

Chapter Twenty-One

I left Fair Lady shortly after Terrence, had an early dinner, and spent the first part of the evening deciding how to dress for my big date. After scanning some images of the fashions of the time, I decided against a salaryman-era suit and tie ensemble, opting instead to purchase and print a designer jacket and T-shirt that would have looked OK on today's Tokyo streets, though the lapels would have earned some mild double takes. I also prepared a small batch of business cards for instantiation. In 1990s Japan, their presentation during meetings was not optional.

That done, I decided to take a break to watch an ancient noir film, "Kiss Me Deadly," that I'd spotted while scrolling through the video catacombs. I think I'd seen parts of it as a kid, but couldn't be sure. It was an odd but strangely compelling bit of surrealism involving the pursuit of some mystical wad of 1950s nuclear waste, a swaggering detective, and a treacherous dame who gets her just desserts. I found the film an oddly appropriate prelude to tomorrow's program and watched it to the end, then went to bed. I enjoyed a sound night's sleep and woke up early the next day, well rested and eager to help WILD HARE bound along to its conclusion. I also decided I was starting to annoy myself with the rabbit jokes.

After showering, I grabbed one of the old-fashioned immersion kits Jaclyn had requisitioned and sent to my apartment a couple of days ago. First, I pulled the kit's bodystocking over myself and waited for my skin's surface heat to activate and fuse the fabric's sensor net to my skin. (These days, most people wore regular clothing integrated with gossamer linings, though serious and professional gamers still like to use stockings.) I then took out the small bottle of sensor-infused mouthwash, filled the cap, swished the contents around my mouth and spat it out. Again, most people no longer used the wash to enable them to taste and smell when immersed, as a modern gossamer's resolution was high enough to

handle this via epidermal contact (again, the gamers begged to differ. Some fanatics still experimented with installing wetports in their skulls, only to invariably discover that your brain is designed to work with an existing sensor web called your "five senses," and bypassing it almost never works very well). Finally, I slipped the kit's active contacts in my pocket — I'd insert them shortly before I immersed.

I hurried through a quick breakfast at the dining hall and by 8 a.m. was at my workstation mentally reviewing how I would handle my first "in the flesh" encounter with Jessica. By 9 a.m. the entire group, including Jaclyn, was there to see the show. During the night, someone had brought in a comfortable looking mercliner and placed it at the front of Fair Lady, centered on the central projector. At 9:45, I handed Michael my little stack of business cards to scan into inventory, sat down in the mercliner and prepared to immerse. Michael walked over to where I sat to brief me and check the chair's settings.

"OK, let's review the process and specifications," Michael said. "This is old technology, but it's still competitive with most of today's systems in many respects. How do you want to handle the cards and the gift?"

"During transition can you place the box in the bag? And place the business cards in my jacket's inside pocket? "

"No problem. Your sensor net will scan your clothing and sync it with your avatar during transition. It will appear and feel exactly as it does now. Once immersed, gossamer resolution is set at 400 sensors per square centimeter. You will be standing at the far end of the front walkway. I'll assume you'll be talking to her in Japanese, so we'll display the machine translation on the displaybanners. No one wants to miss any of this. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"You're ten minutes early, by the way."

"That's fine. Being late to a formal meeting is still a major social faux pas in Japan. Arriving a few minutes early is not regarded as rude. I'm going to assume she's going to make me cool my heels for a bit to establish the ground rules. I may have flexibility further on in the scenario."

"You're in charge. OK, let's go."

I inserted the APCs and sat down in the mercliner, its soft surface made of a special, high-wear gossamer. I placed my palms flat against the chair's armrests and waited for its sensor net to interface with mine. A small light embedded on the right armrest glowed amber, then green as the two nets successfully connected.

Michael stepped away from the mercliner and returned to his console station. "System immersion in ten seconds. Ada, activate voice count down."

"Instantiation in five seconds," she replied. "Four. Three. Two. One."

My contacts went opaque and I dropped into blackness. There was a slight moment of disorientation, then the light returned and I was standing under a clear blue sky on a warm day in front of the home of Hanabusa Narihisa-san.

I spent a few seconds stretching and moving about in order to allow the system interface to map my motor reflexes to my avatar. Early immersive systems had required you to stand in a harness that provided you with 360 degrees of movement and the room to swing things (like large fake plastic guns) around freely, but improved gossamer technology and interface software had made the old haptic methods obsolete. "Moving" in a modern immersive required you to visualize the action and allow the

gossamer to transmit and receive neural input back through the interface. It took an hour or so for most people to acclimate, but like riding a bicycle, once you learned the skill you never forgot it.

Once synced, I paused to listen for any sound of movement or stirring from inside the house. I was sure that Jessica had seen and heard me after I'd appeared and was watching carefully from inside, but I could hear nothing. Outside, it was equally still. Not even a breeze stirred the warm, humid air and the leaves hung quiet and undisturbed. No insect chirps or buzzes rose from her garden's bushes and flowers and the birds soaring above me were quiet as well.

Next, I evaluated the environment around me. Despite being twenty-five years out of date, the system's visual rendering was first-rate. I rubbed the toe of my shoe in the dirt, excavating a small hole, and was unable to see any of the pixelation, blurs, or other visual artefacts a cheap commercial immersive would exhibit. Then I walked over to a flowering hydrangea bush in the garden, knelt down, and stared closely at one of the purple clusters. Again, real-life resolution with no visible pixels. Reaching out, I shook the blossom gently. No hint of blur on the petals and stamens and it felt right. I drew in a deep breath and could smell a subtle, light fragrance. Another measure of the sim's quality. Hydrangea scent is difficult to reproduce and an inexpensive system might have substituted a generic "rose" smell.

At precisely 9:55 a.m. I headed up the walkway carrying my gift. Arriving at the bottom of the small flight of steps leading to the home's front entrance, I stopped, put down the bag, and waited a second to see if she would come outside to greet me. No.

"Hanabusa-san, I am here for our agreed upon meeting," I called out. "Do you wish to come outside? Or would you prefer to invite me inside?"

No answer. Our meeting would take place at 10 a.m., no sooner. Five minutes later I repeated my invitation.

This time the panels opened and Jessica came down the steps. As she came up to me, I reached into the bag, took out the box, set bow at 45 degrees, and handed it over with both hands.

"Please accept this as a token of sincere apology for all the inconveniences we have caused you," I said. "It is my hope that we can become friends and colleagues and I will work to assist you to return home." (Not really, but I had decided storage on long-life archival media was appropriate.)

She took it without the normal once or twice refusal, but I did receive an *Itadakimasu*, a good sign, and she also took the bag, placing the box back in it. A Japanese receiving a gift in the context of our type of meeting does not open it in front of the visitor but later, after the guest has left.

Next, I reached into my jacket pocket, extracted a business card, bowed again, and handed it over with the same two-handed grip. I started to straighten up in anticipation of possibly receiving a card in return, but was prevented from doing so by the katana now sticking out of my chest.

Jessica kicked the gift bag between my legs and the blood leaking from my body splashed into its interior and onto the box's olive and yellow wrapping. My legs began to buckle. Using the embedded katana to hold me upright, she looked up at my face. "When you abducted me, you failed to provide me with any cards or the ability to buy gifts, so I decided to give you this instead," she said quietly. She pulled the sword clear of my torso and the flow of blood turned into a torrent. She walked back into her house without a backward glance as I stared at her in disbelief and fell to my knees. After a few more seconds, the pain in my chest transformed into agony and I bled out.

Then I died.

Well, not actually. Ever since popular literature discovered the concept of virtual reality, the idea that you can die while your "brain" is "inside" a computer has been a popular meme. Complete

nonsense, of course. A person interfaced to an immersive is not "in" anything. All that's occurring is your nervous system is being fed biometric inputs created previously and saved in the system's storage.

The best systems provide the highest quality bio-inputs and more precise neuromuscular control over how those inputs are handled. For example, instead of being squeezed and mishandled by constricting bands that simulate lifting and weight, a high-end immersive can convince your muscles to use isometric resistance and tension to do the same thing. If you were in a combat sim, the system could precisely measure the amount of damage your avatar was experiencing and realistically impede its ability to perform based on the wounds you were suffering. But when I'd been stabbed through the chest by Jessica, I hadn't actually lost any blood or suffered any tissue damage. All that had happened was the computer had packaged up the various sensations and neuro signals associated with this type of trauma and sent them through the interface. It's very unpleasant and can be quite painful, but it won't kill you. Contrary to popular myth, people are shot, stabbed and die in their dreams all the time. They wake up.

Yes, people have died while immersive gaming. People still die while out jogging, diving or performing any of a dozen stressful sports. If you've have an undetected heart malformation or aneurysm (a rarity in the age of QRIs, at least in the first world), avoid violent or high-activity immersive sims.

Yes, yes, death modding. The interesting thing about death mods is that, as in the case of snuff films, everyone has heard of someone who has a brother who's friend's cousin's sister's boyfriend participated in an immersive death match during which someone, we're not sure who, died while wearing a special modnetted gossamer. Only no one has ever been identified as having died that way.

It's not technically impossible. You could have played play death matches a century ago with what were then called "personal computers." It was quite feasible to rig a gun to point at your head and use an electro-mechanical "finger" to pull the trigger if the game detected that you had lost. But no one has ever done that because people aren't idiots. Just the way no one puts on a gossamer that connects to a high-voltage power line when you die during a game.

In fact, with the sophistication of today's interfaces, you don't have to suffer while playing. It's up to you to dial in the amount of discomfort you'll experience while slaying orcs, refighting Pickett's Charge, or tracking some B-list actor with a paint-ball gun while playing the latest reality show craze, "Celebrity Trackdown: The Show that Enables You to Take Revenge on America's Most Annoying Stars!" If you want, you can adjust your sensory input down to levels that make being hit dead center by an 88mm Nazi cannon feel like an impact from a cotton ball, or demonstrate your manliness by experiencing the sharp stabbing pain inflicted by a Civil War era .58 caliber Minie ball piercing your abdomen while you advance across a level battlefield as Napoleons thunder and comrades to the left and right of you drop by the scores.

Or, as in my case, you can even notch it up a bit and embrace agony when speared by a berserker tsundere.

I jerked up in the mercliner and muffled a scream as my hands reflexively clutched at the hole near my heart. After a second, I relaxed, took a deep breath, waved away Darcy's helping hand, who had taken up a position next to my chair while I was immersed, and stood up. I glanced over at the rest of the group to judge how they'd reacted to my summary execution. It was a mixed bag. The Parks looked a bit shocked. Michael looked concerned, but also amused. Myrdin was fighting to prevent a smirk from spreading across his face.

"Most. Epic. First. Date. Ever." Michael said.

"Thank you, Specialist. I'm glad to have tickled your fancy. In return, can I ask you a favor? Can you please turn down the gain on the neural inputs? That was very, very, very unpleasant."

"No. He can't," Myrdin said. "Terrence and I have tried. The interface doesn't support that feature and we've not been able provide an implementation. Whoever coded up Eleven apparently wanted to live death to the fullest."

"Wonderful," I said sourly. I walked over to my station at the console, sat down slowly, and collected myself. "Give me a few minutes," I said to the group. "Let me see if can figure out what went wrong with that bit ... with the lady."

"What do you want me to do with the body?" Michael said. "And the gift?"

"Let me rot in peace for a while. Leave the gift there. Maybe when she looks at the blood-stained box, she'll feel guilty."

"Somehow, I don't think so."

Fair Lady was quiet as I watched the replay of my encounter with Jessica, but the review wasn't helpful, at least from my standpoint. My adherence to 20th-century Japanese social protocol, which differed little from the 21st, had been competent. I'd used the right verb forms and vocabulary. You might argue my bows were a bit obsequious, but that usually wasn't a problem in Japan in any era. It couldn't have been the gift — she'd killed me without even opening the box, as a quick glance at the displaywall still revealed.

I looked over my colleagues. "Any ideas or insights into what just happened?"

"She's good with that pig sticker," Michael said. "When she drew on you, it was a blur."

"She's moves beautifully." Jaclyn said. "A balletic style of approaching a target."

"She still hasn't Turing failed," Myrdin said. I gave him a long look.

"Actually, I think you two are kind of cute together," Terrence said. I added a strong splash of sour lemon juice to the look I'd given Myrdin and allowed Terrence to bathe in it for a few seconds.

Darcy was silent. I looked over at her. "Captain Colavito?"

"A probing attack. And she was precise. If she'd taken you through the heart, you would have died quickly. She made sure to spear you at a location that gave you time to enjoy the experience. I'd prepare myself," she said. She rose and walked to Fair Lady's exit. Before stepping out, she turned to face me.

"See you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here and ready to resume whenever she is," I answered. "This is a temporary setback."