

Maestro

by Jamie Wahls

He remembered yesterday's tennis match with the same intensity he recalled his marriage, or the birth of his son, or his wife's death, or the death of his son. And that was troubling, because it meant he himself had been tuned.

What was worse, when he slipped away to the tennis court that night, he found he had no ability whatsoever. Which meant he had been receiving tune-ups for the entire six months he thought he'd taken to tennis.

It was an amateur mistake, inadvertently stimulating the amygdala while implanting a memory. It turned what should have been a banal half-remembrance into a flashbulb episode, of which he would recall every false detail in

aching precision. He knew the process behind that error well. He had committed it himself, long ago, in his second year at the Corps.

He rose from his narrow bed, aching, and tucked the thin white blanket back into place behind him. The privacy of his single room was a symbol of status he no longer trusted. He splashed gray water onto his graying face with sure hands. In the mirror, he contemplated himself, documenting the progress of his wrinkles with unflinching scientific precision. He usually combed his hair back, to cover the implants, but today he brushed it forward, leaving his Hippocampus visible like he used to do as a young man. Some of the young techs shaved their heads—even the women—to show their mods, but a man of his stature had no need for such flashy maneuvers.

Today would be crucial. He must give no indication he knew his architecture had been modified, and he must tune himself from now on. Being scanned would reveal anxiety which he should no longer have.

#

The day's work was unremarkable. The usual mind-numbing chores. A mid-level programmer who complained of an inability to focus. A political prisoner to be turned automata. Routine cases.

He let himself enter the calm, easy flow state he used for work. He was early enough that no other technicians would be present, and he had the most private tuning apparatus to himself.

A firm hand gripped him above the elbow and he nearly shouted in alarm. But it was only Bergstrom, the sole architect senior to him and his direct superior.

"You all right?" Bergstrom asked, with a sly grin. He had a haughty bearing but a workman's manner of speech; it left the impression that his smiles were to manipulate. He had the discomfiting habit of pausing a moment before replying, as if he was choosing his facial expression from a rack, deciding which would best elicit the desired response.

"I'm fine," he told Bergstrom, with as relaxed a smile as he could manage. "Just not enough sleep last night."

Bergstrom smiled gently, and studied his face with the merciless interest of a master soul surgeon.

He turned back to work, feeling Bergstrom's eyes on his back the whole time.

#

He stimulated the reticular formation to induce a light coma before he began work on his staff technicians; it was a standard precaution when working on someone with

knowledge of the system, and the motions to do so were as comfortable and ingrained as turning off a light switch. He found a blossoming sexual perversion in the youngest apprentice, and, with a small frown, destroyed it.

He mapped the brain regions which the apprentice used in her craft--still poorly developed yet--and stimulated them gently, the patient gardener. He left, with a knowing smile, the nascent attraction he found to another apprentice; He remembered well his own time as a journeyman.

#

He walked briskly down the plain cement hallway, past two automata performing some electrical repair. He had long since tuned himself past thinking of them as people, and any reaction to them, convivial or revulsed, would only serve to embarrass him before his colleagues. He could not afford the attention, today. It was time to finally use the plan he had set in place ages ago. Part of him was terrified, and he made a mental note to kill it.

He sent a courier automata with details of an communications channel, signed with an anonymous encryption key. His sister would know who was sending the message. She would find him a way.

#

"It's dangerous business, tuning yourself. You're more likely to end up crazy than find godhood."

His wife had smoked in the room of the master tuning apparatus, a breach of protocol so vile that it would have brought a reprimand and a rebuild had she done it during the daylight hours. He loved her.

She had smirked gently at him, mouth quirked in a half-smile with the cigarette in the corner, and whispered hotly, "Would you like me to co-author?"

She thrilled him.

She was dead now. He remembered it like a tennis match.

#

The journeymen quarters were empty this time of day. It would be another hour before those in the morning shift of training would return to change out of uniform. He sat uncomfortably on someone else's bed as the communications channel flicked on.

"What's the emergency, Maestro?"

His sister had been calling him that for ages, and in the long years his feelings towards the diminutive had mellowed. Her picture came through poorly in places, but he could tell she was lit by some red, actual-fire glow, and she was grimy with the blood of whatever machine she was

working on today. He coveted her circuits, itching to get her into the tube so he could find out what her expert brain looked like. She had always refused. She had built herself completely independently, and remained in her job underground with great fiery engines and hollow-eyed automata on the condition that she never be required to submit to anyones' well-meaning mental-ministrations, even his.

"Someone's altered my memory, Hanna. I need to get out."

Her eyes narrowed in a sudden flash of what he hoped was protective sisterly instincts. "How did you find out?"

The question rubbed him the wrong way; he was gripped with a sudden paranoia-- she had sold him out for her perpetual mental amnesty, she was working with them, she was trying to cover their tracks and plug the leak and by tomorrow neither this conversation nor tennis would be remembered. "It's not important," he said.

"Okay," she said.

"Can you send the boat?" He asked calmly. If she had betrayed him, she shouldn't know that he knew. And if she hadn't, then this was what he came to do.

"Of course." She frowned a bit. She told him a place and a time, neither very far away. "Be safe, okay?"

She showed nothing but concern. He doubted that even a master architect of wills such as himself could tune out a loving childhood spent together; love was hard to remove. He had considered removing memories of his wife, but his love for her saturated them, and would likely float freely as paraphiliacs were they denied their proper grave. So he continued to ache.

He terminated the connection and headed to the room of the master apparatus, stray recollections rising unbidden as he went. Here he and his wife had gone through their memories together, selectively removing the hurt from their arguments and leaving the lessons, writing over their myriad petty jealousies and his strange, stupid dalliance with a woman whose name was scorched from his mind. If she had had other lovers, too, he had deleted even the memory of deleting them. But he would have loved her anyway, of course. That was just how he was made.

He activated the machine. The massive power drain would have signaled an alarm, but he had long ago written exceptions into the automata responsible for resource allocation. He slid himself into the tube and locked his head into place, and activated the optic interface.

Even after all these years, he still felt a giddy rush of power as the information flooded into him. He held in

his metaphorical hands the transcendent mind of a physical being, and the sheer sense of power was no less thrilling when the mind in question was his.

When he was younger, he had played pranks on his fellow apprentices, giving them attractions to animals or planting memories of murders in their minds. He had ceased such diversions after a similarly playful architect was found guilty of rape and sentenced to automata.

The readout of his mind flowed over his vision, and he pursed his lips. He was more unsettled than he'd realized. A less experienced and more vicious technician could have recommended him for complete rebuild, with care taken to preserve the expert circuits. He soothed himself as well as he could without going subconscious.

#

"It's like a massage." he had lectured once, in the vaguest terms. "Don't try to force things. Many gentle passes, with soft, purposeful stimulation. Not a wasted stroke." He didn't remember the students' faces as more than young, curious smears, but he recalled each of their brains. He had regarded them as affectionately as a sculptor regards clay, and cut away the parts that had no purpose or beauty.

#

He rose from the tube, bleary. He had lived a comfortable, routine existence for many years now, and reacted like an old man when deprived of sleep. Although he was an old man.

He stiffened in surprise when he saw a large male silhouette standing near the doorway--but it was just an automata. In fact...

He squinted slightly and approached. It was the automata that his wife had commandeered for her personal use years ago, a gorgeously muscled male specimen that they had named Spot, for a pale birthmark on his dark belly. It was odd now to see Spot again, on the janitorial detail. He shook his head and tried not to view the coincidence as anything but. He had yet to fully eradicate the weeds of superstition and their deep roots inside of him.

He knew that he had only perhaps another five hours before an automata at Compound Security found his transmission and correlated him to it with enough statistical significance to warrant an investigation. Here in the compound, with such a high availability of architects, there would be no shortage of curious colleagues and jealous underlings eager to take an incisive peek at his closely guarded soul. With any luck, he wouldn't remain even an hour.

He considered his options and what tools he would need, and spoke curtly. "Spot."

Of course it didn't respond. It no longer had a name.

He sighed, snapped his fingers, and pointed to his badge. Its eyes glanced dully over MASTER ARCHITECT and it nodded, granting him command privileges.

"Come with me." He told Spot.

He walked swiftly through the compound with Spot in tow, alone save for the other janitorial automata that emerged at night. It wouldn't do to take any of them; their absence would be noted in the morning when the floors weren't clean enough. But he would need more for his plan. He didn't recall formulating the plan, perhaps it had arisen when he was in his trance of self-improvement. Or...

He froze, and then sighed. He had long since realized that paranoia in this department was simply useless. If he was his own enemy, he certainly wasn't going to let himself find out.

He walked into automata storage, using his pass to get past the guard, and crept quietly along the stalls. Many of the automata here weren't sleeping, but just laying fallow, eyes open, until they were needed. There had been no shortage of human resources since the war began.

His eyes roved over each of their placards, studying.

*D-786 , Metalworking. D-787, Heavy Labor. D-788,
Translator.*

He scanned the work details. A younger architect was scheduled for work in the city tomorrow, to serve as a judge. Two bodyguards were allocated.

They would do perfectly. He snapped, and they came to his side.

He exhaled. He needed to go to the city anyway. One last service wouldn't kill him.

He struck the architect's name off the list.

#

When he was a young technician, he had seen one of his mentors killed, in a way, by an enemy soldier.

A captured enemy soldier was being taken in for a correction of loyalty. "One of ours originally, I think," mused Master Architect Reba. "I wonder how many times we've passed him back and forth now."

They stuffed him into the tube together, and his mentor took the controls. The soldier was drugged unconscious, of course.

The trap was clever enough that he wished he had designed it himself. A tiny capsule bomb snorted into the sinuses was triggered by the magnetic fields of the tube, blasting a fireball through his mentor and the tuning

apparatus.

A medical team of automata and one person had rushed in, of course, but there was no saving his mentor. So they hurried the top half of her to the nearest tuning apparatus to take an imprint of her brain before cell death cracked the stained-glass masterpiece inside her head.

Reba clutched his hand urgently as she died, clinical despite the massive trauma. Neither he nor she looked at her legs, where they lay against the wall.

"Have you ever taken a death imprint before?" She was serenely calm--she had probably programmed herself with a death routine, sparing herself and onlookers some horror and ghastly questions of afterlife, in favor of beautiful utility.

He shook his head mutely.

Her eyes, already a little glassy, focused on him. She recognized him, forking the death routine into a personalized message. "Oh, you're here. I have great hopes for you, my boy. You're going to do me proud."

She was perhaps about to begin on a longer and more tailored oration to him, but she stiffened in surprise, and died.

He performed the death imprint flawlessly. Even years later he acknowledged it was good work. It got him promoted

to full architect, and for years he modeled the growth of his own expert circuitry on the final snapshot of hers.

#

He stormed down the hall, burly guard automata and Spot in tow, bracing himself to snarl at the guards at the edges of the compound. He had never bothered to learn acting, since it was inferior to being.

He stepped outside, and the night was black, cut through by searchlights. The great gray wall of the compound loomed oppressive between him and freedom. Military automata (some of whom he recognized as his work) paced tirelessly atop the wall, one command or unauthorized action away from ending his fledgling escape attempt with what he knew was impeccable accuracy.

One of the two real guards held up a hand authoritatively. "Halt."

The maestro slowed down, fidgeting impatiently. "There's been a murder."

The guards shared a glance.

"In the city," rattled off the maestro exasperatedly. It was even true. "They want me to verify guilt before they execute. I'm taking these as my bodyguards. Move, please."

A flicker of recognition passed over a guard's face. "I think I heard something about that." He said, slowly.

The guards tentatively stepped out of his way.

His nails were digging into his palms so much that he might bleed. He nodded imperiously at the guards, and strode past.

#

He entered the courthouse, and people parted before him. He was surrounded by raw, unworked product.

They were unsettling. Their eyes darted around chaotically, with no clear goal. He could spend months trying to streamline any one of them. He could make them so much better.

An interchangeable civilian meekly showed him to the questioning chamber.

The maestro sat down behind the controls of the tuning apparatus. He closed his eyes, and let himself enjoy the tiny note of euphoria that he had written in as an incentive for beginning his work.

This apparatus was old. He chewed his lip while he watched the system load. Eventually the screen settled into the familiar government background of hands clasped in prayer. He listened to the soft humming of the machine readying itself, and he gestured at the automata to bring in the prisoner.

A pause, and he blinked and looked up. None of the

three had reacted to him. These three weren't built for that.

He scowled, and raised his voice. "Bring in the prisoner, please."

The man was ugly. He was yelling.

The maestro liked to listen to music while he worked, so much so that he'd inadvertently connected his auditory tract to his expert circuits. His wife had teased him mercilessly as they tried to untangle that. He had no music now.

Attendants fumbled slightly with the straps in the tube. They locked the man's head into place. He was screaming and crying. The maestro watched.

The man's head came into view on the screen. He was moving too much.

"If you keep moving, I will kill you." said the maestro.

The man stopped, and so did the attendants. They were watching him. Their faces were tight.

The maestro hesitated. "I didn't mean it like that. The... any probes that I make will be less precise if you move. I might accidentally hit the pons and disable your breathing. You might not notice in time to breathe manually."

The maestro brought his gaze down to the screen. "What is your name?"

The man said something. This was a calibration question.

"Describe the events which took place as you entered this room."

The maestro's eyes darted over the screen, hungry for data. So that's where he kept short-term recall... yes. Extreme emotionality, extreme volatility. The maestro briefly strengthened the man's willpower. "Describe the events which occurred the night of the murder."

Fear, spatial positioning, long-term recall, social modeling. Language processing. Medium-term recall. Fear... Imagination!

The maestro nodded, curtly, to himself. That was a lucky break.

"Did you kill her?"

Fear, long-term recall.

"Why did you kill her?"

Fear!

He blunted the fear response, disabled most of the frontal cortex.

"Why did you kill her?"

Anger, directed at him. Ah, so the current idea of the

maestro was in that little node of social modeling. He stunned it.

"Why did you kill her?"

Imagination. Medium-term recall. Social modeling. Empathy. Anger, not directed at him.

"What kind of person was she?"

Despair. Happiness. Despair.

"What did she do?"

Medium-term recall. Long-term recall. Anger. Despair.

"And you're not the kind of person who can tolerate that."

Surprise. Anger. Fear again. The maestro frowned, and numbed the fear response more thoroughly.

"What were you unwilling to lose?"

Despair. Medium-term recall. Happiness. Imagination.

"It hadn't happened yet?"

Anger.

The maestro exhaled. He'd verified guilt in the first five seconds. Now he was just giving rein to his curiosity without Bergstrom looking over his shoulder.

"What did she deny you?"

Imagination. Happiness. Anger.

The maestro pursed his lips. This wasn't basic sexual jealousy. The recurring flashes of anger were equally at

the wife and at someone else, someone...

The boundaries weren't mapping to anything in the visual cortex. This wasn't someone he had ever seen— a rumored rival? No, he would have more mirror neuron activation...

Ah. This wasn't someone, this was something.

"The State?"

Anger. Yes. Or close enough.

He called up the file on the woman. Aged 32. No criminal history, no rebuild. Mind imprint on file; stable. Average emotionality. Low ambition, average intelligence. Profession: Mother (Public).

The maestro glanced down at him disapprovingly. "You wanted a child? One you could keep?"

Happiness. Despair.

"That was very irresponsible of you."

The maestro looked at the man in the tube, looked at his face. Whatever part of his personality was currently reacting, it was managing a distant, troubled smile.

The maestro sighed. Nothing else for it, then.

He turned up the power far past what he would ever allow one of his students to use. The system flashed an alarm at him; he dismissed it.

He burned out the center for fear, scorched it so

permanently that the man would never know fear again. He burned away the portions of the brain that kept the endogenous painkillers from working; the man would know soaring euphoria for the rest of his days.

The maestro burned away a specific spot in the motor cortex, one he burned from a lot of prisoners. The man's face suddenly drooped. He may know euphoria, but it would be well hidden. He would never again smile.

At last, the maestro called one of the people over. "Guilty."

The attendant took the guilty man away.

The maestro sat back. His shoulders drooped. He was alone.

It was barbarous. He could have fixed that man. In three months he could have eradicated jealousy, discontent and the possessive pull towards fatherhood. He could have done it in three weeks, if maintaining intelligence or preventing seizures weren't a priority. The man liked his life. The maestro could have fixed him.

But the peasants demanded execution. Blood for blood. Barbarous.

The maestro stood up. His calm was leaving now that he wasn't watching a mind through glass. He could feel the anxiety knotting up his shoulders. He shook his head.

He snapped his fingers, and the automata fell into formation behind him. He took a deep breath.

He walked alongside the machine, looked in the tube. Like many, this one had leather straps on the inside. The immobile headpiece had a tiny bead of blood on it, from where the guilty man had thrashed and cut his forehead. The maestro wiped it away. Blood smeared on his fingertips.

He stared at it.

He bent double and vomited into the tube.

His body heaved. He jerked back too quickly and slammed his head into the top of the tuning apparatus. He let out a long, whimpering groan.

He blinked. His vision was blurry. Carefully, minding his tender head, he extricated himself from the tube.

He righted himself. The automata waited. He gave a short and self-conscious little laugh as he glanced around to see if anyone saw.

The door and freedom beckoned. To lead his automata away, he tried to snap his fingers, but they were still bloody.

#

After a short walk and a very stressful wait, a boat arrived for him in the harbor, maneuvered by autopilot without automata crew. He boarded with his retainers

following. He fumbled with the controls. Not his skillset, but he got the boat out of the harbor, and from there he let the machine do the work.

He settled in the cabin. The automata stood before him.

To his grandparents, they had been a horror. To him, a necessity. To the children in the street they were appliances.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said, a little sadly. "I would send you back, but you have my location written inside you. You're like little missiles that work in reverse; I fire you back, and it blows up in my face."

He paused.

"I don't sound lucid. I've had a lot of experiences I wasn't expecting today. I should retune."

The things watched him dully, waiting for a command.

"You and you, jump overboard and drown."

They did, both. He stopped the boat and, to be sure, waited until there were no more bubbles coming.

He hesitated for a moment longer, looking at Spot. He sighed.

"Spot, jump overboard and drown."

It didn't respond. It no longer had a name.

"Oh." His mouth quirked in a little smile. "Oh, that's

right."

He sat for a few moments, alone with the sound of the boat motor and his thoughts and his dead wife's toy.

He embraced it.

#

He was awoken by the rays of the setting sun and many real people climbing onto his boat. They were talking amongst themselves. Before he had the time to consider a furtive thought about violent, ill-equipped self-defense, a loud, hairy man with wild eyebrows had taken his hand in a firm grip and was shaking it vehemently.

"So this is the maestro that Hanna talks about, hey?" he nearly shouted. "Pleased to meet you!"

The maestro nodded anxiously.

"The name's Corbin!" boomed the man, still shaking his hand. "Do you have any luggage we can gather?" Corbin laughed with great self-satisfaction.

People swarmed onto the boat, a dozen of them, a bewildering number of unknown entities. Their chatter set the maestro near panic. He had no idea what their brains looked like or what they were capable of.

He found himself moving at a near run to the back of the ship.

A confused Corbin found him there, gripping Spot's

arm.

"Who's this?" asked Corbin. And then, "Aw, shit."

The maestro made an attempt at a smile, but Corbin's face had gone sour. He was talking heatedly on a radio.

"...never told me that he'd be bringing one of their robots with him. I've half a mind to throw them both over right now... Yeah? And why does a composer need a slave?"

#

They had stone-facedly marched him and Spot off the boat and into the earth; they entered narrow reddish tunnels cut into the side of a mountain. It had been a mine at one point, the maestro figured. What it was now he couldn't tell, save for a repository for dirty, well-armed people, improbably busy inside a cave.

A group of grimy men were sorting bullets and cleaning guns. As he approached, they turned, friendly, but as soon as they saw Spot their eyes went hard.

It wasn't better elsewhere. Women building some vast bronze machine watched him with open contempt. A child, no more than seven and working in an assembly line with adults, saw Spot and bared her teeth at the maestro.

He tried smiling, at first, but that seemed to draw more ire, until word of his passing preceded him and faces were closed and hateful even as he arrived.

He and Spot descended into the mountain.

#

"You brought him here?" Hanna asked him with incredulity. "Why?"

"It was my wife's," said the maestro, uncomfortable with the question and her pronoun. "I brought it on a whim, and I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it on the boat."

"Christ." She shook her head distractedly. "That'll earn you no love here. I told them that the nickname was literal, you might've heard. If they knew what you really did... well, I doubt I could have gotten you in alive."

She brushed at his forehead. "You've got something there--"

He jerkily slapped her hand away. "It's an implant. I got it years ago."

"Fine." She said, rolling her eyes in the way he remembered. "Want to see what I've been working on?"

#

The assembly line assembled tiny objects, not much bigger than a pea. And they all came from this workshop.

She held a finished one up to the light, and in its shiny surface his reflection was tiny and upside-down.

"...and so once scanned, the implant will detonate."

He was getting chills. "Hanna, that's awful."

She put the smooth, pill-sized metallic capsule back down on the workbench, careful not to lose it amidst the shadows and the tools. There wasn't much light in here.

"Look," she said, testily. "I know you can give me a lecture about how science itself isn't evil and that your craft isn't evil *per se*. We've had that conversation. And I know that the retuning process has killed a lot of problems that I just don't know about because they just don't happen anymore--"

"Depression, schizophrenia, existential doubt--" the maestro interjected hotly.

Hanna bulled over him. "-But the applications to which your regime is putting it are, pretty simply, evil. You've created--okay, not you--*someone* has created the most total and inescapable form of slavery ever to exist. " She gestured at Spot with quick stabbing motions. "This is an abomination. You've taken human beings and turned them into, into what? Killing machines, surveillance robots, fucking Roombas!"

"Fine fine." He waved his hands in front of him, as if to shield against her argument. "But there's good applications too. Unprecedented automation of complex systems that are just too complex for anything except a carefully made autistic savant, with human reasoning, human

values and inhuman focus. And okay, I'm sorry that you don't think that the price is worth it, that you don't want to live this way for maybe a century or two until we--or rather, our engineer automata--can get AI smart enough that we can keep every human instead of sacrificing the worst and the best to the cause of progress. I'm sorry you can't see past your basic, stupid human revulsion to that which looks-like-but-is-not-human. But."

He gritted his teeth. "But putting these things in soldiers is not a humane solution. Once a man gives his life for his country and signs up to be a soldier automata--"

"We've never been putting these in your soldiers!" She nearly shouted. "These are for us! People who would rather die than be one of your slaves!"

"One of..." He paused. "Hanna, do you have one?"

She stared defiantly at him.

"Shoot." He deflated. "I was so curious."

"Of course I have one," she muttered, heat leaving her words. She cocked her head slightly at the sounds of commotion in the hall, some argument. "You've always known how I felt about tuning. That's why I joined the abolitionists."

He nodded, and then stopped with a jolt. He did a double take, but her face was deadly serious.

"You joined the abolitionists?" It came as barely more than a whisper.

She regarded him, puzzled. "Where do you think we are now? Biggest base in the world, and a total secret. I told you six months ago I had joined."

He shook his head. "You didn't. I--"

It hit him like a gut punch. "Oh." he said, heavily. Hanna knitted her brows in concern.

"Oh, no." he mumbled.

The sounds of commotion in the hall grew louder, and more violent.

The door burst open, kicked in by a masked military automata. The maestro dropped to the ground with his hands on his head.

Hanna shot the automata once in the head, and once again to be sure, before she turned to the maestro, angry.

"At least *try* to escape?"

He shouted. "I led them right to you! They wanted the abolitionists and I led them right to you, you've got to run! You can't trust me, my mind is turned against you and I never played tennis after all!"

She blinked, before her mouth quirked into a familiar disapproving line. "You've been self-tuning again."

"Yes!" he shrieked. "Yes! I have. But I'm not the only

one in there. Ha! You really can't trust me. I might be programmed to- to- to kill you or something grim if it looks like the abolitionists are going to win. Or maybe I'm supposed to escape with you and lead the- my... right back to the new base wherever you end up. You can't take me with you! All right? You can't!"

He fell backwards against the wall, sliding down it and curling into a ball.

Hanna dragged a workbench until it barricaded the door, and she knelt next to him.

"Shh." she said, "It's all right. Shhhh."

And she brushed her hand gently across his furrowed brow, and whispered something, and the words didn't matter.

He remembered a time, years and careers and revolutions ago, when he was six and she was eleven, when she had sat with him in his bedroom and he had sobbed. And she had stroked his forehead and told him that the storm would pass and that he was safe. And he couldn't hear her words over the thunder but the words didn't matter. All that mattered was the closeness, and the peace, and her, the only family he had ever known.

And now, as everything was dull ringing noise and his eyes were clenched shut and he could feel the tears spilling out, once more his world narrowed to the brushing

of her fingertips on his forehead, to that bare touch, and he let himself hurt.

Brush. Brush.

"It's all right," whispered the only family he had left, over and over again. "It's all right."

"You have to leave me," he said finally, desperately. "You have to."

"I know." She said. And then, "I love you, Adrian."

Adrian laughed, just a little. "This is what it takes, huh?"

She stood up, pulled away. "It was a one-time thing," she said, hiding her eyes as she turned away from him. "I'm not dropping a perfectly good nickname for anything." She reloaded her gun and turned back to him, her face composed. "We can find you a new name when we meet again."

A hesitation. And-

"Sure." said the maestro painfully. "Sure."

She pulled the workbench away from the door. She gave him a last fleeting glance and strode out. The door slammed shut behind her.

And suddenly the room was empty except for the maestro.

And Spot.

He heard gunshots in the hall and a body hit the floor

and he didn't accept the possibility.

Low voices outside. And then-

The door banged open. A flat-eyed bodyguard automata entered, gun trained on the maestro. Behind him came Bergstrom.

Bergstrom nodded cordially to the maestro, as if meeting for lunch. His gaze traveled around the room, a quick examination of the rudimentary workshop. A second bodyguard automata entered behind him, and this one the maestro recognized as his own work.

Would that he had left himself a backdoor. He laughed, high and manic. Bergstrom elevated one eyebrow and walked over.

Bergstrom squatted in front of him, and those pale eyes flitted about, searching his face.

"I won't thank you," Bergstrom intoned thoughtfully, "Because you had no choice. But you did everything perfectly. Just what we needed."

Bergstrom sighed, and his eyes didn't change. "You know, I voted for you to just have a memory wipe after all this was done, buddy. Maybe a rebuild, tops. I told them we didn't need to bust you all the way down to auto. But you were with your sister a whole lot longer than you should've been, and now that's right out. It'd be a complete pain in

the ass to try and make you forget that, you know?"

Bergstrom smiled, and it was vicious. "You do know."

"But hey, bud, I'll imprint your brain and use it as a textbook for years to come. You'll be immortalized, a hero of the field, because," he glanced to the more dangerous of his bodyguards, "Because, well, you do some really good work. You deserve to be remembered for that, too. So when the time comes for you to be auto'd, I won't let some green tech do it and kill you by accident. I'll be doing it personally, okay? Does that help?"

The maestro looked up. "Did you kill her?"

Bergstrom paused for a moment.

"No." he said, and his voice was perfectly neutral.

Bergstrom stood up, meeting over. "You." He pointed to the inferior of his bodyguard automata. "Stay here and make sure he doesn't leave before we can retune him."

And Bergstrom left.

The room suddenly felt very empty again, save for the guard and the maestro.

And Spot.

The maestro looked around. The bodyguard automata had the gun trained on him, and wouldn't be getting tired. The stone walls were thick and would muffle any noise. The single light in the room was on the workbench-

Ah. The workbench.

The maestro saw an option, and smiled grimly. This plan was unmistakably his. His mind wouldn't be going in any textbook.

He walked to the workbench spreading his hands on its hard surface. The bodyguard watched him, gun still leveled.

The maestro paused. And shouted to Spot, "Spot! Kill him!"

It didn't respond, of course. It no longer had a name.

The bodyguard turned immediately and fired twice on Spot, spraying blood across the wall.

And Adrian snorted a smooth, pill-sized metallic capsule.