

Electronic Telepathy

Officer KL-124, or Kal to his teammates, received the transmission of a 187—homicide.

As it was 2:43 A.M., he was on his sleep cycle with all but the automated systems on standby mode and his power port plugged in to recharge his batteries. Normally, he ran two to three weeks without recharging, but he had been feeling sluggish, and a quick check revealed the energy cell was down to thirty-five percent.

Kal emerged from his sparse quarters, which provided a modicum of privacy that was more for his human co-workers than for himself, and entered the forensics lab. Motion sensors triggered the overhead lights to illuminate, though he could see in the dark just fine. Except for special occasions, the human police officers in this unit worked a traditional eight to five schedule and left after-hours investigations to Kal, which was his function, after all.

In the parking garage below the station, Kal chose the sedan that belonged to the Cybernetic Forensics Investigation Unit. As soon as he closed the door behind

him, he connected to the vehicle's CPU through his wireless Electronic Telepathy and started the silent electric engine. An instantaneous data transfer told the car its destination, and it rolled out onto the deserted street.

Kal usually drove manually instead of using the car's self-driving mode. It was his way to have dominance over what he considered lesser machinery, and the tactile feel of his hands on the wheel and control on the road satisfied him in a manner he did not quite understand. However, his response time lagged, so he turned the driving over to the more primitive A.I. under the hood. This lag would be imperceptible to humans, but Kal noticed it. Though this wasn't enough to cause concern, he planned to perform a full diagnostic of his hardware and software as soon as he had a free moment.

The city is beautiful this time of night, Kal thought. It was a marked difference between the bustle and chaos of daytime streets. Lights stretched up the sides of towering buildings, brightening the sky with multiple colors. During the day, the sky was gloomy with little sunlight breaking through the peaks of the skyscrapers; but at night, it was like a canvas illuminated with neon paint.

The route to the crime scene brought Kal through the seedier side of his precinct, where most of his cases transpired. In this part of the city, the night was alive with humanity who rarely saw the sun. They filled their lives with drugs, illicit sex, and violence. Many previously outlawed vices were legalized in recent years. However, it didn't change the situation these poor creatures lived in day to day, and it didn't quell the turmoil that infiltrated

the streets. Not for the first time, Kal wondered how a species that seemed intent on killing itself could create such magnificent pieces of art and technology—himself included.

Not everyone, he corrected himself. Some people were kind at heart and wanted to lead good lives. But even the best of them struggled with problems, both internal and external. Kal considered the possibility there was a flaw in their programming, in this case DNA, that prevented humans from ever reaching full potential, both as individuals and as a population.

I don't have perfect programming, either. Of course, imperfect humans created me, so there's no way they could produce perfection.

High-rise buildings gave way to blocky warehouses and industrial parks. Old-fashioned ground rails spider-webbed the open expanses between behemoths that lay like monstrous carcasses under the yellow gloom of ancient sodium-vapor lamps. Chains of boxcars stood on the rusty tracks like sleeping serpents. Concrete suspension railways for high-speed trains criss-crossed overhead, a more efficient means to transport goods to ever-demanding consumers.

Kal approached a modern building incongruent with the dilapidated structures surrounding it. A sign out front marked it as being the state headquarters for the Interstate Transit Bureau. Red and blue flashes showed police activity. He commanded the car to park behind one of two patrol cruisers near the main entrance. A third vehicle, a standard-issue unmarked city police four-door, denoted a detective.

If I were human, I could rise to the rank of detective. I should consider myself fortunate to be designated an "officer." The lab analyzer doesn't have that honor.

Kal exited the car and strode to the patrol officer posted at the door. The officer glowered at him, his lips curling back in an inadvertent scowl. Kal was used to such reactions. Though he was modeled after a human male with an unobtrusive medium build and an unassuming five-foot-ten height, he could not hide the artificiality of his appearance. He was aware of the term "uncanny valley" that referred to human-looking objects that created unease and even revulsion in the onlooker, though he was uncertain why he would cause that reaction despite seeing it almost daily.

"I am Officer KL-124 from C.F.I.U.," Kal said to the patrol officer. He held up the badge that hung around his neck as emphasis. He wore a white uniform that all members of his team were issued, rather than standard police blues, and sometimes other cops found it hard to believe he was on the force. "I was directed to report here and assist in the investigation."

"Detective Sokolovich is inside." The patrolman spat the words, as if trying to dispel an unpleasant taste from his mouth. "Down the hall to the end, second door on the left."

Kal followed the directions, though he would have located the crime scene based on the activity. A second officer stood next to a man sporting graying stubble and wearing a security uniform. Kal assessed that the security guard found the victim and reported it to the police. The detective on the scene had already questioned the guard,

who was now standing by in case further questions arose. Upon seeing Kal, the guard's mouth dropped open and his pupils dilated, a reaction Kal associated with unease in humans. To his credit, however, the patrol officer remained dispassionate and waved Kal through another doorway, which led to an anteroom of a larger office filled with cubicles.

The victim lay dead on the floor, face-down in a pool of blood soaking into his expensive suit. Two more patrol officers stood nearby while Detective Sokolvich, a man in his fifties who could stand to lose thirty or forty pounds, snapped photos of the scene. He glanced up at Kal with bloodshot eyes.

"I am Officer KL—"

"Yeah, fine. I was expecting you." He raised the device in his hand. "I know you'll record the entire crime scene, but I want my own evidence. Sometimes human brains can work better than artificial ones."

Kal wanted to tell Sokolvich he had nothing to explain, but remained silent. The detective displayed an aggressive temperament, so Kal took care to not escalate hostility. He had a job to do, regardless of Sokolvich's feelings toward him.

"Have you identified the victim?"

"Waiting for you to do it, Artie." The nickname "Artie" was a derogatory term often given to beings with artificial intelligence. "The force paid a lot of money for you, so we might as well get our money's worth."

He knows I'm artificial. Why does he think insults will hurt my feelings? Kal turned his attention back to his job. "Any

relevant information I should know before starting my sweep?”

“The guard never saw the vic before. The room was locked and alarm armed.”

“Would the three of you please step into the hall?”

Sokolvich cocked his head toward the door and the patrol officers exited the room. It was standard procedure to allow the C.F.I.U. team full access to the crime scene, and the other cops should not have even been in this room until Kal arrived to conduct his forensic analysis. In his experience, police who worked overnight tended to be sloppy and often contaminated crime scenes. Sokolvich remained in the doorway, a minor act of defiance that told Kal *he* was still in charge.

Kal scanned the body, first with a regular vision, then with ultra-violet, infrared, and several other filters that picked up traces unable to be seen by human eyes. He would record organic residue such as hair, bodily fluids, and even fingerprints left on clothing and would gather all but the most microscopic of any biological samples he detected.

He searched all pockets for identification, but found no wallet, and then rotated the corpse onto its back, taking care not to smear any more blood. Upon locating a bloody hole in the front of the victim's suit, Kal inspected closer and discovered a bullet hole in the left side of the man's chest. No exit wound existed. Using the size of the wound, the body's position, and the dimensions of the office, he calculated the calibre and trajectory of the bullet. He used the limited X-ray technology built into his

vision and detected a metallic mass embedded in the victim's damaged heart.

Excellent shot, but in these conditions, the killer didn't need to be an expert marksman.

Kal recorded an image of the victim's face. The man died with his eyes open, which would help with facial recognition. He connected to his vehicle's network via Electronic Telepathy and searched the police database for matches. The results were ninety-eight point three percent accurate that this was State Senator James Boggins. To confirm, Kal placed his fingertips onto those of the dead man, whose open hand was still pliable, being only in the early stages of rigor mortis. The sensors on his fingertips recorded the man's fingerprints, and they matched the senator's.

He continued to evaluate the deceased, retrieving fibers from his clothing, samples from under his fingernails, and even scrapings from his teeth, to analyze further at the lab. Based on evidence, the approximate time of death was three hours ago.

The floor revealed no clues. A lot of footprints, as expected in a business office. Based on residual heat signatures, the most recent sets belonged to the police. Beyond that were the prints of the victim himself. No sign of a second person in the room at the same time Senator Boggins was killed.

Kal followed the victim's tracks. He entered through the door that Detective Sokolovich was blocking.

"Excuse me," Kal said. "I need to examine the hallway."

Sokolovich huffed, then stepped aside to allow Kal to continue his investigation.

“Boggins had approached from the main entry,” Kal explained to Sokolvich. “He stood outside this door momentarily, presumably to disarm the alarm, then entered the anteroom. Within several minutes—I am unable to determine the exact time—Boggins was shot and died from blood loss. The killer did a good job covering his tracks, literally.”

“What was he doing here at midnight in the first place?” Sokolvich asked.

“Unclear.”

“Did he have any connections to the Transit Bureau?”

“One moment.” Kal accessed the database again. He found no police records, so broadened the search to news reports and official government filings.

“Damn, that’s creepy,” one of the patrol officers said under his breath. Of course, Kal heard it. When he ran network searches, his body fell even more into the uncanny valley, and it was often unsettling to onlookers. He hoped his manufacturers, Eden Labs, developed an upgrade soon to prevent this reaction—even a blinking light that would show activity instead of just stiffening like a mannequin with blank eyes.

The search ended within seconds. “Senator Boggins served on the committee that oversees guidelines in how the state interacts with the Interstate Transit Bureau, which is under federal jurisdiction. Each state has authorization to legislate how best the I.T.B. operates within its borders.”

“Riveting,” Sokolvich said. “It brings us back to why he was here, and who he was with. A politician doesn’t just

show up at a federal installation in the middle of the night for no reason.”

Kal turned to the security guard. “I need access to the main alarm console and security camera recordings.”

The guard escorted Kal and Sokolvich to a back room with a console filled with monitors showing various angles of both inside the building and the property outside. He shifted from one foot to the other, keeping as much distance from Kal as possible.

“You saw nothing on these screens?” Kal asked.

“I-I wasn’t in here during the time of...I would’ve been outside doing my rounds. Here, I’ll show you.”

He typed on the keyboard and then the main monitor switched to a view of the rear of the building with a timestamp of 11:35 P.M. The guard appeared on the screen, meandering along the grounds.

Sokolvich checked his notes for the guard’s name. “Arliss, right?”

Arliss, the guard, nodded.

“How long does it take you to do your rounds outside?”

“Maybe a half an hour.”

“And you saw nothing out of the ordinary?”

“Not until I found...you know...”

“No one else you know of on property? You didn’t see any cars?”

“N-no, sir.”

“Okay. Pull up the video of the room where the murder took place.”

Arliss typed again, and then frowned. “I don’t understand. The recording for that camera is gone.”

Sokolovich turned to Kal, as if expecting some answer from him. Kal raised his eyebrows.

“Try the hallway.”

“Not here, either.” Arliss ran a hand over his mouth. He typed again. “And I just tried cameras in the parking lot and front entrance. Nothing.”

“Erased or never recorded?” Sokolovich asked.

Arliss shrugged. “Doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“Where is the access panel for the security system?” Kal asked? Arliss flipped open a hinged cover to reveal several data ports. Kal retrieved a cable from a hidden slot in his wrist and plugged it into a port. He accessed the data with an emergency police override code. “The videos were not erased. Those cameras were turned off at 2047.”

“That wasn’t me,” Arliss said in a panic. “My shift didn’t start until ten. I can prove it.”

Sokolovich sighed. “No one is accusing you. We’re just trying to gather the facts.”

“It wasn’t done from this console,” Kal said. “I located a breach. Someone tied in remotely.”

“How? This is a closed system.”

“It is equipped with an emergency back door for the security company and federal agencies.”

Sokolovich rubbed his temple. “That means anyone could have hacked in.”

Kal nodded, a gesture he picked up from his coworkers. “I want to check one more thing.” His body stiffened again as he conducted another search. “The alarm pads to the main entrance and to the crime scene show no activity once they were activated at 1730, not even when you arrived, Detective. My assessment is

whoever deactivated the cameras also turned off the recording function on those pads.”

“Premeditated murder,” Sokolovich said. He put his hand behind his head and stretched.



THE SENATOR'S BODY WAS TAKEN TO THE MORGUE, WHERE IT would remain in stasis until the investigation was complete, upon which time the police would release it to next of kin for proper disposal.

Detective Sokolovich retreated to his own office to file the report, grumbling about the mess this murder was causing—a case this high profile would involve the highest level of the police department, the media, and government officials, all of whom would apply pressure to solve the crime with urgency. Kal sympathized with him because he knew the detective was in over his head. Sokolovich worked the overnight shift for a reason—it was none of Kal's business, but those hours were reserved for rookies, those with behavior problems, or old-timers who were marking time before retirement. Sokolovich was no rookie, so Kal could only speculate on which of the remaining categories fit the detective.

Kal returned to the lab with the evidence he gathered, both physical and virtual. He ran analysis on the samples from the crime scene, but nothing brought him any closer to finding the identity of the killer. Since the physical evidence did not lead anywhere, he turned his attention to the virtual.

He recalled the coding of the security system he stored

in his memory and examined it line by line. The hack entry point was obvious, but the hackers left no breadcrumbs to lead back to them.

They must have made a mistake somewhere. Humans always do.

He repeated the procedure hundreds of times, searching for something he may have overlooked. He was closing in on a thousand when his teammates reported to work, so he paused the search to greet them.

Officer Raul Ortega arrived first, as usual. He had spiky blue hair that went against department regulations that was overlooked because he was on a special crime unit. He liked an outrageous appearance, but his work ethic was impeccable.

"Hey, Kal! You're up early. Got an overnigher, huh?"

"Yes. I'm still working through my analysis."

"With dedication like that, you'll make detective any day now."

Kal frowned at Ortega's obvious untruth, but processed it as an attempt at ironic humor.

Sergeant Maria Fontana burst in with Officer Jennine Yoshida right at her heels. Fontana wasted no time with pleasantries and directed her attention to Kal. "I saw Sokolovich's report. What's your take?"

"Guess we're diving in headfirst this morning," Ortega said. "Fully clothed. No goggles."

Fontana shot him an icy glare, and he shut his mouth.

Kal recited what he learned from the investigation so far. Fontana kept constant eye contact with him. *She could pass for an artificial being herself.*

Ortega leaned forward and propped his elbows on the corner of the desk to listen to the recount.

Yoshida busied herself with morning activities. She had never quite warmed up to Kal, though she tolerated him. Despite her feigning disinterest in his report, her tilted head gave away the fact that she was indeed paying attention.

“Let’s go over what we know and what we don’t,” Fontana said. This was Detective Sokolvich’s case, but it was the responsibility of the C.F.I.U. team to deliver to him whatever evidence they could decipher, so he could make an educated call. They often solved the cases, leaving the lead detective to make the arrest. “At 8:47 P.M., someone unknown hacked into the security system of the Interstate Transit Bureau and deactivated specific cameras and alarm pads. The security guard arrived on duty at ten, and at 11:30 started his rounds outside. During this time, Senator Boggins and our killer entered the building, sight unseen. They went into that office where Boggins was shot and killed. The perp departed, leaving no evidence of his having been there.”

“Or her,” Ortega said. “No need to assume it was a man.”

Fontana pursed her mouth at him. “The *killer* left no evidence. Including any residual heat signature. Two hours later, Haverback discovered the body. Our unknowns: why Boggins was there; who he was with; how the killer left no trace; and how the security system was hacked.”

“How did the killer get away?” This was the first time Yoshida spoke since arriving. “Just vanish into the night?”

"The senator's car," Kal said. "It was not at the I.T.B. building."

Fontana turned to Yoshida. "Run a check on the registration of any vehicles Boggins owned, then trace their GPS locations throughout the night."

Yoshida sat at a workstation and concentrated on the computer.

To Ortega, Fontana said, "Find out everything about the Transit Bureau oversight committee Boggins was on. I want to know his position on it, anything controversial, opponents he may have had, whether he had any financial interest in it. Everything."

It would be more efficient if I conducted that research, Kal thought. I can process information exponentially faster than they can. But maybe I overlooked something that requires a human brain to register, some connection that would pass right by me because I don't have the proper context. I can deliver facts, but not nuance. Kal watched as Ortega and Yoshida worked. They were serious, dedicated, and skilled. *If I had those human qualities, they would become obsolete. I wouldn't want that.*

Fontana addressed him. "I need you to continue working on the hack. We *have* to get to the bottom of it. Examine it from all angles. Try to reverse engineer it if you have to. What would *you* do if you needed to hack into this?"

"I will do my best." What if my best isn't enough? This is possibly the most important case I ever worked on. What if I fail? Maybe it would prove that artificial intelligence is too limited, that containing it in an android body is too expensive? They would transfer my intelligence into a computer, and there

I would remain, forever unable to be independent. A virtual slave.

“Kal?”

He snapped back to the present.

“I thought I lost you there for a second. Is everything all right?”

“Yes. Later I need to run a diagnostic. I’ve detected some abnormalities that need to be addressed. Nothing serious, I assure you.”

“Okay. Get to work.”



