

THE POLLUTANT SPEAKS excerpt

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The cybernetic giant reached out to grab me, too quick to be avoided, but I threw two punches at his face as he pulled me in. The coachgirls screamed with excitement, opened their purses and took another dose of the memetic.

The giant threw me into the front doors of the Hotiocha, smashing the plastic on one side, where one of his colleagues and a coachgirl, who couldn't believe her luck, started kicking me with all their might.

'Eloi! Abba! Save us great and stray—fit us with cinema of the head! HEAD! HEAD!' They chanted. As if being kicked wasn't enough, I had to listen to The Pollutant Speaks being misquoted.

Adrenaline overrode the pain for a moment, and I took a blow in the face to grab the foot of one assailant and pull him over into the coachgirl. I got to my feet just before a runaway train struck me. The half-machine thug smashed me back through the doors and onto the street, where I lay flat on my back.

He put his foot in the centre of my chest.

'Be the Cannot!' The ecstatic coachgirls screamed out. 'We lay off the cloaks and speak the truth in sewers, the river whose source is foul!'

'Foul source!' The giant bellowed down at me.

The golden period of adrenaline-powered fighting rapidly passed, and pain spread through my back and ribs. The immovable boot crushed the breath out of me. I thought the red in my vision was

blood. Actually, it was my proxy asking me to authorise emergency payment.

Authorised.

Instantly, the weight lessened on my chest, accompanied by an ear-popping decompressive sound. I watched as one of the coachgirls was blasted, mid-chant, in a cart-wheel backwards down the road. Above me, the giant cradled his arms over his head as he appeared to be beaten by massive invisible fists.

As the neVERRiders and the coachgirls fled, I spotted the approaching Order unit, a metal skeleton with compression cannons on each arm and the face of its remote operator projected across its visor. The operator appeared to be a teenager. *Long live exact demonstration!*

‘Duration of engagement: seven seconds. You sure took your time calling for help there, buddy,’ the operator received an off-air reprimand. ‘But you’re the customer, man. You want me to call an ambulance?’

The skeleton leaned over me and gestured a weaponised hand over its shoulder to indicate where medical attention might come from.

‘No thanks,’ I said, ‘just a cab home.’

The truth was that the extortionate charge for seven seconds of rescue had used up the last of my culcap. I couldn’t afford an ambulance. People on life-basic get the knockout drones for medical attention, and I just wanted to get home while it was still mine.

If the Cannots were trying to kill me, I’d be safest back in my apartment in Javod, but if I returned to life-basic and the dormitories

or worse, the Shang Lo commune, they'd be able to buy my net activity for the cost of a cheap meal. That was the kicker of life-basic, no privacy, and privacy seemed to be all that was keeping me alive.

The remote-controlled skeleton helped me to my feet. Amazingly, I didn't seem to have broken any bones, but an army of bruises erupted over me. *Haematoma hero*. My proxy noted the snowballing excitement online as my friends checked if I was OK and hurled abuse at the Cannots, who in turn were posting all the gory details of the encounter on sites and forums everywhere. I let trusted contacts know that I was on the way home, battered but unbroken.

'You sure you don't want to file a police report?' the concerned teenager on the faceplate screen asked.

'I can't afford the deposit, and I'd rather go home. Maybe I'll make one when the shock wears off.' I stumbled over to a cab rank, where a newly arrived vehicle played its jingle and opened its door.

'*Order* is glad to be of service in this private dispute matter,' the young operator launched into his sign-off script. 'Damage and injury sustained by the plaintive and other involved parties are at the discretion of the engaging client. No liability is assumed for property or emotional wellbeing. *Order* is a profit-making capital lease engagement organisation...'

When the controller finished his spiel, the faceplate went blank, the machine crouched into a tight box and waited to be picked up. It occurred to me that I'd forgotten to thank the gamer for saving my life.