



FICTION

# PRANK TO WORK IT IN

by Jeff Somers

I handed my license over to the pretty young receptionist with a flirtatious but mild grin, despite my guess that she could be my granddaughter.

“My HDPT number is —”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hemming,” she interrupted perkily, “but we have a new policy. I’m afraid you must submit to a Pint Test. We no longer accept HDPT as proof of coverage.” She smiled prettily, eyes twinkling.

I frowned. “I’ve always used my HDPT number. I’ve been a patient here for six years.”

She smiled again, nodding. But I could see her grin grow just slightly brittle. “I know, sir, and all the doctors apologize. But we experienced some security concerns recently, and for the time being we are forced to employ stringent security. We do apologize for the inconvenience.”

I considered. I knew I seemed like a typical whining rich asshole, and she —being at best a Class II or IIA employee— probably hated me. But I disliked DNA traces. The government had enough information on me as it was, and I paid plenty to keep it that way. As far as I knew their last update on me was seventeen years old —but that would change in seconds if I submitted to a Pin Test.

The again, I had a rattle in my chest that made me nervous.

“Oh, all right. Sorry to be a bother. I know you’re just doing your job.” I held out my hand.

She softened a little. “You’re no bother, at all, really. Some of our patients are real horrors, you know.”

She said this in a mock-conspiratorial tone that made me think she didn’t hate me after all. “That makes me feel better. Maybe you’d care to tell me some stories? Over dinner, perhaps?”

Not pausing in her swabbing and pricking one finger, she glanced up at me. “I’m not supposed to be overly friendly with the patients.”

“I see.” I didn’t want to push things, it was so easy to be misinterpreted when your credit rating outclassed everyone in the room. “Well,” I winced as she quite professionally drew blood from one finger. “I’ll consider that my loss.”

She smiled again as she inserted the samples into her desk workstation. It chimed pleasantly almost immediately. “Very well, Mr. —” she glanced at the screen unnecessarily “— Hemming, you can go right in.”

I nodded and turned for the door.

“Oh, Mr. Hemming?”

I paused and turned back to her.

“Happy birthday! One hundred thirty; that’s impressive!” There was nothing nice in her eyes.

I glanced around the room in a reflexive shame reaction. “Thank you.” I managed, hating her. I hesitated, watching her cheerful smile slowly turn quizzical. “Do you know who I am? Why I get to be here?”

Her smile was carefully plastic. “No,” she admitted.

Nor, I could see, did she care. I turned back to the entrance, hating her. just as she was undoubtedly hating me, for still being alive.

What had I done? Most people didn’t understand, it was technical. Basically, I’d invented the Super Registry System for the Bowman CPU —every computer system in the world ran on a BCPU and I’d been a part of that team. As a result, I got my name on the Preserve Lists. How I got voted into the program is a tedious story; suffice to say my shares in the BCPU profits gave me more cash on hand than most companies, or small countries.

“Hello, Mike, you’re looking well.”

Dr. Bellinger was a cheerful, loud man. I wasn’t sure I cared for him, but he was very good. “Thanks, doc. Getting harder and harder to get in here, ain’t it?”

He put a hand on my shoulder and shook his head. “Ah, I’m sorry. But some Hacker faked a bunch of HDPT numbers and we had a rush of illegals in here.” He chuckled unattractively. “I almost scheduled a kidney transplant on one particularly good actor, before the Feds flagged the file. So we’ve had to tighten up security for a while.”

I shook my head. “It’s all a damn shame.”

He looked at me strangely. “Sure, sure. Now, what’s the problem?”

I sighed, and was wracked by a few quick, wet coughs.

“Hmmm...your Lung Regeneration might be funkng out, Dr. Hemming. Have a seat on the unit there and we’ll see.”

I nodded. I was beginning to hate the doctor, too —not to mention myself.

There were demonstrators in front of my building again, so I told my driver to drive through the park until the police gave us the all-clear. I accessed my mail from the rear console. I ignored most of it: two requests that I speak at commencements, one request for an interview, a few personal notes I flagged ‘keep as new’, and two death threats which lacked flair or originality or, for that matter, a serious attempt at anonymizing their transfer protocols. I bundled these off to my mail server’s security office.

I went back to the personal messages. There was a quick note from Diedre which made me smile; at one hundred and three she was still vibrant and hilarious and still one of the few people who could make me laugh. Then a long report from one of my Kid PhDs at the lab which I scanned quickly —we still hadn’t solved the heat problems on our experimental processors— but he’d attached almost two gigs of

patch code so I forwarded it to my desktop. Finally, there was a typically audio-only missive from my daughter.

“Dad,” her voice wheezes into the back seat of the car, “I hope this message finds you well.”

Denise is seventy-four years old. She calls me once a week to let me know that she’s still alive.

“I couldn’t get out of bed today, so I’m calling you from the portable unit. It’s damp in here and the arthritis is kicking up its heels.”

I could have given Denise full HDPT coverage, but she’d refused. She was growing old, dying. I knew that one day no call would come from her, and that she would be dead.

“I hear they’re protesting your building again. I don’t know why you stay in New York. Go someplace they can’t find you.”

Friends and colleagues asked me that all the time, mailing me from their bunkers in the mountains, in the country. They seemed to think new York –any city – was a madhouse. They were right, in a sense. There were protests, bombings, murders –riots. It *was* dangerous.

“You’re too stubborn, I guess. I have to go, I’m getting lightheaded.”

She never said goodbye, she just disconnected. I listened to the clicks and hisses of the system eating its tail for a few seconds. Then my driver buzzed in.

“Sir? The police have cleared the street outside your building.”

“Okay. Let’s go home.”

I watched the curfew-emptied park slip by. Pasted on the inside of the front windshield were six black magnetic disks which broadcast my various clearances, which were very high-level, giving me the ability to ignore various curfews, prohibited areas, and access to private lots. We were the only car in the park, as far as I could tell.

“It’s a sad and lonely world we’ve inherited, Charles.” I said.

My driver might have been surprised at hearing his name. “Yes, sir.” he eventually replied.

There were still some protestors in the streets, and plenty of police. Only illegals and unfortunates walked the streets these days. The rest of us had cars. The poor souls left shouting across from my building were a pathetic bunch. Some were weeping, some were yelling at the cops. Some were unconscious. There was trash and blood in the streets as well, but I didn’t ponder it. Most of the protestors turned their attention to my car as we approached, shouting at us. One soul heaved a bottle which shattered harmlessly against the windshield.

As we swept into the parking garage, I turned to look out the back. It was just a swarm of police.

“Welcome home, Dr. Hemming.”

I’d never gotten used to the apartment speaking to me. I had the source code and bus map for the system but my interns considered it a juvenile challenge to keep it TSR in my apartment. Every time I disabled the Verbal Interface they had it back again within hours –a trojan they believed remained undetected in the OS registry alerted

them every time I disabled it. In truth, I left the trojan in to keep them amused.

“Good evening, Humbert.” I said tiredly.

“Happy birthday.”

I nodded. “Quiet Mode, Humbert.”

I made a cup of coffee and went into the lab. The apartment was twenty rooms, and I used two of them on a regular basis –three when impressing someone, which wasn’t often. The staff kept the place dusted and neat for ghosts and imaginings, parties never held, and a family long gone.

I didn’t do any real work. I used my privileged ID to log onto the nets and I lurked in the unmoderated offshore groups, reading endless screeds against people like me. I never posted anything; it was dangerous and they didn’t want to hear from me anyway. I enjoyed reading them, though, because they weren’t cleaned up and blacklined like the in-country nets. If you sifted through the garbage you often got news most people never heard. Or cared to.

“Excuse me, sir.”

I closed my eyes. “I asked for Quiet Mode.”

“I apologize, sir. I have an Emergency Interrupt from Dr. Bellinger.”

“Store it, please.”

“It is an Emergency Interrupt, sir.”

I couldn’t lose a privilege battle in my own home. “SU to Root, voiceprint password. Basic shell.”

“Yes sir.”

“Store all messages.”

“Yes sir.”

“Shut down.”

“Good bye.”

There was a slight hum, and then blessed silence. I returned my attention to my browser. People knew I kept my OS off line. No one would bother me.

“Sit down, please.”

I tried to swallow some coughs and failed. I spat into a handkerchief. Across the desk from me Dr. Bellinger kept his eyes averted, studying his fingers carefully.

“Dr. Helling, I’m afraid our tests indicate your synthetic lungs are undergoing a premature degeneration cycle. As you know your organs are genetically tagged to degenerate at a natural pace, since perfect organs invariably are rejected by the imperfect host body.” He finally looked up at me. “I’m afraid a replacement procedure is required.”

I coughed again. “No.”

He had already begun speaking again. “We can admit you next Tuesday, if that’s convenient, and have you home by Thursday. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but no procedure is perfect. I’m sure you understand.” He began looking through files. “Luckily, you’re on the Full Med list with the FHD, so none of this is a problem.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“As a matter of fact, some of the new work these magicians over at –”

“I’m not submitting a claim.”

He stopped and stared at me. An expression was on his face. I didn’t recognize the expression. From the look on his face, the gentle tremble of his muscles, it seemed like he didn’t recognize it either.

“Excuse me?”

I stood up, shaking my head. “No, doc, I’ve lived long enough, don’t you think?”

He stared at me for a moment. “Mr. Hemming – Doctor Hemming– ”

Even I forgot my Ph.Ds sometimes; I’d earned the last one almost seventy years ago.

“–frankly, I don’t–”

I offered him an infuriating smile my first wife taught me.

He gestured at my vacant seat. “Please, Dr. Hemming.” He waited for me to take my seat, then gave me a smarmy smile which reminded me that I didn’t entirely like him.

“Dr. Hemming, it is not uncommon for people on the HDPT TL list to go through something like this –typically significantly *after* their century mark. Having just turned –what, a hundred and thirty?– you’re a prime candidate.”

The condescending prick. ‘TL’ –doctor slang for *to live*, an unkind, arrogant term most MDs had the wisdom to avoid.

I kept the wattage high on my smile. “Are you suggesting this is some sort of mid-life crisis?”

I could see the retreat flash across his face as he realized he’d made an error. He opened his mouth to respond, then seemed to think better of it, shutting it with a click and settling back in his chair.

“Please consider, Dr. Hemming, that the majority of the human race does not live as long as you and I. Health science is achieving more every day –a lifespan of two hundred and fifty is becoming common – but such drastic technological and medical resources are not available to most of the citizens. It is highly unusual for you to be as old as you are, Dr. Hemming, and you should consider the possibility that you are not equipped with the mental context to deal with your situation.”

I nodded. “*I have* come to realize that I have become an artificial being. A piece of wetware.”

This was obviously not where he’d thought he’d taken me. He blinked. “I don’t see –”

“My lungs, liver, heart and one kidney were lab-created. I am injected twice a year with synthetic enzymes and cocktails which retard the natural erosion of my synapses and muscle proteins. I’ve got three plastic bones.” I shook my head. “Two years ago when I fell and broke my hip, the HD wanted to implant a chip to aid my coordination and balance.” I laughed. “You’re turning me into a cyborg.”

“I think that’s a poor choice of word.”

I shrugged. “I do not.”

“Dr. Hemming, your attitude and reasoning are not unusual for someone of your ‘vintage’. Trust me. I have seen this before. Trust me as well when I say that it will pass. In every instance I’ve encountered this ‘malaise’ or ‘mid-life crisis’ it has proven to be brief. Think of it as a ‘necessary mental reevaluation of your situation.’”

I could just about see the phantom quotation marks floating in the air by his words. I didn’t care for them.

“In other words, a phase.”

He looked down at his shoes. “Dr. Hemming, I can see you think I’m patronizing you. I assure you I am not. I won’t schedule this procedure yet. I ask you not to make any rash decisions. Wait a month before doing anything.”

“In case I snap out of this.”

He glanced back up at me. “Not much to ask. And in the mean time your illness will be running its course.”

“And friends and colleagues can work on me.”

He shrugged. “If your resolve on this matter can’t withstand your friends and colleagues, Dr. Hemming, well –then it isn’t resolve at all.”

It was my turn to open my mouth and then shut it. “You have a point, doctor. And I admit I haven’t made any plans anyway, so ‘letting the disease run its course’ won’t be any great burden.”

“Thank you. Can I make another appointment a month from today to discuss this again?”

I stood, nodding. “If I live that long.”

He laughed. I think he’d primed himself to laugh at whatever little joke I made on my exit. We shook hands. I was trying to remember Dr. Sallow’s private number; I wanted to talk with him. He’d been my doctor for fifty-three years, but he’d retired a year ago at the age of one hundred and sixty-seven.

Doctors ranked in the top three Skill Levels were automatically on the To Live Lists.

We played golf on Sunday. Dr. Sallow had a membership at Lansing Green, which even I couldn’t get into. After nine holes we retired for martinis.

“You come to me about that cough, Michael?” he asked.

“Indirectly, Tom.” I admitted. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Sallow was a tall, tanned man with powerful, hairy arms that amazed me with the feats of dexterity he achieved. He flashed a smile. “Mike, I practiced medicine at the top Skill Level for ninety-one years. I didn’t do it for the money. Go ahead.”

I sipped my drink. “I’ve decided to not seek treatment.”

His glass paused in mid-air. “Mike,” he said with a little cough, “that’s very dangerous. At your age unsupported physical decay can be fast.”

I nodded. Nothing was said for a few moments.

“Is this suicide, Mike?”

I blinked. “I wasn’t thinking of it that way.”

He nodded, and gulped more of his drink than was necessary. “Legally, you know, it fits the definition. I could submit a report to the

HD Council and have you treated against your will.”

I sighed and dissolved into coughs. “Will you do that?”

“I don’t know, Mike.”

I stared into my drink. “It doesn’t seem right that I can be forced to live, and the unlucky in the world can’t get treatments like this under any circumstances.”

Sallow laughed, throwing his head back. “Oh, Mike. It’s amazing. You sound like me, forty years ago.”

I leaned back with my drink. “Not you too.”

He sighed. “Listen, Mike –just listen for a second. Sometimes people keep telling you the same thing simply because its true. Its not a conspiracy. Everyone goes through this.” He held up his hands.

“Everyone. It’s natural for you to worry about this; you’re intelligent, educated, accomplished –you’re an invaluable asset to society.” He tapped the table forcefully. “*Those other people are not.* And thus we cannot afford to maintain them.”

I looked back at him. “I don’t care for that term.”

“That’s too bad. Mike, the only reason you’re a Level One HD priority is your work. You’re brilliant, you contribute to society, so society maintains you.”

I tried to interrupt. He waved me off.

“It costs billions, Mike. Billions every year, just to keep you alive. That money is not spent on you because you’re a nice fellow with pretty good manners. It’s an investment. Or, in some ways, a compensation for past achievements.” He shook his head. “We cannot afford to spend that money on someone who has nothing to sell. And to throw that away is the height of arrogance, ignorance, and selfishness.”

He sat back and raised his glass and obviously expected that to stun me.

“I’m not that important, Tom.”

His eyes, ancient and dry in that tan, taut face, flicked to me over the rim of his glass.

“Not for you to decide.” he said.

I spent the next two days and nights in my lab, savagely disassembling my team’s latest work. My notes were mean and borderline-insulting and I knew most of them would be quaking after reading them, wondering if I was going to fire them all. I had kept Humbert on a basic shell the whole time, basking in silence. Finally I emerged and let him surface. Immediately, his calm, neutral voice came up on the ambient signal.

“*Dr. Hemming, there is an urgent message from the Federal Health Department. I also have red-flagged messages from Dr. Bellinger, your law office, and Diedre Salinger from the NASA net.*”

I paused. “Play Ms. Salinger’s message, Humbert. Audio only.”

“Michael, damn you and your screening! At least I hope you’re screening and not sequestered. The FHD is going to put you down for an Involuntary Procedure, or so my sources tell me. What have you been up to for God’s sake? Call me. Any time. I’ll give your Sig to my

shell for Emergency Override. Call.”

I sat down in my kitchen, and rubbed my eyes. “Play the FHD message, Humbert.”

“Dr. Hemming, pending conclusion of an investigation you have been temporarily scheduled for an IV LUNG REGENERATION and TRANSPLANT. Please contact this office at PTP-slash-FHD-dot-one-one-four.”

Silence. I stared at the white counter for a few moments.

“Humbert, play the message from Max.”

“Mike, this is Max. Listen, buddy, I’m sure you’ve heard what’s going on. If you were planning to refuse treatment, kiddo, you should have brought me in on it weeks ago, to lay the groundwork. At any rate, an M.D. named Sallow submitted your name to an Investigative Committee and they pulled Bellinger’s file. All perfectly legal. I’ve filed the usual injunctions and appeals but the FHD will invoke its ‘Best Interests of the Patient’ mandate and they’ll win. Give me a call or stop in –it’s imperative we get cracking on this. I’m not sure what you want me to do about this.”

I leaned back. “Play Bellinger’s message, please.”

His was brief. “Dr. Helling, I’m sorry. I just want you to know I meant to honor our agreement. It’s out of my hands. Best of luck.”

I let a moment go by. “Store all four permanently, Humbert. Put a link through to Max, and record it.”

“*Should this be audio only, Dr. Helling?*”

I sighed. “No, give me a flat visual.”

Max popped up in midair about a minute later, just his balding head.

“Mike! Thank god! What the hell have you been up to?”

I shrugged. “Work, actually.”

He gave me a steady look. “Is it true you refused life-saving treatment?”

I sighed again, and collapsed into coughing. “I hadn’t –” cough “realized –” cough “that it had gotten to that point.”

He shook his head. “Christ, Mike.” He glanced down. “Well, I had to assume you did this on purpose, Mike, so I’ve filed six motions on your behalf. They’ll all get quashed in court, but it will delay things a little.” He leveled his stare. “Get your ass in here. I need an indie M.D. to render a diagnosis. And I need you to explain to me why you deserve to die.”

I opened my mouth.

“And please spare me the hippie pro-choice death argument, okay?” He snapped. “I’m your lawyer, Mike. I don’t need to be convinced; I’ll do my best to see your wishes served regardless of how I feel about them. You need to convince the *court*, Mike. And for that I’ll need data. So boogie. I’ll send a car.”

I nodded. “Fine.”

Max blinked away.

“Humbert, alert me when the car arrives for me.”

“*Connecting to Auto Track...searching...I have it, sir.*”

I sat and waited.

“Have a seat, Mike.”

I sat down in one of the plush leather chairs across from Max’ huge oak desk. To my surprise he sat in the other. We watched his pretty secretary –a class III worker Max had granted Level Three HD status at his own expense. It was unusual. I assumed he was having an affair with her, but bumping her two HD grades was hugely expensive.

As she shut the door, Max sighed. “Mike, it’s not good. My motions, as expected, didn’t last long. And my doctor concurs that without a regen you’ll die in a few months. The courts going to hear arguments tomorrow at noon but,” he spread his hands, “I’m not sure what I can argue.”

“Max,” I asked, “is your shell recording this?”

He glanced upward. “It records everything, Mike. Necessary precaution. Please don’t ask me to turn it off.”

I leaned forward. I was actually enjoying myself. “Tell them they can perform the surgery, but I’ll starve myself.”

Max stared at me. I imagined I could hear his office shell whirring and clicking, down at the subatomic level of its nanos.

“If they hook me up to IV fluids,” I continued slowly, “I’ll try something else.”

For a second, Max just watched me in silence. Then he stood up, laced his hands behind his back, and paced away from me, suddenly turning to face me again.

“Zelda, lock my office and go dumb.”

A short click of the door lock was the only response.

“Mike, forgive me. I know you’ve been through this already, and I know your doctors have tried to talk you out of this, but I have to get this straight if I’m going to represent your interests.”

“Are you? Going to represent my interests?”

He smiled and looked down at his shoes. “Mike, come on. I’m your lawyer.” He looked me in the eye, then. “Yes, I will. But first I need to understand. After I understand, you will need to be evaluated by psychologists. Okay?”

I studied his face, then nodded. “Okay.”

He took a deep breath, then paused. “Mike, this is going to happen fast. Don’t think I’ll be able to delay until...it becomes moot. This will be decided in four days, at most. The HD doesn’t fuck around.”

This was very disappointing, and I guess it showed. I shrugged. “Okay, Max. Thank you for being honest.”

Max waited a moment, and then looked around. “Zelda, resume script, unlock door.” He sat back down. “All right. Explain it to me.”

“Quite suddenly,” I began immediately, “I have realized that I need to let nature take its course.” I sighed. “Max, if you really meant what you said, about being a lawyer –my lawyer– then that’s all you need to know, isn’t it? I don’t think of this as suicide, although I realize that death is a significant possibility. I just need to let the natural order of things assert itself.” I shrugged. “Call it a religious belief.”

“Mike, I may have to, to push this through the courts.”

I stood. “You know how to bill me.”

“Where can I reach you?”

“My shell will know how to reach me, Max. Thank you for not dropping me.”

He nodded; he was still looking at my chair. “No thanks called for, Mike. I’m a professional.”

That depressed me, and I left.

Sitting in the car, I listened to the news absently as we passed through the Federal Checkpoints on the EHS access ramp. We were crawling along, inches at a time. The Feds did full background checks on every person in every vehicle on the EHS ramps; trying to gain illegal access to the ancient highway system was a grave crime, and an enthusiastically prosecuted one.

I had tuned in to one of the offshore stations for news. They were shrill and paranoid and I didn’t know if I could believe it all, but I thought there was value in it.

There were riots in Detroit, according to the offshore. Thousands of people had stormed the hospitals, smashing equipment and attacking the staff. Dozens of the Full-Coverage patients had been killed. Cities across the country were implementing contingency plans in case it was an organized conspiracy.

“Humbert, link to the Detroit net.”

For simplicity, I’d named all my shells Humbert.

The Detroit net reported rain, heavy traffic, a postponement of the opera that night. And then went to local restaurant reviews, delivered by some pompous-sounding Englishman.

“Disconnect audio, Humbert.”

I studied the back of my driver’s head as we inched up the ramp. “How are you, Charles?”

His head turned slightly to the side. “Sir?”

“How are you?”

“How do you mean, sir?”

I sighed. “Charles, I’m asking if you are of sound mind, body, and soul. If you have any complaints. If you look forward to waking up in the morning, if you enjoy your work, hate your boss. If your back aches. I am asking you, human to human, how you *are*.”

He drove in silence for a few moments. “I don’t think that’s something humorous, sir.”

I’d offended him. Maybe he thought I was throwing high level medical coverage in his face. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

“I apologize, Charles. I was honestly asking.”

Another moment. “Very well, sir. I’m very well.”

I smiled.

A sharp tapping at the window woke me up. A dour-faced woman was peering at me. I rolled down the window.

“ID, please.”

I handed it over. “Nice day, isn’t it?”

She took my papers without a word and walked away.

“They’re being very strict today, sir.” Charles offered suddenly. “Something must have happened.”

I told him about the reports I’d heard about Detroit. The back of his head nodded. “That would do it, sir.”

When the Federal Officer came back with my papers, she seemed disappointed to have to pass us through.

“What is your destination, sir?” She asked curtly, handing back my dossier.

“Philadelphia.”

She jotted this down. “Purpose of trip?”

“Personal.”

She glanced at me as she wrote. “Sir, is your car shell recording?”

I frowned. “No.”

“Please set it to do so.”

I paused, then nodded, coughing. “Humbert, ambient record.”

“Doctor Michael Hemming, it is my duty to inform you that your file has been yellow flagged by the FHD pending the resolution of Court Docket NY23A49-7. This means that while your movements, financial transactions, and other activities have not been restricted, they will be monitored. My Federal ID is X-V761A and it is four-oh seven p.m. on November 16th. Do you have any questions regarding this action?”

I coughed. “No, officer.”

She nodded without looking at me. “Very well. Please sign here and instruct your shell to log this recording with Federal Records.”

I signed with a shaky hand, and told Humbert to do so. She tore a carbon from her clipboard and handed it to me.

“Have a good day.”

I watched her step back and wave us through.

“Don’t speed.” I sighed wetly. “We’re being watched.”

I peered at the slip of paper. Even though I’d had my laser update a few months before and didn’t think anything had gone wrong, the paper was blurry in the dimly lit hall of the building. Doors lined each of the walls, each a flat green color, each numbered. I matched the number on the door with that on the paper, folded the latter carefully, and returned it to my pockets.

I knocked. There wasn’t a shell interface.

Immediately, a door down the hall opened. I turned in time to glimpse a gray form as it dashed back inside and shut the door behind it. I coughed in the dusty air, and each cough was punctuated by a hitching pain in my chest.

Behind the door, I could hear movement. Then, dim from behind the metal: “Who is it?”

I swallowed coughs. “Denise?”

For a long, shapeless while there was nothing. Then, the door trembled as locks were undone, and it slid inward.

My daughter was an artist of no recognized ability. If she’d been talented her life might have been better –fame brought wealth and

health benefits, if she would have accepted them. If she wouldn’t take them from me as a gift, I didn’t know if she would take them from society, either.

I hadn’t seen her in thirty-one years, around the time she’d started to look older than me. Not even on video. So the shrunken, wizened woman who greeted me in astonishment was quite a shock.

“Dad?” she said. “What’s going on?”

I couldn’t speak. Tears filled my eyes. “May I –” I finally managed. “May I come in?”

She stared at me for a few seconds. Even the best HD rating couldn’t stop the aging process altogether, and I looked older than when she’d seen me last. She reached out a thin, baggy arm and touched the lapel of my overcoat.

Suddenly, she stepped back. “Come in!” she said, and I stepped into her apartment.

It was one large room. Dim, no windows. Dusty. Painted white, cold concrete floors. I looked around at the scavenged furniture and the pathetic attempts at decor. I’d tried to keep her from this, but she’d refused.

“It isn’t much, of course.” she said fussily, her breathing labored. “But the rent is free. The city’s declared these old building Squatter’s Homes, for people like me.”

I’d heard of that program. I sat gingerly on the deflated couch and looked up at my daughter. She was wearing a thin pull-over print dress that fit badly. She was standing staring at me as if she had no idea what to do, her hands nervous and fidgety.

I looked around again. The walls were covered in her paintings: she favored sunsets. None of them objectively special, but they covered the walls gloriously, endless interpretations, the active perseverance of hope despite her grim surroundings and crappy father. On an easel in the corner was an unfinished one. I wondered how she afforded the paints, the canvas.

“I sell one, sometimes.” She said shyly, as if sensing my question. “I go to the Square sometimes and set up a booth. Sometimes people buy one.”

I looked back at her, feeling thick. We look at each other. “Denise,” I said hollowly, “I have been such a fool.”

It was finally time to be mortal, and only fitting. She’d read about me in the Tech journals, of course. I asked her about the past thirty years: she’d lived in artist communes, been arrested a few times, mostly for Theft of Service when one of the commune members had gotten sick. I’d at least managed to force a good education on her, and she’d been able to act rich when necessary. She told me about her emphysema, how she got out of breath all the time, passed out sometimes.

I told her how everything had changed for me, just recently, and how the forces of the world were aligning against me. Then I told her I knew how arrogant that sounded, that I knew I hadn’t changed, would never change. I told her how even my work at the lab felt like old

work, how I didn't understand anyone, anymore.

She smiled, old and beautiful. "And now you're here at last with me."

The Denise put on our tea, bitter and dark, and brewed it according to my instructions. And we toasted each other, and laughed for the first time in thirty-one years, and slept.