

Parts

THE SENATE

The attendees were a distinguished bunch, and varied. The chairman was Dr. Hal Burke—expert on Human/Robot Relations. His hair was a metallic quaff of silver and brown, as was his beard. His suit was the impeccable kind in the old cut as was almost unseen since the Revolution. To his left sat a robotic figure who would make little sense in the context of a twenty-first century imagination. With unblinking, beady eyes that shone with a lazy yellow hue and a face that more closely resembled a napkin dispenser than a human visage, Dr. Gauge cut a somewhat ridiculous figure, albeit an intimidating one due to his height, which was remarkable even when seated. Though his face, with its expressionless countenance and utilitarian features seemed more accustomed to taking orders than issuing them, Gauge had long been one of the city's richest and most well-known inhabitants.

To the right of Burke sat a man who would have been better suited to wandering cobblestone Victorian streets than ultra-modern city passages, yet here he was. With his jet-black handlebar moustache, his towering top hat at a forty-five degree angle and his impeccable dress (something between a lawyer and a count), Mr. Vaynor sat slouched in his chair, twirling a guttering cigarette between his yellowed fingertips.

Around the table sat the figures of the senate who served the eight boroughs of the city and surrounding municipalities. They were half robot and half human, as was the custom since the city's inception, and they were waiting.

Burke cleared his throat.

“We have come together on this, the seventeenth day of March, twenty-one-fifty-four to discuss the implementation of a bill allowing the creation of un-brained robotic beings for the express purpose of sexual service. Dr. Gauge, you have the floor.”

“I have said my piece and would like to remain silent for the duration of the proceedings,” Gauge said immediately.

“Apologies, Doctor, but any and all conversations either spoken, written, or implied beyond the confines of this chamber will not be admitted into the official record, and will not count in the ruling.”

Gauge made no motion to object, but to those who knew him, his rage was obvious.

“I will not support such an abomination. Nor will I continue to engage in civilized conversation with those for whom this topic is little more than a formality.”

“Well, it’s hardly a formality,” Burke said, hiding his smirk with a sip of coffee.

“The discussion of whether to allow the free market to distribute sexually-able robots devoid of free will is not one I will willingly accept as reality. Obviously, I cannot allow such a conversation to pass freely into the books with my name attached to it.”

“Oh, come off it,” Vaynor drawled, lighting a cigarette. “It’s happening whether you like it or not.”

“As I suspected,” Gauge said.

Burke laid his hand over the robot’s.

“He doesn’t mean the ruling. This is still a conversation.”

“Let’s see how relaxed you are when the hearing for sexual-based cloning finally comes up. I expect you’ll be singing rather a different tune.”

“These proceedings are to determine whether robots built for the express purpose of human sexual usage would be an asset to our society, or a liability; no other issues beyond that are valid as of this instance,” Burke said, turning a bit red.

“Obviously you know my opinion, and I can assure you I will not be changing it,” Gauge said, crossing his arms.

“Well, you can imagine what I’ve got to say,” Vaynor said, sitting straighter in his chair. “Anything that keeps the scum from going after our city’s most vulnerable has my vote, hands down.”

“Let the record show Mr. Vaynor has voted aye,” one of the delegates stated from the far end of the table.

Burke raised his hand.

“This conversation is off the record until a consensus is reached. Mr. Vaynor, please do not attempt to vote until the end.”

“You saying you want those pre-verts out there going after our people? What if one of them got Jenny, hmm? I doubt very much you’d be so procedural then.”

Burke sighed and closed his eyes.

“Can we stay on topic, please?”

“I for one cannot condone such a ruling,” one of the delegates to the left stated, banging their fist against the table. “The production of robotic bodies, brained or un-brained, is not a victimless act. To produce a body with enough brain for nubile compliance and not enough for opinion is an act against all of us--not to mention that it is the furthest thing from progress, and an insurmountable step in the wrong direction.”

“But what of the vulnerable humans *and* robots for whom such a thing as rape would leave them scarred for life? What of them?” a man asked. “To create a body that satisfies the needs of those for whom healthy, consensual relations are--apparently--unachievable, would remove, for the most part, the risk for those with more advanced psyches falling into irreparable damage.”

“The facts have shown in other places that when this practice has been implemented, the statistics regarding violent sexual crimes have decreased dramatically,” Burke stated, reading from a sheet of paper on the table before him.

“But not ceased.”

Burke looked to the man who’d spoken, noting the glow of his eyes and the perfection of his hairline. An android--and an expensive one at that.

“No, not ceased. But if your argument is that those citizens who make up the undamaged statistics don’t matter, or don’t appreciate the reduction...”

“I’m simply saying perhaps we should not be so quick to assuage these monsters for a few minor wins, and a hell of a lot of losses.”

“But obviously we have to do something,” Vaynor said, “unless you’d rather we remain little better than the birds and beasts.”

The android narrowed his eyes.

“If you are implying, sir, that we the robotic are little more than...”

“Oh, can it,” Vaynor drawled, puffing lightly at his cigar. “Don’t make this about you.”

“I don’t speak for myself, sir; I speak for the robotic populace who live each day with the constant reminder that they’re little better than slaves run amok, as far as the humans are concerned.”

“These beings would not be intelligent,” Burke said, steering the conversation back. “They would masquerade as intelligent, but they would not be brained. They would be little more than lights and recordings, and if the other cities are to be trusted, they would stem the flow of assaults against *both* humans and robots.”

“Oh, yes? What about the first time those freaks get a taste of their little robot slaves and decide that brainless isn’t quite enough for them? What then?”

“Then we’re back where we started. At any rate, that hasn’t happened in other places it’s been tested.”

“And how far back does your data go?”

Burke hesitated.

“Ten or twelve years.”

The android snorted.

“You cannot make decisions based on what worries you, or how unpleasant you may find something,” Burke said with a sigh. “The fact is that sexual crimes are on the rise in our city, and this method has been proven to work in other areas experiencing the same thing. We *cannot* know every possibility, or eventuality, but we *can* act with the information we have. People are dying--or worse--and we as a society have a way to help. The game is not one that any of us wish to play, but it is, unfortunately, the one we are playing.”

The silence was cut by a snort to Burke’s right.

“Could always bring back the gallows,” Vaynor muttered.

“The gallows existed long ago, for a lengthy period, and we still have rapists and murderers today. We are looking for a solution, not a show.”

“Who would make them?” a man spoke up from the back.

Burke turned his weary eyes to the fellow. The man appeared to be in his early twenties--well dressed and classically handsome, with a head of thick black hair and deep, blue eyes.

“Beg pardon?” Burke asked.

“Who would physically make the robots?” the man asked, resting his elbows on the table.

“You mean what factory would be used?”

“Well, that, and also, who would the employees be who would physically make them with their hands?”

“We can hardly know such a thing at this point.”

“Your best guess.”

“Well...most likely one of the factories in Central and South America that manufacture most of the robots we have now.”

“And who works primarily in those factories?” the man asked.

Burke cleared his throat.

“If you are implying some level of wickedness in asking robots to assemble other robots for the sake of protecting women and children *and* other robots up here...”

“Would they fully understand the purpose of these robots?”

“Well, I don’t...obviously every effort would be made to ensure they understood it was for protection, and not for the sake of rich playboy North Americans to descend even further into moral degradation...”

“And would they believe that, you think? Not even that, but, would you want them to? Do you want them to understand what’s going on out there, and to build these creatures that are supposedly needed to stem such an awful tide?”

“We could choose a factory with human workers...” Burke said, turning a deeper shade of red. “We don’t have to turn this into the most sordid thing imaginable.”

“But isn’t it?” the young man asked. “Or do you not find this sordid?”

“You know goddamn well I do!” Burke shouted, bringing his fist down on the table. “No part of this is anything but unsavoury for me, and I’ll stand toe to toe with anyone who believes otherwise.”

The delegates shifted in their seats, muttering amongst themselves.

“I am simply trying to find a solution for something which seems impossible to eradicate. These people are out there, they want to do awful things, and there doesn’t seem to be anything we can do to stop that.”

“Now hold yourself there,” Gauge said, sitting forward in his seat. “That is not entirely correct.”

Burke turned slowly to meet the robot’s gaze.

“Such genetic manipulation is far from approval for the open market.”

“But it *is* possible,” the robot said. “Just as possible as the solution you’re putting forth-- except for once it would be *your* kind under the knife, being moulded into something less obtrusive.”

“I didn’t once say that I *liked* the solution of brainless sex bots...”

“And yet it is the only one being discussed here today.”

Burke sighed heavily, checking his watch.

“Gentlemen, a consensus must be reached today, or it’ll be another year before this bill sees light again.”

“I say we put ‘er through and revisit in a year,” Vaynor said, mashing his cigar into the bottom of his coffee cup. “Get something done now, so we’ve got something to show, and fine-tune it down the road.”

“We could just as easily amend the bill right now,” Gauge said, producing a pen from his pocket. “Vote unanimously to push forward genetic modification and see where that gets us in a year. No harm in curing what can be cured before it has a chance to spread.”

“Sexual deviance is hardly contagious,” Burke said before he could catch himself.

“Ignorance, however, that is catching. Race riots, those are catching,” Gauge said, trying to catch Burke’s gaze.

“We are not rewriting the whole damned thing. We vote on what we have, or we walk.”

Gauge stood suddenly, knocking his chair to the floor.

“The record will show Dr. Gauge votes nay,” the robot said, heading for the door. “And if there are any patriots in this room, they will do the same.”

THE RUNAWAY

The Landfill sat down river from the city proper on a leaky, disease-ridden peninsula to which few ever ventured. Established in the mid twenty-first century, it quickly became the foremost landfill for the entire city, handling waste from all the households, businesses, and factories within a fifty mile radius. Though bustling from a shipping and receiving standpoint, the place was not frequented by any humans, owing to the high degree of radioactive and drug-related waste that so dominated the city’s garbage. The company was owned and run by robots

who were impervious to the dangers of such things, (or at least resistant), and it was rare to see a human being within ten miles of the plant.

And yet, were one to stand at a dump-facing window and apply binocular to eye on that particular sunny afternoon, they would make out the incongruous form of a young man of about eighteen, sitting atop a heap of mechanical garbage, sifting in search of something unseen. The youth, a boy of middling height and skinny build--far too pale to be out in such sun--sat atop the pile, not with the imperious weight of a king overseeing his lands, but with the furtive, apologetic presence of one to whom the world has never readily surrendered anything. His back was bent and his legs splayed as he pulled metallic limbs and joints from the wreckage and held them briefly to various parts of his body. He dug deep, and confidently so, as if nothing could cut or impale him; his skinny arm wriggling like a worm in a fresh corpse. Some of the pieces he laid down beside himself. Most, he tossed over his shoulder without a backward glance.

After a while, when the pile beside his ragged thigh was three or four high, the boy suddenly grabbed the pieces to his scrawny chest and took off into the trees.

The ground was littered with rusted cans and broken pieces of metal of every make and use, and the boy had to move slowly to avoid cutting his feet and legs. His eyes darted from side to side under the damp veil of his bangs. It was clear he was looking for something, but what that something might have been was not clear until he stumbled upon a small grove backed by a steep rock face. As he crossed to the rock, though, he suddenly began to cough. Dropping his spoils into the grass, he held his hands to his mouth until the coughing stopped. It took a few minutes, but eventually the color returned to his cheeks and he gathered the pieces he'd collected and wriggled over to the rock where he set about clearing the junk from the potentially useful pieces.

Half of the recovered items were ruled useless from rust alone. The remaining half were divided into the segments that were valuable, but broken, and the bits he was unfamiliar with that might be of use to someone with a few dollars. Not a single piece was in any way useful to his needs.

There were no tears. He was beyond that now. But the exhaustion of the day was overwhelming. Leaning against the rock, he glanced once around the clearing to see if there was somewhere more protected he could sleep. Finding nothing better, he closed his eyes and was instantly asleep.

The figure had watched the whole thing from the trees. He'd seen the boy race to the top of the trash heap and rifle through it. He'd watched as the boy ran into the woods and collapsed into the grass; watched him sort through the pieces and fall asleep. It was clear that something--perhaps several things--had taken the wind out of his sails, but it was impossible to know more without getting closer.

There were twigs and wires and dead leaves and other unseen alarms stretching between them, but the figure drifted over them as if they weren't there. These woods were familiar--as were their hazards--and there was nothing to fear.

The boy was still asleep as the figure approached, allowing for a closer inspection. That he was sick was obvious--his face was gaunt, his muscles atrophied--but what was the illness? Radiation poisoning was on the rise from the recent leaks, but his hands were un-calloused and the rest of him was far too emaciated besides. There was no way he was a factory worker.

The figure leaned closer and brushed a hair from the boy's forehead.

The boy woke.

There in front of him, staring as only a robot could was an early model server robot. The robot's face was only inches away, its expression frozen in the open compliance of all robots of the early days. It was braced with its hands against the rock on either side of the boy's head, as if to keep him from running.

The boy's hand twitched towards the pile of metal, but the robot saw the movement and quickly slid the pieces out of arm's reach with a scuffed, metallic foot.

"I will not hurt you," it stated, unblinking.

The boy squinted, unsure what to say.

"Are you injured?"

The boy paused then shook his head. He looked quite pale, and there were beads of sweat on his small forehead.

"Can you stand?" The robot's voice was electrical and distant sounding, but otherwise clear.

The boy nodded, sliding up the rock face to stand unsteadily before the robot.

The robot straightened too, towering over the boy.

"It is very dangerous to be out here alone. There are scavengers and wild animals and all manner of dangers."

The boy squinted at the robot. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"Is there something I can do for you?" the robot asked.

The boy licked his lips.

"I'm thirsty," he said.

"I can remedy that," the robot said. "Would you like to come with me?"

The boy hugged himself, as if caught in a draft only he could feel. Then he nodded once and pushed off from the wall.

“Do you want those?” the robot asked, gesturing at the pile of metallic pieces.

The boy paused, then shook his head and began walking back towards the dump.

“This way,” the robot said, heading in the opposite direction.

The cabin was made entirely of white wooden planks which were clearly chopped from the nearby trees. It blended so perfectly into the foliage that it would be easily overlooked by a random passerby. It looked sound, though perhaps a little rough around the edges; flawed, as if made by the passionate, yet not-altogether knowledgeable hands of someone driven from a life in the city to scratch a living off the land.

The door was unlocked, and swung open at a touch. The boy stood on the threshold, sniffing the air inside. It was sharp and tangy in a way he hadn't encountered before, and smelled vaguely wet.

“It's moss, among other things,” the robot said. “I keep a garden in the back, and the windows are always open so some of it creeps inside. It's alright.”

The boy hesitated, then he took a step inside and collapsed.

The robot was preparing something on a hot plate. The boy's stomach growled loud enough the robot turned around.

“I was wondering when you would come around. I didn't know who to call.”

The robot was folded into a chair, its legs bent and back bowed. At 6'2", the robot was not remarkable; it was the same slender, nubile form the boy had seen all his life: slender, to allow for easy storage, and tall, to reach the top shelves of any kitchen or pantry. The boy had

Brianna Ferguson

not, however, seen a servant robot sit so comfortably before. Normally, such robots remained standing no matter the occasion. One never knew when their services would be needed somewhere, and quickly.

“Were you hoping to convert?” the robot asked, stirring the small pot on the counter before him.

The boy looked taken aback, but remained silent.

“With those pieces you collected,” the robot tried again, “were you hoping to convert yourself into a robot using those rusted pieces of metal?”

“Yes.”

“And how were you going to do that?”

The boy’s lip quivered.

“I don’t know.”

“There are better places for that sort of thing than the dump.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“There are places you can exchange parts for labour.”

The boy pushed himself up on the floor.

“I don’t know anything about anything. I haven’t even graduated yet.”

“You’d be surprised,” the robot said, turning the hot plate off and rising to his feet. “Do you want some soup?”

The boy nodded. His lips were almost blue, and his skin was as white as the daisies in the window box.

“I’ve been out of practice for a while, but this should taste good,” the robot said, grabbing a spoon and lowering the pot onto the floor beside the boy. The boy shifted over and leaned

Brianna Ferguson

towards the bowl. As soon as the robot straightened back up, the boy grabbed a spoonful and took a sip without blowing on it.

“I would say you should blow on it first, but this plate doesn’t warm things up terribly well, anyways.”

The boy made no indication of hearing, slurping away at the soup as if he hadn’t eaten in years.

“Why would you want to convert?”

The boy went on slurping, not looking up.

“There are always options: government programs for youth, group homes, boarding schools...”

Silence.

“You don’t need to die.”

The boy stopped slurping a moment and sat up.

“No?”

“No--converting to Roboticism should be the last option in anyone’s mind; especially these days. It’ll all get worse before it gets better.”

The boy frowned and went back to his soup.

“You think becoming a robot is dying?”

“In the traditional sense of the word, yes. Your body would cease to function. Obviously your experiences would go on, but you wouldn’t age or breathe or taste the soup in that bowl.”

“That’s not the same thing as dying,” the boy said, sitting back and staring the robot in the eye. “When you die, you don’t do anything. Robots can do tons of things. They can do more than human beings can.”

“You can’t possibly understand,” the robot said. He stood abruptly and went to the window where he rested his hands on the sill and stared out at the forest. “It isn’t how you think.”

“I’m dying,” the boy said.

The robot turned.

“We’re all dying.”

“I have cancer.”

“There are many treatments available.”

“And I’ve tried them all. I only have a month. Probably less.”

The robot couldn’t frown, but the light in his eyes dimmed as he glanced down at the floor. He wished he could smell the room. He wished more than anything he could grab the boy’s soup and taste it for himself. But what would the point be of giving robots taste and smell? There were already systems in place to protect humans from every avoidable danger. To give robots senses would be unnecessary forays into pleasure, and that was something the senate still would not consider.

“I know someone who can help,” the robot said, “but I cannot guarantee he will not demand a high price for his services. I wish I could put it a better way, but I can’t.”

The boy frowned.

“How soon could you take me to him?”

The robot glanced outside. A storm was beginning to brew, but it would be hours before it reached them.

“If we left now, we could make it before the rain. Can you stand?”

The boy pursed his lips and pushed against the wall but only managed to bring beads of sweat to his forehead and even more color from his cheeks.

“I will carry you,” the robot said, bending and scooping the boy into his arms.

The boy was light as a feather as the robot turned and headed out the door. There were many things he thought of to say as they headed into the woods, but he kept them all to himself. He *could* just let the boy die, of course. One less human was one less human. But if he did so, he wouldn't have a moral leg to stand on when war broke out, and he needed to stand. There would not be many more chances to right the wrongs of the past, and this was the clearest way to start.

A single rain drop splashed onto his shoulder, and he quickened his pace. It would be hours before they reached the sewer door, and even then, who actually knew if they'd get in?

“Hold tight to me,” he said to the boy as he broke into a run. “It'll be a while yet before we're out of this mess.”

THE COUNTRY

“Are you sure you weren't followed?”

The boy glanced over his shoulder, his silver head cocked.

“I don't think I was.”

The girl smiled and pressed her lips against his. As she pulled away, the heat of her skin left a foggy patch on each cheek.

“What did you get?” the boy asked, pointing to a sack on the floor.

The girl frowned.

“Few bottles of water, some bread. Not much. I tried, but they were everywhere.”

Brianna Ferguson

“It doesn’t matter. In two days we’ll be in the country and there’s nothing else they can do.”

The girl nodded, but her eyes said something else.

“What?”

“Dirk’s never been reliable before. What makes you think he’s got our backs this time?”

“Because this time it’s not some scuffle he can turn a profit on. He knows it’s time to pick a side.”

“I hope so...”

Galileo looked ready to say something else, something that would start them fighting, and now was not the time.

“Did you catch the 2:00 report?” Gwen asked, squeezing his hand.

“They’ve taken the square. Town Hall was evacuated. People are being told to stay in their homes but half the houses are on fire, or about to be.”

“Jesus.”

“They’re not even trying to get the bodies out of the streets. They stopped this morning. Some streets are just impassable. There’s no one left who isn’t military.”

“Christ.”

The robot wrapped his arms around the girl, and she wrapped hers around him, kissing him at his temple.

“We’re gonna make it.”

The girl pulled away.

“Have they announced why?”

“It was the boy.”

Brianna Ferguson

“Just him?”

“You can’t take a human-robot transition and sell it into slavery without a few people getting very unhappy.”

“But it was a total mistake.”

“That may be, and that would have been bad enough, but he died.”

“Jesus.”

“The senate has dissolved. No one knows where the orders are coming from.”

“It’ll be Gauge.”

“Most likely. If it is, he’ll use the Gas...”

Gwen sighed.

“I can’t believe it’s come to this...I mean, I can, but I never thought it would actually happen in our lifetimes.”

“We should get moving,” Galileo said, taking Gwen’s hand in his. The sewers were dark, but he knew the way.

The day had given way to a fiery night, but they could see none of it below the city. The cries and the gunfire were easily heard for a while, whenever they passed beneath a storm drain, but eventually the noise gave way to an eerie silence, forcing them to slow their steps and keep out of the water lest someone hear their progress from above.

Gwen squeezed Galileo’s shoulder.

“I’m freezing,” she whispered.

Galileo turned and saw immediately that her lips were blue and her arms, clutched in front of her chest, looked frozen in place.

“We’ll stop here,” Galileo said, lifting her under her arms and up into a pipe that branched off of the main tunnel. He wanted to scold her for not saying something sooner, but he understood.

“I wish I could warm you up,” he said, staring helplessly at her trembling form.

“There are some matches in the sack. We can burn the sack and carry the water and bread from here. Or eat it, I suppose. We should be in the country tomorrow, right?”

Galileo nodded.

“Should be.”

Gwen sighed softly, lying back against the pipe as the bag sprang to flame. Her eyes were closed and Galileo wondered if she’d fallen asleep.

“I feel sorry for that boy,” she said suddenly. “I feel sorry for all of them, really. None of this would have happened if the senate hadn’t passed that disgusting law.”

“Well...” Galileo began without knowing how to finish. He had all the numbers in his head--all the probabilities and possibilities calculated down to the nearest percentage that reality would allow--but what was the point in saying any of it? It happened. The city was under siege and there was no longer a place for them there, if there ever had been...

“I hope the kids made it out alright.”

“What was left of them,” Galileo said without thinking.

Gwen’s lips stretched out in a thin, unhappy line.

“I’m sure they did. Dirk may not have been great to his fellow man but he did genuinely want to help the kids. Made him sick to see them in trouble.”

“That’s true.”

“It’ll be alright, Gwenny,” Galileo said, sliding the back of his hand over her damp forehead. He couldn’t feel the fever setting in, but he could detect it. His sensors were more than enough for that, and right now she was approaching a hundred and one. He would need to get her some warm water and warmer clothes, and soon; and for that, he would need to go above ground, which would mean leaving her unprotected.

“I’m going to check out the tunnel a little ways,” he said, kissing her forehead.

“What do you think it’ll look like? The cabin and the grounds...”

“Gorgeous, I expect. There’s supposed to be a river, and fruit trees.”

Gwen giggled.

“I have never actually seen fruit growing on a tree.”

“Neither have I. But tomorrow we’ll see it together,” Galileo said, squeezing her hand once more. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Just rest.”

Gwen nodded and settled a little closer to the fire.

Galileo stared down at her, imprinting every detail of her face into his memory. Then he snuck down off the ledge and raced silently down the tunnel as only a robot could.

It was immediately apparent as he poked his head up through a drain that they hadn’t gone nearly as far as he’d hoped. The buildings weren’t government controlled, but they were still high rises. There were fewer of them, granted, but there wasn’t a single family home in sight. With the lights out in all of them, they towered dark and silent over the street, disappearing into the smoky clouds. His scanners didn’t detect any Gas, but that didn’t mean much. He was an old model, and much had been done in technology since his original build.

Glancing once more up and down the street, Galileo braced his hands on the cement and quickly pushed himself up and onto the road. A quick scan told him there was no organic life in two kilometres, and he had his pick of the closest buildings--most of which were, thankfully, apartments.

Leaving the sewer lid on the ground to remind him which hole he'd exited through, he slipped into the closest building and took the stairs three at a time to the eighth floor. The first apartment offered little in the way of clothing, but there was plenty of food that hadn't had a chance to go bad. He found a plastic bag and quickly filled it with whatever he could find, trying to ignore the fact that the suite looked almost identical to his and Gwen's first place in the Village. No doubt it was burnt to a crisp now, he realized with a shudder. The Village--well-known for its liberal bent--had been one of the first neighbourhoods to be targeted.

The next apartment held no clothes either, (the former occupants of the building having obviously received the signal to evacuate before the first of the fighting broke out), but the decorative blankets on the couches would do.

He could think of no one to pray to as he made his way back to the lobby, but he muttered a soft wish that the cabin remain standing and free, and that they might make it there tomorrow. It was a long shot, sure--especially given how little they'd actually traveled so far--but they *had* to make it. They just had to. They'd been lucky so far with the sewers remaining un-raided, but that luck wouldn't hold for long. The city was neutralized, and the sewers would be next.

Gwen was asleep when he got back. His scans informed him the fever hadn't progressed, and that her temperature was actually falling. Not wishing to wake her, he was silent as he unfurled the blankets and draped them over her.

He sat back against the curve of the wall, grateful to not feel cold, but envious of the cheerful crack of the fire. What would it be like to be able to feel the heat, he wondered. At one point he had approached Dirk about an upgrade, and Dirk had said it would be possible. But that was before he'd been forced to flee. Who knew what he'd been able to take with him?

Although he'd seen the whole disaster coming, Galileo had to admit he felt the same as Gwen. How unfair was it that they'd been forced to live in such tempestuous times? He knew, of course, that almost every generation had its own chaos and trauma, but certainly some were worse than others. And this conflict was going to get much worse before it got better.

He would be lying, though, were he to say he was not in some way relieved that conflict had finally broken out. He was, obviously, heartbroken for those who had lost their lives, and those who would soon do so. But it was a tragedy that was largely unavoidable, and he could not devote much energy to mourning inevitabilities. Everything that needed to come to pass would eventually do so. It was a waste to spend one's time fighting fate. Besides, he had lived long enough to see robots go from being little more than cash registers and dusters, to being legal, autonomous citizens. For the first thirty years of his own life, he'd done nothing more than manufacture and replace tires on mining vehicles. He'd seen robots used like currency; seen them harvested for their parts without a second thought. And he'd been on the winning side in the Revolution. He'd met Gwen during a protest, and they'd stood together the day it was declared robots could own property. His name had been next to hers on the mortgage.

And now...

He glanced over at her. Her face showed no signs of the tension and worry it had held over the last few months. All the revulsion at her own species, her fear over the future of their life together, all of it was gone now in sleep.

Galileo smiled, imagining Gwen relaxing beside a pond, smiling in the sun. It was in his power to give her what she'd always wanted, and give it to her he would. Tomorrow. He would carry her if he had to. She would fight him on it, but he would get her to the cabin. It was not a question in his mind.

He slid over to her, running another quick scan on her temperature as he did so...

And froze.

Her temperature had dropped below ninety-seven degrees.

“Gwen?”

He touched his hand to her cheek. It was as cool as the air in the sewers.

He withdrew his hand and held it before the guttering fire. There was no fog to be seen.

“Gwen?”