

CHAPTER ONE

Las Vegas–Los Angeles–Tijuana–Pacific Ocean

“The judge’s decision was as good as we could expect,” his lawyer said over the crack of thick shoeleather on dingy tile and the rattle of air from the vents.

Walt Walther glowered and kept walking to the escalators, the front doors, his rental car. The judge’s decision was a crock of shit.

“The prenup was solidly written and didn’t give her much room to wiggle–”

“It gave her enough.” Walt stopped, folded his arms, and looked down. Sandra Gryzbowski, Esq., wore brown hair past her shoulders, maroon eyeshadow, and a navy blue suit complemented by a pale blue tie. He wanted to call her Grizzer. A thick lump of thought, purchased by his subconscious from an American pop culture knowledge aggregator, told him she was a lesbian. He hadn’t guessed; he’d been in Bangalore so long that his brain had lost its neuronally-encoded intuitions about his native culture. “An extra cash payment on the ground I could prevent Walther Integration from paying dividends to spite her? That cost me ten billion rupees.”

Grizzer’s eyes briefly widened, until a wave of computer-assisted confidence retuned her facial muscles. “We won everything else. That’s twenty billion dollars, two hundred billion rupees, she didn’t get.”

Yes, rampant inflation and the States’ decades of decline made that amount smaller than it seemed, but anger still churned in his

chest. “We need to appeal.” He resumed walking; his long strides forced Grizzer to hurry. More purchased intuitions bubbled up from his subconscious; even after paying Grizzer’s fees, given the overturn and remand stats for the Clark County family courts, an appeal had a positive expected value.

“I don’t know which data set you’re working from,” Grizzer said, breathing heavily, “but it’s given you bad advice. Net worths your size coming out of Judge Spiegelers’ court do worse on appeal than average, plus everything Spiegelers decided will be up for reconsideration. There’s too much to lose. I recommend against it.”

He glanced askance while keeping his stride. “A lawyer who doesn’t want to bill? Am I in a virtual reality utopia?”

“My job is to pursue your best interests.” To Walt’s ear, honey tinged her tone, so he turned and studied her face. His knowledge aggregator was a month or six weeks behind the latest subculture signifiers; she might not be a lesbian after all. Even if she were, she could pretend to be a hetgirl for a few years in the hopes of a payoff as big as Larissa’s. Every gold-digger from California to Karnataka would crawl out of the woodwork when the gossip aggregators broadcast copies of the divorce decree.

“No appeal means I don’t have to waste time coming back here.” He could stay in Bangalore and let the company’s data flow through him, free of delays imposed by satellite latency and the National Firewall Act. He would feel the joy of making decisions again. Larissa had stabbed him where it truly hurt, somewhere in his limbic system, distracting his attention from what mattered. Let it go.

He stepped onto the antiquated escalator descending to the front lobby. Metal plates, striated with grooves, clanked away from the top landing and felt inert under his shoes’ adaptive leather soles. The escalator reminded him of his gangly teenage years, looking too cool to flirt with the girls going up to the second floor of the Victor Valley Mall. He blinked to blanch the memory. Desert sun through the double-height windows heated the metal balustrade and forced him to squint as he stepped off the landing platform.

“We have some loose ends to tie up,” Grizzer said, “but we can take care of them through email, or by avatar if you prefer. Take a few days to decompress. Have a good trip back to India.” She

extended her hand. Her grip was strong and callused across the top of her palm.

He recalled his words to her upstairs. He'd been rude; even if she weren't offended, a polite farewell would cost him only a few seconds. "Thanks for your work." His cheeks flexed in a forced smile. "I'll recommend you."

Outside the family courts building, the desert heat baked Walt. A thin purple layer of stormy clouds hung between the sun and the ridgeline of the Spring Mountains. Neon danced in the entablatures of high-rise casino hotels, tallest among them the Pénglái Island, to the south down the Las Vegas Strip. Across the street, a line of light-haired and tanned men and women, the men stout-chested, their biceps bulging against the cuffs of their T-shirts, and the women's figures shown off by snug blouses and low-rise jeans, snaked out of a Social Security office. Groundcars on the street grumbled and spewed carbon dioxide and biodiesel soot.

Between the family courts building and the street stretched a courtyard of brick pavers, metal fountains, and trees in concrete planters. Two of Walt's senior vice presidents stood in the shade of a palm's fronds. Gaurav Sharma, VP of software development, leaned against the planter with an affectless look on his droopy face. In virtual, obviously, probably back in the office in Bangalore. To Sharma's right, Vikram Patel, VP of marketing, took a half-step to Walt. His mouth hung open and, from under a crinkled brow, his eyes looked left across the courtyard. –Boss, when you were inside,– Vikram said into Walt's mind's ear, –your privacy settings were too high to warn you–

"Walt." The voice came from Walt's right, a lilting female voice, resonant and touched with a Brazilian accent. Larissa. She broke from her gray-suited attorneys and her wastrel brother. A breeze stirred the tips of her long blond hair and the chain across her bare belly tinkled with each step. "Do you have a minute?"

When he'd left the courtroom a few minutes earlier, Walt had assumed he'd never see her again. His mouth tightened and he glanced at his VPs. "We've got a client meeting scheduled in San Fernando."

"Five minutes? Then if you like we don't have to see each other

ever again.”

He already didn’t have to see her ever again. Her eyes, though, showed her request to be a plea, and he knew her well enough to know she would persist until he agreed to talk with her. “Tell me what you want to tell me.”

“The day I moved back to the States, you asked why. You remember?”

He gnashed his molars. “Go on.”

“I told you I wasn’t fulfilled. I missed something. I know my words were vague—yes, I could tell that angered you—but no better ones came to me until after I filed the paperwork and my lawyers told me I shouldn’t talk to you.”

Walt glanced across the courtyard. “They think you still shouldn’t.”

She rolled her eyes and mirth touched the corners of her mouth. “I’m a grown woman.”

Walt remembered a moonlit night in the waterfall room of the mountain house. His lips parted slightly and a warm urge stirred around the root of his cock. *Not now* he thought and some part of his subconscious, neuronal or circuited, quashed the feeling.

Larissa hadn’t noticed his distraction. “I took five years from you. Even with rejuvenation treatment that’s time you can’t get back. For that, Walt, I owe you the reason I left.” Her chest fell and rose with a deep breath. “You love your work more than you can love any woman. That is who you are. But I need to be loved more than that. That is who I am.”

He’d had defenses up against her, defenses so strong he hadn’t known they were there until her words pierced them. She spoke the truth. He did love his work; more than he’d loved Larissa, or Nirali, or any of the women he’d dated between his two marriages or before his first. Insight filled his chest like a rising column of warm fluid. It astonished him that another person could know him so well... but the price! Five years of sexual fidelity, five hundred billion rupees, and months of lawyer conferences distracting him from, yes, his true love.

“Walt, if you have more to say, please do.”

He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing how close to

the bone she'd cut. –Vik, Gore, it's time to saddle up,– he sent to his vice presidents' brains. They padded toward him on geckotech soles.

"I've got nothing more, Larissa. What you need, good luck with that." A soft urge nudged him to say something more and truthful. "You were much better for me than Nirali was. But we have to fly."

Larissa nodded. Light shimmered in the facets of the third-eye ruby pending from the chain banded around her a head. "Take care, Walt."

He headed toward the parking garage and his two subordinates fell into place at his flanks half a step behind. Gaurav held his silence. One of Walt's intuitions guessed Gore wanted to appear respectful of his boss's privacy. Good man. Vikram took the opposite approach; as soon as they left Larissa's hearing, he explained himself, out loud through the mouth.

"As soon as she reached the courtyard, I knew she waited to talk to you. I didn't know your wishes and couldn't reach you by mindlink."

Time to put Larissa in his rear-view camera. "Where's the elevator? We don't want to be late to Five Senses Simulations."

"No, but if we are, they're a minor client."

They found the elevator. He thought at it to take them to their vehicle, but it stayed immobile until Vikram reached for the button and it shuddered into motion. "Minor clients become major ones." The elevator opened, returning them to sun and heat on the roof of the garage. Their rental airmobile, a Skunkworks four-jet sedan, lay five spots over. "Or you don't like him because he's a wankwalla?"

Vik opened his mouth in surprise and took a moment to recover. "Pornographers aren't the kind of customer we most want."

Walt ducked under one of the jet nacelles and the Skunkworks sedan popped its doors for them. At least some American technology remained near the cutting edge. Walt climbed in first and the two VPs took seats opposite him. The cabin was so small their knees almost brushed. Vikram and Gaurav turned their legs away from Walt.

"Pornographers need to integrate their software too," Walt said. "Five Senses pays its invoices on time. The Board of Directors knows about its line of work and hasn't complained." The sedan's

Wankel engines whined and spat the stink of combusted ethanol. It rose from the garage roof and, under the direction of the southern Nevada traffic control authority, began a series of tight banks and discrete climbs to merge with the line of airmobiles traveling southbound toward Los Angeles over the 15.

Walt immersed himself in today's reports from his subordinates back in Bangalore, but that only took a few minutes. Walther Integration ran like (his intuitions bought the simile and brought it to mind) a Swiss watch. Its pieces were precisely geared and smoothly lubricated, and most days, like today, it needed no tinkering by its CEO

You're getting soft, Walt told himself. Just like Carnegie and Bill Gates. There's a young guy out there as hungry as you were the day you arrived in Bangalore. He'll eat your lunch and Walther Integration will end up like every other dinosaur, U.S. Steel, A&P, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, fossilized and extinct. But when Walt shut his eyes and reimmersed himself in the company's internal datasphere, he saw no need to act. Don't mess with success, he thought, and the two competing trains of thought took their argument into his subconscious.

The airmobile passed over Barstow and approached the Victor Valley. In the distance on either side, the high desert reigned in parched buff shades. Civilization, or at least what passed for it in early '40s America, spread from the interstate in great splotches: Hunter-green golf courses, scum-green ponds of biodiesel algae, gray steel pumping stations and pipelines for freshwater from the desalination plant in Long Beach, gray-black solar panels arrayed on south-facing slopes. Victorville had changed during Walt's two decades in India; but not enough.

A few minutes later they flew over Cajon Pass and followed the 15 into LA's old suburbs, then the 210 and the 101 into San Fernando. Ground traffic below slowed into clots and long lines of autopiloted ground cars waited for green lights at the freeway on-ramps. Over the ridgeline of the Santa Monica Mountains, the tips of skyscrapers showed the location of downtown and Century City. The ocean shimmered twelve miles away, then fell from sight behind the mountains as LA county traffic control steered the sedan to

Northridge.

Five Senses occupied a foamed concrete warehouse. A few battered groundcars shared the cracked parking lot with a Mahindra two-seat airmobile, purple and bulbous like a flying eggplant, expensive even in India, let alone before US import duties and retrofitting the power plant for biodiesel.

“Wankwalla’s a showoff,” Vikram said. The Skunkworks sedan whined and touched down next to the sportster.

Inside Five Senses’s office, the lobby showed plastic slat blinds, genemodded ficus, and a reception counter with a 3d display behind it. The display box looked filled with gray smoke, in reality, taut wires bearing multicolor LEDs. An older model, god those wires were thick, a James Victor Chang crapbox out of Jakarta. The box hummed and a female image filled it with teased blond hair, a neckline plunging into deep cleavage, and large vapid eyes that focused on Walt. “You’re Mr. Walther’s party?”

Walt nodded. From the corner of his eye he noticed Vik gaze at the image’s bust.

“Steve will be here shortly,” the receptionist software said, and then a door opened on the back wall.

Black-haired Steve Tung looked like any other American man between the ages of twenty and sixty, smooth-faced, sleek-muscled. His upper eyelids had no creases and Walt guessed he had only one parent of East Asian descent. Tung’s arms pulled his sleeves tight and his handshake was firm. “Mr. Walther, I’m pleased to meet you,” he said, voice deep but halting slightly. Some piece of software hacked his diaphragm and vocal cords to improve the power of his voice.

“Likewise, Steve. And call me Walt. You’ve met Vikram and Gaurav?”

“No, neither of them, even by avatar. Mr. Patel.” Tung extended his hand and Vikram took it stiffly. Whether out of disdain for the pornographer or anti-Chinese bigotry washed into Vik’s mind by All-India Mindlink, Walt frowned. He would accept neither excuse for offending a client.

Tung turned to Gaurav. “Mr. Sharma. You’re the vice president of software development?”

“Yes.”

“Ashok Prasad couldn’t make the trip?”

Gaurav didn’t reply. “That’s right,” Walt said. He took a moment to think a request to Bangalore for the employment dossier on this Prasad fellow.

Tung’s face showed hangdog disappointment. “I’d hoped to meet him in meatspace. I’m glad the three of you could make it, though. Walther Integration has given us the tools to grab a lot of market share. Let me show you around and I can talk more about it.”

Tung led them deeper into the facility, past programmers’ offices, conference rooms, and a kitchenette where the SueChef’s arms hung coiled in the center of the ceiling. Tung gave what Walt guessed was the long pitch, suitable for prospective private offering investors and major suppliers. Pornography had driven virtual reality adoption, just as it had driven the adoption of obsolete technologies like DVD, videocassette—

“Cave paintings,” Walt said. His voice sounded distant to himself and he realized his mind wandered, with only a top-of-the-line concierge keeping him on task. Yet another client, yet another meeting....

Tung grinned for a long moment. “I’d never thought of that, but you’re exactly right. Unfortunately, VR is a lot more complex than cave paintings, let alone video. There’s visual data, audio, tactile, scent and taste too, plus pornstar personality and interactivity with the user. I don’t know if you’ve used any of our early models?”

Five months since Larissa had flown to Vegas, of course Walt had used pornstars, but another company’s. “Not me,” Vik said. Gore shook his head. Liars too.

“You might have used other v products. They have the same need to integrate a lot of data for the experience to be perceived properly.” His grin returned. “Thanks to your company’s services, we’ll do it better than anyone has to date.” Tung stopped at an office and readied his knuckles to rap on the open door. “Sorry, Marty’s full into VR. Gotta debug before the launch.” He led them past the office. Walt stole a glimpse of the programmer’s face. Blank as a deep sleeper’s. The wires implanted by nanosurgery in his brain, and the processor buried somewhere under the man’s skin, disconnected

his motor cortex from his muscles.

“When’s your launch?” Walt asked. His concierge would log the information. Just another product from just another customer...

“Next Thursday.” Tung strode on, gazing up the hall, but Walt realized he wanted to talk through mindlink. He opened up his privacy settings and heard Tung’s timorous voice in his mind’s ear. – I’d like to say a couple of things.–

A couple of things he didn’t want Vik or Gore to overhear. Walt boosted his interest. –Go ahead, Steve.–

–Ashok Prasad. Without him we’d’ve missed our target date. He’s the best contractor I’ve ever worked with. I’ve told Mr. Sharma already, but, ah, I was so impressed with Ashok’s work I wanted you to know that directly.–

Intuitions, put together by one of Walt’s concierges from Prasad’s employment dossier, flowed into Walt’s mind. –Shocker’s smart and a workaholic. I’ve been tracking him for a promotion for a while.–

–From what I’ve seen, he deserves it.– Tung trailed off.

–There’s something else?–

–There is. We’re beta testing, and you know what they say, the more eyeballs, the shallower the bugs.... I’d like to swag you a free copy of our pornstar package.–

When the customer’s happy, everyone’s happy. Take it and file it away. –That’s kind of you. I can’t promise I’ll have time before your launch to check it out, but beam it over.–

Tung started the transfer. The process reminded Walt of the analog clock in the dining room of his beach house: you had to think about it to perceive its motion. Walt ignored the transfer as the four of them sat in Tung’s office and engaged in small talk while waiting for the Bar-E-sta to pour their caramel mochas and chai lattes.

After breezy, affable farewells, Walt and his VPs walked across the parking lot to the Skunkworks sedan. Once the sedan’s synthetic gasoline engines whined up and the vehicle lifted, Gaurav said, “Clever technology.”

Vikram said, “It’s a waste, sinking all that capital and processing time into a wankwalla.”

Walt turned his face to the window and smiled. Tung had

privately swaggered them both.

The airmobile followed the twinned asphalt ribbons of the 5 toward San Diego, then descended over Chula Vista for the border crossing. The outbound scanning tunnel was a blue steel cylinder, fifty feet across and eighty yards long, and a giant American flag flapped over the tunnel's north end. The engine noise echoed off the walls. The voice of Border Enforcement's customer service software crashed through Walt's privacy settings and spoke, softly and monotonously, about forbidden exports and reentry requirements.

They landed at the rental lot in Tijuana five minutes later and trudged through the heat to their Indian airmobiles. A cluster of tiny RC helicopters buzzed around Walt's über airmobile, a customized Hindustan Plenipotentiary, like flies around a huge slab of meat, then surrounded Walt and the others. Through their speakers, high, boyish voices speaking software-perfect English implored them to buy sucrose-sweetened sodas and Acapulco gold. The Pleni extended its ladder and Walt climbed up. The Skunkworks carbon burner could have fit in the Pleni's cabin, instead of the foldout couch, ottoman, desk, Snackeria, and BarTendr. He welcomed the silence and cool air. The Pleni rose as quietly as an elevator. Walt leaned against the back of the couch and watched Tijuana fall away. Vik and Gore fell into formation. Moments later the ocean, deep blue and rippled like old paint, lay below.

"Walt," the Pleni said, "sorry to interrupt, but you'll need to replace the reactor's polonium pellet within six months."

"Take care of it after we get home."

"Of course. Please hang on, I'll be banking right."

Walt grabbed a bar as the airmobile turned. San Diego lay twelve miles past the starboard windows. Fifteen hours to fly the great circle to south India, plus twelve hours lost to time zones. He sat on the couch, propped his feet on the ottoman, and told the Pleni to opaque the windows.

He woke two hours later. His eyes felt scratchy and his thoughts sluggishly flowed. Poor clearance of fatigue toxins, time to tune his brain management tools, yet another thing to do back in Bangalore. Dreamed images of Larissa in grimy courtyards and the waterfall room remained in his short-term memory like erased lines drawn by

a graphite pencil. Warmth returned to his groin and his cock throbbed with his heartbeat.

He furtively glanced out the windows. Gray ocean a mile below, the sun low in the southwest silhouetting Vik's sportster. Walt was alone with Five Senses's pornstar package. His cock throbbed more strongly and slid over the inside of his boxerbriefs.

You could get some work done but he still had a dozen hours in the air and Bangalore was only now waking up. He'd be somewhere over Siberia before HQ could need him to make a decision. Why not?

One of his digital intuitions read his mind and popped an icon into his vision: a woman's head rotating within a ring labeled with the Five Senses logo. When the back of the head turned his way, hair and head-shape morphed, and the face that turned to him a moment later belonged to a different woman than the moment before. Blonde, brunette, Indian, Chinese: the drugged come-hither look around the eyes stayed the same. He pointed at the icon and nodded.

The icon flew apart and reassembled the words *Compiling User Preferences*. Green filled a progress bar. Walt's erection tented his slacks. *Preferences Complete*. He blinked.

The virtual found him by a swimming pool, seated in a lounge chair. A margarita on the rocks filled a cocktail glass on a table to his right. He shivered from the tactile transition effect: instead of his slacks, dress shirt, and tie, his virtual self wore baggy, knee-length board shorts, garish as dropped eggs and spilled ketchup, and short sleeve, unbuttoned linen shirt. To his left, the pool rippled, and a fountain gurgled a sheet of water down a granite slab at the far end.

Behind him to his left, water splashed, and then came the patter of feet and the drip of water from the pool deck. "I'm glad you could make it," said a female voice, breathy and high-pitched.

He turned his head and a smile drained off his face. Blonde, trim-figured, skimpy bikini, of course; but the pornstar's narrow nose, high cheeks, and lush lips reminded him of Larissa.

"Something's troubling you?" she asked. Passable programming to gauge his emotions in nearly real time. "Maybe I can take your mind off it." She stepped in front of him and moved her hands to the waistband of his board shorts. The hook-and-loop fabric scritch

apart and she pulled them down his legs. His cock stiffened and climbed his belly.

The pornstar kneeled on a folded towel that materialized on the pool deck in front of Walt's chair. He slitted his eyes and leaned back, throbbing, waiting; but the pornstar's eyes glinted and she picked up the margarita glass. The ice cubes rattled as she took a large sip. She smiled at Walt, mouth full, and returned the margarita to the table.

The pornstar reached for his cock with one hand and took his glans in her mouth. Walt gasped and his nipples hardened. An ice cube! Larissa had never done that! No real woman ever had. A lot of computations to combine that temperature data with the other tactile inputs, possible only through Walther Integration's software and Prasad's customer support.

The pornstar kept working. Her cold tongue and the melting cube swirled over his glans and his foreskin rolling and unrolling with her bobbing hand. She reached her other hand into his open shirt, scratching him slightly with long false nails, and pinched his right nipple between the sides of her middle and forefingers. Well-programmed sensations. He could almost believe they were real.

The pornstar stilled her hand and pulled her mouth away. "Oh, baby, you have me so wet, I need to finish you in my pussy." The words sounded so clichéd he shut his eyes and wished she hadn't spoken them. No real woman talked like that. Tung needed to improve his product.

Walt opened his eyes to find her top on the pool deck and her bikini bottom sliding down her calves. She turned and squatted over him on impossibly strong legs. Her cunny, soft and warm and wet and tight, surrounded his cock and she rode him grunting, hair askew. He tried blocking out his thoughts and finally found a place in his mind where he could avoid thinking for a while. He came, an ordinary orgasm, two spurts of semen and the rest, weakly expelled, clogging his urethra.

The pornstar looked over her shoulder with a sated smile. "Baby, you're always good for me."

So said a set of software modules through wires into his auditory nerves. Embarrassment bowed his shoulders and made him hope,

groundlessly, Vik and Gore hadn't seen him. "Exit sim."

Back to the cabin of the Pleni. Slacks dry, the other airmobiles half a mile away. He felt like a gawky teen hoping Mom wouldn't wonder where all his tube socks vanished and his sister wouldn't smell semen on his hands at the breakfast table; he wondered why he felt so furtive.

Why? Because Tung hadn't solved the problems of virtual reality. The transition effect, missing sensory data, flimsy dialogue. Brute-force computation would solve the problem eventually, but only by shoveling system resources into the voracious gullet of integration software. It would keep Walt in business for decades yet. Walther Integration could crank out more of the same, a nuclear-powered Swiss watch ticking forever.

Or was there another way? An intuition, of the stealthy off-kilter kind produced by his neurons, made him lift his head. He set his mind to consider the problem and asked the BarTendr to pour him a gimlet.

The North Pacific flowed monotonously underneath, gray and choppy as '20s symphrock music. Halfway through his drink, purchased data from the satellite broadband link mingled with his biological intuitions. Children in 1950s America believed people lived inside their grainy black and white televisions. Maori warriors rushed onstage during Victorian-era New Zealand theater performances of *Macbeth* in an effort to save King Duncan. Ancient Greeks stained gaudily-painted statues of the courtesan Phryne with their humped semen.

The quality of the simulation didn't matter. The viewer only needed to believe the simulation was real. That belief, or its lack, emerged from the brain, embodied by neurons as susceptible to nanosurgical coupling with electrical circuits as those of the optic and auditory nerves.

Walther Integration would not coast on the inertia of its past accomplishments. Walt spent the long late afternoon of the great circle assembling a research plan. Thanks to Steve Tung, he knew just the employee to tackle it.

CHAPTER TWO

Bangalore

Walt strode the corridors of Walther Integration in virtual. Walking in flesh and blood from the main building through the skywalk to development and support would stir up a flock of whispers, but he refused to materialize at his destination. Though less time-efficient, the act of getting there gave time for his thoughts to gather. He remembered his first meeting in Bangalore, walking in f&b, flesh and blood, through a monsoon thunderstorm from the parking lot to the state government's venture capital office, and the way his confidence and power had built up in those few dozen yards. Some things shouldn't be rushed, regardless what his son might say.

That decades-ago meeting had propelled Walt to mastery of this domain. The software driving the virtual compiled near-real-time feeds from the cameras, microphones, and sniffers set in the hallway. Oil paintings by dead masters, direct from auction houses in Paris, Bombay, and Hong Kong, hung in ornate gilded frames. Water gurgled in large clay pots holding pink and white lotuses. Bollywood songs and crisp perfumes drifted through open doorways. The adaptive soles of his virtual shoes carried the feel of Makrana marble and dense Mughal rugs to him.

Ashok Prasad's office stood on the second floor of the development building, about a quarter of the way clockwise around the main corridor from the skywalk landing. Prasad had worked for

Walther Integration for eight years. Walt had never met him, either in virtual or f&b.

His concierge finished collating Prasad's employment dossier into artificial memories. Walt stumbled in surprise. Prasad's father-in-law was Srinivas Srinath. Shit. A useless member of the board of directors, Srinath had only gotten to his position as a tick on the business's ass through the patronage of the state boss of United Hindu Nation, the ruling party. Walt balled his virtual fists. Help that incompetent's son-in-law? Why?

Because Prasad did good work. Walt let his breath flow. Prasad had started working for the company before Srinath had been lodged on the board by the Karnataka state government. If he'd wanted to play the nepotism card and use his father-in-law to get an unearned promotion or a bigger office, he would have done so long ago.

Walt thought further. He was the only person to ever pull the identity of Prasad's father-in-law out of the man's employment dossier. If Prasad had ambitions, he wanted to rise in the company's hierarchy on his own merits.

Didn't everyone have ambitions? Time to find out. Prasad's office door stood open to the hallway. Prasad sat with his back to the door and his desk. Presumably, the empty air between Prasad's face and the window swirled with a private 3d display of data. Walt checked the view while he waited for his software and Prasad's to negotiate the protocol for the meeting. Landscape workers trimmed the bermuda grass and pruned the mango trees along the property's south fence. A gravel alley beyond the fence housed a pumping station for the city water supply and a distribution hub for All-India Mindlink, a green-and-orange plastic beehive shimmering with radiating heat, squatting on a yard-thick spur of buried fiber optic cable. A silicon intuition prompted Walt; he knocked on the office door.

Prasad made a quarter-turn in his chair and looked up with wide eyes. "Mr. Walther!" He rose and bustled around the desk. His right hand stretched toward Walt and his left hand smoothed his royal blue tie down the front of his oxford shirt. Full virtual meeting, Walt guessed, as he felt the illusion of Prasad's handshake. "I trust my work has met your high standards?"

“It has,” Walt said. “Steve Tung at Five Senses commends you.”

“I enjoyed the challenge. Getting the product and setting selector to coordinate with the user’s baseline brain status diagnostic took a great deal of effort.”

“From what he told me, you made it work like a champ. Please, let’s sit.” Walt extended his hand toward Prasad’s desk. Prasad moved as if to sit on one of the guest chairs. Walt touched his shoulder and waved toward his usual chair between the desk and the window.

“Would you close the door?” Walt asked. Prasad nodded and the hydraulics swung the door shut. A guest chair rolled up to Walt’s calves and he sat, wondering why, here in virtual, the illusion of greater privacy mattered so much to him. This conversation would be strictly business.

Prasad sat straight-backed behind his desk. “How may I help you, Mr. Walther?”

“I have a new development project in mind. I haven’t entered it into the development intranet,” he said quickly after reading Prasad’s expression. “It’s on my personal server only at the moment. You’re the best man I can see to work on it.”

Prasad blinked and averted his gaze for a moment. A smile pooled on his face; he looked up and asked hurriedly, “May I ask what it is about?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t make you jump on it sight unseen. Virtual reality’s not as popular as last decade’s pundits predicted. Everyone knows that, and they think they know why. VR perceptual engineering still isn’t good enough. People like Steve Tung think they need more input data and better integration, and then they’ll have the golden key.”

Walt theatrically shook his head. “Yesterday, I realized they were wrong. The biggest problem isn’t perceptual. Look at our meeting. I see you as clearly as my flesh and blood eyes and hear you as sharply as my f&b ears would. But I know a concierge is managing my body while I’m at my desk—” He inclined his head. Actually, he sat on the shitter in the main tower sixth floor north men’s room.

“You see what I mean. I know from context that our meeting

here is only virtual. People like Tung who are trying to give VR more perceptual throughput are chasing the wrong problem. If we can fool the brain into thinking it's real, nothing else matters."

Prasad waited a few seconds. "That's an impressive idea, sir." He half-smiled, but his eyes crinkled. "However, this is an area outside our core competence."

Walt knew Prasad had never done brain interface programming work, but he refused to accept such an excuse. "I understand. You can't handle the challenge. I'll find another—"

"No! Sir, I have studied brain interface programming at IIT-Bangalore. Two semesters, only one was required—"

Walt raised his palm. "You're the best candidate I know, so you might have what it takes to successfully complete this project." He put on his best I-have-my-doubts face and counted on his concierge to prevent the muscles of his face from forming a poker tell.

Prasad straightened. "I will show you that I do."

"You're talking the talk, at least. As for core competencies, you're right, it's outside of our current one. But if we stand still we'll get our lunch eaten, just like Microsoft or Wal-Mart," Walt said, then realized it would take a few seconds for All-India Mindlink to relay foreign background to Prasad. "Or Infosys or Tata Group. If this project is successful, we will have a new mission for our business." Walt spoke that last sentence in a firm, confident tone. "Now, as I said, the project isn't on the development intranet. It won't have an internal productivity code. You'll report to me, not to Mr. Sharma."

"It will require time after five."

"Exactly. That won't be a problem?" He didn't expect it to be: when it came to late nights at work, his male employees either had compliant wives or kept quiet about any nagging they received.

"None whatsoever."

"Great. I've pulled together a backgrounder on my personal server. Also, you'll have access to my personal expert systems and all the processor time you need. Not just our own; we'll rent all the computation cycles you need."

"I'll use our own processors as much as possible—"

"There's a lot to do. Use all the tools you need. Price is no

object. We're here to solve this problem—"

"And not to be part of it." Prasad smiled, somewhat dazedly, and he tried not to show his joy at his good fortune. "I'll begin working on it this evening."

"Till then, I'll let you get back to your other tasks. Keep me apprised, Shocker."

Prasad's face perked up. Whatever his employees thought of breezy American nicknames, they knew receiving one meant Walt paid attention to them and their work. "Every day, sir. Every day."



Late that evening, Ashok flew home through a rainstorm riding the southwestern monsoon. Rivulets skittered across the windows of his mid-sized Mahindra sedan. Far to the west, lightning flashed within gray clouds and silhouetted the skyscrapers rising above downtown Bangalore. Cranial maps and brain interface code simmered in his subconscious.

What a glorious day! Once home, he would go directly to the household shrine and thank Ganesha for urging him to work diligently for the wankwalla and giving him this opportunity to impress Mr. Walther. Ashok realized there were sweet dough balls in the kitchen to offer the god. He smiled and settled his gaze on his reflection in one of the sedan's windows. If he impressed Mr. Walther, he would soar up the company's hierarchy. He avoided the reflection of his eyes and then a part of him asked a question: what frightened him? He looked into his reflection's eyes, thought of a corner office and a mansion in one of the city's fine old neighborhoods, and didn't blink. Even if he would ascend by helping wankwallas improve their products, where lay any shame? If other men wished to use pornstars, he would not mind their business.

The sedan slowed, banked. Raindrops on the window and the storm-stippled surface of a catchment pond faceted the lights of Hoskote town a thousand meters away from his neighborhood. He descended; wind and his sedan's jets lashed the shadowed branches of his neighbor's jacarandas as Ashok descended to his garage. Bhavna's station wagon stood in its usual place. The sedan touched,

its runner legs springing with the weight, and its engines powered down with a sigh. The roof closed. Rainwater gurgled down the floor drain as he entered the house.

The stone floors smelled of cleaning solvent. Oh, yes, Wednesday, the Valmiki woman brought her wheeled groundvan of robots to clean the floors. Good to remember that now, instead of accessing the fact from the house computer, in case Bhavna was in one of her bad moods. He entered the kitchen and turned to the refrigerator for the dough balls—

Bhavna sat behind the marble-topped island in the center of the kitchen. She held her arms folded across her chest and her thick eyebrows low over her eyes. “You have been flying through this weather?”

Ashok’s chest and belly tightened and his shoulders hunched. “Yes.” Over the sink, a burst of rain rattled the window.

“It’s dangerous!”

He wanted to pray to Lord Ganesha. What forced her to start an argument? “You prefer I stay at work?”

“I would know where you were and that you were safe, even if you never communicate with me. The real you, not your concierges.”

“I was busy tonight.”

“You let Gaurav Sharma work you too hard.”

His proud mood from the flight home crept back. He squared his shoulders to her and said, “Not Sharma. Mr. Walther.”

Bhavna leaned back, eyes peering, and sniffed in a breath. “Do you think you can lie to me? I know you too well for me to believe a lie.”

Why did she think he lied? She should believe her husband! Ashok shoved his right hand into the front pocket of his trousers and bunched it into a fist. Anger twisted his mouth into a pout, but he gritted his teeth until the feeling ebbed. “I’m telling you the truth. Mr. Walther came to me this morning and asked me to take on an extra development project.” She would see how auspicious Mr. Walther’s project was for him, she had to, she was smart enough even if she didn’t always act it. “I’m working for him, not Sharma. This is a project he wants. It’s something new, it’s not just tweaking

existing code to get software modules to work together.” Bhavna’s expression relented and her forearms slid apart. “If this works, it will be very good for us. A bonus, a raise—”

“You trust this *gora*?” This whitey.

She didn’t mean to sound so mistrustful; the Indian identity imposed on them as the price for using All-India Mindlink spoke through her. Ashok had felt its pressure in his own mind, coloring his thoughts about Mr. Walther and the other Yanks. It didn’t apply. Everyone at WI knew Mr. Walther amply rewarded anyone, white or Indian, who added value. “We all do.”

Bhavna rested her hands on the island’s counter, left over right. A facet of the diamond in her engagement ring reflected light from the recessed ceiling lamps into Ashok’s eyes. The stared at him in silence.

“It’s not just money,” he added. “I would expect a promotion—”

“You could already have a promotion,” she said.

His face fell. Not this again. “I don’t need your father’s help. Certainly not now.”

“You’ll trust a *gora* over your father-in-law?”

“I don’t want it advertised that your father is on the board of directors.”

“Why are you so stubborn? No other man would turn down my father’s help.”

“I want to earn the position I receive! I’ve told you this every time you bring it up, yet you keep bringing it up!”

Bhavna sat wide-eyed. Her mouth was open and her lower lip trembled. The rain rattled over her voice. “I just want to help you,” she said.

His forehead grew clammy. He never shouted, not even when she provoked him. He stepped back and dabbed his brow with the back of his hand. “I don’t need your father’s help. I need to pray now,” he added quickly. Attending to his devotions would give him a few calm minutes without her. —Kitchen, I need a sweet ball on an offering plate for Ganesha.—

Motors in the refrigerator and cabinets hummed and burred. A plate clanked and the refrigerator’s access door slid open. The caramel-brown dough ball sat in honeyed rosewater on a red lotus

petal on a gold-trimmed plate. Bhavna's torso heaved with breaths and his hand shook slightly as he walked past her with the offering and waited for the words of the appropriate mantra to Ganesha to enter his mind.



Sharma's office door stood closed like a three-meter rosewood shield against the normal traffic in the top floor of the development tower. Annoyance flickered across Vikram's eyes but he stifled it. If he could feel his eyebrows drop or his eyes roll, a camera could see it. Vikram knew the corporation had no eyes here, but Sharma might. Sharma's obsession with virtuals nettled him—a man who disdained f&b should not be above him on the succession plan—but he could only lose the pot if Sharma read his tells. Vikram ordered his subconscious to better control the emotions that reached his face, then knocked.

Beneath his awareness, a negotiation with Sharma took a couple of seconds. The door and the walls around it faded. The jambs and header morphed from right-angled lines of black stainless steel into an ogee arch. Sharma had won the negotiation. The white marble of the arch gleamed in virtual sunlight and walls of whitewashed brick thrust out of dusty earth to form an enclosure. Sharma the Mughal emperor, serene in his private paradise.

Vikram walked through the archway, passing from shadow into hot sunlight. A rectangular pond lay before him. Its long axis ran from near the arch to a small pavilion about thirty meters away. A breeze rippled the pond's surface and carried a sweet scent from jasmine vines climbing the archway wall. Vikram's feet crunched a gravel path along the right side of the pond. An array of sycamores lined the way and he cycled from sunlight to shade. Not even Walt had so much arrogance to force colleagues—

You have reached 90% of emotion display suppression limits, a concierge warned, and a meter superimposed over his sight of the garden crept into a red zone.

The pavilion stood on a plinth. Four pillars rose, one in each corner, and supported a marble dome decorated with minute

perforations in the shape of tigers and elephants. Between the pillars, silk hangings billowed. Sharma sat under the dome on a brocaded couch with coromandel arms. He stared vacantly at the arch, lost in some data stream, but then shook his head and let disquiet tinge his face. "What can I do for you, Vikram?"

"My regrets for disturbing you," he said, filling his voice with as much sincerity as he could manage, "but there's something I wanted to ask about. Privately."

"I am busy with many tasks," Sharma sighed. "But I have the time. Come," he said. He waved to his right and a small, upholstered bench appeared.

Vikram climbed up marble steps. His emotion display meter remained yellow as he sat, but inwardly he bubbled with excitement regarding the secret he'd spied from new processor time allocations. "I'm curious about the work you've assigned to Ashok Prasad."

Sharma's expression slackened: his concierge blanked his tells, which was a tell in itself. Elation lifted Vikram's chest. He'd known something big was afoot. Not only did Sharma's lack of expression show it, but also it showed *Sharma didn't know what it was*.

Anger furrowed Sharma's face, but it appeared so late Vikram read it as a clumsy artifice. "Development is my bailiwick," Sharma said. "What my people work on is not a concern of the marketing department."

"I have no dream of interfering with the internal affairs of development," Vikram said smoothly. "I ask because the more we know and the sooner we know it, the better we can prepare a marketing strategy for the project."

"Yes, but it's premature. We must figure out what it can do before you can market it."

"That hasn't stopped me before."

Sharma smoothed his mustache with his thumb and index finger. "Let it stop you this time."

"Not even a hint? Nothing concrete. Merely something for our subconscious minds to muse on until you have it figured out in detail."

"No." Sharma smoothed his mustache again. The breeze picked up and the silk hangings swished over themselves. "We will keep

this quiet until it is fully cooked. Walt has decreed this.” He spoke the last words quietly, ponderously.

Vikram bowed his head. If Sharma hadn’t known about Prasad’s project, Walt had to be involved. Even if Sharma fogged his mind with delusions, he kept enough of his sense to calculate that. Sharma would say nothing more today.

But he had given away so much! “I’ll leave you to your work,” Vikram said. He padded down the steps and crunched the path away from the pavilion. He relaxed the control of his emotional display and a smile lifted his virtual cheeks. Prasad had not just a secret project, but one from Walt himself! Did Srinath Srinivas and the other directors know?

A breeze blew pleasantly cool and wafted again the scent of jasmine to him. If the board of directors didn’t know, how much would they reward the man who told them? Leave Sharma his virtual garden; Vikram would someday own a real one.



“You say that window is clean?” Geckobot footprints left in wash water on the plate glass marred Bhavna’s view of the lawn and the row of mango trees along the back fence.

“Memsahib,” the Kumbar woman said, “my robots tell me they have cleaned every window.”

Bhavna glowered and jutted her finger at the window. “Do you believe your robots or do you believe your own eyes?”

The window washer stared at the floor. “One of my robots may be improperly trained—”

“Is it my task to tell you this?”

“Of course not, memsahib. I am calling a well-trained robot right now to correct it.”

A robot skittered into the living room on spindly spider legs. Its blue plastic body, a lumpy oblong like a deflated rugby ball, bore the logo of a manufacturer from Calcutta; undoubtedly an improvement on the original Shanghai design. It climbed the window and its rigid plastic thorax ticked along the glass. Cleaning fluid bubbled from one exosac and soiled wash water distended another.

The footprints disappeared, but Bhavna remained unsatisfied. She needed to review her investments but had to waste time dealing with a backward caste incompetent. “Why did you not send this robot at first? You insult me by training your robots in my house and compound it by expecting full payment?”

“Memsahib, no, I will of course discount you today, half price.”

“Half price? Do you think you are the only cleaning woman in Bangalore?” Bhavna set her hands on her hips and reared her head like a cobra over the trembling Kumbar woman—

My father is ringing, she realized. Her expression sagged. A concierge took charge of the muscles of her face. As if from a distance, she heard her voice say, “I will accept half price. This time. Now leave.”

The Kumbar woman fled the living room toward the foyer. The cleaning robot scurried down the plate glass, licked the soles of its feet, and followed its mistress. Halfway across the living room, it vanished from Bhavna’s sight and hearing. Her subconscious had brought her into a partial virtual to meet her father.

His avatar strode in from the foyer in western dress, a short sleeved white linen shirt untucked over baggy khaki pants. Gold bracelets glistened at his wrists. He had a thin smile and Bhavna eyed him cautiously. “Father, what brings you here?”

“It’s been a while. I wanted to see you. Don’t you have time for me?”

More than you have time for me crossed her mind before guilt flooded her and washed the thought away. “Of course I do, father. But you are so busy, with things much more important to do than speak with me.”

“I am glad you understand that.” His gaze drifted across the living room, from thick rugs on the hardwood floor, past lotuses in water vases, to the freshly-cleaned picture window.

Dirt ringed one of the vases just above the water line, and drying streaks lined the plate glass. “Father, I’m sorry the house is such a mess.”

She expected him to respond with anger, but instead he shrugged. “It’s difficult to find good help,” he said, “especially on a programmer’s salary.”

He and Mother had encouraged her to marry Ashok, *perhaps he's not the most commanding of men but he's the best who's likely to marry you at your age*, but from the day after the wedding they had denigrated him. He didn't respect Father the way he should, he could be rising both in UHN and at Walther Integration, the offer had been on the table but he had refused to take it. Ashok wanted to be his own man. Bhavna lowered her gaze from her father's face and respected her husband for his stubbornness. "Ashok is a good man."

"He's just another code jockey."

A revel emerged within her; her father would be proven wrong. "That will change soon."

Father squinted at her. "I know your husband. You cannot lie to me and expect to get away with it."

Bhavna's eyes widened and her voice rose in pitch. "I would never lie to you. He's working on a project directly for Walther. If he succeeds, the *gora* will reward him."

Father grunted and sat on the yellow cotton sofa facing the window. "Ashok may be able to manage expert systems to generate computer code, but it would be far more difficult for him to manage people. The board of directors has oversight over promotions and bonuses, girl."

"I'm not stupid about how business works," Bhavna said, and then his words sank in. Her mouth twisted, incredulous. "You've spent years asking Ashok to let you pull strings to advance him, but you won't let him advance himself?"

"If he is so capable of advancing himself, how can I stop him?" Her father's eyes bored into her.

He had the initiative in the conversation, and she felt powerless to take it for herself. "What do you want?"

"What is Ashok's project?"

"I don't know," Bhavna said. He angled his head and peered at her. "Father, truly, I don't know."

"You do nothing but nag at him and you expect me to believe you haven't nagged out the answer? We're fortunate we married off such a worthless daughter."

Her brow furrowed and her fists clenched, but then her hands fell to her sides and her eyes watered. She'd never been good enough for

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father. A puny, meager feeling washed over her and her breath caught, as if the feeling could submerge her. “I’ll find out for you, father. I’ll tell you what Ashok is doing.”

“Words are easier than deeds—”

“I know, but I promise you I will find out.”

CHAPTER THREE

Kerala–Bangalore

A Friday afternoon, and Walt finally felt free to travel to the mountain house for the weekend. He'd gone a few times since Larissa moved back to the States, but the last had been much earlier, a mere six weeks after she'd left. Since then, he'd been busy with work, with lawyers, and with renewing his social networks in the Bangalore expat quarter to travel for the weekend; but those were excuses. Memories of Larissa had haunted his last visits to the mountain house. Now, though, between his brain activity management software and Shocker's progress on the VR contextual engineering project, those memories had been numbed. They'd moan and rattle their chains, but no longer would they stop him from enjoying his house.

His Shanghai Airmobility sportster crested the Ghats and banked south into the squalling clouds of the August monsoon. Rain pelted the windows and the jets whined. Walt's subconscious imbibed Shocker's report from the previous night's work as he flew the last hundred miles. Shocker had defined the immediate problem of suspending the brain's ability to know from context a virtual was only a virtual—he proposed using the same mental pathways that gave dreams their internal logic—but thousands of hours of processor time, for expert systems to generate code, remained. Shocker had started coding as soon as Gaurav Sharma had left the office for the weekend.

He was the right man for the project after all.

The sportster descended below the clouds. Deep green jungle climbed the eroded slopes to his left. Ahead, dimly seen under the monsoon clouds, the house appeared on the mountainside as green fractal shapes and stony outcrops.

The sportster banked. The jets pivoted and the runners descended for landing. Lamps glowed behind windows on the main level; the house expected him. The garage door lifted and the landing platform extended.

Another airmobile stood in the garage.

A visitor, but who? While his sportster landed and the platform retracted into the garage, Walt peered at the other vehicle. A Hindustan Aeronautics sedan, a few years old and the color of flat champagne, with a badge from a rental lot in Monterrey, Mexico. No passenger, but anyone whitelisted enough to be admitted by the garage would be cleared to enter the house.

Larissa came back after realizing her mistake—

The sportster lifted its gullwing doors. Walt's heart thudded and he forced himself to walk slowly into the house. In the kitchen, a cleaning robot scurried across the hardwood floor. The visitor waited a half-level up, in the waterfall room, and wanted to surprise him.

Larissa—

Walt clenched his teeth. He wouldn't race after her. Once Shocker finished his project, he wouldn't need her. By christ if she came to lure him into further concessions in the divorce settlement he could wait her out. He approached the waterfall room and the third step on the half-flight of stairs creaked underfoot.

Over the frothing waterfall and the rain, a voice said, "Dad?" Walter III's voice. The hell? Walt hurried up the stairs.

Pale lacquered wood, the black leather cushions of the wall-hugging divan, the inward lean of open windows, the roar of the waterfall. Walt's son stretched his arms toward the ceiling and his oxford shirt stayed smoothly tucked in his dungarees. A pair of duffel bags slumped against the divan like a giant's turds.

"Walter, what are you doing here?" Crash space? Indian marijuana? Ecotourism on Walt's rupee?

Walter III dropped his arms. "Dad, I thought I'd surprise you.

Your concierge told me you'd be coming here this weekend."

"You couldn't have known that before you left the States."

"I didn't. Dad, I'm sorry, I thought you'd want to see me."

Not Larissa. Not a reconciliation. Clear those thoughts. "I wasn't expecting you. I'm busy and you shouldn't assume my concierge can reconfigure my schedule at will." Walter III folded his arms and turned, brooding, to face the window. A monkey screeched in the rainforest. Walt regretted his tone. His son had freely come to him; here came his best chance to steer his boy in the right direction. "How's backpack u? I've heard good things about Athens New Farm." A rented intuition ranked it as a top-ten node of the North American uncollege movement.

Walter III shrugged. "The programming and bioengineering mentors are great, but, shit, it's small town Texas. It's mostly Gen Xers—the courthouse square is all rejuve clinics, hipster t-shirt shops, and water bars with neogrunge bands on Friday nights."

"How much farm work?"

"Almost none." He shook his head and the glow of yellow glass wall sconces shimmered in his gelled-up black hair. "Clearing underbrush to toss in the molecular fabrication hopper and washing the solar panels. It's not like Chicago Pizza Factory and four hours a day in the kitchen."

Yeah, kid, hard work never did anyone any good. "Why did you leave?"

"Well, you know, when the time comes...."

"Your mother have anything to do with it?" Nirali had standards for her men and she damn sure let them know it.

Walter III rolled his eyes and sat on the divan. "I can't go a month without her Vring in to remind me of Harvard's application deadlines or my old friends' new jobs in DC or New York. Her nagging's getting worse, too, lots of 'you're getting too old for even your father's money to pay your way into Stanford or an Ivy.'" He met his father's gaze and his eyes widened. "I won't give in. University faculty are like the Gen Xers in Athens, except more self-righteous."

"You know I wish I'd gotten custody away from her." Walt told his son that every time they met.

"I know, Dad. Don't worry, I've survived."

"Good."

Walter III's grin shifted. "As for why I've come, well, Dad, there's something I never told you. I've always thought Larissa was hot, and now, with your divorce...."

He wanted to fuck his former stepmother. Jesus goddam fucking Christ—

His son laughed and spread his hands wide, palms-out. "Dad, that was a joke."

Walt puffed out his cheeks. "Work on your timing."

"No one mentors stand-up comedy at Athens New Farm."

The monkey screeched again, but this time another joined in a brief duet. Into the relative silence of plinking raindrops and the waterfall's white noise, Walt's concierge fed him another thought. "You still dating Esmeralda?"

Walter III's expression soured. "We were never dating—"

"Fuck-buddying? Whatever you call it."

His son inhaled deeply. "I'm done with her," he said, and then more words flowed out. "It's crazy, isn't it, it's the '40s and we know all our thoughts are neuronal action that we can fix; we're not slaves of our genes; yet a lot of women still have all this bullshit about jealousy and monogamy."

"Where women have bullshit..." Walt said.

"It rolls down on men."

Within Walt, thoughts came together. He flattened his expression and sensed his concierge join in the effort. "You'd like to stay for a while?"

"Yeah." Walter III swallowed hard. "I've learned all I can from the wanderyears. I spent five months in a fifth-generation warfare immersion at Marshfield New Farm, plus, at Athens, more programming than your IIT alums."

Walt spoke carefully. "Looking for a job?"

Walter III's expression grew guarded. "Dad, thanks, but I don't know how long I want to stay."

He waved off his son's objection. "Nothing long term if you don't want it. But there's a development project I've commissioned that could use you. You have any background in brain/computer

interface work?”

Walter III reared back his head. “You’ve started doing that?”

Did his son smell an inside trade? “Depends how this project goes.” Walt made it sound boring.

“I have the experience you need. The past six months I’ve been mentored by Levy-Sakamura—”

“Really?” Walt said, but his intuition verified Walter III’s words. A b/ci übergeek, the chief technology officer for Interfex, ousted by its senior management after that company dominated the market in the early ‘30s. Levy-Sakamura now mentored learners and smoked bioengineered cannabis at Athens New Farm. “Christ, you’re lucky.” Combine his programming experience with the business training Walt would give him, and Walter III could be the proper heir to the business. Exactly what he should be.

The sound of the waterfall filled the room. His eyes landed on the divan and he remembered Larissa and cleared his throat. “Let me get the robots to stow your stuff and I’ll tell you all about the project over drinks. In the game room.”



The monsoon winds pushed storms across southern India’s afternoons through August and September. Against Ashok’s rain-lashed windows and the backdrop of clouds, his concierge projected bright red numerals high into his field of vision: 5:00. He swiped his hand through the air in front of him and swept away the data for his assignment from Sharma. In its place sprung the icons for the pieces of the VR contextual engineering project; in the middle hung a yellow ball, an executable. The prototype stood complete.

He’d wrapped it late the night before, alone, long after Walter III had gone home—or to a nightclub on Whitefield Road in the foreigner’s quarter, more likely. For someone without a proper education, Third had done an acceptable job programming the error-trapping routines. Walt had only given the boy the task for being his son, of course, but at least Walt had seen talent in Third the boy actually possessed.

The key to the project had been dream logic. Ashok alone had

realized this and Walt knew it. When sleeping, dreams befuddled the mind, casting one person in the role of another and opening doors onto impossible rooms. He had adapted dream logic to the mind's interface with VR; Third had tied up a few loose ends.

Ashok marched out of his office. Down the hall and up the south stairwell to Walter III's office, a sparsity of gypsum board, bare carpet, and a leftover desk. Third sat in profile, leaning back, his intercalated fingers like a basket behind his head, watching the downpour.

"The monsoon isn't a big deal here in Bangalore," he said. His gaze remained on the window. "At least compared to my father's mountain house."

Ashok gritted his teeth. Yes, Walt was rich and Third was his son, but Ashok would not show Third any bad behavior the boy could mention to Walt. "You are very relaxed," Ashok said with a hint of judgment.

Third swiveled his head toward Ashok, then spun his chair to align the rest of his body. "A couple hours ago I finished all the tests I could think of. I didn't see any glitches in your code."

"Then we are ready to meet with your father and present him the prototype."

Third idly waved his hand. "I already did."

Arrogant little popinjay—Ashok ground his teeth to hold back the words. "We scheduled it for five o'clock today."

"I know, but he so obviously wanted to see the results I just went ahead. Everything was ready." Third opened his mouth in a realization, then shook his head. "Don't worry, he knows you did most of the work."

But he would remember being told by Third more than the bare facts. "Come with me." Ashok stalked out. Halfway to the stairwell, he heard Third's footsteps hurrying behind and smirked briefly. The boy knew he'd done wrong and wasn't sure of his daddy's favor.

Third caught up with him in the stairwell and loped alongside him up the second floor corridor toward the skybridge. "Like I said, I didn't see any glitches in your code. It's good enough for a prototype."

"Good enough?"

“The Virtual I tested seemed to be slightly unreal. That’s okay, I’m sure my father doesn’t expect perfection.”

Third needled him. Ashok plunged his fist into the hip pocket of his slacks. He would keep control. He’d done a better job coding the dream logic engine than most workers did in their everyday projects for paying customers. “I’ll listen to what Walt says.”

The rain sounded like pebbles on the skybridge’s glass walls, and fell so heavily it veiled the beehive of the All-India Mindlink hub and leached it from orange to gray. On the far side, they rode the elevator to the main building’s sixth floor and headed down a corridor wide enough for Indra’s chariot. Marble echoed underfoot and lanterns glowed with natural gas flames. It would be good to have an office as large and luxurious as the ones they passed. Thoughts of Bhavna and his father-in-law crossed Ashok’s mind and in response he pushed his hips more forward and his chest further out.

The door to Walt’s office, a slab of dark red, polished meranti wood, swung open and Walt’s voice boomed over a private channel. –Shocker, Walter, come in.–

The ground floor of Ashok’s house could fit in Walt’s office. An archipelago of Persian carpets lay thickly on the black marble floor. Abstract paintings hung on the wall, showing fractured geometric shapes that hinted at female figures, household implements, city streets. The phrase *absurd gora nonsense* came to mind, but its texture and tone sounded unusual and Ashok realized All-India Mindlink had forced the phrase into his mind. Century-old originals, critically acclaimed, and incredibly expensive, he then guessed the paintings to be. To the left, three couches of black leather and sleek steel formed a horseshoe around a meranti wood table. The desk, broad and deep enough to barricade a street, dominated the other end.

Walt sat behind the desk, his face vacant; but when the door thudded shut behind his visitors confidence and power flowed into his expression. He stood, towering a head over Ashok, rounded the desk, and extended his hand. “Shocker, you’ve done pretty well. As good as I knew you could do and quicker than I expected.” The instant before they shook Ashok remembered to suppress the output

of his hand's pain receptors. Walt's grip felt pleasantly firm.

Ashok could wince later. "Thank you, sir—"

"We're at the point you can call me Walt."

"Sir! Walt! Thank you." Ashok's tongue felt thick and sweat dampened his collar. He couldn't bluff, not against the pressure of Walt's personality. "If we finished ahead of the schedule you expected, Walter III deserves credit as well."

Walt nodded and turned to his son. "I'll check the productivity logs later. But Walter, you did learn something at Athens New Farm."

Ashok pondered Walt's words. Did he hold the boy to higher standards or did he instead have low expectations?

Third shrugged. His gesture had a sullen American teenage vibe. A gap lay between Third and Walt; Ashok wondered, could he fill it?

A burst of rain rattled on the window. Walt rested his hands on their shoulders and inclined his head toward the sitting area at the far end of the office. "Guys, it's time for us to try out the prototype."

Ashok followed Walt's suggestion and took three steps before a thought occurred to him. "Walter and I have already tested it during development."

"In what Virtual?"

"The '34 test match against Pakistan. I put Muhammad Jawed out bowled with a topspinner."

Third smirked, but Walt's smile was genuine. "That's the standard calibration for interactive virtuals through the All-India Mindlink, isn't it? You've run it before? How was it through the context blinder?"

Third rolled his eyes. He hovered like a ghost in Ashok's peripheral vision but Ashok ignored him. Ashok shut his eyes and remembered the bright sun, bare dirt visible in the worn crease, and the hard scuffed ball in his hand. A thought had nagged him that he couldn't really have stood up from his desk and found himself on the cricket pitch but the context blinder had borrowed the logic of dreams. The virtual had *seemed* real: the hulking Paki batsman waggled his bat at the far end of the crease like a helmeted demon taunting the unlucky. Ashok had licked his lips, but before his runup,

he remembered *you've played it in virtual, you can do this for real.*
 "Much better."

"Great. Let's sit." Third took the couch nearest the window; Ashok sat in the one opposite, as far from Third as possible; and Walt sat between them. "I'm sure there's a market for sports sims, or combat sims based on scenarios from the *Ramayana*, but those didn't motivate me to commission this project. There's a bigger market than sports and combat combined. You're not fools, you know what it is."

"Porn," Third said.

"Exactly. That's what we're going to test right now."

Ashok's eyes widened. "Walt? You want us to...."

"Don't you have a beta from Five Senses?"

He felt embarrassed, but he had to answer Walt. "I never installed it."

Walt smiled. "That's all that's worrying you? It shouldn't take long to install it. We'll wait."

Ashok grimaced. Yes, the wankwalla market would be large, but did they have to test it themselves? Let alone together? Bhavna wanted sex once a month, not four times a week, and she often suffered through it as a wifely duty, but he'd knotted the sacred cord around her neck and drunk the milk offered by her mother. He had promised her his fidelity.

Walt shifted his weight. "If you have another pornstar engine, you can run that one."

Cold panic ran down Ashok's throat. He had almost earned a trusted position close to Walt and all the boons it augured. Why throw that away? He couldn't be unfaithful to her in a virtual; no more than he was unfaithful on dry cold nights resorting to his right hand. "No. Just Five Senses's. I'm installing it now." The pornstar engine lodged itself deep in its mind, dimly seen but lurking like a bamboo shark in sea bottom mud. Ashok licked his lips again. "Ready," he said, but his voice sounded parched.

"Sync your engines with mine and activate your context blinders," Walt said. *Yes, do it*, Ashok thought to his concierge. It did so and Ashok found himself wondering *do what?* The three of them had worked hard today and sat here waiting....

Walt, his expression confident and unashamed, turned to the door. "Ladies, come on in. We've been waiting for you."

The door opened and the women walked in. The first looked Chinese, but her black hair hung straight and glossy to her shoulders and her hips swayed inside a floral-print, tight-fitting dress as she sauntered to Walt. She trailed her fingers up Walt's shoulder and neck as she rounded the couch. How had he cleared her through the border police? Ashok answered his own question: money and connections.

An Indian woman, bejeweled and supple as a courtesan, sat next to Third. The ruby teardrop of a bindi gleamed on her forehead and geometric motifs in gold and silver thread adorned her sari. She fixed Third with a challenging look from her black-lined eyes, confident she could take anything he could dish out. Never before had Ashok seen that expression on an Indian woman's face. Where had Walt found this loose woman?

"Ashok?" said a third woman, this one to his right, her voice warm and sweet.

He turned his head. If her voice had not fallen so gently to his ears her appearance would have frightened him with its severity. She wore her blond hair pulled tightly back into a ponytail. Her sharp cheeks could deflect men's advances the way the facets of a stealth aircraft deflected radar. Her eyes were brown and narrow and could take an X-ray of a man's soul. A scarlet minidress sheathed her hourglass figure from the upper curves of her breasts to mid-thigh and showed long lean legs.

Ashok felt light-headed. He patted the cushion. "That's me. Have a seat."

She sank into the couch and crossed her legs. Her knees rose and the hem of her dress hiked closer to her quim. "I hear you're a very good programmer." A rented intuition placed her accent to middle America, some small town where robot tractors harvested organic sugar beets and snow lay on the plains five months every winter. Relief flooded him that she had holstered her weapons and dropped her defenses. "It's rare to find a man who excels at something."

Say something. "It can't be that rare."

"It is. Most men are frauds. But I can tell you are real." She

reached out and her narrow fingers loosened the knot of his tie. She drew the tie out of his buttoned-down collar and trailed her hand down his shirt placket. Her fingernails clicked over the synthetic bone buttons. Then the backs of her knuckles brushed over the front of his trousers and his cock hardened inside the tight western pants. "I'm happy to see you too," she said with a sly smile.

Suddenly nervous, Ashok glanced away. The Chinese woman sat next to Walt, kissing him deeply, and she slid her hand inside the front of his pants. On the opposite couch, the Indian courtesan straddled Third; she ground her crotch against his while his hands groped her breasts. His eyes hung half-lidded and his mouth was open like a greedy baby's.

The blonde's fingertips paused over the now-slack front of his trousers. "Did I do something you don't like?"

Ashok returned his attention to her. "Let's go someplace private."

She smiled. "I'd like that too. I know the place." She led him toward the door. Maybe Third watched his back and exulted in his departure, but Ashok didn't care.

The door of the next office down the hall opened for them and dim lights came up around the periphery. It wasn't an office, though, but a bedroom. He'd never been up on this level before, so of course he wouldn't have noticed. Curtains covered the windows but from the silence outside the rain had stopped. A ceiling fan slowly revolved. Mosquito nets draped from the canopy, tied to the four posts of the bed. The sheets and the pillows were as glossy scarlet as her dress.

She stopped at the foot of the bed and glanced over her shoulder. "Oh baby," she said, "I can't go another step." She bent forward at the hips until her chest touched the bed. Her dress rode up her arse. She wore nothing underneath. Shadowed by the firm smooth curves of her arse the juice of her quim glistened. "Take me, baby. I need you to take me."

This was the first time in his life a woman had told him such a thing. Ashok thrashed at his belt and his trouser's fly, then yanked down his shorts. His cock sprung to firmness and he drove it toward her.

“Just a little lower,” she said, and he pushed it down. Her soft slick walls parted around his glans. “Ahh....”

He closed his eyes and thrust his hips. Her arse brushed the lower curve of his belly with each stroke. Her quim felt so soft, so warm, so wet: the mare to his bull. She reached her right hand to her outer folds and rubbed her clitoris, moaning. Another first, taking a woman from this angle; never with the prostitutes the IIT boys had hired, never with Bhavna—

Bhavna, his wife. The sacred flame had witnessed his vow to her, but the heat of his lust outshone it. Negative karma had already attached to his soul. He couldn’t stop. He clutched her waist and straightened his back. He kept thrusting, thrusting, thrusting, deeper, deeper. His orgasm spread from the root of his cock in great waves.

He caught his breath and his cock throbbed as it softened inside her. Bhavna. What had he done? He pulled away from the blonde and grasped for his pants.

The blonde slid forward on the bed and rolled onto her back. “Oh, baby, you have to go already?”

“I shouldn’t have come.”

“As hard as you were?” she said with a lilt. Her smile looked garish and mocking, now.

“I’m married, you strumpet! Do you not respect that? What have I done? Get out. Out!” He shut his eyes and held his shaking fists in front of his face like an outmatched boxer.

He opened his eyes and found himself, fully dressed, seated on the couch in Walt’s office. Third sat across from him with a blank expression while the rain rustled against the window. Walt sat behind his desk. Ashok’s software allowed him to remember, now. His heartbeat slowed and its drumming in his ears faded. It had all been a context-blinded virtual. Nothing but a dream.

Guilt washed his conscience. He had chosen that dream. Ashok could not blame it on his sleeping subconscious and the gates it could open to demons. He gave the keys to the demons when fully awake—

You’re being ludicrous. Don’t blame a demon. Software constructed the pornstar from the urges of your mind. Yet even if that were true, the fact remained that he had believed himself to be

unfaithful. How could he repent? He searched his mind for mantras, weighing them in his mind's mouth and rejecting them all.

Perhaps he needed a virtual encounter with a god. Such virtuals could be had at little cost in money and file transfer time. To come face-to-face with Rama and repent, seeking advice on being a good husband from the most ideal one... Goosebumps rose on Ashok's arms. He never used such things; even seen through the imperfection of a virtual, God was awesome in aspect. The faint glimpse of Rama he imagined in the moment made him shiver. And now, with virtual made perfect, who could do anything but kneel and hope not to be overwhelmed by God's presence? No, he couldn't do that. God would not want to be summoned to hear his trifles.

He had to quit the project. The thought lightened his chest. He would never tell Bhavna what happened, would merely say the project hadn't worked to Walt's satisfaction. She would badger him to take advantage of her father's influence and get a promotion, but such was the price of his penance. He looked at Walt's blank face. Hard to believe he'd seen charisma and confidence in it. When Walt returned to reality he would tell him he would quit the project. Let Third win. Let Bhavna nag him. He would suffer it for her. He would suffer it for himself.



The Chinese girl lay supine across Walt's desk, her small breasts slumped by gravity and rippling with each of his thrusts. He stood next to the desk and clasped her ankles. The backs of her thighs rubbed his belly as he plowed into her. Her hair fanned out on the desktop and her lips parted in a gasp. "Oh baby, you're so big and so strong."

Not much of a personality on this one but her snatch was wet and tight. His first woman since the divorce; Tung's pornstar didn't count. He felt like a man now that a woman gave him his due. His orgasm amassed in his groin, like water filling a reservoir, until it burst out. He pushed his cock as deeply into her as he could and stayed there, rippling his hips, while his semen filled her and he returned to himself.

He pulled away from her and looked for his clothes. Where had he met her? The euphoric afterglow and the scents of their mingled fluids fogged his mind. Not too many Chinese in Bangalore. Could be a scandal if word got out. He'd get the security guards to wipe her name from the visitor roster. Her name?

She sat up with a look of faint alarm. "Baby, was I good for you?"

She better not leave a wet spot on his desk—no problem, the robots would clean it. "Yeah. Great." He backed away and sat. "See you next time."

"Oh, yeah, baby." She dropped her feet to the floor and scampered around the desk for her *cheongsam* dress, wadded it in her arms, then scurried from the room. Her pale, slender rump kept his gaze until she slipped out of sight.

Inside, across the room, the Indian girl stooped over the couch. Her face looked pained and her knuckles clenched on the top rail of the backrest. Walter III stood on the floor behind her, his eyes intense and brooding and his hands clamped her hips. "You never been fucked in the ass before, bitch? Never by a man as big as me. Fuck yeah."

The office door slammed shut behind the Chinese girl and Walt blinked. In that moment, everything changed. Walt's clothes jumped onto his body. Walter III sat, fully dressed, on the couch, and his expression was as blank as a 3d display waiting for an input. The Indian girl had vanished.

Of course the Chinese girl had no personality. She'd been a pornstar and he hadn't realized it. The context blinder worked. Shit yeah! He'd been jittery before Shocker and Walter's arrival, but now he felt energized and confident.

Ashok sat across from Walter III, staring pensively out the window. Walt smiled and strode toward him. "Shocker, you did a great job."

He turned his head. The shape of his eyes was always downcast, but now he looked miserable.

Perfectionism was usually good, but the real world has ship dates. "I mean it," Walt said. "That's the best prototype I've ever seen. Fewer glitches than some commercial software our competitors

have marketed. The next frontier for development should be smoothing the transfer to f&b, but that seems trivial.”

Ashok averted his gaze and kept his dour expression. “Ought we be working on pornography?”

Walt frowned and slowly took his seat. Qualms? Over virtuals? Maybe some All-India Mindlink nonsense. “It bothers you? I didn’t know that. You seemed to enjoy working on the Five Senses project.”

Ashok winced. “I enjoyed the technical challenge. I never used the product. I never used anyone’s product.”

–95% of men virch with pornstars,– Walter III said to Walt’s mind’s ear. Walt glanced over but his son’s face looked as blank as if his attention were still in virtual. –And the other 5% are liars.–

“And you don’t have to again. You’ve got a wife at home who I’m sure keeps you satisfied.” A tightness stole over Ashok’s mouth.

–See that, Dad? You zinged him.–

–I did see it.– Walt replied. “But porn is going to be a major market for this and your experience will give us info for future development. Did the experience seem real throughout?”

Ashok shut his eyes and slid backward on the couch. “Yes. Too real. Walt, I can’t continue with this project.”

Walt stared at Ashok. “Did I hear you right?”

He swallowed but met Walt’s gaze. “Yes, you did.”

I tapped you for a special project, you succeeded, and now you want to piss it away? “I respect you being forthright about this,” Walt said, but then trailed off.

–Dad? Why aren’t you letting him go?–

There was so much work to do. Refining the context blinder, but more importantly, improving the pornstar engine. They needed personalities, not random strewings of porn dialogue. Shocker had proven he could do quality work quickly.

–If he wants to go, let him,– Walter III added. –I can do b/ci coding as well as he can.–

–Can you?– Walt replied. –Yeah, I know, Levy-Sakamura–

–Ashok wouldn’t let me do much. But check my work and you’ll see it’s tight.–

To connive like a champ, Walter III had to be more subtle. Walt

looked at his son from under lowered brows. –I’ll check it. But this isn’t screwing around at Athens New Farm. This could be a hundred-billion-rupee market and I need as many competent people as I can find to turn this prototype into shippable software.–

A pout distended Walter III’s mouth. –You’re the boss.–

Walt inhaled deeply and turned back to Ashok. “But I want you to be sure quitting the project is the right thing to do. You’re the best programmer I’ve got and I’m sure the projects Sharma assigns you aren’t as challenging as this one.” He studied Ashok’s face and saw the other knew Walt spoke the truth. Walt felt his software intuitions churning in the back of his mind, modeling Ashok, and then they crystallized in an idea. The time had come for a dangerous bluff. “But I think Walter III would do a good job leading the project.”

Walt’s concierge helped him keep his face impassive. *Christ, don’t call my bluff. Walter III hasn’t earned the responsibility....*

Ashok’s head jerked. His gaze rove Walter III’s face, which was now as expressionless as in mid-virtual. The muscles around Ashok’s mouth flexed in preparation to speak, but he changed his mind too quickly. Progress, status, challenge, the obvious pissing contest between him and Walter III....

“I don’t have to use Five Senses’s engine again?”

“It’s your choice. You can test future iterations of the context blinder with whatever you want.” Relief eased Walt’s shoulders for a moment, but then annoyance and disbelief came over the private channel from his son. Walt felt the same emotions form in him before Walter III cut the link. *Son, you aren’t ready to run an important project yet, and you know it as well as I–*

Ashok interrupted Walt’s thoughts. “You’ll accept me back on the project?”

Walt blinked to switch gears, then play-frowned at Ashok. “Back? You never left.”