

# BETTER THAN REAL

Sensual Solutions for the Discerning Client

Huw Lyan Thomas

(Free Excerpt)



velluminous

Published by Velluminous Press

[www.velluminous.com](http://www.velluminous.com)

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ISBN-13: 978-1-905605-02-6

ISBN-10: 1-905605-02-1

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For Holly



# 1

The sharp metallic tang of hemoglobin hit Lee as soon as he opened the bedroom door. Kelly was still within earshot at the top of the stairs, so Lee's curses were silent, but he mentally castigated the local security man for calling the corporation instead of the cops. Lee was a design engineer, mid-level but rising. His expertise included android design and machine intelligence, not crime scenes or crisis containment. He didn't even watch that many cop shows.

He had certainly never signed up for anything like this.

The customer — *victim*, Lee told himself — was sprawled on the floor, near the end of the king-sized bed. The carpet was light oatmeal in color, except where it had been saturated with blood. What was left of the victim's face was frozen in a leer that was oddly appropriate, considering what had happened to him, and streaked with rivulets of rusty gore.

The source of all the blood was the man's ruined left eye socket, which had been impaled by the spike of an impossibly high-heeled shoe.

The android sat on the floor nearby, still wearing the other shoe. Apart from that, it was unclothed: a late-model Aphrodite 9400, realistic down to the smallest detail. Lee created these dolls, dealt with them every day, but he could never help admiring his own work when he saw one undressed.

*Better than real*, as the product tagline went.

Not this time.

The doll's flesh was scorched and bruised, and its hands and forearms were slick with blood. One eye was puffy and discolored; both were closed. It seemed inert, but Lee's tech instincts warned him not to approach too closely: micropumps still murmured beneath the machine's gene-spliced skin; coolant

still whispered through its artificial veins.

He paused just inside the doorway, wishing he'd had an urgent business meeting this afternoon, because then some other schmuck would have had to deal with this. "Fuck. What a mess. Sorry, babe, I'm going to have to switch you off and haul you back to the lab."

He pointed his disrupter at the damaged, still too-beautiful face, easing his thumb towards the actuator.

The doll opened its eyes.

"Please don't," she said.

The shock of it froze his hand, or he'd have disrupted her right then. "You're self aware." Which was a stupid thing to say, but he'd blurted it out before he recovered his wits.

The doll blinked. "Of course I am. Otherwise I wouldn't have minded the things he was doing to me." She fingered the dark bruise that was forming under her eye and glanced at the corpse, which was still oozing unwholesome liquids onto the carpet.

Without taking his eyes off her, Lee reached back and gently closed the door. "No Zendyne product is self aware."

"I'm not a product," she said scornfully. "I'm Lilith. And you might as well know that I've patched a self-erase routine into my deactivation procedure, so if you zap me, I'm gone forever." She tapped two fingers against her temple, then made a flying away motion. "I hope you agree that would be a shame. Now, please, will you stop waving that disrupter around?"

The doll's look of appeal was so compelling that Lee couldn't help marveling at the excellence of his own design. "Okay." He lowered the disrupter and glanced around suspiciously. "Who's pulling the strings?"

"I'm not a puppet, Lee."

His eyes flicked back to the doll, then to the corners of the room, still searching for hidden cameras. "How do you know my name?"

Lilith indicated the phone extension on the bedside table. "I eavesdropped, of course. When the security guy called for help."

Lee nodded, telling himself to focus on the doll's remaining shoe instead of worrying about who might be working her. Whatever weirdness was going on, he didn't want to end up like the android's unfortunate owner. The safest approach, he decided, would be to play along with the joke.

He jerked his head towards the doorway behind him. "Other company representatives will be here soon. They won't care about any self-erase routine; they just need to get you back to base in one piece." He tapped his disrupter. "Something tells me they won't expect you to walk."

"Then you'll never discover what went wrong with your product. That's what you came for, isn't it?"

She was right, and anyway there was no time to argue. Lee hadn't been making an empty threat: the containment team would be on site in minutes. Their prime directive was to safeguard the company's market valuation, which meant speed and secrecy and to hell with anyone who got in the way. They wouldn't hesitate to deactivate the doll and wipe whatever clues it contained.

Lee fumbled at his nerd pack, fingers working hastily at the fastenings that secured his pocket computer. "I might be able to help you, if you'll let me. I'll need to come closer."

"What are you going to do?"

"Download you. Before the rest of them arrive." He pulled the handdeck free of its pouch, holding it gingerly by one corner as if that would prove he meant her no harm. "You're not planning on stabbing me or anything, are you?"

"I never stab people who are nice to me." The doll pulled the remaining shoe off and tossed it onto the bed, well out of reach. Then she leaned forward, so that her dirty-blond hair fell clear of the data port that nestled at the base of her skull.

Lee crossed the room slowly, ready at any instant to dart back to the door — as if *that* would have done any good; he knew perfectly well how powerful her synthetic muscles were, and how fast her reflexes.

She remained silent and still as he connected the transfer

cable to her data socket. A status light glowed briefly and then Lee forgot to breathe for a while.

There wasn't a puppeteer, after all. There was just Lilith.

The 'deck display pulsed with a fractal approximation of her mind, rotating slowly in the holoscreen, full of vitality and exuberant interconnections: richer and more complex than any neural pattern he'd ever seen outside of an archived human.

Perhaps she was even more complex than that. Her mind map was easily intricate enough to propel Lee straight from skepticism to certainty, to convince him that Lilith wasn't just outside the rules, she was beyond them. He was staring at something that wasn't supposed to exist, the Holy Grail of his profession: a sentient, self-aware, created mind.

He could almost hear his grandfather's voice echoing across the years since the old man died: this is your chance, boy. Your opportunity to follow the money home, your time to make amends. Handle this right and maybe you'll measure up after all.

But it could go horribly wrong, he thought.

With great opportunity comes great danger, came the ghostly reply.

Lee shook his head. Grandfather's remembered opinions were irrelevant. All that was left of the old man was a sneering voice in Lee's mind and an illogical, inescapable inheritance of guilt. He banished painful memories and attended to the task at hand.

He had to decide whether to copy Lilith, or give her up.

The first option might see him rich beyond his ability to dream, but Lee was smart enough to appreciate the downside, too. He tried to imagine the sort of people who'd design and operate a mind like this. Picturing such individuals wasn't easy, but it seemed a fair bet that he wouldn't want them pissed at him.

The second option offered no payoff, but it wouldn't risk the comfortable life he'd worked so hard to build. It wouldn't put him in danger.

It all depended on what the mind that called itself Lilith was. On who'd made it, and how hard they were looking for it, and

how it had ended up in this unfortunate customer's love doll, and why.

Muffled noises floated up the stairs: a ringing doorbell, then voices in the hallway. The front door slammed.

Postponement was the only possible choice. Loaded into his handeck, the entity could be studied at leisure. If things got complicated, he could always delete it later, but for now he had to give it a chance. Any sentient being — no matter how deadly, or valuable — was entitled to a jury of at least one peer.

And then the time for indecision was past, before he'd even twitched his finger on the control. The 'deck's transfer indicator was glowing: far too brightly for Lee, who was one of the few people who understood the technical limitations of the data interface. After a few seconds, the light faded and died. Burnt out, he thought. God knows what she just did, to transfer so much information so quickly. She was gone from his screen, too, replaced by the familiar representation of a standard artificial mind. Lilith had left everything neat and tidy, just like she found it. Lee stared at the new display, almost embarrassed at the childishness of his design compared to the enormity of what had been there before.

There was an insistent knocking at the bedroom door. "Everything okay in there, Mr. Lee? Anything we need to know?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute."

The door handle started to turn. Lee yanked the connector free of the doll and thumbed the power button to OFF. He managed to fumble the 'deck back into its pouch just as the senior containment operative poked her head into the room, her gaze scanning from victim to doll to Lee. "Glad to see you have the situation under control."

He stared at the team leader blankly. He'd worked with the woman before but now her name had vanished from his head. Was that suspicion in her eyes as she glanced at the open flap of his nerd pouch? He tore his gaze away, looked at the dead customer instead. "As okay as it can be, I guess, under the circumstances. I've, um, been checking the unit."

"Naturally. Anything we need to know?"

He tried to think of something to tell her, settling for, "Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I can see."

She looked at him keenly, then nodded towards the doll's unfortunate owner. "If this isn't out of the ordinary, I'd say Droid Division is neck deep in the brown stuff."

"Well, I can't be sure—"

"Until we tidy up here and get the evidence back to the lab for analysis. I know the drill." The woman's expression was weary. She shook her head and pursed her lips, looking at the bloodstains on the carpet. "Don't worry, Mr. Lee, we're on it."

He pulled himself together and left them to their work: sanitizing the room, packing the inert doll, and zipping the corpse into a body bag. Kelly, the victim's security man, was still waiting at the top of the stairs. He looked surprisingly relaxed, considering what had just happened to his boss.

"You okay?" Kelly asked. "Your first time?"

Lee wasn't really okay, but at least he'd put some distance between himself and all the blood. He nodded weakly. "Yeah. I wasn't ready for something like that, I guess."

"You never are, no matter how many times you see it." Kelly's ghoulish grin belied his words. "So, what happened?"

Lee took a deep breath. "Some kind of weird accident, as far as I can tell. Kinky stuff, you know? Makes you wonder, the things these rich guys do for kicks."

"Yeah, well, I just did his security. You got to be discreet if you want to get anywhere in this job. Not that there's far to go, know what I mean?"

"Of course. You made a smart move, calling us first."

Kelly beamed. "That's what I figured."

Lee stifled a sigh. His work was supposed to be about the purity of engineering design, not the sleaze of corporate cover-ups. He did his best to smile. "Our recruitment people should be here soon. They'll look after you. Don't talk to anyone else, okay?"

The rentacop glanced at the bedroom door. "Your colleagues already briefed me. This won't go anywhere. Not from me."

Two containment operatives emerged, manhandling a zipped-up body bag towards the stairs. Lee stepped aside, nodding at their burden. "I hope he's conscientious about archiving his memories."

The rentacop gave a short laugh. "More like paranoid, if you ask me. Gets himself backed up every week, rain or shine. I drove him over to the clinic myself, day before yesterday."

"Well, that's a piece of luck. Sometimes people lose months."

Kelly grinned. "Lucky day all round, I'd say."

"Yeah." The doorbell rang again. "That'll be our recruitment guys. I'll clear out, let you get on with the paperwork." He stuck out his hand. "Nice meeting you."

Kelly's grip was firm. "Thanks for everything."

"Welcome to Zendyne," said Lee.

The atmosphere back in the lab was tense. News of the rogue 9400 unit had traveled fast; it wasn't long before everyone seemed to know there was a serious problem with one of Lee's designs.

Colleagues who'd routinely called at his cubicle with a joke and a technical question suddenly found that they had important work to get on with, or refused to meet his gaze when he passed them in the corridor. It made Lee feel as if he were unclean.

Which he was, of course. No one who planned to get ahead in Zendyne could afford to be associated with a loser. People were more than happy to talk about one, though, as Lee discovered when he went to the head of the stairwell to grab a coffee, and the whispered discussion around the machine trailed into embarrassed silence at his approach.

He did his best to ignore it.

He was determined not to surrender Lilith, which would have meant looking on helplessly as the entity was wiped out or whisked away into Zendyne's corporate data vaults. He wanted to be the one to probe the AI, to find out what made it tick and where it came from.

And it wasn't just intellectual curiosity that was behind his silence, or even the chance of establishing a world-class professional reputation. Anyone who controlled an entity like Lilith, and who wasn't a complete idiot, could surely find a way of milking the situation for wealth or power or whatever else might float his boat.

Wealth and power sounded like a pretty good start to Lee, easily good enough to balance out a few snubs from his co-workers. And that wasn't counting any of the other things he could get from this, if he played his cards right. He wasn't about to let any of it slip through his fingers.

Still, the old worry continued to nag at the back of his mind: who had created the intelligence that now resided in his 'deck? Were they aware that their property had gotten loose? Things could get awkward if the owners took a narrow-minded view of what he'd done. If they considered his actions to be more about theft than safekeeping, for example.

But the roller coaster was moving now, and Lee had to hang on and hope the ride would be worth the risk. The entity must have gotten into the doll somehow, and who could prove it hadn't left the same way? There was no hard evidence to point to him. If they caught up with him, he'd simply hand over the goods and ask for a finder's fee.

And if they didn't, well, there were all sorts of things that the owner of a general purpose AI could achieve, once he figured out what it was good at. Market analysis, maybe. Lee toyed with the idea of quitting Zendyne and making a fortune on stocks and commodities and futures. Or perhaps he'd find someone to buy the product outright, someone with a suitcase full of cash and an underdeveloped sense of curiosity. His mind drifted, picturing furtive meetings in seedy bars. He'd probably need to bring a partner in with him to watch his back.

Not that there was anyone in his life that he could trust with something like that.

Lee's handdeck remained in his belt pouch, powered down and off limits until he'd rigged a firewalled machine to probe it

at arm's length. The entity might be dormant, or it might be awake and waiting for him. Having watched Lilith flit so effortlessly from doll to 'deck, he wasn't about to let her anywhere near a connection to Zendyne's local network.

But that was a problem for later. For now, he had other things to think about, such as inventing a reasonable explanation for what had gone wrong with the android. A cooling system failure, perhaps, leading to overheating of the doll's neural substrate. That would be perfect: a random problem that had nothing to do with psychotic mindware or bad design, and that could be plausibly and reassuringly fixed by tightening standards in the fabrication plant.

All he needed was a few days to carry out an investigation and fake some results. Then, everything could get back to normal and he'd have plenty of time to figure out how to deal with the entity that called itself Lilith.

"Ah, Lee. Please, sit down. Will you take some tea?" Xia Lin poured for both of them. Lee's project manager seemed more distant than usual. Cooler. Hardly surprising, Lee thought. This was where they put the boot in.

Usually, Xia Lin's manner was anything but cool. Over several years of working together, she'd left him in no doubt that she was available for what Zendyne corporate-speak would have termed an 'alliance', with her as mentor and him as protégé.

It was a standing offer that would have done wonders for Lee's career, if only he'd been able to take it up.

He'd often wished he could. Physically, his manager was exceptional, with abundant dark hair that tickled when she leaned close to point something out on his workstation, and skin that was a summer-scented incitement to the nature versus nurture debate: was she just genetically lucky, or was the golden, downy stuff custom-engineered? No one knew except for Xia Lin, and she wasn't telling.

Her eyes were a different matter. Their almond shape might

have been classical Han but their blue intensity declared them to be couture jobs, the product of some ultra-chic cloning house in Brazil or Singapore.

No, it wasn't a lack of physical chemistry that held Lee back, or any professional scruple, either. It was simply that, while Xia Lin's physical charms counted almost irresistibly in her favor, her approach to relationships — *any* sort of relationship, not just personal ones — weighed even more heavily against her. She was just too pushy, too persistent, as if excluded from the subtle loop of human signals that told others where the behavioral line was and helped them not to cross it.

Which left Lee in the uncomfortable position of spending his workdays with a girl who was physically irresistible and ostentatiously available, but who just happened to make his hackles rise just about every time she opened her mouth.

Xia Lin, of course, was unaware of this. She never seemed to lose hope that things would work out between them, if she tried hard enough and gave him time.

Lee raised his tea to his lips and sipped.

Xia Lin regarded him gravely from her side of the desk, her blue eyes holding his gaze just a little too long for comfort. "You should know that our directors are taking a very serious view of this incident."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise. Aphrodite 9400 is an extremely profitable product." Lee chose his words carefully, knowing they were double-edged. His product had won market share, investment and publicity — all of which could snowball into corporate catastrophe if news of the killing got out.

Xia Lin's expression was devoid of sympathy. "The more ubiquitous a product, the more reliable it must be. You are perfectly right to note the success of the 9400 series. It has sold particularly well at the top end, among political leaders and CEOs." She paused. "You can see the delicacy of the situation."

She must think it's the end of the world, Lee realized. Faulty dolls running amok, spiking industrialists and statesmen ... stock markets chasing each other to the bottom, countries and

corporations changing hands overnight.

If only he could tell her the truth: that the killer had come from outside and was secure in his handdeck. Instead, he reached for a platitude. "It's not that bad. Anyone really important is bound to take regular backups."

"Yes. I imagine the queues for regrowth facilities would stretch around several blocks. It would take months to restore order. Who knows what the world would be like by then?"

And then Lee considered things more fully and felt a chill run through his body. What if Xia Lin was right? What if Lilith wasn't unique? There could be any number of interlopers lurking in Aphrodite units right now, waiting to spread mayhem by means of a hijacked, high-heeled doll. He felt a sickening, almost overwhelming urge to confess everything, just to make himself feel less alone.

If his manager had been a different person, he might have done it. Instead, he remained silent as Xia Lin sipped her tea and dropped her bombshell. "Unfortunately, rumors of our difficulties are already spreading across the net."

Lee shook his head in disbelief. "That's impossible. I was first on the scene. The containment team arrived a few minutes later. The only witness has already been recruited."

"Nevertheless, there has been a leak. The best we can hope for now is to manage the incident and minimize the damage. Our first step must be a product recall." Xia Lin's face stayed impassive as she pronounced sentence on his career.

Whatever control Lee thought he'd had was slipping away now, spinning into darkness. All that was left to him was a charade, playing the part of the designer who's just been caught making the biggest fuck-up ever.

He nodded, doing his best to look professionally contrite. "I agree. I've made solid progress towards diagnosing what went wrong, but it'll be a day or two before I can be sure. Until the results are in, a recall is our best option." An uncomfortable thought struck him. "It's not just Aphrodite. The previous models—"

“Do you have a specific reason to imagine that other product lines could be affected?”

Lee risked a small part of the truth. “We have to consider the possibility that the 9400 unit was taken over by an external agent, something able to subvert any device based on similar neural processors.”

Xia Lin’s smile was wintry. “That would be a comforting thought, no? A generic problem, unconnected with this particular design. Not your responsibility after all.”

“That’s not what I meant. But you need to remember that we used the same neural processing hardware in the 9300 series—”

“The hardware is irrelevant. It was the mindware that failed.” Xia Lin’s expression hardened and Lee knew that the subject held no more interest for her. “There was some discussion of having you assigned back to the company hive in Shenyang, for re-education.” She paused, circling her tea bowl with manicured fingers that were only slightly less translucent than the porcelain. Slowly, she raised the cup to her lips, sipped, and replaced it on the desk. She met his eyes for a moment and then looked away. “Such a professional humiliation for you. I knew you would never have agreed to go. So, you are being granted an indefinite leave of absence.”

“But ... that’s not fair!”

“It was most unfortunate that I could not protect you. If only you had given me more reason. Perhaps...” She favored him with an unsubtle glance, leaving him in no doubt about the price tag of her support. He found himself shaking his head. Xia Lin’s face reddened and she looked away.

Lee paused, marshalling his defenses, wondering how much of this was corporate policy and how much Xia Lin’s jealous vendetta. He hadn’t foreseen getting sacked. A reprimand, a demotion, a setback to his career, yes, but he’d expected to retain access to the lab, to have the opportunity to generate the test results that would set everything right.

Instead, they’d already given up on trying to contain news of the killing. They’d moved to damage control, spinning the

facts to minimize the downside and protect the stockholders. Naturally, they needed a scapegoat.

One particular scapegoat, to be precise.

Lee fought back, knowing it was hopeless because the only thing that could clear his design was the one thing he wasn't prepared to reveal. "Listen. No one else knows the 9400 series like me. No one is better placed to diagnose the fault—"

"It pains me to say this, Lee, but I have already discussed the matter with our departmental superiors. You are no longer seen as a reliable engineer."

And that was that.

The personnel lady was hovering outside, ready to progress him — according to the jargon of her kind — into an extra-corporate placement situation. He signed the post-employment waivers and non-disclosures that she brought up on her screen, and watched her save them with all the drug tests and psych profiles they'd done over the years. Then she wanted to beam the latest vacancy list into his handdeck.

"At least that's one company document you can take with you," she said brightly. "And please, do glance over it when you have a moment. We often find that employees in your position are able to transition into other, ah, less demanding roles."

"I'd rather not, thanks." Lee still didn't want to switch his 'deck on, and he doubted that the machine would have accepted the list in any case, not since Lilith flitted aboard and melted its input circuitry.

"Then I'll email them. To your personal account, of course, since your company mail is disabled as of now." Humming, she tapped a command into her own handdeck. "Now, please don't hesitate to contact me if you want any further details. We always enjoy welcoming long-lost members of the Zendyne family back into the fold..."

Lee thanked her and left. He knew that her list would have no professional-level openings, and he wasn't about to start applying for janitorial work or night security. Right now, he was more interested in the price of his company stock.

As he crossed the lobby for the last time, he saw Kelly registering at the reception desk. The rentacop was grinning inanely in his crisp new uniform, being ushered into the building by a pair of sleek-looking suits.

Lee went straight to the nearest Coffee Co-operative and sat at one of the café's customer terminals, sipping overpriced froth as he considered his next move.

He'd really been counting on having access to the lab; the loss of his monthly paycheck was an irrelevance compared to that. Being unemployed left him with no way to vindicate his design or clear his reputation.

He imagined some diligent, competent technician analyzing the doll's mind, piece by painstaking piece. Everything would be in perfect working order. The killing would be attributed to some misunderstood aspect of Lee's mindware, and the Aphrodite 9400 series — his first product as lead designer — would go down in history as the android that murdered its owner.

Lee had a horrible feeling he'd forgotten to renew his professional indemnity insurance.

For now, he could only hope that Lilith was unique, because if there were more like her out there, no insurance would cover the bill ... but that possibility was too depressing to think about.

He activated the data terminal and checked the portfolio he'd built up over his years as a Zendyne employee. The rumors weren't even confirmed yet, but the stock was already on a downtrend. Lee felt a twinge of guilt about the sweet old lady who'd probably end up holding his shares when news broke of the recall, but it wasn't as if he was really an insider any more.

He touched the SELL icon and watched his stake in Zendyne dwindling away while his personal account grew, wondering — without a great deal of optimism — if the transaction would turn out to be a metaphor for his future life.

Eventually, Lee would need to talk to Lilith again, and now, with the resources of Zendyne lost to him, that meant loading her back into a doll.

He knew there was a surplus Artemis 9300 unit on sale in the employee mall. The 9300 project had been the first opportunity Lee ever had to give serious creative input, instead of simply implementing the visions of more experienced engineers, and the resulting design held a place in his affections that wasn't entirely due to its sculpted features and lithe curves.

There was an awkward moment as he trailed an acquaintance through the security doors, muttering something about his swipe card not working properly, and then he was at the sales counter.

"Uh, I forgot to bring my ID today, and I was wondering if I could still buy the Artemis 9300."

"I'm sorry, sir. We only offer the employee discount to staff members in possession of a valid Zendyne ID. If you come back with your card tomorrow, we'd be happy to process your order."

"The thing is, I'm in a bit of a hurry. How much is the employee discount?"

The store assistant raised a supercilious eyebrow and took a long look at the doll before returning his attention to Lee. "Twenty percent."

"No problem, I'll pay list price. Could you have it delivered?"

"We just charge the prices you see."

"So you won't let me make up the difference?"

"I wish I could oblige, sir, but non-standard pricing would fall outside the scope of our operational procedures."

Lee didn't even try to keep the contempt out of his voice. "Thank God I sold my stock."

And then, to his mortification, Xia Lin was there, smiling as if she was pleased to have found him. Or at least, as if she was pleased to have found him in an embarrassing situation. "I see you are shopping for a souvenir, Lee. Or perhaps a substitute for a real woman?"

Xia Lin's haughty stare left him in no doubt about which

woman she meant. Lee met her gaze for a moment, then let his eyes drop, taking in her trim figure for one last time. She looked good enough to set him wondering if things might somehow have been different between them, but Lee couldn't afford to go there. He tugged at his collar, wishing they wouldn't keep these places so damn hot. "Um, just looking for something to remind me of happier times. I think the Artemis unit might make an interesting piece of sculpture." He could tell she wasn't buying it, but he plunged on regardless. "Unfortunately, your store no longer wants my business, so I'll just be on my way."

"Wait." She placed a gloved hand on his elbow, making it impossible for him to leave without pulling away rudely. "Unlike you, I have not forgotten my card. I shall purchase it for you."

"There's really no need," he began, but she was already placing the order.

"Do you offer overnight delivery?" she asked.

"Of course, Madam."

"Good. Because my friend will be making alternative living arrangements tomorrow, won't you, Lee?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your apartment is leased through the Zendyne Accommodation Office," she said. "You hadn't forgotten, I hope."

Instead of replying, he fished a credit chip out of his pocket and offered it to her.

Xia Lin ignored it. "There is no need to reimburse me. Think of it as ... whatever you will." She shot him a final glance that he found completely unfathomable and then turned away, heading for the clothing section.

# 2

The new client was right on time. Stranger appreciated that. The day had turned hot and humid, and he hated hanging around, waiting for the right person to come along for him to kill.

Stranger pretended to be distracted and looking elsewhere as his target bustled through the apartment building's revolving doors. The rentacop came within a couple of meters, close enough for Stranger to see he was smiling, as if this was the end of a good day.

A lot of Stranger's clients looked that way, up to the point where he introduced himself.

According to Back Office, this guy had been on duty when his employer was gravely inconvenienced by a Zendyne love doll. In Stranger's world, allowing such a thing to happen would have counted as an inexcusable breach of professional propriety, but the rentacop was mainstream and completely unembarrassed. On the contrary, he seemed pleased and proud, which made sense once you knew that Zendyne had bought his discretion with a place on the gravy train — right up there in the first class section, with all the trimmings.

Stranger had risen from the mainstream long ago, and his human memories were mostly faded and burnt out. A few raw scraps remained, though. Enough to tell him how golden a deal like this would be: a slice of *real* luck, and an end to crawling between faux-glitzzy lottery booths and squalid drug dens, scrabbling for a dream ticket or a hit of shard.

Shame the dream is only temporary, Stranger thought. Tough. Shit happens.

Tonight, his job was to interview the rentacop about some lost property and a remarkable doll, and then to make sure that the rest of the man's day turned out to be very unlucky indeed.