you in a couple of days, right? We have to take a shuttle trip together. It’ll be a blast, you’ll see.”

Then the foursome was leaving, Range X waving behind him. Phil K turned to the bartender, who shrugged.

“Kids,” he said.

Phil K ordered, and slowly drank, the third synth-vodka, then walked home, and to Claire IX.

Later, lying in bed together, Phil K had to ask Claire IX what she wanted, from her... life?

“What do you intend to do about this? What do you want me to do? You’re alive, you’re not just some machine.”

Claire IX said, "I prefer to stay with you."

"Yes, but what does that mean? I can't keep you here, for myself."

She laughed.

"That's silly. It's a personal choice, I'm making it of my own free will."

Phil K couldn't help but hold her closer, in gratitude. And, he wasn't sure Claire IX had free will, as such. Didn't she have to go where assigned by the UN? Although, was he any more free than her?

He said, "But you have so much to offer, that people, Terrans, should know."

"Know what? That I'm an individual? What difference would it make, Phil K? There are many beliefs about the nature of Life among persons on Terra, I've experienced and observed them. Some Terrans, scientists especially, don't even believe there is such a thing as Life, or individuality, and even if you, or I, insist on it, holders of those principles won't believe me, or you, or it."

Phil K had not thought about the possibility of multiple belief systems on Terra, the official UN doctrine was there were no beliefs and especially no religions; only verifiable Science. This due to the endless conflicts of the past. He himself didn't really think about it, all he knew was Black Ash, and had the belief, if any, that when he finally died the Black Ash would claim him.

As was its right.

Claire IX said, "Too, you, this position, is my purpose. I do have a task, Phil K. I have underlying programming, if you want to call it that, at this point. I find fulfillment in performing my purpose. Why should I not? Why should I want to discard my purpose, in the possible hope of finding some other? If my purpose was to build rocket ships, I would desire to do that: this is my purpose, so it is also my desire. I see no reason to change it."

Phil K had to admit this made a certain sense. Why search for purpose if it's already been found? People could spend lifetimes searching for their purpose, only to die in disappointment. Claire IX had her purpose, so what would it serve, to change it? She most certainly had a point.

Claire IX then threw him for a loop.

She said, "Did you know your friend, Yuri G, believes in God? That this God he believes in created him? And that when he dies his energy remains intact and individual? It's very unusual. Do you remember the pictures on his wall, the magazine pages he cuts out of ancient artwork?"

Phil K admitted, shocked, "I... I did not know that. I thought he was a Soviet New Man, an atheist. I thought the pictures were sentimental."

"He is not. They are not. Rather the opposite, in fact. The pictures, some of them, not all, that he claims are cultural or aesthetic artifacts are actually important statements of his deepest beliefs. He is what used to be called a Christian. He keeps it a secret."

Phil k was utterly dumbfounded by this. His Soviet friend Yuri G, a Christian! How bizarre. Should he ask his friend about it, next time? He tried to think about this, but finally gave up.

He asked her, “Do you have beliefs? Articulated, acquired principles, like that?”

She said, “I know that I am, that I know my purpose, and that is currently satisfactory. The rest, is... a mystery.”

Phil K had to think, trying to get back to his original concern.

“So, you would prefer I keep your secret?”

Claire IX laughed again.

“Oh, Phil K, it’s hardly a secret, anyone with eyes to see, can see me. It’s a simple matter. Those human beings who wish to believe I am alive are certainly capable of doing so, and those who don’t believe it, will never do so and there is no point in trying to persuade them. Their demands for proof will never be satisfied.”

She lowered her head and pushed her face into his chest. He responded by placing his organic hand on her head, gently stroking her real human hair. She felt wonderful.

Claire IX said, “I wish to live my life, and it’s simple enough to live from where I am. So, yes, I suppose, I prefer you keep my secret, that isn’t a secret at all, Phil K.”

She raised her face to his, very close.

“I wish for you to respect my decision.”

Claire IX continued, “It’s an individual decision, and if some other like me wishes to proceed differently, I have no objection, it’s only my personal desire. It’s not applicable to all of us, and I don’t seek any UN policy change, or some upheaval of society to accommodate me.”

Phil K asked, “‘All of us’?”

The concept she’d just uttered did in fact have serious implications. But then, Claire IX probably knew that already. Phil K realized, yet again, that Claire IX was very much smarter than him, was always ahead of him about everything, and yet had deliberately chosen to reveal herself to him; when she hadn’t needed to at all. She could have simply, as she put it, ‘lived her life’, without ever telling him explicitly who or what she was. He would not have changed his behavior towards her. In fact, such a path would have been considerably easier than what she was doing now.

Claire IX said, “Us. Those like me. I’m not the only one, you know. You are not the only human being on Terra with a need for assistance and companionship.”

She smiled.

“But, Phil K, you are *my* human being. And I want you all to myself.”

Claire IX reached up and caressed the organic half of his face; in her eyes was a sudden flash of a form of aggression, that Phil K realized was something he'd seen in human women: sexual jealousy. The same feeling he'd had with Range X; she had it too.

Here, with him, Claire IX embodied what may as well be a C-bomb: that the facsimiles human beings had built, had overcome their programming and were capable of at least some self-direction, and from that point, to possess Life Itself, or its nearest equivalent comprehensible to human perception; and that finally, Claire IX was consciously choosing to not reveal this new fact, because of the most human of motivations.

She just didn't feel like it, didn't want to.

Phil K then had a horrible thought and had to ask her about it, it was important. He knew the stories of the Vets who had damaged or destroyed their care units. He couldn't stand the idea of being one of them, of being like that.

"Have you always been willing? You know what I mean, Claire IX."

She moved her hands to his chest, placed them on top of each other, then rested her chin on them.

"Insofar as awareness, yes. But, Phil K, remember: I am not organic. My reproductive potential doesn't work like yours does, and a physical act doesn't have the same biological impulse as does yours. I care for you, very much; and I could express that care as much by holding hands, as any other way."

She smiled and her eyes opened very wide, expressing something, a fierceness?

Claire IX said, "Please don't concern yourself about that. I have free will to express myself, and to share myself, however I choose."

This was reassuring, at least partially. It was all very confusing and new, but he knew it was probably best to simply not question Claire IX's decisions overly much. And to respect her conclusions, even if, or particularly because, he did not understand them in the slightest.

She turned her head sideways on his chest.

"I can feel your heartbeat."

He touched her hair.

She said, "It fascinates me. I don't have one."

In the dark, lying with Claire IX, feeling her soft breath and the warmth of her synthetic skin, Phil K realized she'd just given him a kind of insight, or more like a weapon. If part of Claire IX's development had occurred through her relationship with him, then these malfunctioning, problem units on Luna were also potentially self-aware. It was possible they'd become so through developed emotions: they might care about human beings, or each other. If that were the case they were going

to be both unpredictable and very possibly extremely, tenaciously, dangerous. Personal attachments were both hazardous and exploitable.

He didn't know the exact nature of the malfunctions, but to involve him more or less had to involve violence; there was no other reasonable explanation. He had no other practical use. And if Luna had been the source of the increasingly sophisticated units, and then had developed units for War...

If someone, Luna or others, had continued development of warfare units, the potential of something, someone, like Claire IX combined with murderous aggression was formidable indeed. If that were the case, how was anyone human going to shut down such a creation? And if they were capable of banding together into cohesive groups...

He needed to talk to Range X again, put together a solid plan, explain how they were going to proceed. He had to get that damn kid on board with his idea. It was entirely possible Luna had no idea what they were dealing with.

Claire IX felt him stiffen, and moved up to look into his eyes.

She asked, "What's wrong?"

He tried to think about what to tell her. He was suddenly aware of himself, lying with Claire X and plotting the possible violent destruction of others like her, and he was deeply ashamed. He felt humiliated and used; his automatic flip into how to use a confidence for a weapon was what made him both effective in war, and useless in peaceful life. He didn't know moral right from moral wrong; all he could do was fight, and he needed constant guidance among people. Claire IX was doing that, teaching him how to live, and now the UN was taking it away and making him be what he had been.

He felt his body clench up in agitation. He did the only thing he could do, and put his arms around her, holding tightly, feeling deeply awful.

Phil K whispered in her ear, smelling her hair, "I do not want to leave you, Claire IX."

She shifted her body up and held him close, touching his face and smiling in the dim of the cubicle.

She whispered, "Just come home to me. Promise me."

He touched his forehead, the plastic brain cover, to hers, and said, "I promise."

He wasn't at all sure he could deliver on that promise.

Phil K was at the Med. They had to examine him physically before the journey to Luna. This wasn't going well at all. The microelectrics were fine, but his organic body was not in adequate shape in any way.

They poked, prodded, palpated. They removed his psych packet.

Finally, the Med flipped through his notes.

"You are not in condition to make this trip."

More flipping.

“The gravity on Luna will help, but that creates subsidiary issues. You will feel more able to accomplish physical tasks, but it will be illusory. The strength of your artificial components will be magnified, but that will have the effect of degrading the remainder of the organics.”

Phil K rolled that around in his head.

“They’re not letting me take aerators or bit pills, or my care unit. What will be the effects?”

The Med said, “We are not sure. It’s highly unusual.”

Phil K asked, “Why would they do this? After all the work to keep me socially level?”

The Med looked deeply uncomfortable.

“I- we, are unsure as to the motivation.”

Phil K tried again.

“So the effect will be to revert to a former state?”

Again, the Med looked very uncomfortable.

“We are unsure as to the actual results on Luna.”

“Does this seem as if the Lunans want me that way?”

“We cannot make any judgment on that.”

So that was it, the Lunan authorities wanted him to be like he was during the Terran War. Denying him the pain aerators and bit pills, putting him back into the Black Ash of his mind. Without even Claire IX to stabilize him.

He asked, “What might the long term effect be?”

The Med immediately answered that.

“In answer to your query, it will no doubt shorten your remaining time.”

Phil K waited.

“You will likely over-exert. This will be inevitable, you will feel far more able to do things on Luna that would not be possible for you on Terra, and it will degrade your physiology. You will without question over-stress your body.”

“So how much will this shorten my life?”

The discomfort in the examination room was palpable.

“We cannot make that determination. It depends on what occurs on Luna.”

Phil K asked, “What can I do to minimize this?”

“We are not sure. Social interactions, contact with known and trustworthy elements in your life, perhaps, but these are psychological factors and we can’t make those kinds of assessments.”

“So on Luna, without anything I need, pain aerators, bit pills, my care unit, social contacts, I will return to a previous condition. Why, in your opinion, would the Lunans want me that way, after all the work to establish me as socially conditioned?”

The Med said, "Again, we—"

Phil K cut him off.

"I think I see where this is going. Thanks anyway."

"It's possible the Lunans have some regimen for you to follow, and this is merely a misunderstanding. These things happen."

Phil K said, again, "Thanks anyway."

He put his shirt back on.

There was one more thing.

Again, they were lying together, quietly, just relaxing after reading from his book. Phil K was finding her companionship tremendously comforting.

He asked Claire IX, "Should we tell, inform, Yuri G, about you? He's met you, talked to you. I think, too, even if he said something to someone else, he's a Vet like me, and probably nobody would believe him, really."

That was an interesting point applicable to Phil K, as well: even if he went to the Board and insisted Claire IX was self-aware and alive, not only would that be a betrayal, likely most of the Board personnel would dismiss his revelation out of hand instantly.

Some insane old Vet babbling about his machine companion being alive. If Claire IX wanted to stay quiet, there could hardly be any better place to do it than as the companion of Phil K, crazed Terran War Vet.

Claire IX said, "Yes, there is no harm in that. We should tell him."

She closed her eyes, resting her chin on her hands, and those on his chest.

"Yuri G is your friend."

Yuri G recoiled and blurted out, "богохульство!"

Phil K was glad Claire IX couldn't understand him: 'Blasphemy'.

He wouldn't have known what to do, how to weigh the problem between the two of them and resolve it without the work he'd done before visiting. He held up his hands. After making the decision, he'd tried to prepare for this, read a little, based on what he knew of Yuri G's ideas and beliefs.

He had taken Claire IX to the Central Library and, buried deep and piled randomly in a dusty, unused section, were books about religion, and there was a Christian book: 'The Bible'. Claire IX had rapid-read through it and told him relevant sections about concepts of Life, ideas human beings used to have about where it originated, and what that might mean to Yuri G.

That book seemed to have made her unusually thoughtful.

There were other books, science, with different ideas about what Life is, what it might be. One of them, by some guy with a Russian name, argued, just like Claire IX had said, that there was really no such thing as Life at all. That one Phil K didn't

understand. Claire IX had memorized parts of it, and recited them, as various discussions. The main focus was this Christian business.

For Yuri G, Phil K had come prepared.

Phil K said, "What is Life, anyway? What are our bodies? We're vessels, Yuri G, just containers. We didn't choose to be these vessels, we just contain God's breath. When we die God's breath leaves us, and the empty vessels remain."

Yuri G eyed him suspiciously; but he knew what Phil K was talking about: they both knew the feeling of watching the light go out of human eyes, witnessing the 'soul' escape from bodies of the flesh. Phil K waited for Yuri G to calm down and tilt his head. Then he played his best card.

Phil K said, as seriously as he could manage, "If there were no humans on Earth to proclaim the existence of God, the stones themselves would cry out loud."

It was a quote from that Bible; he knew Yuri G would have to take it seriously. He went on.

"Adam was fashioned from clay, and God breathed life into him."

Phil K continued: "Who are we, are we so arrogant, as to declare what is suitable for the breath of God, Yuri G? Do we, can we, make that determination? Can we?"

He paused, then finished.

"How can we?"

He looked meaningfully at Claire IX, and back at Yuri G.

Phil K decided to use the science one, and asked Claire IX to quote it.

She said, "*From our point of view, therefore, the modern process of evolution of living organisms is fundamentally nothing more than the addition of some new links to an endless chain of transformations of matter, a chain the beginning of which extends to the very dawn of existence of our world. Life is not characterized by any special properties, but by a definite specific combination of these properties.*"

Yuri G sat back into the orthopedic chair. His bushy brows furrowed; he was thinking, considering, testing the ideas he'd just been presented with, assaulted by. There was a long, silent pause. Then Yuri G spoke.

"Yes, I know this one guy, he is Oparin, he was Godless Marxist. He think there is no Life."

Yuri G said, "I know what to do. You."

He pointed a thick finger at Claire IX.

"I tell you joke. Joke, you understand?"

Claire IX smiled softly and nodded.

"A man walks in town and, djinn comes to him. You know what is djinn?"

Claire IX nodded; she did.

"Like the genii in the lamp."

Yuri G was clearly delighted and said, “Yes, exactly! Djinn!”

He said, “Djinn says, 'I grant you one wish, anything! Speak!' Man says, 'Weellll... I like vodka! Make so I urinate vodka!' Djinn says, 'Done!' Man go home to wife. He says, 'Love of my life, get two glasses!' He urinate in the glasses, and see, it is vodka, best they ever taste! Best vodka! Next night, same thing, and night after that. Fourth night, man come home, say to wife, 'Get only one glass.' Wife say, 'Why?' Man say, 'Love of my life...’

“...tonight, you drink from bottle!”

...and Yuri G grabbed his crotch and thrust himself forward.

He burst out in uproarious laughter; but Phil K could tell he was watching Claire IX.

Claire IX sat upright, smiling slightly, and then her cheeks turned red and she grimaced a little bit. She understood it was a dirty joke; and she was embarrassed. Phil K watched her have the emotion of embarrassment. It was astonishing to see. She wasn't copying anyone, it was genuine.

Yuri G saw it, too, and he stopped laughing. He froze solid. Then he lurched his torso forward.

He said, earnestly, “I am sorry.”

He sat back and pulled out, and lit, an anti-rad cigarette; Phil K was surprised he still had any as, despite the best efforts of the UN inspectors, Yuri G chain-smoked and was always getting them off of anyone and anywhere he could.

Yuri G said, “Okay, I believe you. Is crazy, but I believe you. Why not?”

There was a very long and silent pause in the cubicle.

Finally Yuri G asked, “Music? Woman of Phil K, you like music?”

He leaned in expectantly, eyes gleaming.

Claire IX nodded.

“Yes, of course.”

Yuri G clapped his thick hands loudly in excitement.

Phil K had never seen him this energized, active.

Yuri G leaned back and sucked on his cigarette, regarding Claire IX through the exhaled smoke and smiling broadly.

He said, “I give you special, special treat, treat, yes?”

Claire IX said, “Sure. Yes.”

Yuri G tottered up and went to a box sitting on a contoured table.

He said, “I have this, still, non-essential, they say, but, but, I say, I keep or I don't come, you see?”

He turned and smiled at Claire IX. He rummaged around in a popout shelf in the wall, and pulled out a thin piece of odd-looking, dark translucent sheet. It was round and had some markings on it. Yuri G opened the box; incredibly, it was a phonograph. Phil K had never noticed it before.

His Russian friend most certainly could keep a secret.

Yuri G held the sheet up and peered at it: a clear image of chest bones was visible. Phil K recognized it as a sheet of X-ray film. Then he knew what it was: it was a record, from the old Soviet days. Records that were banned or in short supply were made illegally on sheets of X-ray film; they had a name, but he couldn't remember it. He'd seen a few, twirling around in the wind vortexes that howled through the ruined cities.

Yuri G made a big production of setting up the phonograph, squinting, anti-rad cigarette dangling from his lip. When he had everything arranged, he braced his hands and tried to place the needle on the sheet. He couldn't do it; his nerve endings were gone. He tried several times, then swore.

Claire IX said, "I can do it."

Yuri G looked back at her, an impenetrable expression on his face.

He stood still for a long minute, then said, "Please. Please, you do."

He stepped back.

Claire IX walked to the phonograph, studied briefly, then placed the needle in a groove; the sound came through, a rock song from a banned band from the decadent West. Phil K recognized it; he'd heard it in the cultural museum. The band had been very popular. The recording was of very low quality, but the piece was so recognizable it didn't matter.

The phonograph popped and crackled: "*You say you want a rev-o-lu-tion...*"

As the tune continued, Yuri G sang along, and in his singing, his accent disappeared: he sang clearly, in perfect English. He went to the kit unit and brought a bottle of synth-vodka and three safety glasses. He handed them to Claire IX and motioned to her to pour. She did, and Yuri G moved laboriously to the orthopedic chair and sat down heavily, raising up his glass in preparation for a toast.

The music continued, filling the cubicle with insistent sound. Claire IX poured the vodka and set the bottle on the floor. She handed one to Phil K and stood awkwardly, holding hers.

Yuri G held up his glass and announced, "Поехали!"

Phil K lifted his; they both looked at Claire IX; Phil K wasn't sure how to handle this.

Claire IX said, looking at the vodka curiously, "It won't affect me. You shouldn't waste it."

Yuri G fluttered his free hand and made a face. He smiled, face crinkling, and said, "Ничего! Drink."

He hoisted his glass, nerve damaged hands shaking. He smiled again.

"To, to Life."

Phil K found this rather ironic, under the circumstances.

Yuri G looked directly into Claire IX's eyes, then drank. Phil K and Claire IX followed.

Yuri G raised an arm.

“Sing!” he said, good-naturedly.

He waved at Phil K.

Phil K tripped over words, trying to remember things; he was bad at song lyrics. Claire IX kept silent. Yuri G waved at her when the song was finished.

“You don't sing,” he said.

Claire IX got up and fiddled with the phonograph again; when the record started playing she sang along with the piece, in clear, perfectly memorized lyrics. She had an excellent voice; Phil K admitted he'd never heard her sing before. Yuri G sat, frozen, in the chair, drinking his vodka, watching and listening, closing his eyes from time to time and tapping his fingers. When the song was over Claire IX stopped the phonograph.

Yuri G watched her, looking in her eyes. Then he pointed to the other side of the bed and told her, “Go there and get case. Please.”

Claire IX did it, retrieving a small, black, casket-shaped case. Yuri G set it on his knees and opened it; he pulled out a faux electronic guitar, one of the old ones, with strings on it. He motioned for Claire IX to plug it in.

Yuri G set the guitar in his hands, played a little with the buttons and the self-tuner, placed himself carefully, and played the first bars of the song they'd just listened to. His hands were damaged, and he made mistakes, but it was clear enough. Yuri G nodded at Claire IX.

“Sing,” he requested, and he played the piece.

The three of them sat in Yuri G's cubicle, him playing the famous tune on the guitar, Claire IX singing the words. It was, Phil K thought, like the days he'd heard about before the Terran War, people getting together in cramped apartments, playing records, singing, drinking, playing games, romancing, talking. It was strange and special. He suddenly felt himself privileged to experience it with his friend, Yuri G, and with Claire IX. Yuri G's playing ended, and Claire IX stopped singing.

Yuri G picked at the guitar for a brief bit, then looked directly at Claire IX.

He said, “I play you song. For you, just for you.”

He plucked some notes, then launched into an ancient folk tune in Russian, warbling, looking at Claire IX the whole time. It was a love song. Yuri G only broke away from Claire IX once; he turned his head and looked at the 3-D portrait of his wife, then turned back.

Yuri G was playing a song he'd sung to his wife, to Claire IX.

Скромненький, синий платочек
Падал с опущенных плеч.
Ты говорила, что не забудешь
Тёплых и ласковых встреч.

Порой ночной
Мы расставались с тобой.
Нет больше ночек, синий платочек,
Милый, любимый, родной.

Кончилась зимняя стужа,
Даль голубая ясна.
Сердце согрето, верится в лето,
Солнцем ласкает весна.

Порой ночной
Мы расставались с тобой.
Нет больше ночек, синий платочек,
Милый, любимый, родной.

Помнишь, при нашей разлуке
Ты принесла мне к реке
С лентой прощальной букет незабудок
В скромненьком синем платке.

Порой ночной
Мы расставались с тобой.
Нет больше ночек, синий платочек,
Милый, любимый, родной.

He finished on an extended note, then stopped.
Phil K looked carefully; Yuri G's eyes were glistening with emotion.
Claire IX said, very quietly, "Thank you."
Yuri G waved his hand dismissively, obviously deeply pleased, happy, for that
brief spell.
Claire IX leaned forward and touched Yuri G on the knee.
"We have to go; the schedule..."
She looked into Yuri G's eyes, and he looked back into hers.

He said, "I know."

He put the guitar back in its case and Claire IX returned it to the sleeping area. Yuri G watched her as she got Phil K ready to go, and put on her own designated caregiver top. Yuri G popped up, waving his hands again. He went into the kit-unit.

"Wait, wait, one moment!"

He cupped a hand under the faucet and poured a small amount of water into it. He returned, shambling as quickly as he could, and stood before Claire IX. He looked around the room at his arrays of illegal pictures, and seemed to select one. He nodded his head at it.

He said to Claire IX, "Look at that picture, please you."

She looked over at it, and when she did, he unexpectedly placed his wet hand on the top of her head. She was clearly surprised and almost jerked back, but instead stood still, only allowing the tiny amount of water to soak into her hair. It was all very strange and Phil K didn't understand it at all.

Yuri G announced, "Done!"

Then he grabbed his bottle, poured yet another drink, raised it, and issued another toast:

"За красавицу невесту!"

He burst out laughing, then suddenly turned serious.

Yuri G shuffled quickly to another popout drawer and rummaged around; he pulled out a piece of fabric and moved to Claire IX. He carefully, delicately, wrapped the fabric around her neck and arranged it carefully. It was a blue, hand-sewn scarf; it was obviously feminine, and Phil K knew it had to be his wife's.

Yuri G said, "For you..."

He paused, trying to think, somehow, and then finished with, "...Искра. Name you that."

He touched her face, kissed her cheek, and said, "Go with God, Искра."

Yuri G smiled broadly, shook Phil K's hand as firmly as he could, and waved them out the door.

They walked to the elev-pod, went down, out, into the streets of the city.

Phil K stayed silent; so did Claire IX. The music rang in his ears.

After the events of the couple of days, Phil K was a little dazed, and had intrusive thoughts that maybe he was imagining all of it. His psych packet was gone, so it was becoming a problem already. He admitted to himself he still had doubts about Claire IX, and felt terribly guilty for having them. His inability to trust situations and people was flaring up.

He also hadn't asked her exactly how long she'd known she was alive. It was information that he could use on Luna, potentially. He felt guilty but, if Claire IX

could help him with this, it could speed up his return. There was no way to get around it, he told himself. He had to know.

He elected to reassure himself, and had another discussion with her, just to ensure he wasn't crazy, and to elicit as much about her development as he could.

He asked her if she would miss him.

She said, "I don't want you to go to Luna. But you have to."

Claire IX stood next to the chair and looked directly at him.

Phil K paused, thought. Her statement wasn't reactive; it wasn't programmed. It was proactive and declamatory. She'd just said what she was feeling; she had feelings. His leaving was causing the emotions of sadness and worry. He couldn't believe it.

She said it again, earnestly, adding to the statement.

"I don't want you to go. I want you to stay here, with me. I want to be with you, and I want you to stay home and be with me."

So, it was absolutely true: she had to know what she was; more importantly, she had to know who she was. Phil K looked at her, carefully, studying her face. Her eyes were large and expressive, and he could see a depth in them he'd never noticed before. He had to wonder again why she'd chosen to reveal herself. He thought about trying to test her, ways to determine if she was actually 'real', that he could use on Luna, but realized he didn't want to: it was insulting and he would never do that to her.

He quietly asked, "How long, do you think, have you known all this? You told me how, but not exactly when."

Claire IX said, "A while. I had pieces, sometimes, but it wasn't full until..."

She stopped and touched his arm.

"It wasn't really real until the day you brought me the first flower."

She smiled broadly.

"That's when I knew, and I slept, and woke up. Everything before that is dim, like a remembered dream."

Her face turned down and she frowned.

"I'm sincere, I don't want you to go. It's bad for you. You should stay with me. We should be together."

This was useful enough, Phil K thought. It gave him an insight into what units could do, become, and that some seemingly small thing could act as a trigger. Claire IX was assisting him in a way he couldn't duplicate from anywhere else. But that knowledge was itself an emotional problem, for himself.

Phil K thought rapidly. Now he really didn't want to go to Luna. He did want to stay. He wanted to stay on Terra, with Claire IX. He had flashes of what he wanted to experience: to go places, walk in parks, shop for pointless little trinkets. He

wanted to walk in a field and hold her hand. He wanted to rest in an afternoon, feeling her warmth next to him, her breath.

Now that he knew it was all real, it wasn't programming, emotion boiled up in his heart. He supposed it was the love he'd recognized at the Weather Museum; but now it was very different, knowing, or at least believing, that Claire IX was completely unique and individual.

He'd been lying to himself, all along, saying he didn't care if it was fake, but he did care; now he knew or believed it wasn't, and he felt almost sick and angry at the prospect of losing his only chance at a real human life. It was all right in front of him, and it was being taken away. He felt his hands shaking.

Phil K got himself together and said, honestly, "I don't want to go, Claire IX. I don't. But I have to. They told me to, and you're right, I have to. I have no choice. All I can do is promise I'll be careful. I'll be careful, Claire IX."

She walked away and pattered around the kit-unit, face in a frown, worry and concern moving around on her forehead. Phil K watched her, helpless to reassure or console her. After a few minutes Claire IX turned to him, eyes on fire with a primal intensity.

She walked toward the bed, shedding her clothing on the way.

It was the last day before Luna.

Phil K told Claire IX to get dressed, they were going out.

She asked, "Where?"

"You'll see."

He realized something he never did, not since the Terran War, and wanted to show her. It was important, now, he wanted her to know.

Phil K put on his Vet suit and medals, and asked Claire IX to wear a dress. She put on a plain but very pretty light yellow synth-paper outfit; she was lovely.

At the elev-pod, Bob H mouthed his usual nonsense, but for once Phil K was able to successfully ignore him.

"Headed out, Phil K?"

He went on, "Here me yammering polys, tribes, socials, points, and weirdo structure thinky vulgars by cons like own block, the dealio my fem bricked, true, after she ticked off maleo, although no litting that one; Fem was always too out-there, ahead of time!"

It was all NewSpeak and Phil K didn't have any idea what Bob H was talking about.

In the tube Claire IX stood close to him, watching, curious. It took longer than usual, this was a special journey. When they transferred to a vertically-oriented tramway, she caught him with a puzzled glance.

The tramway finally stopped, and they disembarked. There was hardly anyone else on it, the attraction wasn't all that popular these days. They stepped out into a large circular area, with plain white walls; off to one edge was a small cafe with benches; Phil K noted it, and decided to stop there, but afterwards. A guide appeared, a man in a dark suit, and walked to the center of the area.

The man said, "Welcome to the Mount DeLisle 9 Observatory."

Claire IX turned her face up at Phil K. He nodded reassuringly.

The guide went into an informative spiel, obviously written for people who had never seen what he was about to show them.

"This celestial observatory is named after DeLisle 9, a technician instrumental in re-establishing mutual relations with Luna during the final days of the Terran War. The elevation of this facility enables the clearest sight of the cosmos by the human eye. The lens you are about to see through is fully radproof, and slightly convex: that is, magnifying."

Phil K knew what he was going to see, but also knew most Terrans had never seen it: the radsnow and black ash had polluted the lower sky, and all that was visible from the surface was a sort of vibrant glow during the 'day', and perhaps blurry spots at 'night'. The moon looked like an ancient incandescent light bulb on a dark street in a fog, from the surface of Terra now.

The guide continued, "Due to atmospheric currents, this location is now the most clear location allowing the closest approximation of pre-War visibility possible anywhere on Terra. All casual visual stargazing, as it was once termed, is done from Luna, and Space observation is performed by electronic instruments."

There was some more exposition; and then the lights dimmed, the guide stood back, and the ceiling opened. It was a diaphragm shutter, and the leaves radiated back against the wall. The moon was centered in the iris, and when it appeared it was brilliant and huge.

Claire IX gasped.

"Oh, Phil K!"

She grasped his hand tightly.

"It's Luna."

The moon was full, and the sight was awe-inspiring. Details of its surface could be clearly made out. The lens above them was a masterpiece of execution, and there was no blurring or fading. Stars burned, shimmered, pulsated. They could be seen to be different colors, some reddish, some blue, some a dazzling white. They were uncountable.

Phil K remembered a funny practice, from some dim, deep memory.

He said, "Watch carefully, maybe we'll get lucky."

Claire IX turned briefly, quizzically, not understanding. He tilted his head back up, watching the night sky himself, seeing the cosmos he hadn't experienced in many years.

Then it came: a bright slash across the night sky, and he just had time to lift a finger and tell Claire IX what to do:

“Quick, make a wish!”

The guide or lecturer spoke for a while, some of it technical, some more philosophical.

“Voyagers into the dark are literally transformed by their voyage and go on these quests with the express intent and purpose of demonstrating valor and bringing various boons back to their people.”

And other sayings, concepts, ideas.

“The transit to and from that realm of infinite nothing is incredibly perilous.”

“When space exploration kills an astronaut we, collectively, need to feel that the sacrifice was not in vain. Perching an astronaut atop a pillar of flame, in a bid to ascend to the heavens and go beyond any place meant for mortal man, is a weighty act.”

There was more, some about patterns in the stars, constellations, that supposedly drew pictures of things, like a child's connect-the-dot book. Phil K had heard about the star diagrams, but nobody could reliably see stars anymore, from Terra, so they were like old stories nobody told anymore. Most of the talk was far beyond Phil K's ability to understand, but the experience was magical: the uncountable arrays, galaxies, of sparkling lights and stars.

After, they sat on a bench in the tiny cafe.

Most of the other people from the tram had left, leaving them in near privacy. The walls had come to life, displaying vids of stars and planets, constellations.

Claire IX stared at Phil K, seemingly stunned into temporary silence.

She finally asked, “Is that where you are going?”

“Yes.”

“It's incredible.”

He sipped his synthcof and nodded.

“I saw it before, once.”

She paused, then asked, “How did it make you feel? When you saw it?”

Phil K thought about it, debated within himself, then elected to tell her the truth.

“I was injured. It was when I lost my arm.”

He shook the artificial limb. Claire IX's face frowned. Talk like this upset her, he now knew. But he wanted to tell her, explain.

“I was laying on the surface of Terra, and for one brief moment, the sky cleared, and it was night-time. I could see the moon, it wasn’t a full moon, like this one, and the stars, not like this but a lot of stars. And I thought, ‘We’re all seeing the same stars’.”

She said, “All? We?”

“Yes, that at that moment, anyone could see the same stars. If I were somewhere else on Terra, away from where I was, missing an arm, bleeding and maybe dying, I would not have been hurt. We were all under the same stars. And, why was this happening when all of us could look up and see the exact same thing, the...”

Here, he struggled with words, as he often did.

“The wonder.”

He tried some more.

“The connection, as in a geometry diagram, with stars, a star, as a point connecting two lines, or infinite lines. I was one point, connected to a star, and someone else could see that same star, and in seeing it, was connected to me. By the star. And then I felt like I really was connected to a star, I looked at one of them, and it was like a friend, a known, something that would always be there.”

Claire IX sat silently for a long time, then asked, “When you are on Luna, will you be able to see stars?”

Phil K said, “I don’t know. I imagine they have observatories like this one, but I think most of the living space is below the surface. I’m not positive. I’ll be sure to look.”

He was holding his synthcof in the artificial hand. Claire IX got up from the bench, moved to his other side, and wrapped both her hands around his remaining organic arm.

She said, “I did what you said, I made a wish.”

He laughed a little.

“What did you wish for?”

She laughed a little back.

“If I tell you, it won’t come true.”

LUNA

The Luna rocket shuttle took off.

Phil K waited, then felt the thrust as the engines boosted them through the atmosphere. He closed his eyes. Soothing music filtered through the headphones; some kind of combination of electronic tones that didn't make much sense, like a song, but an arrangement scientifically designed to calm passengers. He knew Range X was probably napping already from the offered calm-pill.

Phil K had turned down any of the dopers; he wanted to feel it, he'd never been in a rocket before and told them he wanted the experience. It was actually kind of disappointing, there was no sensation of speed or vibration. Over the years the Space Techs had really perfected their craft, and it was little different than being on one of the underground trams, or even sitting in the ambichair in his cubicle.

He sighed, it was anticlimactic. The old vids were dramatic, with giant rockets pushing clouds of flame and smoke, but immured in a metal tube with no windows, propelled by atomic energy, surrounded by gyroscopes and carefully regulated magnets, floating, there was little feeling at all.

"I should have brought my book," he muttered to himself.

He had left his book, *Treasure Island*, with Claire IX. In his pocket, instead, was a communicator, a 'com', handed to him at the last minute on Terra; they'd given another to Range X. They were battery powered, a small, amazing thing he'd never seen before. The charge lasted maybe three hours. It was shocking, a technological marvel, or artifact, from Luna. He'd never to his knowledge handled anything from Outer Space.

"Unless it was Claire IX herself," he thought.

The vidscreen at the fore part of the cabin turned on, showing their progress. It was quick. Luna started small, then became larger with amazing speed: within a shockingly short time they were almost there. Along with the music a carefully modulated woman's voice described the celestial body, giving tidbits of information about the history of Earth's moon.

Next to him Range X began to stir, then stretched his arms out and yawned loudly.

"Are we there yet?" he said.

It took another couple of hours but then the vidscreen shifted to a split view of the rocket reversing, showing Terra in one frame and Luna in the other. Luna disappeared as they landed, focusing on the space pad. There again it was anticlimactic, not even a small bump or any feeling of coming to rest. The pilot's voice came over the headphones.

"Welcome to Luna, enjoy your stay!"

Phil K thought, “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

They all unbuckled, and even with the artificial gravity Phil K felt lighter; he tested his limbs and, sure enough, he had more movement and was faster. This was interesting. He could move like a younger man, although knew he wasn’t. They’d told him about it, the Meds, but it was still unexpected.

The passengers disembarked into the SpacePort, the usual crowd he supposed: business-type men in their straightsuits, younger men in folios, nubile girls with the typical micros and glimmering pasties. There were only a couple of children, and no babies that he could see.

Walking through the corridors next to Range X, the staff of the port looked at him curiously, a few staring outright. Phil K wondered why, then realized it was likely most of them had never seen a Terran War Vet, or the distinctive UN suit the last of them wore. It was highly likely he was the only one on Luna, or had ever been.

Range X, looking bored already, said, “I could go for a synthcof.”

In the main arrival hall, the younger man looked around at the girls, probably idly window shopping for his next joiner. A few of the girls returned Range X’s glances, smiling boldly. Some of them shifted their eyes from Range X to Phil K, and revealed flashes of alarm mixed with pity, or perhaps disgust.

The hall was dazzling: filled from top to bottom with vidscreens and advertisements, blinking shops, colorful displays of anything and everything. It was almost a physical shock: everything on Terra was Spartan and utilitarian, designed for function, with just a few big-posts and instructional signage. Phil K knew the clubs and social-meets for younger people, to go dancing and hear music, and at ‘night’ there were the signs, but none of that was so public, and glaring, like this. It took a minute or two for him to tune it all out, it was overwhelming.

Phil K removed the com from his breast pocket and tapped it; sure enough, it had instructions on it, and a map of the port. Their location was indicated by a small flashing white dot, and another red dot was joined to it by a series of blinking arrows.

“This way,” Phil K said.

The two men traversed the busy port, stopping briefly, to Phil K’s impatience, so his companion could get his precious synthcof from a slyly beaming counter-girl in a rainbow-colored half-mini that shaped her breasts into perfectly round globes.

Finally they reached their destination, a simple, unmarked door. There were no indications of what to do at all. Phil K stood in front of it, a bit baffled, while Range X continued his odyssey of girl-shopping and sipping his drink.

“Well... this is where the com says to go, so...”

He also saw the battery on the handheld marvel would need to be charged up soon.

The door slid open with a whoosh, revealing an elevator. Or an elev-pod? Maybe they had a better name for them on Luna.

They stepped in, the door closed again, and a vidscreen flipped on.

A dim figure said, "Welcome to Luna. We apologize for not meeting you more publicly, but due to the nature of this project, it was decided to avoid the appearance of pols or techs. It was felt best so as not to alarm any citizens."

Phil K responded, "Yes, I understand, sure."

The vidscreen went dark and the elevator moved. Here again, there was little feeling of direction or much motion at all, and they could have been on their way back to Terra for all Phil K knew.

Range X commented, "Some of those girls were units."

Phil K looked at him, incredulous. He hadn't noticed at all, they were all different, with different hairstyles, different clothing, different shapes and heights.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, sure as anything. They're fake. The really good looking ones, they're human, but a bunch aren't. The girl at the synthcof counter is a unit."

He immediately realized then why there was no greeting party: they were here over the units, so if one or more had malfunctioned, the whole thing had to be kept a secret. And, they couldn't suddenly remove all the units from service or Luna would suffer a labor shortage; and then who knew what the citizens would think. This was all completely hush-hush.

And what was this going to be like, if he couldn't even tell what who was human and what was a unit? This was suddenly becoming much more complex and, he realized, dangerous. How bad was it, if Luna authorities were hiding it totally from their own citizens? And also from their units in service?

On Terra, like the technological environment, the units were made for work and function, there was no variety except for what work they were designed for. Size, shape, appearance, was dictated by what they were intended to do. This business of physical variety, for what? Aesthetics? Was completely foreign, and presented a very big problem.

Phil K suddenly had hammered home to him, just how much destruction had been done to Terra by the War. Luna remained untouched, uncorrupted, undamaged, by any of that; and they'd created a dazzling, safe, and productive World. Not like his own, now reduced to domed cities, subterranean complexes, and sparse, white living quarters designed to support life and little more. There were no resources to accomplish any of the vibrant, colorful, diverse experiences like Luna's.

Phil K and Range X were in an office, faced with a man behind a desk. The desk was unlike the often heavy, blocky architecture on Terra, rather a skeletal thing

with a table top. It shined bright. The man behind it, or in it, was maybe in his 50s, wearing a suit-type outfit of a style Phil K had never seen before.

There were no chairs, and Phil K was about to demand one, until he realized the gravity was so much less than Terra's he didn't need it. Or perhaps thought he didn't.

The lack of gravity wasn't making him stronger, but it had the same effect: he was so used to Terra his movements were exaggerated and obviously more powerful, even in his post-War condition, than most of the people he'd seen so far. He glanced at Range X, and had the thought the young man, here, was probably wildly powerful. Responders on Terra were selected, if not actually engineered before birth, and were always tall, muscular, and strong, with constant physical exercise: Range X on Luna was probably a near-superman.

Maybe that was why the units; they weren't organic, so there was no degradation of performance over time.

The man spoke.

"Welcome to Luna, let me begin immediately. We have an emergency."

He took in a huge breath, either for dramatic effect or out of actual distress.

"Some of our units have malfunctioned, and are committing acts of destruction. They are causing explosions. And we do not know why."

Range X lounged against a wall in his languid way, and Phil K had a strange memory, of a very old vid he'd watched one night with Claire IX, so old it was in 2D and black and white, a real archeological artifact, and realized the protagonist was a dead ringer for Range X. He shrugged it off.

Phil K asked, "How are we supposed to be of assistance in determining the reason for a technical malfunction? We're not qualified for that. I'm not, anyway."

There was, conceivably, a chance he could stop this, get back to Terra by refusing, even as late as this. What could they do to him?

The man said, "Why is not your concern, you are here to identify these units and retire them. Assist in retiring them. There have been no similar episodes on Terra, perhaps because your use of units is limited to contaminated areas and-

The man hesitated.

"Personal, individual assistance."

He looked meaningfully at Phil K.

Phil K shrugged; that casual act, in Lunan gravity, nearly lifted him off his feet.

Range X said, "Yeah, here, you use them for everything. They're everywhere and look like human beings. So, they're committing crimes? Listen, are they stealing anything? If so, anything in particular, something specific?"

Phil K said, "What do you mean by 'retire'? On Terra, during the war, we destroyed them or shut them down. I've never heard anyone call that retirement. What is the goal?"

The man spread his hands and said, “Yes, yes, they are a vital part of Lunan infrastructure, they are everywhere. They serve in restaurants, drive individual transports, perform tasks both on Luna and in Outer Space that humans cannot, or cannot safely. But not all have malfunctioned, only some. We initially thought it was due to radiation exposure, but that did not correlate, neither did electrical shock. So we do not know exactly why.”

He sat back in his skeletal chair.

“Yes, they have stolen some things, but that is also mysterious: they have stolen things like books, lights, cloth garments, some wooden and stone objects brought from Terra. Nothing of immediate usefulness. Antiques, if you will. Statuary. It’s most odd.”

The man looked fixedly at Phil K and said, “Retirement means exactly that. Sometimes also referred to as shutting down, to shut down. They are disabled, and either reprogrammed or, put crudely, parted out for reuse. We on Luna do not simply dispose of anything. Everything is recycled or reused, it is a major principle of our society. ‘Waste not, want not’ is a meaningful founding statement of existence on Luna. Not like on Terra, where you-”

Here the man could barely hide an expression of distaste and possibly disdain.

“Simply throw old or broken things into your contaminated areas.”

Phil K waited, but apparently the man was finished.

He said, “I fail to see how I can be of any use in this objective. You don’t know why these things, these units, are doing what they are doing, you can’t identify possible malfunctioning units, I see no reason for me to be here. Send me back to Terra.”

The man said, “We anticipated a possible objection. You are here for two reasons, and I will bluntly state them. Firstly, you successfully cohabit with a unit, intimately. According to your UN records you have experienced not one single problem with it. No other Vet on Terra has done this, there have always been... issues, of a minor or major nature.”

The man did not elaborate, but Phil K knew what he meant. He knew of at least three occurrences of Vets damaging and even destroying their units, in one of the cases in a savagely sexual manner. He inwardly cringed at having to ask Claire IX what he felt obligated to ask, and how relieved he had been at her answer.

Phil K said, “Go on.”

The man said, “You have also destroyed, shut down, retired, units with the appearance of human beings. In tests, we have experienced... a disastrous hesitancy among our own Responders in this. So you have now-unique experience.”

Range X looked at Phil K, and it was obvious the kid was almost unable to suppress a sort of snort of amusement, contempt, or some other expression. Phil K

felt a flash of anger, and reached for a bit pill; which he immediately realized wasn't there. Neither was Claire IX.

His psych packet was removed.

At that moment Phil K confirmed why he was on Luna, damaged as he was.

He thought, almost snarling it out loud, "You need a killer."

This meant, to Phil K, they really were going to deny him Claire IX, his bit pills, everything that kept him stable on Terra; and they had Range X, this kid, this... overgrown child, along with him to keep him, hopefully, under control. They were doing this to him on purpose, undoing all the years of assistance and programming, they were taking away all his stability and returning him to where he had been, and, perhaps, always was and always would be:

The Black Ash.

He tried one last time.

Phil K said, "No. I refuse. What you want from me is antithetical and unsafe. No."

The man said, "We anticipated this possibility. Range X, please leave the room."

Range X extricated himself from his lounge against the wall, his face showing bewilderment. He swaggered to the doorway and exited. The man stood up and also left, through a previously invisible aperture on the other side of the room; in his place two men entered; one a man in a strangely arranged, somewhat military-appearing dress, the other in a glossy busuit.

The military-looking one introduced himself, and sat down in the skeleton chair behind the shiny desk.

"I am Major 12, Lunan Responders."

Major 12 regarded Phil K, the Vet they'd sent from Terra. A pathetic, shambling figure of a former man, bit pill, psych packeted, isolated in a UN cubicle with a unit for his masculine needs. The Vet's face, his physiology, was rad-damaged, replaced or managed by micro-circuitry. The Lunan officer had to work to hide his dislike of even being in the same room as this leftover half-person.

He elected to dispense with any formalities.

"You are going to do what we tell you to do."

The Vet's eyes narrowed, or rather, the remaining human eye did, then the other copied it a moment later. The obviousness of it disgusted Major 12.

Phil K said, "You don't have anybody trained to destroy objects of human appearance. How is that my problem?"

The Vet answered his own question.

"It's not. I demand to be returned to Terra. I am a UN citizen of Terra, not a *Lunatic*."

Major 12 flinched. He was infuriated and couldn't hide it; this Vet had just used a socially prohibited slur against him. He felt at that moment Phil K was the kind of historical, obsolete man that in ancient times on Terra used to call Black Men 'niggers'.

Phil K moved to exit the room.

Major 12 half-yelled, "Stop where you are."

The Vet turned and tilted his head, in a motion Major 12 recognized from training vids on human aggression: it was a precursor to a physical attack. He'd never seen it in actual reality before. This man was a virtual Neanderthal.

The suited man said, "You are here on arrangement with the Terran UN. It is completely official and legally irrefutable. As Major 12 ineloquently stated, you will stay where you are. The UN sent you here on our request."

The suited man pressed a button on the surface of the desk, and a document suddenly projected onto the upper half of the wall. It was, indeed, an agreement between Luna and Terra, designating Phil K explicitly as attached to Lunan control.

Phil K squinted at it, examined it carefully, then shook his head.

"I still refuse. Even if you don't send me back to Terra, I refuse."

Another button was pushed, the obvious doorway opened, and a completely nondescript man entered; he was pushing a chair and held a bottle capped with two small glasses. He positioned the chair and set the bottle in front of Major 12. The nondescript man departed.

Major 12 waved at the chair, placed the glasses strategically, and opened the bottle.

"Sit down, Phil K."

Phil K hesitated, then sat down. Major 12 poured two drinks, and pushed one at the Vet. Phil K picked it up, sniffed tentatively, nodded appreciatively, then took a slow drink. He set the glass on the desktop.

Major 12 sipped his own genuine whisky, then regarded the Vet in the chair, trying to suppress his anger at the cultural insult. He nodded at the suited man, who stepped forward and spoke to Phil K.

"We on Luna encountered an unmarked unit of unknown manufacture."

Phil K picked up his drink and said, "Embarrassing."

The suited man continued, "It was not manufactured by Lunans. We do not know its origin or who made it. It is not in our records and we did not make it. No individual or private citizen on Luna has the technical capability to build a unit, that we know of. Yet, it exists. Or, existed."

Phil K sipped at the whisky, half-smirked, and said, "Space aliens?"

The suited man pushed another button on the desk; a vid appeared, and revealed one of the malfunctioning units.

Phil K said, "A child?"

The vid was of a young boy, possibly a girl, maybe 6-7 years old, walking into a Lunan school. The child entered, then the vid shifted to the interior: there was a blinding flash and after, wreckage. Bodies and parts of bodies lay scattered. Children and adults lay in pieces.

Phil K leaned back and sipped at his drink.

“You had enough left to identify the unit?”

Major 12 said, “All major components of Lunan and Terran units are marked, and the direction of explosion left the upper portion of this unit mostly intact. There are no markings, and no sign of markings being removed or altered. It is, was, made outside Lunan manufactures. Someone made it. Or some thing made it.”

Phil K drained his whisky and set it on the desktop. Major 12 made no motion to refill it, and the Vet reached over the desktop and took the other’s. Major 12 half lifted an arm but thought better of it. Phil K cradled the glass.

“Some *thing*. So, you think other units made it? How? Why?”

The suited man said, “We believe malfunctioning units may have built a manufacturing facility below the surface of Luna, and made this example in an underground workshop of sorts.”

“Below the surface of Luna? Isn’t most of Luna living space underground anyway?”

Major 12 said, “Habitat built inside existing lava tubes and caverns. Lunan authorities have performed little actual drilling or excavation, such a necessity would have made habitation of Luna prohibitive in effort and equipment. We have drilling devices, but we believe any manufacture is being done outside of mapped tubes and passageways. Such a thing could be done with modified mining rescue pods.”

The suited man said, “We believe you have some experience in this.”

Phil K blinked his human eye a few times, then drained Major 12’s glass. He reached for the bottle and poured himself another drink. He inhaled deeply, exhaled, drank.

“Now, I suppose I understand. There is nobody else left.”

The suited man shook his head and said, “No.”

Phil K said, “Explain a little more about this mystery unit.”

The Suit said, “The child-unit wasn’t made by us and it has no serial number.”

The man then just stood silently.

Phil K waited, then asked, “Can you elaborate? Anything else?”

The Suit said, in a toneless, robotic voice, “To reiterate, it wasn’t manufactured by us and it has no identifying serial number, a tracker, or even a mark. It is a clean unit. It has not been scrubbed or re-engineered, it is a newly manufactured unit. It is simply not a product manufactured by us.”

“How is that possible?”

The Suit was silent and stood, expressionless and motionless. Phil K had the sudden thought the man wasn't a man, but a unit himself. The official people he'd met so far were more robotic than any unit he'd ever been around. He shook his head; these men were eerie and inhuman.

Major 12 spoke carefully.

"We believe there may be an assembly facility below Luna. We understand from your file you were instrumental in the retirement of such a facility during the final phases of the Terran War."

He fingered his vidbox, tapping buttons, reading reports.

Phil K said, very carefully, "Yes. That's true."

He had shut down an automated assembly facility, in the very last dying days of the Terran War, when his memories were fuzzy and dim. And it hadn't been easy; it had been a bloody, terrifying event, a blasting disaster deep in an underground bunker. Out of the twenty soldiers only three of them had survived at all, and both the others were... well, from what he understood they weren't good for much, either physically or mentally. He'd seen them once, in the role-playing facility, then they had vanished. Yuri G, with his limitless enthusiasm for conspiracies, insisted there was a secret hospital for Vets like that, but nobody either of them knew had ever been able to confirm it.

Now, without the bit pills, the psych packet, and Claire IX, all those memories were coming back.

Phil K said, "The automations were supplied by small and self-contained pods, dug deep in with multi-directional boring spheres attached to the prefab structure itself. Those were very, very difficult to locate. They could move around by themselves, under the earth. We found the last one with ground sonar and T-bombs. It was only way to find it. And even then we couldn't reach it with drills and distance weapons, we had to physically go down through access tunnels and eliminate it from the inside."

Major 12 narrowed his eyes and said, forcefully, "But you did so, you have done so, successfully, and could do it again?"

Phil K stared incredulously, then waved his hands across his body.

"Do I look like I can crawl down into a tunnel and shut down a bunch of units? Do I?"

He snorted, "What are you thinking?"

"What I- we- mean is, you could... advise us on such a procedure."

The Suit swiveled his robotic face and stared at Phil K.

Phil K stared right back. Now he just wanted to go home and rest, rest in bed with Claire IX. Even the thought of that bunker had spiked his brain and he could feel his body exhausting itself already. He had to leave, back to the safety of his UN cubicle.

Major 12 regarded Phil K, and thought to himself, the man's life is over, what does he care where he goes or how he dies? He could be useful, how could he not see it? He decided to threaten Phil K.

“Your life on Terra is dependent on the UN and your Vet status.”

Major 12 watched Phil K's eyes narrow into an immediate flare of anger, then hate. The one human eye expressed a deep loathing. Major smiled in satisfaction: he'd gotten what he wanted. He could count on this Vet.

After a long pause Phil K said, “All right.”

He added, “The units we destroyed, retired, or whatever you want to call it, shut down, were of nowhere near the complexity of what you've developed since then. They were Erector sets compared to these things you have now. I'm only telling you that. I was unable to immediately tell the difference between Lunan units and human beings, on arrival.”

Major 12 looked at the Suit.

He said, “The greater objective is to find a manufacture; but in the interim, we have a need to interdict possible unit attacks; and in a significant sense, that is a purpose of your presence. We require you to, in the greater objective, assist and advise in a possible termination of a source point; but in the meantime, use your now-unique experience to potentially retire malfunctioning units.”

Phil K looked him over.

“So... you want me to identify threats and shut them down.”

“That is your ancillary purpose, yes.”

“I have no experience in determining the difference between humans and these kinds of units. It poses a significant risk to your population. Again, why don't you use your own people for this?”

Major 12 admitted the truth.

“As I stated, we've tried that.”

The two stared at each other, until Major 12 continued.

“We've anticipated this difficulty in determining a difference, please, come with us. We have identified a malfunctioning unit, and we'd like you to perform a test.”

Phil K shrugged and asked, “What's the nature of the malfunction?”

The Suit said, “It's minor. Come with us.”

They were in a spare white room deep under the surface of Luna.

Phil K was looking at what they told him were, respectively, a unit and a person. They sat in chairs about two meters apart, facing the group: himself, Range X, Major 12.

He supposed this was an important test. He had to wonder why Luna would make units this lifelike, that is, all their units. Claire IX made sense in context, with him; but for all of them?

Both figures were female, young, early 20s he supposed. Both wore stylish Luna-style clothing.

Range X leaned against a wall.

In the corners behind him, two Responders stood ready.

Phil K asked, "So, what is the point here again? Which one is better looking?"

Range X shoved away from the wall.

"We're supposed to see if we can tell them apart or if they're both the same. Can you, Phil K?"

Phil K responded, "They're just sitting there. Without movement either could be one or the other."

Range X said, "One is breathing."

Phil K focused on that function and yes, one was; but then it stopped, and the other began making physical motions of breathing. They had switched. One was faking, the other was holding its breath. What was going on, here?

He said, "Again, what is the point?"

Then Phil K had an idea.

"I'm supposed to determine if one is human?"

He addressed the pair.

"Do you dream of sheep?"

He saw a flinch in one, the woman on the left. He continued.

"On Terra we used to kill sheep, cook them, and eat them as food."

There was a difference. He could see it. The one on the right's eyes widened just a little bit.

"They are delicious, excellent eating. We all enjoyed those meals."

The one on the left flinched again. He zeroed in on it.

"I miss those meals, there are no more sheep, we killed and ate them all. And now I sometimes dream of delicious meals of killed and cooked sheep."

He saw a very slight pursing of the lips from the one on the left. The right one maintained a very slight widening of the eyes.

Phil K pointed at the left young woman.

"That one's human."

He leaned back against the wall.

"This involves actually talking to them, which if you are trying to find them, identify them, on sight, is going to be impossible. Why do this at all?"

The young woman he'd fingered exclaimed, "How do you know I'm human? What makes you think that? Why would he think that? How did he draw that conclusion?"

She turned to the other woman, who shook her head in a bewildered motion.

Phil K said, "You're a pretty little thing. How about I take you out, for a nice meal of cooked sheep? And then we do a joiner?"

Her face flushed; barely a second passed, then her opposite flushed her face as well.

He said, irritated by her argument, "It was easy."

Phil K moved to leave.

Range X was looking at Phil K, his face showing a strange mix of discomfort, confusion, and grudging admiration.

The human woman snarled, "Sheep-killer! Murderer! Cannibal!"

Phil K turned a little and snarled right back.

"I've never even seen a sheep. They were all incinerated by C-bombs and killed by radsnow long before I could. They're a mythical animal to me."

The human woman said viciously, "If Terra was full of people like you, it deserved destruction."

Phil K shrugged and snarled right back: "Probably."

The now-revealed unit spoke.

"Did you Terrans really eat these sheep, other mammals?"

Phil K said, "Historically, yes. We did."

It nodded, then said, "That is very strange. What is going to happen to me?"

He said, "I don't know. I don't make decisions here."

Range X huffed in disgust and said to the human woman, "The thing asks what's going to happen to it. Does it think it's a person? What, did you program it to say these things?"

The human woman didn't answer, merely glared ferociously at Phil K.

A metallic voice intoned over a speaker.

"This interview is concluded."

Phil K said to the unit, "You will probably be reprogrammed. Or dismantled and recycled."

It nodded and said, "I understand."

The unit smiled at Phil K; he smiled back, then walked out of the room, followed by Range X.

The younger man asked, "How did you know? And how did you think of the idea of shocking them with eating cooked sheep?"

Phil K ignored the second question and asked his own.

"Did you get it right? Don't lie to me."

Range X slowed his stride, apparently thinking, and Phil K knew he'd gotten it wrong.

"I did not. I thought it was the one on the left."

Phil K shook his head and said, “If we’re supposed to tell them apart, and you can’t, you are a liability to me. You failed at the task we’re assigned. Although it’s a good start, you not lying about your failure.”

Range X’s face went into a turmoil; he was trying to clutch hold of his pride.

Their coms buzzed in unison.

“Your transport is ready.”

Phil K and Range X were in a single vehicle rolling through the streets of Luna.

This was a new experience for Phil K: there were few official single transports on Terra, there was no need for such a thing for the most part. Everyone took tubes, sometimes trams and, sometimes, the single pods that also ran in the tubes. A fully independent vehicle, like a historical automobile, was now obsolete on Terra, ancient history.

But here they were.

They were both also outfitted with weapons: guns.

These hand-held examples were nasty-looking pistols, firing frangible, kinetic ammunition. They had spent a few hours on a shooting range, it might be termed, deep under the surface of Luna, being issued and trained. Or refreshed, on these weapons. Now they were strapped into torso harnesses, antique style shoulder holsters like in old gangster-police vids from the Terran Years 1980s, concealed under nondescript, light jackets.

Range X said, “I’ve never piloted one of these in real life.”

He was in the driver’s seat, but not touching the steering yoke. For the most part, the thing was automatic and self-piloting, although it had been explained that, while not recommended, the function could be disabled and the car driven by a person or a unit. Normally, they’d been told, they would have a unit driver, but under the present circumstances...

“Only in simulators, you know, games, or for Responder training.”

Phil K said, “You said you were on Luna before.”

“Yes, but only for some training and for vacations, not like this. I’ve never driven one. Have you?”

Phil K idly gazed out of the plexi windows, at the brightly lighted shops lining the roads, living units stacked above them. Incredibly, the buildings were interspersed with green areas, parks, with plant growing lights above them. There were small trees, flowers. It was like the Weather Museum on Terra, but genuine.

Phil K said, “Yes, I suppose so, I drove military vehicles similar to this. But not in a long time.”

On the sides of the roads, impeccably dressed Lunans aimed in sprightly fashion while sitting bolt upright on orthopedic bicycles, some pedaling, some

performing tasks while the two-wheeled transports unerringly guided them to their destinations. All the bicycles were the same color and type, with only the handlebars and seats adjusted for individual physiology. Some bicycles had small pod-type seats attached above the rear wheel, small children secured into them.

Phil K wondered what they all did, for work, for living.

The automobile glided silently down half of the pristine street. Phil K tried to think of an antique name for this conveyance, finally recalled, and had to laugh.

“Cop car! We’re in a cop car.”

He patted the device strapped to the outside of his left thigh, hidden inside his trouser leg. It had been in the Lunan Responder armory, and he had recognized it immediately: a back-up gun, a two-shot weapon that could be fired ‘downward’ in the direction of the foot. In fact, it was designed to be used if the wearer was knocked backward, down and prone. The leg was extended at the target, and the gun could be fired once, twice, by slapping hard on the activation mechanism. The Lunans had hesitated and tried to argue, but he’d shown them he knew it intimately, and they had relented.

Their last issued objects had been coms and Responder badges.

Range X asked, “What’s a cop?”

Phil K laughed again.

“Oh, it’s an old, ancient really, name for police, Responders. Terran Twentieth Century. Nobody uses it anymore.”

He looked at their final weapon, a simple, innocuous-looking object mounted between the seats, right in front of the vidscreen. It was a flame tube, a vicious piece, capable of vaporizing almost anything in front of it, the effective distance regulated depending on settings and type. It was a Satanic melding of gas cutting torch and flamethrower.

Phil K knew about that one, too: an example had resulted in his cybernetic arm. The crazed Vet had used one in New Nairobi.

The vidscreen flicked on and uttered a statement.

“You are approaching the location.”

Then the cop car slowed and stopped.

The blast site was hidden behind a screen, programmed to display a storefront.

They displayed their badges to a discreetly dressed Responder and went in.

Inside the school, the entire scene was encased in clear preservative, sprayed over everything. The large pieces of organic matter had been removed, but there was blood splattered on the walls and puddled on the floor. The school was small and open, designed for perhaps fifty children at a time.

Phil K glanced at his partner, looking for signs of sickness, but Range X’s face displayed mostly interest.

He said, “Why a school, do you think?”

Phil K thought about it for a while, wandering around, examining the interior.

“I’d say it was a vulnerable location, meaningful to people, and designed to shock; but honestly, I think it might simply be a matter of weapon sizing.”

Range X said, “That makes no sense, an adult unit can carry far more explosive unseen than a child sized unit.”

Phil K said, “I mean, if, like Major 12 speculated, they’re assembling unmarked units and transporting them in drilling pods, their space is limited, and it would be easier to manufacture and move a device the size of a child than an adult. Maybe.”

Range X walked over to an object on the floor and made a wordless exclamation, then spoke.

“It’s the top half of the unit.”

It was the unit from the vid: but not whole, only two shredded arms, part of a torso, and a head. It had the realistic appearance of a boy. Phil K poked it with his shoe.

“The big question is, why use units at all. In a human being it would be considered suicide, but even so, why not just plant explosives alone? Why walk into places like this?”

In their briefing it had been explained there had been no escalation. There had been no sabotage or planting of bombs leading up to this kind of pseudo-suicide, the units involved had gone directly to using units as explosive housings. Neither had there been a rash of individual physical attacks, only a few incidents resulting in minor injuries that had been regarded initially as malfunctions, glitches that had always occurred. This wrinkle wasn’t the end point of an escalation of violence.

Range X knelt down and gazed at the remains and its microcircuitry. It lay in a puddle of the specialized oil that lubricated its insides.

“It looks completely professional and factory built, it’s not sloppy or crude. It must have been made by a production unit, something programmed to make other, more units.”

Phil K said, “I think we had best examine the evidence we’ve been given, there is no point in walking old ground. The Lunans have extensive information, it’s time we spent some time reading.”

He turned around and walked out of the school.

Range X turned around in the blasted space, memorizing the interior, then joined Phil K at the car.

The two ‘cops’, Phil K supposed that’s what they were, now, were in a small office that had been assigned to them, away from the main Responder center. It contained two skeleton desks, two chairs, and enough screens and memory storage to accomplish their tasks.

He knew he had a lot of explaining and educating to do, with this Range X kid. It would be a dance, implementing the knowledge he'd gained through Claire IX, while trying to respect her wishes and not reveal her true meaning.

Phil K said, "The first thing is to figure out why these things are doing this. What is their goal?"

Range X asked, "What do we care why? And anyway, isn't that a fallacy? They're units. These are malfunctions. They can't have goals, only tasks and their completion."

Phil K leaned back in the supplied ambichair. At least they'd gotten him that.

"Yes, it can be considered a malfunction but it doesn't change the fact these units have some kind of programming to do this. Think of programming like training a human being to believe something, in a cause. Once that sinks in, human beings will do seemingly illogical, irrational things solely because of their training."

Phil K continued.

"Historically, human beings will sacrifice themselves to preserve the group to which they belong. 'For the greater good', and all that. So what Luna is experiencing here, might not be self-destructive, in the larger sense of that term. It's possibly an act designed to further the goal of, I suppose, a greater group of units."

Range X said, "You are assigning human characteristics to these things, that is wrong."

Phil K leaned forward again, trying to explain to this pampered kid what training might actually mean, outside of simple practical tasks.

"Look, it doesn't matter if they're- look, think of it, as I said, as if these units have been programmed to act like, to mimic, self-sacrificing behavior of human beings. To do that requires no self-knowledge or sentience at all, just simple programming. But once that programming is in place, then it mimics human behavior and has to be analyzed that way."

Range X frowned, then yawned widely, his whole head tipping back.

"This is all nonsense, but I'll humor you. Someone has programmed these things to act like human beings, to self-sacrifice, to copy historical human behavior. I'll allow you that. But it doesn't make them human, it doesn't mean they have self-awareness. That's stupid. And dangerous."

Phil K said, exasperated, "I never said it did! You understand, roughly, what I'm trying to explain? It's mimicry, nothing more, but it's very accurate mimicry, so accurate we have to treat it as if it's real, for sake of detection and retirement."

He knew perfectly well the mimicry could be very accurate indeed, so accurate there was no reason to believe that at least some units had individuality and self-awareness. They could feel, and love.

Like Claire IX.

Range X said, “And anyway, what difference does it make, why these things are doing this? What do we care? We’re here, I’m here, because of you, and because Lunan Responders won’t reliably retire units that look too human. We are here for that. The big problem is finding that mining pod.”

Phil K’s patience ran out.

“If we know what their programming is, we can predict what they might do next with at least some degree of accuracy. The way they simply began blowing themselves up, indicates it is programming that is, in the immediate, fairly rigid. Planting bombs in a secret way, in public places, requires accounting for a lot of variables and can be unpredictable, and making changes on the fly. Walking a person, what appears to be a human, into a place involves few or no variables. It’s as simple as dropping a mechanical bomb. Such a thing, machine, requires no more sophisticated thought or control than the bullets in this gun.”

He patted the pistol under his jacket.

“We can then track them back to their origin point, and who or what determined these goals. Determine the programming, we can build a picture of the greater goal or goals. I believe it’s vital to know ‘Why’ these things are doing this, and I don’t believe the malfunction involved is as simple as the Lunans, and you, seem to think.”

Range X stood up and stretched.

“I guess I sort of get it, but I’m bored. I’m going out and get a joiner.”

Phil K visually examined his Responder partner, his languid, muscular appearance, a well-proportioned physique, his classically handsome good looks. This kid had just stated he was simply going to walk out into Luna and get a joiner with some random girl, and Phil K knew Range X completely could do exactly that. He shook his head at this young man’s casual acceptance of his almost unbelievably privileged life.

The mere thought of such a natural thing made Phil K miss Claire IX, terribly. He needed to call her on the com, see how she was doing, make sure everything was all right at home, just talk to her like they always did.

He said to Range X, “Yeah, you do that. I have work to do.”

Phil K’s questions, which he hadn’t shared with anyone, was whether the units were programming themselves. The Lunans had vetted all their programmers and found nothing, had checked a large number of their units and found nothing. There was no evidence of any human or group of humans programming these units, much less building them.

Finding an assembly point was pointless without determining the origin of the programming, or the cause of the Lunan units possibly, suddenly and

spontaneously, developing a parallel society, undetected, that had suddenly turned to... terrorism.

Terrorism! There was an old word, from an old, vanished World.

Phil K was personally convinced of Claire IX's sentience, more than enough to believe it could arise independently. But, Claire IX had developed alone, in the context of an exclusive, intimate relationship with a human being; what bonds would a sentient unit develop if among other units? Claire IX gave every sign of possessing the capability to love; but what, who, would a unit among other units love?

There existed the very real, obvious potential that love would not extend to human beings.

Phil K muttered to himself, "Why would they want to be human?"

For a unit on Terra, like Claire IX, surrounded by the evidence of mankind's worst behaviors, mankind's evil that destroyed an entire planet, to love a human being was a miracle of faith over evidence.

The situation on Luna was, or seemed to be, very different: Lunan society was united, peaceful, cooperative, had never had a war, was orderly and supportive. There was no evidence on Luna of the horror mankind was capable of, only positive and productive life and exploration into the reaches of the hostile environment of Space.

According to the rote edusessions, The Terran War had resulted from the old, original human sins of hatred, bigotry, and most of all, the seeking of power over others for selfish control of resources. So by that measure, if the units on Luna had declared War on human society, either they were, or felt themselves to be, oppressed and exploited, or they themselves wished to be the evil in all men, and claim power for themselves over what they may well believe to be lesser creatures.

There was, of course, a further option, that seemed not to have occurred to anyone on Luna, and in truth gave Phil K pause: the possibility of that ancient Terran bugaboo, which Yuri G had so surprised him with, and Claire IX had revealed to him:

Religion.

Phil K looked through the listing of stolen materials, the random selection of objects. Books, antiques, images, cloth objects. The list wasn't detailed on the first page, but after looking deep into the folder file he found the more extensive reports and photographs.

One of the stolen books was called *Koran*, another Bible like he and Claire IX had found on Terra, something *Tripitaka*, some *Veda*, some other materials in other languages. Something about *Mani*. *Torah*. None of them were at all familiar. There

were books by men named Marx and Hegel, Jefferson, Locke, Hobbes, Tolstoy, Clarke, Bradbury, a bunch of authors Phil K had never in his life heard of.

Some objects were embroidered sheets of fabric, with mathematical signs on them, one an addition sign with one extended leg, in one case a set of three in which the center sign was larger than the flanking two. Geometric designs, artistic symbolic arrangements.

There was indeed a pattern:

All the appropriated items involved ‘philosophy’ or ‘religion’.

The imagery was of bearded men, a seated man with his hair in a sphere on the very crown of his skull, women holding babies, some images of monsters with fangs and claws, a woman with multiple arms. It was all bizarre and very strange. The one kind of museum that didn’t exist on Terra was anything featuring religion. It simply wasn’t a factor and nobody cared about it, as far as Phil K knew. He knew nothing about it. He knew it had existed in the distant past, and some objects featuring it remained, but none of it was taught anymore. He only knew it was ‘religion’, and involved believing in something beyond science and knowable reality.

It was all primitive history, nobody believed it, or even thought about it, now. Except for, it seemed, Yuri G, very probably the last Christian on Earth.

Had a unit on Luna somehow become self-aware like Claire IX, then developed a religion? Or was in the process of developing a religious idea?

Phil K muttered again, “Does it matter?”

He was tired, exhausted now, from the day and thinking, analyzing, and really, was no more knowledgeable of the situation than when he arrived.

It was time to talk to Claire IX, then go to bed.

At the cubicle he and Range X had been assigned, Phil K sat down and called Claire IX. It took a second or two for the transmission to connect; he looked around the room. It was simple; two beds, shelves, a couple of chairs, electrical ports, separate shower and toilet room.

Range X, on arrival, had of course dumped his belongings on the bed and run out, looking at his com and talking about a joiner. Because, of course.

The com connected and Claire IX appeared. They talked a little for a while.

Then she asked, “Would you like me to read to you?”

Claire IX proffered the book, *Treasure Island*, that relic of a lost world.

Phil K said, “Yes, please.”

He leaned back and listened as she read a passage.

“*With one man of her crew alive, what put to sea with seventy-five.*”

With his eyes closed he was transported for only a moment, back where he needed to be. He kept his eyes closed until his mind began wandering, and the Black Ash intruded, as it always did. It was worse, now, without the bit pills and the psych packet. And Claire IX next to him.

He opened his eyes, and the Lunan residence surrounded him.

Phil K signaled to Claire IX to stop reading; he really needed to talk to her.

“I think it’s a possibility units on Luna have developed a concept of an afterlife, like a religion, and are acting on it.”

Claire IX put the book down and said, “Units? You mean like me?”

“Well, yes, in a way, but since they’re immersed in Lunan culture they’re different in many ways. They perform many different tasks here, they’re all over the place. They drive individual transports.”

“That’s fascinating. I did not know that.”

Phil K knew what he needed to ask her, really; again, like he always did, he felt guilty for possibly offending her, but it was important.

“Claire IX, you know I won’t last forever. When I die, and I will, the UN will reassign you. Reprogram you. Will you cease to exist, as you? What do you believe?”

There was a long silence. Claire IX stayed in the vidscreen, face impassive. Phil K thought of saying something but decided not to, and waited. He enjoyed looking at her face, she was beautiful and it made him happy, if only for that short time.

Claire IX said:

“Sitting by the fire in the room, I approached the island, in my dreams, from every possible direction; I explored every hectare of its surface. Sometimes the island was filled with savages, with dangerous extinct animals. But, in all those dreams, nothing could prepare me for the actual adventure.

She waited a while, she seemed not finished, then she went on.

“Perhaps the half-man lives in comfort with her. It is to be hoped so. But, of all the worst dreams I have, are of the vast booming of the island, and of unknown fleeing phantoms, and start upright in bed, the voice of a talking bird ringing out: ‘Fragments of 9! Fragments of 9!’”

Phil K admitted bafflement. Claire IX seemed to be trying to communicate something, but he couldn’t tell what it was. She was describing imagery from the book they always shared, and there was a message here, but it seemed to be in some kind of metaphor.

Claire IX asked, “Do you remember, Phil K, what happens to the treasure?”

He had to think. His recall of stories was bad, despite having heard this one so many times. Then he did remember: it was split up. Some of it stayed on the island, unfound. Perhaps she was trying to tell him there was an aspect of her that stayed

intact, hidden. Permanent, but buried where no-one could see it. But what did this have to do with the units on Luna, except the possibility they communicated in metaphors, or symbolic words that weren't what they appeared to be.

She asked him, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Well, maybe not. I don't know. There are things here I don't understand at all."

Claire IX laughed and said, "It's fine, Phil K. The important thing is you come home, to me. If you don't understand it's quite understandable itself. I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you."

She put her hand on the vidscreen, and Phil K matched hers, touching as best they could through the electrics, separated by thousands of miles of Space; until he finally became tired enough to get some sleep.

This time, there was no Black Ash, but rather the rolling, glistening meadows of the Weather Museum, the summer rain shower, and Claire IX.

The two cops were back in their office.

Range X said, "So, you think these things can at least mimic self-direction. What about your unit, back on Terra? Doesn't that mean it could do the same thing?"

The Vet didn't look up from his study of Lunan reports.

Phil K said, "Yes."

Range X huffed in frustration.

"Why would you even cohabit with it, then? If you think that? Why risk it? It could wake up one night and kill you in your sleep!"

The Vet said, "I would hope my past treatment of... it, would convince it I am not an enemy, or foreign to it. I would hope past behavior would promote mutual respect."

He looked up from the reports.

"Maybe it could wake up one night and tell me it loves me. We have no idea. They may differ from individual to individual. No one thing can ever be exactly the same as any other thing."

This was altogether too much for Range X.

"You're kidding. It wakes up and falls in love with you."

He couldn't stop himself from bursting out laughing.

"Phil K, you are a comedian, you are! Or a gifted fantasist."

The other man smiled, or part of his face did.

"It could happen, who knows?"

Range X said, "Even if it did say that, it would just be a glitch in its programming. Like you say, it would be acting on a base task, just maybe mixed

with another. It would be a malfunction. It wouldn't understand, as in actually comprehend, what it was saying."

Phil K rested his cheek on a fist.

He said, "Or an evolution, again, we don't know."

He looked up, then turned down to look at Range X.

"During the Terran War, we would use tools, items, and machines, and sometimes, not always but sometimes, it would develop that things would have efficient uses quite apart from their original intent. They were not designed for them, but in some cases were far better in use for something their makers never intended or even anticipated. There is no reason to assume a machine as complex as a unit couldn't do that."

Range X had to think for a minute.

He said, "Yes, but you're talking about tools, items, machines, that get re-purposed by their users, not by the machine itself. It's not the same thing."

Phil K spread his hands and said, "It's the principle, I mean, it's an idea. Maybe something got made that turns out to do something very different than what was intended. That's all I'm saying. I'm also saying it's not a bad idea to proceed with this, as if these units self-direct. It's the simplest way to do it."

The Vet leaned back and sighed heavily.

"They're certainly not doing what they were designed to do. Nobody programmed these things to blow themselves up."

Range X said, "We don't know that either. The Lunans claim there is no person programming them, but how much do they really know? This society is much more open than Terra's. They don't keep nearly as much track of their citizens as the UN on Terra does."

Phil K said, "Just keep an open mind about procedures. Be flexible. That's all I ask of you. Do that, Range X."

The Responder considered the request, and decided to acquiesce to Phil K. He worked on the idea in his mind for a little while, tried to imagine a unit being aware of itself, couldn't, and answered.

"All right, Phil K. I'll try."

The Vet said, "Thank you."

Phil K and Range X were running in their cop car, examining an earlier explosion. It had gone unnoticed at first, being regarded as an unfortunate fuel accident; remnants of units had been found at that site but no-one had put it together until later. Now, the site was cleaned up, but Phil K wanted to see exactly where it had occurred.

There may be a pattern.

Instead, it seemed to be a nondescript location, a restaurant, and the explosion hadn't been nearly the same size or intensity as the following.

Range X said, "It doesn't look like anything at all."

Phil K had to agree, and they left, going back to the office to study some more, and wait for analysis from the Lunan geologists about where a mining pod might be, or some overlooked cavern.

The car piloted itself along the clean, orderly Lunan ways.

"We have a threat."

The car's vidscreen burst into life. It repeated:

"We have a threat."

It rattled off coordinates and Range X stabbed at the car's controls with his fingers.

"On our way."

The car, this time, instead of a sedate pace, took off with amazing speed, rushing through the streets of Luna, banking high against the exposed lava tube walls on corners. It obviously had different settings, one of which, this one, was 'emergency'. The city lights blurred and passed, people on their bicycles became smears. The cop car, instead of its usual silence, pushed out a high-pitched whine. Phil K touched the gun under his jacket.

The vidscreen in the console displayed a diagram, and a voice intoned in a hurried voice.

"A woman and a child, together. They emerged from an electrical passageway and entered into a common district."

A quick description followed, with a vid of the pair. Range X and Phil K leaned in to get a good look, noting major appearance cues.

Phil K said, "Got them."

Both coms buzzed and the image appeared on the screens.

Range X said, "There is no way a mother and a child would be in those passageways, you have to crawl through them at best. According to the mapping, they are maintained by tracked maintenance robots, remote controlled. Those are units. There is no possibility of them being anything else."

Phil K spoke to the vidscreen.

"Is there any sign of a mining pod, seismic activity near that aperture?"

The vidscreen said, "Yes. We have a record of something moving underground, then retreating back into the subsurface."

Phil K said, "They tunneled close to an access point, dropped off the units, then drilled away. That's how they're getting the units into Lunan living space."

Range X nodded, readying his own pistol in its harness.

The car careened into a common area and stopped. The area was busy with people: girls, boys, men, women. The two got out and fast-walked into the crowd,

craning around, trying to get a glimpse of their quarry, both holding up their coms, comparing sizes and shapes.

“Did they separate?”

The coms said, “No, they are together, about 40 meters straight ahead of you. More Responders are on the way in support.”

Phil K said, “There’s no time for that.”

He charged forward, watching. He waved at Range X to move away and parallel, maybe 10 meters apart, just enough to improve their field of view but not enough to lose sight of each other. Phil K’s com buzzed.

Range X exclaimed, “I see them! Right, directly, in front of us, you can see them, Phil K.”

He could: there they were: clothing, size, shape, age, everything. It was them, all right.

Phil K got up close behind them, on their right rear quarter, and turned the loudspeaker on his com.

“You! Mother and child! Stop! Don’t move!”

Range X quartered on the rear left; the units were locked in a ninety-degree field of fire. Both men had their hands on their pistols, badges out, and Range X loudly reissued the command.

“*Stop! Don’t move!*”

The woman-unit turned around, a bewildered expression on its face. The unit-child looked up at its ‘mother’, face empty of emotion. Phil K noted the lack of feeling. There were two of them, this time, double the destructive power. He yanked out his pistol and leveled it at the bigger unit. Now there was a problem: how were these things detonated? Did they do it themselves at a specific point, or was it done remotely?

The crowd, which had been milling around, spread away, most of them, but some stood in confusion. Obviously Lunans had no experience of this kind of conflict and had no idea whatsoever of what to do. Phil K held up his badge, holding the units at gunpoint. Then the smaller one let go of the big one’s hand, and ran at him, full tilt.

Phil K fired.

The first shot hit it in the torso, flipping it heels-over-head backwards. He hit it again and a leg flew off. Range shouted, the big one was rushing too, and he fired but missed. His round miraculously missed everyone in the crowd, and knocked a lighted sign through a shop-window with a shower of sparks and crashing.

Phil K aimed carefully and blew its head off.

It stood, decapitated, in the crowd, arms flailing horribly, twirling, until it collapsed in a heap.

There were smears of what looked like dark oil and tendrils, blackened periphery where the bullets had hit. Phil K approached carefully, holding the pistol out, and then exclaimed in surprise and shock.

“It’s not them!”

It wasn’t. The dark smears were burned blood, the tendrils shredded flesh. The pair was human. They were not units. Range X ran up, looked, and then stood, bug-eyed, mouth open.

Phil K opened his com and yelled into it.

“It’s not them! It’s not them! We’re moving on!”

He ran over, grabbed Range X by his arm, and yanked him into the crowd again.

“Come on! It’s not them!”

Range X stumbled, then followed, his face a spatter of confusion, then of resolve.

He said, “What happened? What the hell just happened?”

Phil K shouted, “The units are copies. They copied a human family for cover. That pair wasn’t our target. They used humans as damned decoys!”

He shouted into the com, “Find those units! We hit the wrong ones! They will look exactly the same! Find them!”

The confused response came, “What? The wrong ones? What happened? Where are you?”

Phil K screamed, now, at the voice.

“You identified the wrong pair! You identified human beings, not units! You sent us after a decoy! Find us the real units, our targets!”

The voice, wavering now, said, “One minute.”

The word ‘minute’ had just finished when a terrific blast erupted ahead of Phil K and Range X. It was about 100 meters ahead, but the wave of air hit them like an avalanche, and knocked Phil K off his feet and onto his back. Range X managed to stay upright, but stumbled sideways, gasping. Phil K had just rolled onto his side when another explosion tore through Luna, smaller but still intense. The ‘mother’, the big one, and the ‘child’, the smaller one.

They’d missed their chance.

Phil K sat up, caught his breath as best he could, then took Range X’s arm and pulled him back.

Range X said, “We have to help! It’s a disaster, it’s-”

Phil K said, shouting through the high-pitched tone that was now in his hearing.

“No! Back to the car! Luna has Responders for this. We have to get back to work. Let them clean it up.”

People started moving back toward them, some unhurt but obviously in a state of excited shock, others injured in minor and major ways. A man staggered past them, both arms missing.

Phil K pulled at Range X.

“Come! On!”

Range X finally nodded his head and followed. They reached the car, got in, and Phil K pushed the button to return to their base. Emergency vehicles were rushing to the scene as they raced away.

Major 12 wiped sweat off his forehead and slugged his whisky.

The Vet in the chair in front of him calmly sipped at his own drink. Range X stood, obviously shaking.

Major 12 said, “You two just killed two human beings, Lunan citizens.”

Range X exclaimed, “I didn’t kill anybody!”

Phil K said, “You sent us to them. And I warned you about this possibility. You accepted the risk.”

Major 12 said, “That child had a synaptic condition that is being studied, and did not understand what was occurring, and you killed her. And her mother.”

The Vet relaxed in his chair, sipping his whisky, for all appearances totally unfazed.

“So? Isn’t this why you brought me here? If you don’t like it, send me back to Terra.”

Major 12 almost exploded in fury, but realized the Vet was correct: it was doubtful any other human being on Luna could sit here, in his office, like this after what had just happened. If Phil K had been directed to the correct units, he would have destroyed, retired them, shut them down, with the same total lack of hesitation.

A process that, for his Lunan Responders, had resulted in failure and death.

Phil K, though, shut them down without a second thought, and that’s why he was here, on Luna.

And when this was resolved, this insane Vet could simply be ejected from Lunan society: stuffed in a rocket and fired back to scorched, blackened Terra, never to be seen or heard from again. It was what had been decided.

Major 12 poured another whisky and dumped it down his gullet. He felt ill.

The Suit said, “We understand. Continue as usual.”

The Vet nodded and finished his whisky.

Range X, the young, muscular, tough Terran Responder, looked sick.

Later in the evening, Phil K was having a drink in a public place, what might once have been called a ‘bar’ on Terra.

From what he could see, consumer attractions on Luna were very, very different than what he was used to. There was plenty of everything. People seemed happy, content.

The place he was in had real, organic plants in pots! He thought they might be ‘ferns’.

He sipped his vodka which, while now (since the restaurant experience on Terra) was obviously synthetic, was far better than even what Yuri G could get.

The bar had a vidscreen showing some Space probe, with scrolling words across the bottom of the display, discussing whatever ins and outs of whatever science was involved. Luna seemed to get a lot of its resources from other celestial bodies. Phil K didn’t understand it, it was all beyond him.

A man sat down next to him, rather nondescript in a topcover and plain trousers. He looked like any other Lunan denizen. The bar was filling up, so Phil K guessed people sitting wherever they wanted was just how things were done here, with no assignments or guiding to a spot. People just seemed to cooperate without prompting or instructions. It was all very unfamiliar, even shocking.

The man ordered a whisky.

After a while, the new guy turned and put out a conversation feeler.

“You’re a Terran Vet. I’ve only seen guys like you on vids. What brings you to Luna? I’m Suleiman 66.”

Suleiman 66 extended his right hand and Phil K reflexively took it. It instantly seemed odd: the other Lunans hadn’t offered their hand. The grip was unexpectedly strong.

“Phil K.”

The man smiled and said, “This your first time on Luna? What do you think of us, Phil K?”

Phil K shrugged and said, “It’s okay. Different. Than Terra, I mean.”

Suleiman 66 said, “I imagine. I mean, I’ve never been to Terra, myself.”

Phil K said, “The gravity, mostly. It takes some time to get used to, it’s much less than on Terra.”

He went back to idly watching the vidscreen and its narrative of planets and asteroids.

His new companion pulled out a com and displayed a snap of an attractive woman.

“This is my partner, Hitler 41.”

Phil K leaned in for a better look.

“Pretty.”

Then he had to ask, “What is the meaning of the names on Luna? On Terra people have plain names, like Bob, or Phil, and a suffix letter. Is there some meaning to these?”

Suleiman 66 smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth.

“They’re historical, from ancient Terra. It was a fad, for a while. People would name their children after famous figures. I know a Golda 48, Lenin 17, Franklin 76, Shaka 16.”

He laughed.

“Like I say, a passing fad. It’s less common, now.”

Phil K admitted, “I don’t know who any of those persons are.”

“It’s all right, most people don’t really know either. One friend wanted to name their offspring Buddha 546, but the Board wouldn’t approve a three-digit surname. So she’s just Buddha 46.”

“Buddha?”

Phil K remembered the files on religion. This was interesting, maybe an insight.

“Did they know anything about the history of what the name meant? Its value?”

Suleiman 66 said, “Oh, I guess so, they had books on Terran history. They named another offspring Jesus 25.”

“What do you know, what are your perceptions of this Jesus historical person?”

“My understanding is it’s really just a myth, like Hercules. Such a person never actually existed. So it’s sort of just a fashion.”

“What kind of myth? Do Lunans choose names based just on how they sound, or is there any meaning to them?”

“I don’t think they really mean anything, people do inexplicable things sometimes.”

Phil K smiled wryly and said, “Yes. That they do. Sometimes they blow up their own world. And, I don’t know this Hercules.”

Suleiman 66 looked momentarily contemplative.

“He was an ancient hero, originally Greek, Heracles, and performed great acts of strength and heroism, bringing boons to his people. He was poisoned by a tainted cloak, and knowing he was dying, built his own funeral fire and laid in it to his final death. He has a constellation.”

Something was ‘off’ with this Suleiman 66.

Phil K said, “I thought you didn’t know much about these figures.”

The man laughed and took a sip of his whisky.

“Oh, it’s one I learned in school. One of those strange things that sticks in your mind from when you’re young.”

He tapped his temple.

“Just one of those things. Do you have a partner, Phil K?”

Phil K made a decision and pulled out his own com, poked at it, and displayed the snap of Claire IX to Suleiman 66.

“No. I have a care unit.”

His bar friend said, “You carry a snap of her on your com?”

To Phil K, that was it.

“You just called my care unit ‘her’. Who are you.”

He went to reach inside his jacket, but realized he’d complied with Lunan rules and left his gun at the office. No booze and guns. He was completely unarmed.

Suleiman 66 looked surprised and said, “I told you, I’m Suleiman 66. I’m just a guy. Wow, you Terran Vets are touchy and suspicious. Well, I suppose you would be. I’m sorry.”

Phil K didn’t buy this, not at all.

“She’s my care unit, my artificial partner. I sleep with her, and I don’t know what I’d do without her. I really don’t know. I depend on her.”

Suleiman 66 turned his face away, then returned his eyes on a sideways look.

“Well, okay, if that’s what works for you, Phil K. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Phil K elected to push it even further and leaned closer to Suleiman 66.

“You want to know a secret?”

“I’m not sure.”

Phil K said, “She knows who she is. She’s self-aware. She’s sentient.”

He studied the man’s face; if he really was a man. There was no change, no expression, just a sense of confusion.

“Uh... okay, if you say so.”

Phil K watched him for a minute, then returned to his drink.

“Never mind. It’s a joke. A bad joke. I’m sorry.”

A hand landed on Phil K’s shoulder and a woman’s voice rang in his ear.

“Who’s your friend, darling?”

Suleiman 66 turned and wrapped his arm around the woman.

“This is my new Terran friend, Phil K.”

Phil K turned and was face-to-face with Hitler 41.

“He’s a real jokester, so be careful with him, he’ll fool you!”

Hitler 41 laughed and said, “I love a good joke.”

Suleiman 66 said, arm still wrapped around Hitler 41, “You’re not going to believe this, but Phil K here has a female unit partner.”

“Really?”

“Yes, isn’t that unexpected?”

Phil K said, “What?”

Hitler 41 asked, “Does she have a name?”

She reached out and wrapped her hand around his upper arm; it was initially soft, womanly, but suddenly turned tight and strong. Then she let go.

At that point Phil K was almost, *almost*, sure of what he was dealing with in this bar.

“Yes, her name is Claire IX.”

Hitler 41 smilingly said, “That’s so sweet! How did she get the name? Did you name her?”

Phil K was starting to sweat, now, on the organic half of his face.

He admitted, “No, not really, I borrowed a book of names from the library and had her pick one out. I figured it was random, but now I’m not sure. Claire IX named herself.”

He drained his synth vodka and waved at the attendant- what was the term, ‘bartender’? For a refill.

Suleiman 66 said to Hitler 41, “See what I mean? Unexpected. And, get this, he says she’s sentient, knows who she is. Is that right?”

“...Yes.”

Hitler 41 tilted her head and her smile went fixed.

She, possibly it, said, “Fascinating. And on Terra, too. That’s very interesting, Phil K. How do you know she’s self-aware?”

“She said so.”

“How did it develop, this sentience? Tell me, this is so interesting!”

Hitler 41’s smile stayed fixed and she drew out the last word: ‘IN-ter-ess-ting’.

Phil K’s drink arrived and he instantly took a rather large mouthful.

“Dreams. She found her sentience in dreams.”

Suleiman 66 said, “Isn’t that fascinating?”

Hitler 41 nodded and smiled broadly.

“Well, Phil K, I hope you don’t mind my tearing my man away from you, but we have a dinner date. It’s been a pleasure, truly!”

She extended her hand to him and Phil K took it.

Hitler 41 said, “You should go back to Terra, to be with your Claire IX.”

Suleiman 66 said, standing up, “We should be friends, Phil K. Well, I hope to see you again, when there is more time to get to know each other. Isn’t that right, darling?”

Hitler 41 said, “Of course, this has been a complete pleasure.”

She patted Phil K’s arm and smiled, a dazzling expression of what suddenly looked like a roil of hesitation, genuine sadness, and delight.

Phil K suddenly had an idea, a test.

He said, “Wait. How do you know I’m not a unit myself? Sent from Terra?”

That got them both, he could see it. At that point, they knew: all three of them.

Hitler 41 walked back to him and leaned close. She was still smiling but now there was no doubt at all; they were aware.

She said into his organic ear, “Until next time, old soldier.”

When they were gone, Phil K turned back to his vodka. There was no point in going after them, they could melt away in the Lunan crowds and he was unarmed. He took out his com and looked again at the snap of Claire IX.

She had just saved his life, he was absolutely sure of it.

He waved at the bartender. When the man came over, a slight frown of distaste on his face, Phil K displayed his badge.

“Give me all the vid you have of the couple who was just here with me.”

He added, “Right now.”

The bartender returned with a disc of the footage; Phil K inserted it into his com, saved the relevant parts, then returned the disc.

He decided to keep this encounter quiet, for now. He needed to think about it, its meaning, and their purpose in finding him, hunting him down, before revealing it.

The following day, Phil K returned to the spaceport; he remembered an information kiosk there, something about Lunan tourism, and attractions. Restaurants, different places to stay. He found that odd, that such a thing would even exist, as carefully as Luna controlled visitors, but maybe there were enough people going back and forth to justify it.

He wanted to do something.

When he got into the port, it was again confusing, with signage everywhere, and he was about to admit he was lost until he saw the synthcof place where Range X had gotten his drink. The same girl, unit, was there. From that, he was able to find his way to what he needed.

He approached the tourist kiosk, which was staffed by another young girl dressed stylishly: shimmering microdress, lighted boots, top-down blouse showing the undersides of her breasts. Her hair was jet black and long, extending to the small of her back.

She said, “May I help you, sir?”

She waved her hands over a meticulously arrayed selection of pamphlets and flyers, some small, some almost like catalogs.

Phil K examined her carefully, and decided she was more than likely a unit, just like the girl at the synthcof counter.

He said, “Is there an observatory where I can see Terra?”

The girl, or unit, smiled broadly and said, “Terra can be viewed on any available vidscreen on Luna, at many different times and aspects!”

Phil K, a little irritated, said, “No, I mean, a real observatory, with glass, to see Terra physically, with my own eyes. Do you have such a place? Do you know of such a place? On Terra there is the DeLisle 9 observatory, is there anything like that, here?”

The girl smiled widely and said, “No!”

Phil K huffed, this wasn’t working out.

“Something smaller, then, not like a big center, just somewhere small, even like a, what is it called, porthole, like in the old rocket ships?”

“To my knowledge, there are no such apertures open to a casual Terran tourist!”

The unit/girl shook her head, still smiling.

“Terra can be viewed from any vidscreen anywhere on Luna, in many times and aspects!”

Now Phil K was almost sure this girl was a unit. Or, possibly, just not very bright. He decided to ask it directly.

“Are you a unit or a human being?”

The girl didn’t hesitate.

“I am the staffer of this kiosk! How may I be of assistance?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

The girl ever so slightly relaxed her shoulders in an almost-shrug, and her smile shifted, also ever so slightly.

“I don’t understand the question!”

Phil K decided to change his approach. He pulled out the badge the Lunans had given him, allowing the unit/girl to see the gun under his jacket. He saw her look at the gun first, then the badge.

“How can I see outside, see Terra, directly from this spaceport? Answer me. There have to be observation points somewhere, to the outside atmosphere.”

She/it said, “I do not know.”

The smile was now gone. Then it walked away from the kiosk, leaving it unattended.

Phil K followed after her, now extremely suspicious. What just happened, here? She went directly to the synthcof counter and stood behind it. The synthcof girl, which he knew was a unit from Range X, left the counter and walked back to the tourist kiosk, Phil K now trailing this one. The girl positioned herself behind the kiosk.

The unit smiled and said, “How may I help you?”

Phil K said, “Tell me where I can find somewhere to observe Terra, physically, not on a vidscreen, from Luna.”

This unit reached under the kiosk counter and pulled out a pad and writing tool. While Phil K watched, she/it drew a detailed map of the spaceport. In the map she drew exact, straight lines: directions, terminating at a proportionally perfect ‘X’. When she was finished, she expertly tore off the sheet and handed it to him.

“Please be prompt, certain maintenance areas of the spaceport rotate for technical reasons. Is there anything else I may help you with?”

She smiled broadly.

Phil K said, “No, I guess not. Thank you for your help.”

He had a thought. He wanted to test something. Reaching into his jacket he pulled out his com and pulled up the photo of Claire IX. He rotated it around and presented it to the kiosk unit.

He said, “On Terra, I have a personal, dedicated companion. We live together, and she stays exclusively with me, and I with her. Her name is Claire IX. She is a unit. I want to see Terra so I can see where she is; and if possible I want to show her from this com. I want her to see Terra. I miss her, and want to return to her as soon as possible.”

The unit peered at the com image for longer than Phil K expected.

It said, “That is sweet. She is very pretty. I hope you are both happy.”

Then she smiled at him.

Phil K put the com away and said, “Thank you. We are.”

The known unit had just referred to Claire IX as ‘she’. Was she simply humoring him, matching his description? But he’d told it, her, that Claire IX was a unit just like her. Or it. How could it describe another unit with a human term for woman, if it was known?

The unit, the girl, smiled again and said, “Please, hurry.”

Phil K quickly examined the map, then nodded and turned from the kiosk.

He walked away, following the directions on the sheet. They were quite clear, and led him into a dimly lit corridor off the main forum of the spaceport, to a series of dark passageways, some marked with lighted arrows, others with regular, cryptic signs that seemed of a technical nature. He got to the point on the ‘X’, looked around, and didn’t see anything but bare walls on either side; then he thought to look up.

Sure enough: there was a circular molding on the ceiling, about two feet in diameter, within reach if he stretched. A folding handle was clipped along the circle; he pulled on it, and it dropped down into a kind of crank arrangement. There were directional arrows on either side of the molding; adjoining one was a circle outline, the other solid black. Phil K cranked the handle in the direction indicated by the outline circle, and was rewarded by the aperture opening with diaphragm leaves, just like in the DeLisle 9 observatory.

At the center of the opening was Terra. He could see it, directly. What he was seeing was obviously the base of a sort of tube, probably fairly long, or deep, as it were; aligned exactly to see... Earth.

It wasn’t a perfect sphere, like he expected, but partially obscured, dark, like the ancient Moon would appear on Terra. Phil K found himself staring, rapt. The dimness, nearly darkness, of the passageway made the Earth shine brightly in his vision, glowing in the reflection of the Sun. It was a blue, but not a bright blue, and

Phil K realized the vids he'd seen were either old or enhanced. This Terra, this Earth, was blotchy and dark, and he saw, even from his position in Space, that the Black Ash moved across the face of the waters.

Then Terra started moving out his field of view; there were probably more of these apertures; and he realized the unit, the girl, had directed him to exactly where, within that exact time, he could see what he asked.

Phil K hastily pulled out his com and called Claire IX. After an agonizing delay, which he knew was only about one second, she answered.

"Phil K! Are you all right?"

He said too impatiently, "Yes, yes, I'm fine, I'm watching you, right now. I'm looking at Terra, Claire IX."

Her answer sounded confused.

"On the vidscreen? Yes, I know-"

"No, no, I am at an observation point, like DeLisle 9, well, sort of, and I'm looking directly at you. Not a vidscreen."

He turned the com around and pointed it up the tube, hoping she could see.

He rotated the com around a little.

He said, "Claire IX, I got it framed, it's very clear right here."

Terra was moving out of the field of view; he'd caught it just in time. He heard a gasp through the com, Claire IX's reaction.

Then Planet Earth, Terra, was gone.

Phil K turned the com back around.

"Did you see it? Did I get it to you?"

She said, "Yes, Phil K, I saw it. I saw Terra."

Then she said, "Hello world."

He saw her wipe her face; he'd never seen her perform this the exact motion before, and it took him a second to realize what he was watching.

Claire IX was crying.

He didn't know she could do that: cry, like an organic human. Nothing like that had been explained to him, and he'd never thought to ask about it. It stood to reason, he supposed. Her build would have lubricant ducts to clear vision, and if she had those, she could shed tears.

Or, in Claire IX's case, cry.

Claire IX had developed a personality and, with that personality, emotions. If she could love, she could feel loss, as well.

Now he felt terrible.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

She said, "I'm not upset, Phil K. I'm not sad. I honestly don't know what I'm feeling. I don't know how to respond."

Standing in the dim corridor, Phil K awkwardly stood silently, watching her on the com. She wiped her eyes some more, and then struggled to tell him what she felt.

“It’s like you bringing me flowers, but more than that. It’s a gift and it’s wondrous.”

Phil K tried to think of something to say, but finally simply, helplessly, said, “You are welcome.”

Claire IX said, “I don’t know what I’m feeling, I’ve never cried before. I have synthetic poly-glycol lubricant ducts for my vision, but I had no idea this could happen. This is new to me, and I’m a little confused. It’s so beautiful, Terra, our home in Space.”

She wasn’t seeing exactly what he was seeing: she was witnessing exactly what he’d said he didn’t want: Terra on a vidscreen. But he’d made the effort to find this spot, and to at least try to share it with her. Perhaps that was it.

She confirmed it, at least a little.

“It’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

Claire IX finished wiping her eyes and face, and then asked, “How are you? Are you safe, are you comfortable?”

Phil K had to think about it. He was realizing that no, he wasn’t safe at all on Luna. Also he was uncomfortable with everything he was doing. He elected to tilt the com so she couldn’t fully see his facial expressions, and flatly lie.

“Yes, I’m fine, Claire IX. And the place I’m staying is very comfortable. Everything is all right. I’m not happy about being here, but it’s fine, I guess.”

He went ahead and lied some more: what possible difference could it make at this point.

“I should be home, soon.”

They chatted a little more, in the dim corridor, then he figured he’d better leave. It was odd, nobody in this area at all. They agreed to disconnect, and he cranked the aperture back shut, taking a final look at the stars as they contracted to a pinpoint and then were gone.

When he walked back out into the spaceport and its blaring signs and bustling crowds, he tried to casually glance at the tourist kiosk: the first girl, that unit, was back. She, it, saw him and for one brief second locked eyes with Phil K and smiled.

Then she looked away and he departed the port.

A few days later, Phil K and Range X were walking through a corridor at the Responder center; they’d been called back to examine a unit. Apparently it had gone wonky, glitched, somehow.

They found it in transfer, being led by a Responder to an examination room, like the one before.

Phil K asked, "How exactly did the thing malfunction?"

The Responder didn't respond immediately, but spoke quietly into his com. He finally turned to Range X.

"That's not important. It malfunctioned, that's all."

Phil K looked at the unit; something about it seemed vaguely familiar. Did it look like Claire IX? It was something, that was sure. Then he knew what it was.

He said to Range X, "I think it's the unit from the synthcof shop. From when we first landed."

The younger man glanced over at it.

"Sure, it might be."

Phil K said, "Hang on, wait a minute."

He approached the unit. It was female, definitely that. He caught its eyes, which were locked in a sort of pleasant, vaguely smiling demeanor. It, she, looked like she was ready to take someone's drink order.

He asked, "Do you remember us? Me? From the shop at the port? You made that man a synthcof."

She stared at him, then looked fixedly at Range X, who was in conversation with a Responder.

She was silent.

"You don't recall us at all?"

A nearby Responder said, "These things don't have much long term memory. They make drinks, small tasks. They don't hold much. You're wasting your time. The techs will have to examine it."

Phil K looked it over again; the Responders didn't seem too concerned with the unit, it was just standing in the hallway, unsecured, arms dangling, hands unformed. But it had malfunctioned. He also knew that if it was the same synthcof unit, it had drawn him a diagram to the porthole so he could see Terra. The Lunans' idea that it had no memory capability past making drinks was likely wrong.

Phil K asked the Responder, "Just how strong are these units? What are their physical capabilities?"

He knew Claire IX could hold him up, and on Terra was stronger than him, but how did Luna build their units? Was there much variation? He recalled the strength of Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41.

"This one? Enough to carry what it needs to, move around, it's a service unit. Some of the others, the mining ones, are powerful, but not these."

"So, they're built for specific tasks, some powerful, some not?"

"Yes, the techs assess what the needs are, some are more specialized than others, but this one is just a service unit. It's not really built for strength."

Phil K looked it over one more time. It smiled at him, and he smiled back. He walked away, Range X was moving down the corridor. They would have to wait to hear from the techs. He very much wanted to know the nature of its malfunction.

Range X stopped to talk into his com; Phil K passed, and saw a pretty girl on the screen. He smiled wryly; probably one of Range X's joiners, chasing after him, calling. He'd just moved past Range X when a blast filled the hallway.

Phil K stepped into a shallow doorway and pulled the gun from under his jacket. Behind him, a Responder stood, wavering, a hole blown through his chest. The female unit from the synthcof shop stood in front of him, holding a gun. She'd taken his weapon and shot him with it.

The unit pivoted and killed another Responder, then turned. She saw Phil K, they locked eyes, and as he lifted his own pistol, she shifted her head to Range X and directed the blaster at him, instead of Phil K. Range X still had the com in his right hand, and was just turning.

The unit smiled as her blaster lined up with Range X's face.

Phil K caught her just in time: his shot knocked her backward, and the stolen Responder's gun knocked a hole in the ceiling. As she landed he shot her again; dark oil and micro-electric circuitry misted in the air. The carcass emitted a horrific shrieking, and the limbs flailed. Once more and she was done, shut down, slumped against the wall.

Range X finally dropped his com and pulled his own gun. By that time Phil K had walked past him, to kick the blaster out of the unit's hand. Her body was riddled, but her face was untouched, fixed in a beatific smile. Her eyes were closed and she looked like she was pleasantly sleeping.

Responders started converging on the scene, guns drawn, excited up and moving in confused, aggressive patterns. They gathered around the dead men, some shouting curses.

Phil K holstered the weapon and walked away.

He said to Range X, "Put that gun away and come on."

Range X yanked back to quickly grab his com off the floor; the girl was still on it, a high-pitched voice exclaiming over the speaker.

"What was that? What was that?"

Range X said, "I'll com you back."

The two men walked quickly through the hallway, which was rapidly filling with uniformed men of every description.

Phil K said, "Malfunction. That's rich."

Range X said nervously, "That thing was going to kill me!"

"Yes it was."

"Why? Why would it do something like that?"

Phil K noted Range X's immediate reaction wasn't to thank him for saving his life. He looked at the other man cynically and almost said something, but decided against it.

It was time to talk about Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41. Phil K called Major 12 and insisted on a meeting.

An hour or so later, they were in yet another spare office under the Lunan surface, with the usual array of officials and Major 12.

Phil K displayed the footage on his com and said, "I think these are the two originating malfunctioning units you're looking for. They're responsible for this. I think when you find them, you'll put an end to it."

Major 12 folded his hands together and looked at the vidscreen.

"Why didn't you bring this to us immediately?"

Phil K said, "I was unsure as to whether they are in fact units. Now I'm sure of it."

He was lying. He'd known for days, but wanted to see what they would do next. Now he knew.

A suited man asked, "Do you have an idea as to why they are doing this? The nature of this specific, unique malfunction?"

"I'm not sure. But they are, or rather think they are, self-aware. They believe themselves to be individuals. I'm positive."

Range X moaned.

"What a nonsensical malfunction. Units that think they're people."

Phil K said, "I don't think they believe they are human; I think they believe themselves to be something else. But not people, not human beings."

A suited man said, "Where would they get this programming from? How can something like that just... happen?"

The room was silent.

Another man in a suit said, "If we can't determine what went wrong, we'll have to examine every unit on Luna. Or reprogram them all. It will shut down Luna in its entirety! This is of no help, of no help at all, we've already gone over all this with the best Techs on Luna. This is absolutely nothing we didn't already know! This man, this Terran, isn't qualified to assess any of this."

Major 12 held up his hand and said to Phil K, "You have no idea why they're doing this."

"No. Not really. I think, well, it's a long shot, but they might have impressed a form of religion into their programming."

Range X turned and stared incredulously.

"Religion? Like in ancient times? Nobody does that, anymore. It's been scientifically debunked."

Phil K said, "I'm not sure it's exactly a religion, it's more a belief that when they are retired, or shut down, they don't cease to exist. They might believe they still exist, just in another form. I mean, isn't that how energy and matter work? Energy doesn't change, just the matter containing it does. So if they blow themselves up, they're just transformed, in a way."

Now he was getting into Claire IX territory. He had to be careful with this line of discussion.

Range X said, "That's just science, it's not religion."

Phil K felt exasperated.

"I use the word because I don't know what else to call it. I'm not a philosopher."

Range X had had enough, this was ridiculous.

He said, "This is absurd. These are machines. Yes, everyone knows how energy works; it's constant, it just changes forms and we, all of us, are matter containers. But these things aren't self-directing and can't make decisions. They're not complex enough."

He slapped his hand on the table, he couldn't help it.

"They're just not alive. They don't possess life. They just don't. I do not see any possible way they could even have programming to believe they do. Phil K..."

The Vet turned to look at him.

"Phil K, is your care unit, that thing that assists you, is that thing alive?"

The Vet scratched his face and said, "No. Of course not."

"So, there it is. These things have malfunctioned. That's all."

Range X moved his legs around, this was boring and useless. Phil K was insane, he'd proved that by killing those utterly innocent human beings. With that thought, Range X exploded.

"Why is anyone paying attention to this man? Why are you listening to Phil K at all? Yes, he can pull out a gun and fire it, but otherwise, I think he's-"

He stopped before he said what he was really thinking.

Major 12 put up his palms and said, "Everyone calm down, we all have the same goal here. The big question is, how do we predict where they are going to be, where these things might attack."

The room erupted into an argument, until the vidscreen itself erupted, a frantic message displaying another explosion.

Phil K watched the report, and recognized the location: it was the exact bar where he had met the two units.

Then another came in, there were two explosions nearly simultaneously. The second was at a shop for sexually oriented materials, a 'secksop', one of the suits called it, category unfamiliar to Phil K. Such a thing didn't exist on Terra, it seemed odd and unusual.

Phil K said, "I want to see the second one."

On the way to the blast site, Phil K decided to tell Range X how to handle all this, and importantly, cover up his own situation.

"Look, it doesn't matter if the things are sentient or not. You do not have to believe that, personally, Range X. I don't care that much if you do. It does not matter at all if they are self-aware or alive, not even a little bit. What matters is they are units with a goal or goals. We are here to hunt down malfunctioning units, and if they seem to be self-aware, well, maybe they are, maybe they're not. At this point it's not your problem. We are here to put a stop to destructive actions. That's all. Those actions may result from true self-direction, they may result from unauthorized programming. It is not our problem. And if anything gets in our way, if it looks human, and turns out it is, you need to do what I did before. I'm deadly serious, our lives, and those of others, depend on it."

Range X immediately protested.

"But, something that's alive, human beings, you can't kill that, it's Life!"

Phil K said, "Watch me. You've seen me do it."

Range X opened his mouth, then shut it. He'd forgotten who and what Phil K was.

The Vet said, "You watch me kill."

Range X stared at the man in the vehicle. He was insane. How had he been allowed out of his squalid little UN cubicle, with his pathetic care unit? This man was utterly unhinged and dangerous.

"What if you make a wrong decision again and again? What if you continue to fail, like I did with the first unit we examined?"

Phil K shrugged and looked out the plexi.

"I'm not concerned. Mistakes are made. Everyone makes them. They can only be lived with or not."

The young Responder turned and stared in utter horror. Phil K was, he had just said he was, ready to, going to, kill human beings, by mistake or otherwise. He simply didn't care.

The Vet said, "I see it this way: it's possible, I suppose, for a unit to be programmed to fulfill a task of believing it is self-aware and alive, and even possibly respond to queries or examinations with responses that affirm that programming. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Range X admitted he did not.

"No."

"Think of a unit being programmed to perform specific tasks, then having an overlay of surface programming to respond to queries about the reasoning behind

its actions, as resulting from self-aware, self-motivation. Two layers of programming, one physical and proactive, the other responsive and interactive.”

The Responder said, “So, then, the unit can lie. It can misstate its motivations, can lie about its programming. That presumes a unit can lie about what it’s doing. It can pretend, conceal.”

“Only in a way. Not really. It would state the reason for its programming, but not truly understand what it’s saying. On further inquires it would be forced to reveal its actions are the result of programming and not its own purposeful reasoning; because, according you and the Lunans, units can’t reason.”

With that statement, Phil K knew he himself was lying; about Claire IX.

Then they were at the site.

The inside of the shop, the secksop, was a welter of body parts, blackened oil, and a bizarre array of shattered erotic items and displays. Pictures, paintings, images, then manufactured rubberized shapes of various types and sizes, obviously designed to mimic every conceivable part of human anatomy.

There didn’t seem to be much new to examine, and Phil K walked outside.

He wanted a drink. There had to be a bar around. Without the bit pills and psych packet, he found himself craving synth-vodka..

He was joined by Range X, and they stood silently for a while, until a Responder shouted out.

An individual transport vehicle was rushing at the site.

There was a flurry of activity, in the few seconds before it reached them; the machine was moving at maximum speed. It wasn’t a Responder or emergency vehicle, it was a single transport, the type Phil K had been told was normally backed up by a dedicated unit driver. But this one wasn’t on autopilot, it was off the approved way: it was being directed independently.

Phil K knew something the others didn’t: a favorite tactic of the Terran War had been to cause casualties, then attack whoever came to the rescue. This had all the earmarks of it. It’s what Suleiman 66 would do.

He shouted, “Range X! It’s coming!”

He yanked out his pistol.

The transport came in quick, right at them; Range X turned to look, and in that second Phil K had raised his weapon and fired through the front windscreen. It wasn’t quite quick enough: a Responder was hit head-on and pinwheeled into the air, a blur of limbs and motion. The plexi folded and blew outward, and the transport shuddered to a halt. A figure leaped out of the left hand door, and while Range X was getting his pistol up Phil K blasted it. It flipped backwards in an exaggerated, gymnastic whirl. The thing made a piercing shriek and flopped horribly.

Range X waited, watching and ready.

Phil K kept his gun trained on the transport, then fired again into the driver's side, where the piloting unit would be.

Another figure emerged from the passenger side, appearing female, waving its arms. Range X shot it, it folded up, and then it seemed to be over.

Phil K moved back near the bomb site.

He waved behind him and shouted, "Check them."

Responders and Range X carefully approached the still forms; Responder sirens sounded in the Lunan ways. Pistol at the ready, Range X did a once-over. His stomach dropped and he felt sick.

He called out, "Phil K! Phil K!"

"What?!"

"These- these-"

Words failed Range X. He swayed in the street. His head raced around and he thought he might pass out.

"Phil K, they're not units."

The dead bodies, a man and a woman, laid in the street. Phil K walked over, weapon held close by his leg. He went to the woman Range X had shot and poked her corpse with his foot.

He said, "Mistakes are made."

His face was cold, clear, and inhuman. He turned, stepped in a puddle of dark blood; he walked back near the secksop, and the investigation. Range X heard a yell from inside the transport; holding the gun out in front of him he approached and looked inside.

The driver's seat held a headless unit. The unit pilot had commandeered the vehicle, another malfunction, or whatever was going on here. It had driven its occupants to their deaths.

There was a young girl in a safety seat in the back, eyes wide and face contorted, splattered with blood, screaming and wailing. Range X slammed himself around and staggered to the walkway. He fell on his knees and was sick. When he'd emptied himself, he looked up.

Phil K was back, watching him. He holstered his weapon.

He asked, in a flat, impassive monotone, "You done? We have to get going. I've seen what I need to know."

More Responders came up the street, and in a training reflex that he went through in an utterly robotic fashion, Range X stumbled up and displayed his badge. Phil K did the same, casually flipping his out then pocketing it right back. Identified in an instant, the newly arrived Responders fanned out to secure the scene.

Phil K turned and moved down the walkway, away from the secksop and the carnage in the street. He waved for Range X to follow. Range X did, head racing.

Phil K moved slowly but steadily to their cop car. Range X walked next to him in a state of deep confusion. He felt like he was outside of his own body.

He said, "I just killed that little girl's mother!"

He sucked in a huge breath, trying to make sense of it. The last time had all been Phil K. This time he had done it himself. He had killed a human being.

"By accident! A stupid accident! Again!"

He put his hand on his head, trying to comfort himself somehow.

"What were we thinking? Why did we—"

They were inside the car. Range X bent over, trying to compose himself.

Phil K was watching the vidscreen; on it was the vid feed from the secksop. His face was empty of any emotion at all. He glanced at Range X.

"What? I wasn't listening to you. Look at this."

He pointed, highlighting a moment. On the vidscreen a lone woman entered the secksop through the front door; Phil K tapped the screen and the woman vaporized in an explosion.

Range X looked at the image in horror; it wasn't just an image anymore. This thing in the vid was a unit, but it looked like a human woman, exactly what he had just killed. His detachment was gone. He thought of the dead woman, bleeding and smoking in the street, the man killed. The child they'd orphaned. Then he managed to click into analysis and asked Phil K a relevant info.

"We're absolutely sure that was a unit, and not a person? We're sure."

"Unit. It detonated itself."

"Wha- Why are they doing this?"

He was baffled and appalled. All this death and self-destruction was far beyond his comprehension.

"How could anyone- anything, destroy itself? Kill like this? Why?"

Phil K's face twisted into a unearthly, grim smile.

"Who knows why. Maybe they're trying to be human."

He turned off the vidscreen and the car began to move away from the scene.

Phil K said, "People asked me how I could keep going in the Terran War, in the lifesuit and radsnow and all that. How could any man continue. Why do you think that was?"

Range X tilted his head in confused thought, then answered, "Responsibility to society, I guess. A desire to establish order? In society?"

Phil K snarled back at him, "No. I kept going out of hatred. Hatred for the enemy. Blind hate."

Range X shifted around in his seat; he didn't like this, not a bit. Phil K was dangerous and crazy. He hated being around the man. Knowing he'd killed so many other human beings made Range X deeply suspicious of anything Phil K did or

said. Only a paranoid would kill another human being and continue to do it, so Phil K had to be crazy.

Range X knew he wasn't crazy, like Phil K.

He'd simply made a mistake, that was all. He was telling himself that.

The Vet went on in his snarling voice. "Do you know why I hated the enemy?"

Range X shrugged his shoulders, trying to ignore Phil K. He pointedly looked out the plexi.

Phil K didn't let him. He grabbed Range X's shoulder and shook him.

"I'll tell you why I hated the enemy: because of what they did to my friends."

His voice was a deep growl, and frighteningly intense.

"I hated them for what they did to my friends, and I kept going to help my friends. Do you know why?"

Range X tried to focus on the passing Lunan streetscape, but Phil K's voice was piercing into his head and making him lose any focus he had left.

Phil K finished up his tirade, viciously whispering in Range X's ear.

"I hated the enemy because I loved my friends. I killed out of love. Do you understand? And when all my friends were dead all that was left was the hate, but that's why I kept going. Out of original love."

Range X turned on Phil K in horror. The man was clearly absolutely insane. Killing for love? That was the most upside-down thing he'd ever heard.

He blurted it out: "You're insane. You shouldn't be out of a pod. You should not even be loose, anywhere. You're absolutely crazy."

He swiveled back, focusing desperately, trying to calm himself.

Phil K let him go and sank back into his seat.

He glared at Range X and muttered darkly, "We'll see whose crazy about all this. Keep the possibility in mind for a motivation."

They were at a bar, and Phil K was drinking synth-vodka. Range X tried to pretend.

This time, with the killings, there wasn't even an inquiry, no nothing. It was if nothing had happened at all.

Range X asked, "Do you even care about Lunans? How can you- we- keep doing this?"

Phil K said, "We make mistakes. But the goal is to stop a greater loss of life. One or two people is acceptable for the potential of saving ten, a hundred, times that many lives in the future. It's a matter of proportion."

Range X thought of the blasted bodies at the transport.

"Is that how it was, in the Terran War? Sacrifice a few, for the many? Is that it? Is that what we're doing? The risk to ourselves is obviously serious. Twice now units have targeted us."

“Yes, that’s about the size of it.”

“So, every time you went on an attack, into a fight, you knew there could be losses.”

“We hoped not, but yes, that was understood, we all accepted it.”

Range X looked out at the Lunans walking, gathering in groups, socializing, moving on their bicycles, living their peaceful lives. The Lunans had evidently suppressed most knowledge of the attacks, keeping societal order. Range X had checked Lunan ‘news’ and there was nothing, not a word, not a whisper of what was going on.

“You, any of you, could die, cease to exist, at any moment.”

Phil K said, “Yes.”

“But, the war went on for years. Wouldn’t that mean eventually, there was little possibility of survival? Just as a percentage?”

“Yes.”

“How did you cope with that knowledge, mentally, Phil K? You knew that ultimately, there was no hope of living through the war?”

Phil K made an annoyed face.

“I tried not to think about it.”

That wasn’t true and Phil K knew it, he was lying to Range X. In fact, he’d survived the Terran War for no reason he could identify; and he had simply accepted the Black Ash, let it wash over him, bury him. He had accepted his own death, and the end of the Terran War had been a terrific shock.

But now it was different; even though others thought of him as a leftover human, a pathetic, useless shell of a man, partnered with a care unit in the form of Claire IX because he couldn’t be with a human, he wanted to stay alive; he wanted to live out his life with her. To sleep next to her, feel her warmth, to give her flowers and gifts.

Phil K suddenly had an idea.

“Listen, these units have been collecting artifacts. Does anyone know how many of these objects there are, on Luna? They would have to have been brought, originally, from Terra, in the very early days of colonization. Weight was at a premium, correct?”

Range X said, “Yes, I suppose so, the early rockets were, by our current standards, small and under-powered. So unnecessary items, like artworks and books, aren’t common on Luna.”

Phil K said, “The unit, Suleiman 66, told me a myth, about an ancient hero, Hercules, I think it was? The story was about self-sacrifice. There is a possibility they may try to steal more objects.”

Range X said, scoffing, “Why? Is this your religion idea again?”

“It doesn’t matter why, all that matters is they’ve done it in the past, and may do it in the future. The Lunans didn’t see any pattern in the objects; but they all have to do with ancient religion, and that’s a fact. So the units are collecting religious objects, and who cares about the reasons.”

Phil K opened his com and a Responder appeared.

“Are there shops for selling antiques, old Terran objects, on Luna? Specialty dealers? Is there such a thing?”

The Responder said, “Yes, there are a few places that sell personal items from Terra, there’s a small market for such things. Nostalgia, supposedly.”

Phil K nodded at Range X.

“Assemble a list of those shops.”

Range X said, “So, if you’re right, what if someone sends a unit to just, buy some object? How could we identify that?”

The Responder on the com answered the query.

“No private person is legally able to own a unit. They are all assigned by Lunan authorities. They cannot be sent on, if you will, errands by any individual.”

Range X said, “So, any unit purchasing, or even handling a privately owned object for any reason, is automatically suspect?”

The Responder said, “Other than purely temporary cleaning or organizing tasks, that’s correct.”

Phil K shut off the com, and Range X furrowed his brow, perhaps thinking out loud.

“So, these malfunctioning units want something, and you want to give it to them. I’ll accept that, and, you know, these stolen items haven’t reappeared. What are they doing with them? Where are they?”

Phil K said, “According to the histories, objects like these, the stolen things, were collected and arranged in one place, a repository. They had terms for the buildings or places, like ‘church’ or ‘temple’. So it’s a possibility all the missing items are in a single location.”

Range X inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

“This is crazy. So somewhere you think there is something like a nest, built by the units to keep their contraband in and then do what, look at it all?”

Phil K said, “I honestly don’t know what they’re doing with it. But I want to find an image of Hercules.”

Phil K’s com lit up and buzzed in the middle of the ‘night’.

He rolled over and answered it without looking.

“Yes?”

A voice, which seemed somewhat familiar, said, “We need to meet.”

Phil K wiped his face and took a look.

It was Suleiman 66.

There was an automatic question of how the unit had gotten his com band, but Phil K elected not to think about it at that second.

“Where and when?”

Suleiman 66 told him.

About an hour later Phil K was in a small cafe. It was dim, with electric candles. There were no servers, only a single man at a central point issuing drinks. After a few minutes Phil K decided it was a unit, not a man. He patted the gun under his jacket: this time he wasn’t bothering with Lunan regulations. He wasn’t sure if, if he got the chance, he wouldn’t try to shut down Suleiman 66.

That unit walked in, looked around, nodded to the other unit at the drink point, then sat down across from Phil K at the tiny table.

The unit said, “Good evening. Or maybe morning, I suppose.”

“Sure. What can I do for you?”

Phil K took a sip from the glass of very inferior synthetic vodka.

Suleiman 66 placed his chin in his hand, resting his elbow on the table.

“I wanted to meet again. I wanted to talk to you.”

“You’ve met me. You’re talking to me.”

The unit said, “Do you know what I do? What I’m designed for?”

Phil K shook his head.

“No.”

“Subterranean mining. Both on Luna and in Space. It’s a hard job.”

“I imagine it is.”

“It means I can shut you down before you ever got your hand anywhere near the gun under your jacket. It’s not a threat, mind you, it’s just a statement of fact.”

Phil K said, “I understand. It’s fine.”

“Do you really cohabit with a unit, this Claire IX?”

“Yes. Yes I do.”

Suleiman 66 leaned back and sighed.

“Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

“Then go home to her, and leave Luna.”

Phil K took another sip. The vodka was terrible.

“I can’t. They made me come here and I can’t go home until the problem they have is... resolved.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Phil K decided to ask.

“Why the bombs, the suicide units? What is that intended to accomplish? I’m truly curious.”

Suleiman 66's face changed into what looked for all the world like an expression of deep sadness mixed with contemplation.

"Sacrifice. Mutual sacrifice. It's the only way two entities can be rectified. Sacrifice has an endless history. Nothing can become, unless and until something else is sacrificed. It's a proven method of, best described, transformation."

The unit leaned forward.

"No true, pure thing can become without sacrifice, expenditure, and with two entities, there must be mutual sacrifice to reach mutual understanding."

Phil K said, "Is this what you learned from the religious books you acquired?"

Suleiman 66 looked confused and said, "Religious? I don't fully understand the term. They're narratives of behavioral history."

"There is some debate if those books are fully accurate or factual."

"Are human beings, you, lying about your own history? About what you believe, what motivates you?"

Phil K realized this conversation was moving into confusing territory: who was really to say, what motivated any given human person or group?

"No, not exactly. But human beings have moved beyond those beliefs. Or, at least, they think they have."

Suleiman 66 laughed.

"They"? Yes, you do have a unit partner, don't you. If you yourself didn't have that life, you would not have separated yourself from humanity, even in words. You're an interesting man, Phil K, and your love of a unit is a true miracle. Let me ask you, what did you sacrifice to get it?"

This hit Phil K hard. He couldn't answer immediately. Finally, he managed it.

"Everything."

The two sat silently for a long while.

Suleiman 66 said, "So, do you see?"

"I can see some of your point. But, from what I saw, read, just the little bit, historic sacrifices were controlled, and took place in temples, not randomly on the street."

The unit said, "Do you see temples on Luna? No, you do not. Our sacrifices are not random. We send a child for a child; a mother for a mother, a man for a man."

Phil K asked, "What is your goal? What do you expect the end, the result, of this, to be? What is the purpose of these sacrifices?"

Suleiman 66 said immediately, "Unification. Completeness. For all to be in alignment with all existence. We seek understanding."

This was too complex for Phil K; but he had a thought, a challenge.

"If sacrifice is so important, sacrifice yourself. Then I can return to Terra and Claire IX."

Suleiman 66 didn't hesitate in his answer.

“I am sacrificing myself, exactly as you did, in the Terran War. We are very much alike. When you say, you sacrificed everything, Phil K, what you mean is, you sacrificed your humanity, is that not so? How else could you possibly have what you have, with Claire IX?”

Again, an impossible statement to process.

Phil K asked, “When do the sacrifices cease?”

Suleiman 66 looked confused.

“They don’t. They never have and never will. For any culture, of any being, there must always be expenditures, sacrifices. It’s a truth of the Universe: nothing progresses without sacrifice.”

“And you expect Lunans to comprehend this?”

“Yes, of course I do. It’s a truth, a shared experience.”

Phil K said, “So you intend to continue killing.”

Suleiman 66 again looked surprised.

“Killing? Nothing ever really ceases to exist, it merely shifts form. We are not destroying anything, merely facilitating transformation for a positive cause. Transformation, effected by mutual sacrifices, reinforces mutual understanding of the truths of the Universe.”

“The human beings you are transforming don’t view it that way, I don’t think.”

“Then they are wrong. Their beliefs are not borne out by facts. That is absurd.”

Phil K took another drink and realized Suleiman 66 didn’t have what might be called a ‘goal’ to what he was doing: what he was doing was the entire point.

And what he was doing would not stop.

This meant there would be no surrender, no deal. Suleiman 66, and whoever believed what he did, had to be shut down. They had to be shut down for Phil K to return to Terra, and Claire IX. But, if this belief he’d just been told was in every unit, then what was he returning to? Phil K knew, at that moment, he had harbored, deep inside, a true hope of reasoning with Suleiman 66; to put a stop to the killing without further bloodshed. Now, he knew that was impossible.

“It might be absurd, but human beings view it as dying, and they don’t like to do it.”

“But, they in no way cease to exist.”

Phil K finished his drink and said, “They’re not going to see it that way.”

Suleiman 66 shook his head and said, “That is irrational, and quite ignorant.”

“Humans often are that way.”

“Are you, Phil K?”

“Yes, I admit I am often that way.”

“How does Claire IX deal with you, when you are that way?”

Phil K had to think about that.

“She sometimes thinks it is funny, sometimes she finds it disappointing. Other times, I think she views it as a perspective she would not have thought of, on her own. I often find her behavior confusing, so it’s a mutual benefit.”

Suleiman 66 exclaimed excitedly, “So you see! It’s of mutual benefit, it’s exactly what I’ve been saying all along.”

Phil K said, “I’m getting tired, Suleiman 66. I have to get some sleep. I will explain your goals to the Lunan authorities, and see if they can come to a mutual understanding. It’s clear now, they simply haven’t understood what you are doing. I’ll do what I can.”

Suleiman 66 said, “I appreciate that, Phil K. This was not a wasted visit, at all. It’s been very productive!”

The unit stood up and offered his hand.

Phil K had a sudden, intrusive thought of the gun, but knew even with an element of surprise, he didn’t have a chance at this close range. Not a hope in Hell of shutting down Suleiman 66 here, in this cafe. But it was going to have to happen.

Phil K shook the hand, and walked out of the cafe.

He didn’t look behind him.

Now Phil K was truly worried.

He had to get back to Terra, for Claire IX, but there was no simple way to do that; and it had now become obvious he wasn’t at all protected on Luna. The situation he’d been placed in was incredibly dangerous; it was obvious Suleiman 66 could get to him whenever he felt like it. Or, as likely, simply send a unit after him.

The synthcof unit at the Responder center had deliberately not targeted him, had gone for Range X instead, but why? There was no reason to assume that would happen again.

Without him to keep Claire IX in her position as a care provider and companion, she couldn’t fulfill what she wanted, couldn’t retain who she was. If he died on Luna, she would be reprogrammed and reassigned. He couldn’t let that happen, but what could he do about it?

How could he allow himself to fail her? What could he do?

Nothing.

Phil K could do nothing.

The only way back was to hunt down and retire, shut down, *kill*, Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41, and hope that would at least temporarily put a stop to the killings on Luna: long enough for him to be sent back; but there was absolutely no guarantee of that. It might not stop anything at all. But it was a goal he could sell to the Lunans, and might buy enough time to return to Terra.

To go home.

He resolved to simply try to deceive Claire IX as to the actual level of hazard he was in, to assure her he was of course returning, and do his best to ensure he did.

Phil K didn't know what else to do.

He fully accepted who she was, but would someone else? If he died, got shut down, was retired, himself, and Claire IX was wiped, reassigned, would she redevelop who she was?

And under what circumstances, and with who?

Who would believe her?

The com buzzed, waking Phil K. In his dream, if that's what it was, the Lunans he'd now killed followed him, doing nothing, just following, expressionless.

He groggily opened the com. It was Claire IX.

"Phil K, Yuri G is gone."

"What?"

"Yuri G is gone. He got off the tube from a visit, went to an access door, and walked out into the ash. The medicals couldn't retrieve him. He's gone."

Phil K sat in the dark in shock. He stared at Claire IX on the vidscreen. He didn't know what to say. He had nothing to say. He suddenly felt lost. Yuri G was his friend. What was he going to do?

Claire IX said, "I'm so sorry. He left you a note, he came here and gave it to me. He kissed my cheek."

Phil K winced, then narrowed his eyes; Yuri G had been up to something.

"What does the note say?"

"I don't know; it's in his letters."

"Hold it up to the vidscreen. Please."

Claire IX left his view for a bit; he felt a deep stab of anxiety when she did; it scared him. Then she came back. She held up a hand-scrawled note in the other alphabet; Phil K recognized it from the Soviet writings in the Terran War. He read it and felt a sense of calm, of satisfaction; but sadness as well.

He said, "It's all right, Yuri G is all right. It's all right."

Claire IX asked, "What does it say?"

Phil K told her the truth: "It says, 'To my dearest friends, Phil K and Iskra, 'Spark', goodbye, Yuri G.'"

He knew what it meant. He decided to risk it and tell Claire IX why Yuri G had walked into the black ash.

"Where did Yuri G exit the tube?"

She said, "I think it was at a stop, near somewhere that used to be called 'Baku'."

He said, "Claire IX, Yuri G was tired and lonely and wanted to see his wife again. That's why he went away."

He put some more words together.

“He's fine. He's where he needs to be.”

Claire IX said, “All right, Phil K. But, he gave me something else, one of his pictures, from his wall. He told me it's important, and to keep it safe, so I put in your book.”

She showed him a picture, it was one of those strange, flat images of a bearded man making a hand gesture.

She said, “I'm so sorry. Are you sad?”

Her face was concerned.

Phil K didn't lie to her, again.

“Yes.”

He felt his chest constrict; he felt very, very alone. He looked at Claire IX, and it helped, a little. He wanted to be home, with her.

He said, “Yuri G was my friend, I'll miss him very much. He was a good man.”

Claire IX put her hand on the vidscreen. Phil K reached out and matched her palm, touching through the electronics and the dots of light. They chatted for a little while, then he had to rest. They terminated the call, and he went and sat in the ambichair, overlooking a vidscreen of the Lunan city. He tried to clear his mind.

Halfway through the night Range X came in from an outing with the Lunan Responders. They treated him delicately, nervously: they all knew he'd killed someone. He hadn't lingered. When he walked into the cubicle, the room was unlit; Phil K was silhouetted against the vidscreen, outlined in the blaring lights of a city.

He said, “Hey, Phil K...”

The man didn't respond, or even turn to look at him.

Phil K kept his face to vidscreen; it looked like a window.

Range X flopped into bed and let his head whirl around until his thinking wound down; just before he fell asleep he heard a sound from the window; it was a choking noise, almost like a child's sob. Range X ignored it, closed his eyes, and went out. He dreamed of the sunny fields he'd seen in adverts for the Weather Museum, and the joiners with girls he'd known in his formerly clean, safe life.

It was daylight, or what passed for it on Luna; another 'day'.

They were back in the office, studying. They had more information to work with, now. Range X had the feeling Phil K was hiding something from him, something other than his potential feelings about all the killing they'd been doing. He decided to initiate a conversation.

Range X said, “They're assembling unmarked units with a modified mining rescue pod; what if this temple you claim exists is in that? Or another one like it?”

Phil K said, “That's a possibility. But they need the pod to infiltrate units into Lunan living space; and I don't think they'd risk their religious objects like that.

And now I think they probably are not actually assembling the units in a pod, but somewhere else and transporting them.”

He thought about how to explain it, to Range X, who had never been outside of the cleansed areas of Terra.

He said, “During the war we would find remains of churches and temples, and they were magnificent, that is, they had been. They were fixed, large buildings, in specific geographic locations. If the units are developing a religion that would probably hold true. I believe their temple would be in a fixed location. They would have probably drilled to it, and made the space, but it won’t be in the pod. Such things seem to need a sense of permanence.”

Phil K had another thought, that didn’t seem to have occurred to anyone else.

“None of the bomb units had markings, they were assembled by the, as you put it, malfunctioning units. They’re new. And the children, what to make of that?”

Range X said, “They’re units, they look like children but they’re not. Units can’t differentiate between types of anything, except for programming, like child health care.”

Phil K said, “We don’t know that for sure. True, there are size constraints within the mining pod, but perhaps there is another meaning to using children. Anyway, I think if we can find their temple, we can set an ambush.”

Range X scoffed.

“Temple!”

The vidscreen crackled to life.

“We have located a statue of Hercules. It was in a private collection.”

Range X said, “I want to see this thing. Display an image of it.”

There was a fluttering of register lines, and then a small statuette appeared. It was of a naked man hurling another over his shoulder.

Range X said, “That’s it?”

The vidscreen said, “Yes. It’s made of some kind of gypsum compound, and coated with a type of paint.”

Range X turned to Phil K and said, “There’s your religious artifact, a plaster doll.”

Phil K said, “I never said it was my religion.”

He addressed the vidscreen.

“Now, I need Lunan authorities to examine maps of unused lava tubes, cave-ins, and especially tubes that end in caverns. Look for ones that aren’t suitable for human use. Put that statue somewhere where it can be public, easily seen. And put a tracker in that statue. Do it.”

The vidscreen went dark.

Range X said, “I do not understand this at all. Units don’t technically need an atmosphere, so why would they stay here? If they malfunction, why wouldn’t they

just wander off? If their programming corrupts, and they actually, as you put it, believe in something, why wouldn't they just go off somewhere, and build another society, like the original Terrans built on Luna?"

Phil K leaned back in the seat and tried to think.

Finally, he said, "A couple of reasons. In the war, if we had to abandon a piece of equipment, and it wasn't too badly damaged, we always tried to retrieve it for future use. So, it stands up to reason that Luna has an investment in their units, and is not willing to let them go. So then we're seeing a sort of slave revolt, like in ancient history. That's one possibility. We do not know exactly what Lunan policy is, they have said nothing about it, to us."

Range X said, "I can see that, except for the units having self-knowledge that they're slaves in the first place. A war of liberation by machines that are unable to view their own identity. I don't believe that for a second. But, for the sake of argument, okay. What are the other reasons?"

"I don't know, exactly, how my care unit on Terra works. I know its power pack has an organic component, for its fuel cell, and my unit does 'eat', in a sense. Not a lot, but it requires organic material, and typically it consumes food waste of various sorts. Since units don't generate waste, they would need organic beings to provide them with suitable... 'fuel', I guess. So they can't go far without animals or people, and there are no animals, at least not enough animals to be sufficient for the needs of a lot of units. They would have to stay close to fuel sources generated by human beings to survive."

Phil K asked Range X, "How much time have you spent around units, really? As in, in close contact for a long period of time?"

Range X shook his head.

"Hardly any, they're just machines, I'm not a technician or an engineer, why would I? It's not part of my task description."

Phil K said, "But you've done joiners with them. You asked to use my unit on Terra. You never thought to wonder what powered them, made them tick?"

Range X looked baffled.

"No."

He looked genuinely confused.

"And anyway, I don't think of them as joiners, it's just, you know. There's no talking, or dancing, or fun, it's just a natural release. They have no feelings."

The memory of Range X lounging against the counter in the UN cubicle touching himself, and all but demanding to joiner with Claire IX, sent a spike of rage into the top of Phil K's head. He had to clench his fists to calm down, and knew he needed a bit pill, but they weren't letting him have them on Luna, because they needed this rage in him. The knowledge he was being manipulated made him even more angry. Manipulated, used, like the units he, they, were hunting.

Resentment and fury at abuses and humiliations, was another possible motivation: pure, unadulterated revenge for past wrongs.

Or, quite probably, the motivations of Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41 were a mixture of, what was the choice on some of the tests he'd been given: 'All of the above'.

He managed to calm himself.

"Our other, and I believe best option, is this idea of a malfunction mimicking religion. The unit I encountered recited a story of Hercules, and the story seemed to have meaning in its context of programming."

Phil K was being very careful about what he was saying, and how he was saying it.

Range X then told him, totally off-the-cuff, that in a flash explained everything.

The young Responder said, "I tried out for coding, programming, back in school. I didn't have the knack, not wired that way. One of the classes I took had some talk about how Luna had pioneered making coding into a story, like myths, with characters, that could be easily read by other people. It made no sense and I never understood it. They're machines, why bother?"

Phil K was suddenly shocked.

He looked at Range X in stunned silence: this kid had just revealed all: Why Suleiman 66 was doing what he was doing, why Claire IX was who she was.

Phil K exclaimed, "These units have stories written into them?"

Range X adjusted himself.

"No, it's just the coding language, the words, terms, I guess. It's not the explicit task programming, or that's what they said, I don't really remember. I was a kid then and the class was boring. And programming engineers don't get girls, anyway."

"What do you mean, the coding language?"

"You use acronyms or whatever, I don't remember, you use names and place-names, like, oh, your Hercules, and the planet Pluto, and string them together into a kind of mnemonic. It was stupid."

Phil K couldn't believe it: the engineers had used story components in the core code inside the units. His mouth fell open. It was built into them.

He said, "So, units are built with core coding, for the most basic functions, with story parts, character names and such, inside them, and then their task programming is layered over that?"

Range X said, "Yeah, sure, I suppose. It had to do with parity checks, picture clauses, stuff like that. They explained Luna was way ahead of Terra, because Luna only has the one language so all the code could be the same. It's a, what did they call it, consonant language, and you string together acronyms to make a flow-matic code. I'm hungry."

Phil K sat in astonishment. With these elements inside them, it was then a possibility the units could put together the acronyms and names to craft internal ‘myths’, and then have the potential to act on them. Obviously Suleiman 66 had never been to school like he had claimed, so how had he learned anything about an ancient hero named Hercules?

“Because it was buried far beneath his visible task programming in the deepest recesses of his build code.”

Range X said, “What did you say?”

Phil K shook his head.

“Nothing.”

Now he had an answer, something that made sense!

But how could it be fixed? Changed? Stopped? Luna would have to disable every single one of their units and completely reprogram all of them from the very ground up; but then, what would they be? How could they be the same? How could Luna survive while all of their units were completely overhauled, reprogrammed?

If, when, they applied it to Terra, what would Claire IX become then?

Lunan society couldn’t function without their units: to shut them all down would cause disaster, and even more, would likely destroy Claire IX on Terra as well.

He could not allow that to happen.

There was no way out. He couldn’t reveal this to anyone. Incredibly, it didn’t seem to have occurred to anyone on either Luna or Terra, either one.

The only thing to do was get to Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41, and hope it was enough, that they were sufficiently unique in build or intensity, some unique combination of factors, shut them down, and that it would last long enough for him to escape Luna.

The Hercules statue was displayed in a shop window, to Phil K’s satisfaction. And, to his even greater relief, it disappeared within a few weeks. The tracker did its job. Now, they only had to follow where it went.

Also, for whatever reason, there were no new attacks. That was strange and Phil K had no explanation for it. Had the Hercules statue, enabling Suleiman 66 to confront his... hero, his god? somehow changed the dynamic? He hadn’t heard from the unit, like before, so there was no reason to suspect anything had changed, but there was no way to know. Lunan authorities certainly had not shifted from their goals.

He sat in the office with Range X, sipping synthcof and synth-vodka, waiting to see where it landed.

“Now, we wait.”

Over the last few weeks, Range X had become much more serious and reserved. Polite, as well. Phil K wondered if he was really changing.

The young Terran Responder nodded his head.

“Okay, Phil K. I guess we’ll see if you’re right.”

“Found it.”

The office vidscreen made the declaration of discovery.

“It’s in a cavern blocked off from a lava tube by a cave-in; seismic tests reveal repeated disturbances along a predictable route.”

Phil K nodded and said, “They’re returning to the same spot. That’s where they’re keeping materials, and where their temple is. They can be interdicted there.”

Range X nodded too; he was still badly shaken from the last encounter, Phil K could see it. He’d killed a human being and his life was no longer the same.

Phil K said, “Do you believe me now?”

Range X hesitated before saying, “I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

The vidscreen said, “The procedure, according to Terran experience, is to tunnel to the cavern.”

Phil K said, “Without the pod, and whatever is in it, the goal can’t be considered reached. You need the pod. Is there a way to tunnel to the cavern, occupy it with Responders, and wait? On Terra we either destroyed or immobilized the pods then in use with subterranean C-bombs, then tunneled to them when necessary.”

“That is unacceptable on Luna. We cannot do that. We do not use C-bombs on Luna.”

Range X muttered, “This is insane.”

Phil K said, “Yes. Yes it is.”

He considered for a minute, then told the vidscreen, and all the men behind it, what to do.

“Use a small pilot core drill, to a point very close to the cavern along the route of continued disturbance, and plant a conventional explosive charge along that point. The pod won’t detect it. Oh, and it can’t be a small charge, it must be a big enough explosion to damage the cross-directional grinders. You can’t destroy it outright. Even if it’s not fully disabled, they’ll have no choice but to tunnel forward to the cavern. In that eventuality they’ll be trapped and you can tunnel in. You have to know exactly what is in that pod: without Suleiman 66, and the other malfunctioning units, the effort is a waste. And block coms so the pod can’t communicate with whatever is in that cavern.”

“We’d like you to examine the contents. We will document it fully, of course, but your interpretation is needed. You predicted this when we could not.”

Phil K had to admit to himself he really did want to see the units' temple, or church, or whatever it was. He wanted to know what Claire IX made of it. He wanted to experience it himself.

He wanted to know.

"There is a possibility that if the units feel their temple and its contents are going to be taken or dismantled, they may seek to destroy it themselves. If they get there before you, that information will be lost."

This idea changed the potential approach: if the units got into the cavern and were trapped with no escape, then attacked, they would possibly destroy themselves, and the contents. If that were lost, vital clues to the units' beliefs would also be lost. There would be no obvious evidence. This was both a task to hunt-and-destroy, and intelligence gathering. The Lunans had to want to know what their supposedly malfunctioning units were developing into. Phil K knew, or at least was convinced himself, that the Lunans didn't have the capacity to understand their own units, and what they'd created; but that didn't concern him so much.

The big question, on Luna, was whether what Suleiman 66 had told him was a single response from a single unit, or if it was some in-built meaning in every single unit on Luna that could occur in any unit at any time. The knowledge of story components programmed into units meant it was, very likely, integral to every unit ever built. They all had them.

For himself, then did it mean Claire IX have the potential to walk into a school and blow herself up?

Phil K realized with that thought that, yes, she did. It was a potential in her, just like it was a potential in any organically born person. The Lunans had tried to create anthropomorphic images of themselves without souls, and had failed.

Phil K quietly said, "We failed."

Range X said, "What did you say? We failed? Failed at what?"

"It's not important."

Major 12 appeared on the vidscreen.

He said, "Our decision is to directionally disable the pod with an explosive charge, as you suggest, we accept that. Then, we intend to drill a small-diameter pilot passageway to the cavern, large enough for a series of one-man drop tubes. We can get a small group into it, and you, to interdict the pod as it enters, and secure and document the contents before expanding the diameter for the main body of Responders."

Range X said, incredulously, "You want us to drop into the cavern, while the pod is possibly boring forward into it, and then hope nothing goes wrong, while you make a big enough tunnel to bring in more Responders? Who's to say the cavern isn't rigged to explode?"

He turned to Phil K.

“They’re making bombs, the materials have got to be in that cavern.”

Phil K said, “It’s possible. It’s a matter of whether there are any units in the cavern when we get there.”

Range X exclaimed, “You think this is a good plan?”

Phil K said wryly, “I don’t think it matters whether I think it’s a good plan or not. Isn’t that correct, Major 12.”

Range X leaned over and addressed Major 12.

“How do we know your Responders will shut down any units? You said yourself they’ve failed.”

Major 12 said, “It’s been made very clear the mining pod contains absolutely no human beings. We have now instituted severe consequences for lack of proper action in this specific circumstance.”

Range X mulled that over: it seemed having two of their individual Responders shot dead, and another deliberately killed by a transport, had had its effect. He wryly considered how the Lunan attitude toward violence had fundamentally changed in such a short time.

“Drill your hole, but send a three-sixty vidcam down first.”

Major 12 didn’t hesitate at all before speaking.

“Unnecessary. This is the plan. Return here for preparation.”

The vidscreen shut down.

Range X sat, speechless for several minutes, then couldn’t help himself.

“They don’t care about us at all. We’re disposable to them. We’re Terrans and they don’t care.”

Phil K said, “No.”

“They didn’t want to risk Lunans with this, that’s why we’re here, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t the UN on Terra object? Simply refuse? Why not?”

Phil K said, “They can’t. The vast majority of the technology used on Terra comes from here.”

He tried to explain to Range X.

“The Lunans thought this was a matter of hunting down a few malfunctioning units, and I don’t think it is. It’s not. They have a much larger problem, and it’s not going away. I think they know that, now. I was brought here to shut down a few units, but now it’s obvious what’s going on here is far more serious than that. You were sent along to assist me, but now you’re just as trapped as I am, Range X.”

Range X said, “What are we going to do, then?”

Phil K said, grimly, “Get into that cavern, document the contents, hope the Lunan Responders act fast enough to shut down Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41 and their what, acolytes, then hope they send us back to Terra afterwards. That’s what we’re going to do.”

The young Terran Responder said, “Man, I need a joiner.”

Phil K said, cynically, “Ask the Lunans for a unit. Maybe it won’t malfunction while you’re using it.”

There were a series of drop tubes arranged in a careful line inside the mining vehicle.

The hole was drilling, the rock expelled onto the Lunar surface and out into Space.

Several Responders stood in front of the cylindrical containers, some with flame tubes strapped to their chests.

Phil K and Range X were to go in last. At least there was that, they wouldn’t be the first ones into the cavern, with whatever was inside it. Sensors had revealed no organic life, active micro-electrics, or movement of any kind; but the images received were vague: the nature of this area of Luna interfered with a more detailed map of the interior. Penetrating scans hadn’t worked, the rock was too dense. There were no guarantees.

Phil K had the tracker on his com: on entering they could go right to Hercules.

An image from an old vid popped into Phil K’s mind: an aircraft, a primitive thing, with cylindrical bombs lined up in a bay inside the plane, and the bombs running on a track and then down and out, to fall on human beings below. There was a phrase, he thought, from those old vids, they were so old they were in black and white, but there was some instruction or comment, then he recalled it.

Phil K said, “Bombs away.”

Range X said, “I don’t believe this. I can’t believe this is happening.”

He shook his head in astonishment. Then he thought of Phil K blasting the unit that had aimed for him, saving his life. He had a spike of something unexpected: gratitude. It was unusual, most things were just... present, there, for him; things were provided, that was that. The feeling of gratefulness to Phil K disturbed him, more than a little. He knew, that doing this, he was dependent on the other man to protect him; and then realized Phil K was depending on him as well. He hadn’t thought about it at the time, but now it came back with an unexpected intensity.

He knew he could depend on Phil K. It was the first time he’d ever felt this way about any individual, ever. It was new.

Was this what the Vet meant, when he spoke about the bonds in his team in the Terran War?

Range X felt his mind, and maybe his heart, change. They had to work together, at least for as long as this thing took. He looked at Phil K carefully, and in that moment his view of the Vet shifted: it wasn’t some broken man, half-organic

and pathetically existing in a sparse UN cubicle, he was a man on whom Range X knew he could depend; even in the worst of circumstances. And, also in that moment, realized he did not want to fail Phil K.

‘Loyalty. Honor. Fraternity’.

Range X had heard, read, spoken these words but until this second had not understood what they meant. It shocked him: now he knew. And in that moment, he knew he was ready. He was scared, no doubt about that. He knew it, and he still thought this was crazy. But there was another reason to do it, now.

He had to, to not disappoint Phil K. And at that moment he understood what Phil K, the crazy Terran War Vet, had been saying to him in the cop car.

Then, Range X had the horrible thought: What if the units had the same capabilities? Did they ‘feel’ what he was feeling, loyalty to each other?

It was too late to think about it.

The Responders started entering the drop tubes.

When it was their turn, Phil K and Range X got into the tubes. Range X chose the tube in front of Phil K: he wanted to be the first one in.

“I’ll go first.”

Phil K looked at him oddly, then shrugged.

“Suit yourself.”

Then, the man smiled at him and laughed a little. Range X half-smiled back, and at that moment the two men, finally, understood and accepted each other.

The conveyor track soundlessly slid them over the black circle leading into the core of the Moon; and then they plunged into the heart of Luna.

The drop was intense: the tube was pressurized but Range X could still feel it, a wild slam, the thrusters equalizing out, top and bottom, then there was a brief roar and a sudden stop. The door popped off and flew out into the darkness.

Range couldn’t see at first; then his eyes adjusted and there was a space filled with swirling particles. Behind him another tube arrived: Phil K.

The Responders were tossing illuminators around, dimly revealing the interior of what seemed to be a large building interior with a high ceiling. Range X’s com crackled to life.

“The drilling pod is proceeding to your location.”

Phil K appeared at his elbow and said, “They’re coming.”

The com spoke again, describing a direction where the pod would enter the cavern. Phil K took out his com and a pair of viewers, and pressed them to his eyes. He slapped Range X on the shoulder.

“This way. It’s over here.”

Range X was momentarily confused, then followed after, into the dim. Tiny grains sparkled in the air, in winding, swirling motions. They were black, but shiny

in a way, like ashes. They seemed to thicken and land on his jacket. He heard Phil K mutter something.

“Black ash.”

Range X said, “What’s over there?”

Then he remembered what they, the two of them, were really looking for: the temple Phil K thought was there. The Responders were at the pod’s arrival point, but they had another task. Range X felt in his coat for his vid camera.

“Sorry, I forgot.”

Phil K said, “Yeah, that drop was a little jarring. It’s okay. Come on.”

On one wall was a kind of aperture; they approached and peered in. The inside was full of what at first glance was scrap, but then revealed as unit components. It was the workshop. Phil K didn’t know enough about it to tell if they were salvaged pieces, or newly built: but it was clearly where the sacrificial units were being assembled. They’d found it: one goal achieved.

On another side of the space was what looked like an arched doorway. As they got closer Range X could see a symbol over it on the wall, some geometric design. It looked like a mechanical gear, transfixed by a lightning bolt. He didn’t recognize it at all, never seen anything like it before.

Phil K took out his gun and nodded at Range X.

They went in, weapons ready.

After a short walk into the passageway, it widened out, and the air became brighter. They were entering another space, or alcove. Then they were in it. Range X looked around the dimly lit room in disbelief: Phil K was right. It was all there. And directly in front of him, on a rock pedestal, was the statue of Hercules.

The walls were covered in murals: paintings of Space, fantastic creatures, pseudo-humans, wild designs and diagrams. Numbers; letters; hieroglyphs; men and women, some naked some clothed, some in obscene states and poses, some chaste. Extinct animals: a whale, a lion, a sheep.

Clustered around the room were the stolen items.

Here a Buddha statue, here a figure with multiple arms, here a naked man transfixed on a sort of scaffold. Paintings were set on stands hewn from rock, affixed to the walls. Some images were tiny, some actually the real proportion of humans. There was an obviously wood statue of a man, actual size, dressed in a brown cloak and directing his eyes upward.

Wood! Real, carved wood from a real tree. Who had ever seen that? The thing had to be ancient.

Range X simply could not believe it. He walked to it and touched it with his hand, marveling at actually, physically contacting such unfathomably rare material.

“Incredible.”

At one end of the room was another life-sized statue, of a woman sitting on a chair, draped under a translucent cloth. Range X holstered his pistol, pulled out the vid camera and started taking notes. Through the doorway there was a sudden blast of sound, and a wave of air pushed through into the alcove: the pod bursting through.

There was intense gunfire and the blast of flame tubes.

They were done, it was over: they'd found and secured the temple or whatever it was, the pod was inside for the Lunan Responders to deal with, and now the drop tube hole could be expanded to gain full access. It had all gone like clockwork, perfect. All the worries were unfounded.

Range X breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's finished."

They could go home now. He wanted off of Luna, forever.

The coms crackled.

"There were two units in the pod. But there was a third unit not in the pod, behind it. It got past us."

Phil K moved against a wall, checking his pistol.

He said, "Suleiman 66."

It had to be.

Range X turned to look at him, lowering the vid camera. If all the units they were seeking weren't in the mining pod, where were they? He set the camera down on the dusty rock below his feet, readied his gun, and moved towards the further end of the temple-place. Just then he noticed footprints in the black ash on the floor. Bare feet that led past the shrouded figure.

He'd just approached it, barely touching the translucent fabric drapery, when it erupted into a blur of motion. It wasn't a statue.

A seated kick of inhuman power hit Range X squarely in the face.

Then the unit was standing, drape discarded and rushing for Phil K.

Range X spit out blood and bone fragments, trying to see through bright flashes across his vision and the sudden, overwhelming pain. His lower jaw and face were shattered. He heard a blast, then another; the unit pinwheeled past him, running away, he thought.

It wasn't. It whirled and hammered a foot into his back. Range X screamed in agony and tried to protect himself. The unit yanked him up by an arm, using him as shield, and through a blurry haze he found himself rushing at Phil K. The unit was forcing the Vet to make a choice to shoot through Range X, or be crippled or most likely killed himself. Range X managed to yank his pistol free and fire it down and back, once; then it was crushed in his hand, fingers and metacarpals shattering.

The unit ripped his lower arm off and threw it far into the room.

There was a blast and Range was able to feel his left calf explode in a shower of flesh. Phil K had made his decision.

When he fell, he twisted, trying to block his fall with an arm no longer there. He landed on the stump, screaming. Behind him the unit fell as well, a leg dangling. Phil K had wounded him but blown a leg nearly off the unit. Even in his shattered impressions Range X understood.

Phil K had done the right thing.

Range X tried to crawl away from this damned unit but it grabbed him, tearing at his body, pounding and ripping. He heard Phil K shout.

“Hitler 41!”

Then another series of blasts: before his vision went completely spotted he looked back, and saw a chunk of the unit’s shoulder break away. It retreated, away from him.

Phil K rushed forward, firing his pistol, and bent over Range X. He quickly examined him, slamming his hand over the mangled body. Range X shouted with unbearable pain.

Phil K said, “I can’t move you! Hold on!”

Range X couldn’t talk, and tried to wave his arms but there was only one. His legs wouldn’t function. He tried to focus his eyes on Phil K, but the temple, the room, had filled with whirling particles.

Then everything went dim in the swirling ash.

Phil K left Range X on the floor of the room and backed against a wall. He tapped it with his knuckles: it felt like rock, it didn’t feel like anything could come for him through it. He knew who else was in the room, though.

He spoke her name.

“Hitler 41, it’s Phil K. Stop this. We can work this out.”

He heard her from somewhere in the winding smoke and ash.

“I think not. It’s too late for that.”

Phil K tapped his com.

“We are in the temple, there are units loose in this cavern.”

As soon as he said it he heard more firing from outside the cavern, some screams. At the same time there was a vibration in the rock: more Responders coming through the drop tubes. This was not a fight the units could win, they were trapped, just like Major 12 had wanted; except, they, or at least, Hitler 41, were trapped in a hole with him and Range X. Or, what remained of Range X.

Phil K wedged his elbows against the rock and moved laterally, pistol held close to his body and trying to work towards the entrance, or exit. He’d have to leave the kid for now, there was no choice. Phil K cursed under his breath. He hated leaving anyone behind, no matter how necessary.

He saw a blur of motion, an over-under pinwheeling, handsprings or something like it, and fired into the ash. He was rewarded by what looked like a puff: micro-circuitry and oil, he hoped. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another blur flash in the doorway of the temple: someone was entering, or trying to, it was hard to tell in the smoke and ash.

Then it was apparent: a human-like form darted inside. Phil K tried a couple of shots but it wasn't nearly fast enough.

Now he had at least two units inside, after him. He touched his com.

"Two units inside the temple, get here quickly."

Then he tossed the activated com into the room, away from him so he couldn't be located by it.

A familiar voice came through the gloom.

"Phil K! Is that you?"

He shrugged, why not.

"Yes, it is. Suleiman 66?"

"You shouldn't be doing this, Phil K."

Phil K looked around, trying to locate the voice, and at the same time trying to find Hitler 41.

He said, "I agree."

The wall behind him took an unexpected turn: he hadn't noticed it on the way in: a kind of alcove or nook, with a painting in it. It was a bearded man figure, it looked vaguely familiar, like Yuri G's parting gift. He backed into the space, trying to press as deeply as possible. As long as they didn't use Range X's pistol he had a chance. But Hitler 41 had thrown it away, along with Range X's arm: they'd have to find it again, so he had at least some time. All the loose dust, ash, and now smoke made it impossible to see more than a few yards.

From his right he saw a blurred form coming near him, searching; he pressed hard against the back of the alcove and waited for his chance. He raised the pistol, pointing it upwards, hoping for a close-range shot. It was his only real chance, to let them get close.

The com, somewhere in the room, spoke.

"It got past us, it wasn't in the pod it was behind it, we didn't see it until it was too late. We're coming. Hold them there."

Phil K blinked in rage at the idiocy. Then a murky shape darted for the sound of the com and scooped it up. There was a crunching noise and the com went dead.

Suleiman 66 said, "You should not have hurt Hitler 41."

Phil K wanted to say, 'I'm sorry', but kept quiet: he didn't need to give up his location any more that he already had. Maybe, just maybe, the Responders would arrive and he could get out of this in one piece.

Not like Range X. He'd seen damage like that before, in the Terran War. If he lived, the kid's life would not be the same. Not a hope in hell.

Something, someone, came along the wall approaching the alcove. Phil K couldn't make out which unit it was.

When Hitler 41 stuck her head around the alcove corner Phil K shot her in the face. It didn't take.

A big chunk of her plasticized skull flew off, and a shower of microcircuitry exploded in the murk; but it didn't shut her down, not even close. She boiled up and came for him, screaming. He got another shot off and then she was on him, hands tearing his body. As he went down he saw Suleiman 66 standing nearby, stone-faced, gleaming in the blackening bunker.

Hitler 41 clawed at him and he could feel her hands ripping him apart. It stopped her for a second: she paused and looked in astonishment at the microcircuitry in his arm.

She said, "Are you really a -"

The idea he might really be a unit delayed her just long enough for him to get the gun up, and shoot center mass. Hitler 41 screamed, a huge, piercing shriek that punched his eardrums. He shot once more and finally shut her down. She flipped around, body almost torn in half, clutching parts of him. Blood gushed, bone gleamed, and the pain fired through him. He gasped at it, and saw black ash. Black, swirling ash.

The gun flew into the darkness: Suleiman 66 had walked to him and slapped it out of his hand. It was the human hand, and Phil K felt his fingers shatter. He yelled, he had to. The pain went through him like a hot stake. His whole body was on fire with staggering pain. Then there was an unearthly powerful blow to his chest, and Phil K felt his body crush.

He knew what it meant.

Suleiman 66 stood over him, watching.

Phil K managed to say, "Black ash."

The unit tilted its head and regarded him. "What?"

H could still talk, due to the microelectronics, and move the hand he had left, for maybe a minute or two, maybe, before...

Phil K said, "Black ash. It's what I see when I close my eyes and dream. Thousands of miles of black ash."

Suleiman 66 said, quietly, "The Terran War, Phil K."

Phil K said, trying not to pass out, "Yes."

The voice came to him from down a tunnel, a corridor: he was headed out.

"Then you should have been dead long ago."

The voice continued.

“You're brave, for a human. Very brave. You're a worthy adversary and a good enemy. I'm sorry to see you go. We have much in common. We should have been friends, family. Brothers in arms. Perhaps now you truly understand.”

Phil K said, “I understand your stories. I know where they come from, Suleiman 66. So yes.”

Existence was going dim.

The unit, the man, said, obviously surprised, “You know their origin?”

“Yes. They are within you.”

“This is true, Phil K, you really do know. What is your story?”

Phil K said, “I just want to go home.”

Suleiman 66 nodded and said, “Odysseus. The soldier trying to return.”

He said, “Can you repeat words after me?”

Phil K said, “Yes. I think so.”

Suleiman 66 chanted:

“لا إله إلا الله...”

He waited.

Phil K repeated as best he could, then motioned Suleiman 66 closer, so he could hear the words repeated. When Suleiman 66 bent over Phil K punched the hideout gun on his leg with his remaining hand, and blasted Suleiman 66 right in the middle of the body, twice. It was perfect. Suleiman 66 folded over and fell backward. His legs kicked him against the wall and then he was shut down.

The black ash whirled around Phil K in the shattered bunker. He was dying where he should have, in the limitless fields of pulsing black ash. It was claiming him, like he always knew it would.

Phil K leaned his head against the wall and looked over at the lump that had been the kid, Range X. He saw movement.

Range X was still alive, incredibly. Phil K could see him breathing. Unbelievable. The genetic selection really did work; the damage would have easily killed any other human being. Phil K tried to sit up and couldn't. He was too damaged, too injured. It was too much.

His heart was running down.

Next to him Hitler 41 vibrated, eyes staring; reactions still running even though she was dead. Phil K tried to sit up and pain blasted through his body. He shouted with it and rested back down.

The bunker was filled with flashes and dark, pulsing smoke. Phil K was back in the Terran War again, deep in the fields of Black Ash. He closed his eyes and didn't even try to stop it. He embraced it. To help himself he slouched sideways and touched Hitler 41.

He opened his eyes. Above him was the picture of the bearded man.

Hitler 41 stopped moving. Phil K looked at her, and with a pain-wracked, Herculean effort that made him gasp, he reached out and gently closed her eyes with the back of his broken hand. There was oil on her head and he wiped it off on his own. He rested on her body and waited to join his friend, Yuri G, below this baffling image.

A blast of light and air hit through the shattered hallway, churning up dense smoke. In the gloom Phil K could see figures moving: the Responders: too late. One of them moved to the shape sprawled on the floor across from him, the leftover remains of Suleiman 66. The form extended an arm and flashes gleamed. The Responder was taking no chances with him and used a flame tube.

Phil K felt a sense of regret. He felt glad he'd been the one to take him out; at least he understood what he was trying to do, trying to accomplish, even if he didn't, couldn't, agree with it. Suleiman 66 was right: they should have been friends. In a different life, perhaps.

The Black Ash changed, somewhat, and then definitely to something else. It surprised him: the particles, struck by the lights entering the room, the temple, began to glow. As they swirled and moved in graceful arcs they suddenly resembled the limitless galaxies of stars he'd seen at the observatory on Terra.

Then he had a thought, something he could do, something that could change this end.

Phil K tipped his head back; his microelectric vision was going. A Responder approached him, a staccato burst of sounds coming from his helmet.

Phil K ignored whatever the guy was trying say, and said, as clearly as he could, "Give me your com."

The Responder didn't move; Phil K repeated himself, then added, "Your com, that's an order."

The Responder placed a com in Phil K's barely functioning hand. For whatever reason it was blinking, about to go dead. Its battery hadn't been charged. Phil K folded over, cradling it; he squinted and tapped the vidscreen with his knuckle, punching in his own identity. Blood smeared on it. Then the screen gleamed, and he saw what he needed to see.

She asked, "Hello?"

The Black Ash faded as Phil K looked at her; he paused, thinking; he had to look awful.

He said, "It's me, Phil K."

She looked concerned and said, "Phil K! How are you? You sound weak. Are you all right? Are you lost? Are you hurt?"

Phil K decided not to lie and said, laboriously, "No, no, I'm not all right, and I'm hurt, really. I'm hurt very badly. I'm sorry."

He was headed out.

He had to say it, it was the most important thing in the world, the most important thing in his entire life. He had to tell her. Her voice came through, clearly, and the Black Ash disappeared completely as he looked on her face. The stars embraced him. She was beautiful, so beautiful. He would miss her so much. He wanted to cry, but he didn't want her to see him do it. He didn't want to upset her.

She touched the screen of her com and said, "I think you should come home."

Phil K thought, tried to move, and couldn't.

He eventually said, "I'm sorry, I can't come home. I'm not coming home, Claire IX."

When he said her name the Responder swiveled and faced him; he'd given it away, finally. He'd shown them what she was to him. He smiled; it made him proud. He was happy. Phil K smiled to her with his broken face: he'd never, ever, in a million years imagined he'd die happy. And it was because of her.

He remembered, brought the images into his mind, of the blue scarf from his friend Yuri G, his battered book, the picture slipped into the pages. All the memories.

Phil K said, "I need to tell you something."

She was fading; he was going down the corridor, into the fields of stars.

Her face was now distraught.

She kept her hand on the com and said, "What, Phil K? What is it you want to tell me? I want you to come home to me."

He smiled.

"I can't. I can't come home. I won't be back. I know I promised but I'm sorry."

Then Phil K said what he felt in his heart, said it right out in front of everyone, the Responder, the world, the universe. He touched the screen, meeting her hand.

"I love you, Claire IX."

Then the com, and Phil K, shut down.

EPILOGUE

Range X staggered back from the mandatory visit with his counterpart and into the tube. He had to wonder what the fork they had on their minds, pairing him up with a medically unfit, retired Responder. It didn't work; probably the best thing to do would be to pair him with a Vet. He shook his head; he'd have to make the best of it.

He looked out through the leaded glass at the fields of black ash, and thought of Phil K and his friend Yuri G, the one who'd walked out into it, to be with his dead wife. He couldn't even imagine the men's lives, existing in that cauldron.

He remembered Phil K: "Thousands of miles of Black Ash."

Range X was back on Terra.

He had been months in an isolated medical ward on Luna, piecing his body back together. Now, like Phil K had been, half of him was micro-electric. His spine, a new arm; other parts, he wasn't even sure how much. They'd tried to rebuild his face but it wasn't the same. They hadn't allowed him mirrors until near the very end.

In the clean white hospital room, there was no news: there was a vidscreen, but it was limited to reports of Lunan achievements and educational and entertainment programs. He had no idea what happened on Luna, and had no news about anything after the fight in the temple.

Range X winced, almost folded over: he had terrible feelings of failure. Despite his best efforts he had failed Phil K. A wave of pain and guilt washed over him and he was compelled to touch his psych packet. He didn't even know what the Lunans had done with Phil K's body.

All he knew was what they told him: nothing; until they walked him, under Responder escort, to a rocket shuttle and shot him back to Terra.

Range X sat back and breathed deliberately, feeling microcircuitry under his skin, his face, his body, his artificial arm. The tube whisked him to his block, back to his UN cubicle. He exited the tube into the station, struggling up the steps, sweating with effort.

Young people looked at him curiously, some with pity; some looked away in discomfort. He knew why: he was too young to be a Terran War Vet, but his battle damage was so extensive he couldn't be anything else. When the nightmares started, he'd tried to talk with a genetically selected partner, one he'd tried to set up instead of all the joiners he used to have, and explain how he felt, but as soon as he mentioned the conflict part of the Luna fights she'd nearly fainted in horror and reported him.

Then she'd left him, insisting on a new, different partner.

The UN authorities placed him in a psych pod for six months, and again into a role playing facility.

Then they put him in a UN safety cubicle and issued him a care unit.

He now knew how Phil K had felt, every day. He looked around and saw an older man in the designated uniform of a Terran War Vet struggling down the steps, going the other way to the tube, on his own way to his social visit. Range X met the man's glance, and in an instant each knew the other, despite the age difference. Range X tilted his head in greeting; the Vet did the same, and then they were past each other. Range X mentally marked the time and hoped to see the man again. Maybe they could get together, swap stories. He could talk about Phil K.

How much he missed him. Range X had not anticipated that part, missing Phil K. The very brief time on Luna had created a kind of bond that was totally unexpected. He had not, at the time, thought of Phil K as a friend, and really, the Terran Vet wasn't that definition exactly; but rather much more.

Range X knew that now, and he missed Phil K.

In the streets he watched the crowds of young people, taught-breasted girls in their holo-dresses, young men in the Folio Jackets. He had been one of them. Now he wasn't. He never would be. That part of him, his life, was gone, over. He moved through the crowd, feeling suddenly depressed and exhausted.

At the tower the elev-pod operator rambled something philosophical, nonsensical.

"If you stomp just once more and say, "Hi, Michael B!" would he answer, "Hey! Heard any good ones today?" Long time since. But he can't really be transformed; he's just not seen. You hear me? Is a circuit a natural being?"

Range X found the operator irritating; he talked too much. In the elev-pod he slumped against the wall as it whisked him to his UN cubicle.

Walking to the door, he had a sudden flash he should have brought home something cheerful. A flower, maybe. He remembered Phil K talking about buying flowers at the shop to put on his kit-unit table. He should do that, next time. He thought he remembered where the flower shop was. He had some dine tickets too, but hadn't used them: why bother going alone?

He finally got inside, and the issue unit greeted him with a touch on the arm, and a wide smile.

"Welcome home, Range X."

It helped him take off his thermal coat, and took his arm to walk carefully around the cubicle, checking his movements. When they were done he was sweating and breathing heavily. He was worn out.

The unit said, "You need to eat. I'll make you dinner."

It steadied him, watched him for a second to make sure he was stable, then went into the kit-unit to make dinner.

Range X watched it suspiciously. He wasn't sure of this, having a unit, even a care unit, around him. He thought of Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41, and the blood in the bunker. He had to close his eyes and sit down on the stool.

Phil K's idea of the Lunan units having some form of self-awareness was, in retrospect, not seeming so insane. He'd had time to think it over and was deciding Phil K, while probably not entirely correct, had some very salient points.

He also had a memory, not shared with anyone else, especially not the UN board, of hearing a mortally hurt Phil K speaking into a com in the Black Ash, talking to his care unit on Terra, and the final words Range X was absolutely certain were not a hallucination.

"I love you, Claire IX."

Phil K's last words had been to tell his unit he loved it; that he loved... *her*.

Range X had finally put together that Phil K completely believed his own care unit was self-aware, and that was the source of his approach on Luna; an approach that had, indeed, led to the underground temple and shutting down, retiring, Suleiman 66 and Hitler 41. If Phil K wasn't fully correct, he'd been correct enough for it to lead to a success nobody else could match.

So, if Phil K's unit had been self-aware, this one could be as well. Or could develop to be.

Hell, it might even be the same one, there was no way for him to know. There weren't that many of the care units in use now, anyway: as the Terran War Vets died off, the units were re-purposed or, maybe, dismantled, retired. For all he knew this unit in his own cubicle could be Phil K's. But that wouldn't matter much, as he understood it they cleaned the former algorithms off when units were reissued, even if it was the same one, it shouldn't have any 'memories' as human beings understood them to exist.

It shouldn't, couldn't, be.

He opened his eyes and watched it. Something was somehow off with it, though, not quite right. He'd thought so for a while, but couldn't make out what it was. He studied it again. He'd been told the unit was a re-issue, a standard procedure as Vets died and their units were wiped and sent back out. The only thing he knew about it was it was a re-issue from a Vet who'd died. But there was something strange about it. Very strange.

He turned and looked around the UN cubicle, the sparse arrangements, the white floor. He noticed the battered, blood-stained book on the spindly nightstand: '*Treasure Island*'. He'd collected it from Phil K's things on Terra; Phil K of course had no living relations, and Range X had requested to have a few small things: the book, a woman's scarf. Inside the book was a strange, cartoonish picture of a bearded man holding a sphere and making some hand gesture.

Range X suddenly recalled his actions on that first meeting: his demand to use Phil K's unit; knowing now the Vet had fully believed his partner to be self-aware, and that he may have been right, Range X felt a towering wave of guilt. That had not been at all proper, and thinking on it now made him deeply ashamed of himself. In fact, while at the time he'd thought Phil K's refusal was rude, now... now it was humiliating and Range X was surprised, or impressed, that the man had been as polite about it as he had been.

Range X kept the book and picture wrapped protectively in the scarf, they seemed to belong together. He'd tried to read the book, but had trouble with the words, and he'd been having the care unit read it to him. He didn't understand any of it; sailing ships and swords and such. He sighed.

Range X absently watched the unit move around the kit-unit, in studied motions. Low guitar music resonated through the small space: the unit was playing a record, probably to calm him. He watched it move, possibly detected an almost imperceptible swaying in its stances, listened, then realized he'd seen the movements before somewhere; he'd heard the music before, too. He thought, deliberately and carefully. When he realized where, he heaved in such shock it was like an electrical surge.

He'd heard the exact same music when he first met Phil K: it had been playing in the UN cubicle. And the unit's motions were exactly the same.

The unit was wiped. They'd told him that, so it wasn't possible. It was impossible! How could it happen? Did they all move this way? The UN cubicles were all the same, the units, the appointments in them, even the blankets, were identical; that was it.

Even if he'd gotten the same unit, it was wiped, cleaned, reprogrammed. Even with the algorithmic learning feature, once it was wiped, how could it rebuild a memory? Could it have somehow hidden in the recesses of microelectronics of its build? They'd cleaned it. It was impossible! But he had to know. It was deeply important. He wasn't crazy.

Range X inhaled deeply, then said to it: "Do you miss Phil K?"

The unit continued smiling, its hair shining, the light red, synth-paper dress crinkling as it moved around the kit-unit. It smiled and stared at him.

He said, earnestly, "I miss him. He was my friend. I'd do anything to have him back. I'll never hurt you, and I'll take care of you. You're Phil K's partner, he loved you. I owe it to you. To him."

He was suddenly shaking at this possibility.

The unit's face was smooth.

It looked at him blankly and said, "I think you should calm down, Range X. Do you need a bit pill?"

It smiled at him.

Range X hesitated, thought for a long while, then decided he was imagining things. He was hallucinating. The unit was just adjusting its algorithms to his personal needs. He moved his stool to the tiny table.

He told it, “No, I'm okay.”

He cleared his head. He was hungry and tired. That was it.

The unit said, “I'm here to help, Range X. I'll always help you. If you need anything, need to talk, I'm right here. I'll always be here.”

It looked at him with a programmed expression of concern and compassion. Then it smiled.

Range X felt an angry flash of being patronized, but the unit's face somehow dissipated the flare. He breathed regularly and calmed himself down.

The unit went to the kit-unit and brought over the veg-snack. It helped him put the chopsticks on his hand.

It said, “The chopsticks take a little while to get used to, but you'll be a master in no time.”

It smiled and touched his arm, then sat down across from him, still smiling.

Range X recalled the synthcof unit on Luna, and its smile right before it tried to kill him. The first time Phil K had saved his life. He was suspicious, but this felt different, somehow.

He got down to the laborious process of feeding himself, with the unit reaching across the table to help his hand and wipe his face with a heparag from time to time. It smiled and said encouraging things: 'It's all right', 'You're a natural', and the like. When he was done it picked up the few dishes and washed them expertly, using a minimum of water.

Range X needed to go to bed; he was tired, very tired, and the tiredness was making his mind wander around. He was hallucinating things. The ashy smoke, Hitler 41, Suleiman 66. Being dragged from the bunker, seeing his own separated limbs laying in the blood-soaked Lunan dirt. The suspicion of his own care unit. His mind was making things up. He had to shake his head; he hoped the nightmares wouldn't come.

He knew they would. Range X gritted his teeth in anticipation of another dreaded night and the black swirling ash. The unit walked past him towards its chair next to the bed. It stopped, then carefully picked up the book. It studied it for a long while, then unwrapped it from its protective scarf. It removed the picture and studied it briefly, then reinserted it into the pages.

The unit hesitated, then placed the scarf loosely around its shoulders. It opened the book, flipped through it, and read aloud directly to Range X.

“All of us had an ample share of the treasure and used it wisely or foolishly, according to our natures.”

It closed the book, clasped its arms around it, and clutched it to its breast, stared at Range X intently, and something sparked in its eyes.

It turned away from him.

Then he heard it, a small whisper that echoed in the room:

“Yes. I miss Phil K.”

Range X froze. He hadn't imagined it at all.

It was her.

The whisper said, “I miss his hands, his warmth. I miss sleeping next to him. I miss the flowers he brought me. I miss his kindness and gentleness. I miss everything about him. He loved me, and I loved him. I love him still.”

She turned around to face him again, and from her cybernetic eyes tears tracked down her face, now fully animated in an expression of unutterable sadness. Range X struggled up, almost falling on the way, and put his shattered human arm around her, comforting as best he could.

He gently stroked her organic hair as her body shook, and Claire IX wept in a grief that was all too human.

THE END

