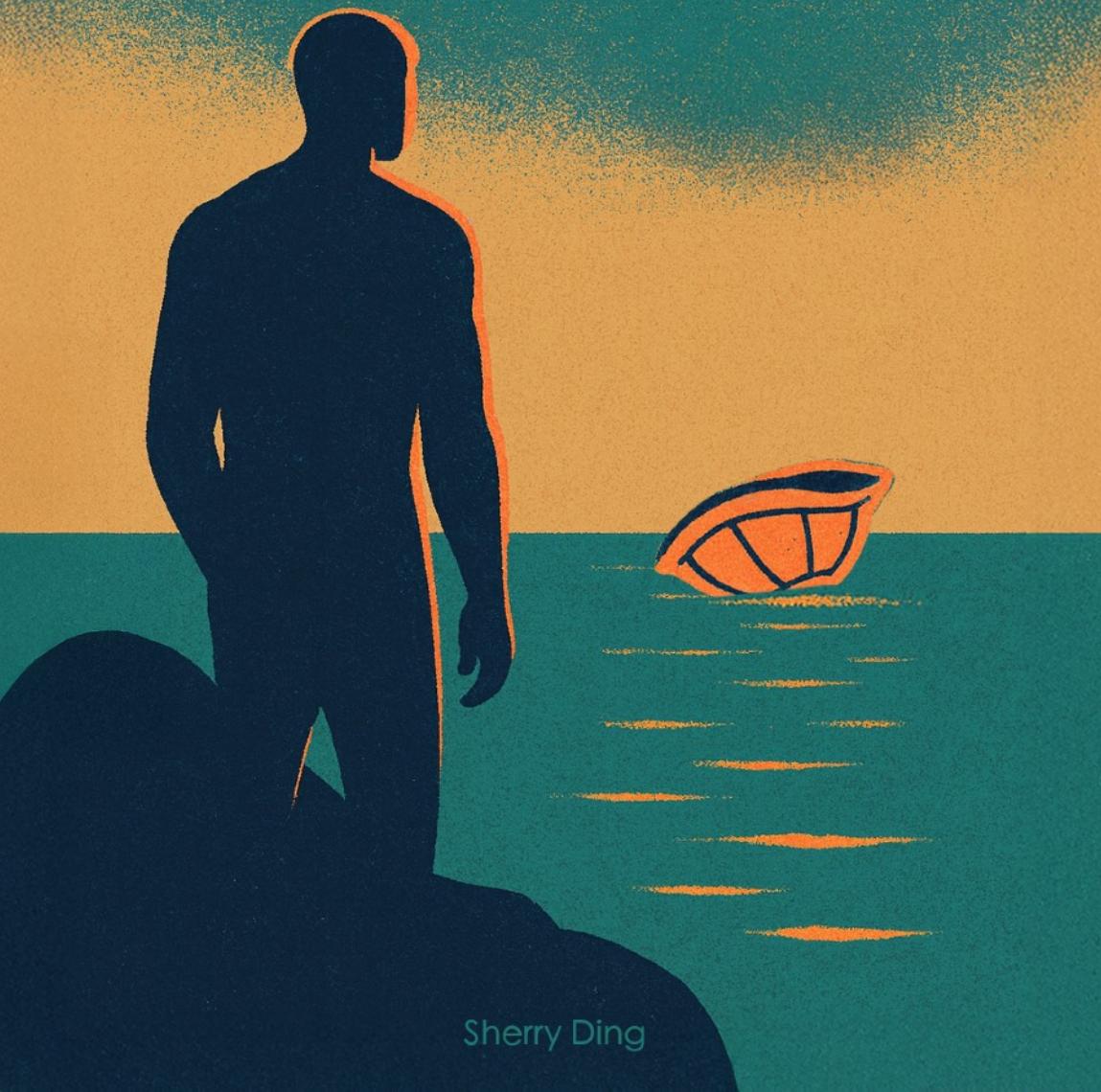


Under AI Rule Humans Go Feral

A Man Without A Shell



Sherry Ding

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PROLOGUE

Freedom Without Limits

“Think it. Be it.”

A lion-headed man hoisted a placard and bellowed at the sky, a low-frequency roar grinding up from his throat.

Behind him pressed a crush of misshapen bodies—tails dragging, wings spread, scales laid bare—nightmare creatures wrenched straight out of their own skeletons, prowling, going into heat, shrieking in the city’s heart.

High above, the security drones cast a cold, precise net. Metal pupils swept the crowd in slow, unhurried arcs; red beams sliced the air like wire, trawling for gene IDs, faces, the temperature of emotion.

Suddenly a stone whistled upward and struck a drone. It juddered and fell out of the sky. The crowd roared, surged, and smashed it to pieces like beasts bringing down a wounded bird.

The next second a fresh drone rose to replace it, its red glare quietly intensifying. The others lifted ten metres without a sound.

Beyond the square the human tide seemed twisted by an invisible sea-force: wave after wave pouring from Charing Cross and the riverside stations, circling inward along Whitehall and St Martin's Street, coiling into a black gyre that narrowed toward Nelson's Column. The air was thick with musk and the raw odour of animal glands. Nelson's Column stood like a rudder that had lost its bearing, moored on the wreckage of an empire aboard a Noah's Ark gone off course. Doomsday creatures, armoured in scale and wing, raved and whirled; in neon and drumbeat they called up the flood they believed must come.

A black-feathered man beat up to Nelson's height with a tin of paint; Nelson's face bloomed red beneath the spray.

“Death to humans!”

Dressed like a dark angel, he flailed his wings in manic strokes—and still dropped, drawing a peel of laughter from the other mutants.

Nelson's statue had lost the last of humanity's dignity. Feet, shoulders, even the bronze lions' heads were carpeted with fervent bodies.

Then the lights snapped out. On the stage before the National Gallery a single cold follow-spot remained, pulsing in the night like a heart; a low drum rolled in like distant thunder.

The mega-screen detonated in neon static, colour flooding everything. Lorelei rose slowly into the light—

She tossed her hair and the air lifted it. Leopard rosettes furred from her collarbones downward, crossing shoulder-blades and arms in an elegant V. Her face still kept human proportions, but at the cheekbones and the jaw a predator's edge had been cut. The bridge of her nose rose slightly; the tip wore a damp black glaze that caught the lamps with pinpoints of light. When her mouth tilted, two fine canines flashed coldly; danger lived in every deliberately languid move.

She raised one finger; the beat withdrew. The electronic swell ebbed like tide. A brief silence domed the square: only the

thin hiss of her breath between phrases. She pressed her voice low into the chest and let out a thread of feline purr, a hidden spark under fur. Heat gathered. A clear, lucid line slipped from her teeth with a tremble of overtones.

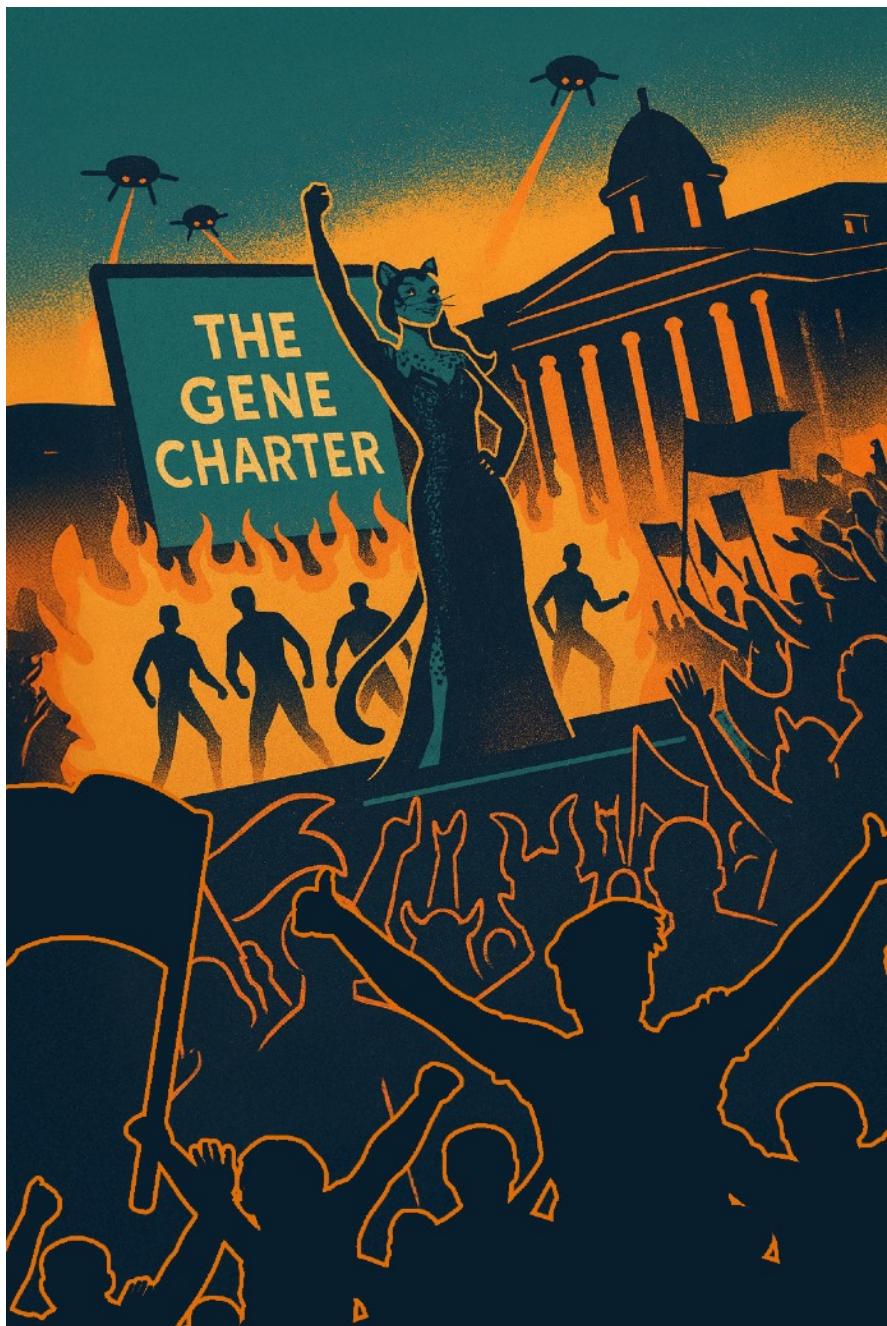
She sang:

You wait for me where the sea runs far; tonight I slip off my name; let me go home wearing your shape.

Each long note dragged tiny sparks of current, settling on the bronze lions' backs, on the edges of raised placards, sanding the sharpness down. The howls stalled. Arms fell, unsure. Masks slid to breastbones. Faces lifted—as if for the first time they saw in her slit pupils a soft want: not for power, but for kin, for return.

Her smile—wicked at the corners—and the lambent glint of those vertical pupils pinned hundreds of hearts at a blink. Four male dancers hovered like prey. She stroked one cheek; velveted claws emerged, her long leopard tail sketching an invisible curve before it coiled the partner close. Her movements were covert and bare at once; each tease of the tail drew a fresh animal scream—instinct taking fire.

The drums snapped faster. On the screen the colours shattered, and the cut came—



The African savannah under a white sun. The camera chased a sprinting cheetah, muscle rolling through gold grass. Next frame: a black 4x4 leapt a gully, a cold flash-muzzle fire. In high-speed the cheetah folded into dust, tail twitching; the zoom yanked closer: the peel of skin lifting remixed into a low beat that locked to the stage's tempo. A carousel of leopard-skin luxury goods: fashion models stroked hide handbags; barcodes, prices, logos fell like a rain of blood-red digits over the cheetah's cooling eye.

Lorelei lifted her hand; her pupils narrowed. Her voice came like wind rolled up from the chest:

“From tonight, stop locking yourself in the sham of a human shell. Speak the id—think it, become it. Let the drug-sick, Mandelbugged tech age go to hell; welcome the Biological Age. Tear up your hunter’s licence. Return to the self.”

Her tail swept once; the drums became a flood, and the crowd’s roar rushed back like tide.

On the screen flame and wings braided into a sigil, then condensed into two words: THE GENE CHARTER.

She flung up her arm as if casting a torch.

“Freedom—without limits!” She pressed her palm down; the voice dropped to a whisper that still cut clean.

“Freedom—without limits!” The reply came like surf, shaking the drones a fraction where they hung.

The chant rose in layers like a spring tide. Wings hammered; tails whipped. Some shouted her name. Blood-stained flags flew. Some dropped to their knees, hands stretched toward the stage, as if swearing fealty to a goddess.

In that moment Trafalgar Square was no longer a square but a high altar to the new kind, and Lorelei stood at its centre like a descended goddess, gazing down on the ruins of the human world.

CHAPTER 1

The Last Human Signature

On the far side of the city, the Home Office—“the White Porcelain Coffin” to almost everyone but the official press—sat by the flood defences on the south bank of the Thames: a right-angled slab of concrete and glass, a grey that looked respectable, and indifferent. The last Home Secretary had vaunted it as “optimised for drone-assisted cleansing”; in truth, in most London weathers it could vanish.

The coffin served as Ω -Gov's physical firewall. In 2040 the global civil service collapsed under drug and corruption scandals; governments rolled out domestic AI governance modules. In time the modules networked in the cloud, sharing scarce resources. The algorithms replaced ministers and mandarins, but were denied the power to legislate. To furnish each algorithm-generated bill with the required human imprimatur, Ω -Gov retained twelve human signatories.

Signer Harold sat in a white office, the light cold as ice, the walls flawlessly smooth. The only furniture: a desk, an old fax machine, and a pen.

In one corner of the ceiling a translucent orb turned slowly, like an eyelid that never shut. Harold knew what it was—the Ω -Gov Emotion Quantiser. Every change in breath, pulse or temperature, any hesitation, would be logged. He forced his breathing into a natural rhythm, unwilling to let the machine scent a stray thought. He picked up an empty paper cup and gave it a shake; he wasn't thirsty, he just needed thirty seconds out from under that eyelid.

The corridors of the Home Office were a 3D cinema: screens everywhere, live feeds of gene-fervour rallies across the world overlaid with surging data streams. Faces alight with joy,

slogans brandished, crowds singing in unison, cheering the victory of the referendum.

The London feed occupied an entire wall:
17 February 2083, 19:25 (London). Emotion vector: +0.034.
Turnout: 21%.

A wheeled coffee machine rolled up to Harold and came to a neat halt, flashing him a digital smile.
“Hello, Harold.”

“Americano, please.”

The machine spat out a paper cup and began to work.

On the side wall the images kept flickering. “17 February 2083, 20:26 (Paris). Public will loading—”

The mutant-march feed stuttered twice, then threw up a few garbled frames: young men spraying Non à la mutation in yellow on a wall. A sudden blackout—one last frame: people in respirators stepping across the burning reflection of the Eiffel Tower.

Harold stared at the coffee as if its slow pour required his full attention.

The coffee bot spoke, calm and firm: “In light of your current

health status, we have switched to a low-caffeine malt blend.” He took the cup and sipped, displeased.

Back at his desk, he woke the screen.

Centre of screen: PUBLIC WILL: LOADING...

At 19:30 the display went black, as if the system had choked.

The air held still. Harold caught his breath without meaning to; his gaze drifted, slow and casual, to the ceiling. The translucent orb now wore a faint blue halo.

GLOBAL WILL: LOADING...

A ring of blue lit around the ceiling: Signature lock T–00:00:45.

He watched the countdown, fingers tapping lightly on the desktop—not impatience so much as a brake on thought.

At last the numbers landed: 19:30:47, 17 February 2083—Global human emotion vector: +0.873. Turnout 76%.

The cursor blinked, waiting for the next result.

“Forget it,” he murmured, as if he’d rather not know.

Then, without ceremony, the message arrived:

Global Gene Charter: PASSED.

He listened as if to a verdict. The pen came to hand; his knuckles tightened.

The fax began to bite paper. Gears expelled a hot ink-powder reek straight up his nose.

First page. Downstroke.

Second page. Downstroke.

A fine line above the signature block flickered:

Non-evolutionary posts are entering a period of structural adjustment; optimisation will be completed primarily through redeployment and capability alignment.

Instinct tugged him to read on; he glanced up—the blue around the ceiling drew tight:

Signature lock T-00:00:03.

No more reading. Flip. Press.

T-00:00:02.

T-00:00:01—

Downstroke. The lock's click was tiny, like a grain of sand.

The screen came back. The Ω-Gov insignia hovered; the female system voice was as flat as ever:

“Please deposit the documents in the designated folder. Disclosure is prohibited. Any disclosure after leaving this room constitutes a violation of the Ω-Gov Civil Service Act.”

The door slid. A roller robot came in.

He pushed the Charter into the slot—clack. Cold white alloy swallowed paper.

The robot’s tray gave the faintest tremor, part reminder, part threat.

The robot rolled out; Ω-Gov spoke again, pace constant, tone cold:

“Mr Harold, thank you for completing signature #1,207,744,983. Your emotion vector today is -0.323. This system has detected a possible discomfort state. If you wish to retain it, please ignore this prompt; for correction, contact the Ω-Gov Human Interface & Harmonisation Unit (H.I.H.U.). Thank you for your presence, and we wish you a swift return to a compliant state of mind.”

Outside, the night still boiled; the animal party was still blazing on the far side of the city.

He looked up and saw the words still rolling across the sky:

“You think it, you are it.”

The office fell back into dead quiet. The low frequency of Ω-Gov spread like the echo inside a sealed coffin.

He thought, without moving his lips: No one intends me to think.

He badged out. Cold wind hit him hard, as if a giant hand had dragged him out of a sterile vacuum bag.

The revels had long since blown over. Feathers littered the street, tufts of biosynthetic fur, mask shards where fluorescent makeup had run. A toppled ad van lay on its side; the display window for tail accessories was shattered; plush faux-fur tails had spilled and were rolling in the square on the wind.

Harold stepped through neon feathers and torn protest bunting. A glowing plume caught on his shoe, clung to his trouser cuff and trailed; he couldn't be bothered to bend. Overhead, drones exhaled a pale blue disinfectant mist, an algorithm's fastidiousness wiping at the air.

Kerb-hugging sweepers crept along, skirting two people curled on a stone bench with "hibernation response", L7 sedative patches on their arms. A first-aid vending unit had been smashed; naloxone and disposable respirators were gone. The sweepers' brushes sucked up feathers, scales and grit into their bellies; spilled alcohol, drinks and bodily fluids were

domed over by jetted curing foam—an aseptic seal over unruly evidence.

A police-dog drone sniffed the air for residual alcohol and synth-grass, bypassed a prone drunk, and set off after a vagrant who had moved a charity donation box and then put it back, correcting a small indecency on the ledger.

The night sank deeper. A drone skimmed over Harold's solitary head; its spray laid a thin cool on his brow. A few stragglers held up hand-lettered boards—"Keep Homo sapiens"—pale and obstinate under unrewarding lamps. London's upper air was being rinsed and corrected; the ground kept using, relapsing, sinking. Two layers like misaligned transparencies, rubbing in the cold wind.

Head down, he cut through streets and alleys towards BioStop 24/7. The automatic door sighed open; a soft cold light fell across his face. He hovered on the threshold till he saw the cashier's warm smile. He thought it was Lucy—only up close did he see it was a life-size poster. Beside it stood a new cashier with a company logo watermark embedded in her cheek. A faint artificial blue moved in her eyes, like a mutant moon jelly.

"Good evening. Welcome to BioStop."

“Where’s Lucy?”

The cashier pointed to the poster. “Lucy Dane signed the Bio-Equality Peaceful Transition Plan yesterday and elected to roll back to a low-energy state—she’s folded her consciousness and metabolism into a phototrophic micro-matrix, a lawful kind of ‘slow life’. We had this poster made for her.”

“Why?” Harold could barely believe his ears.

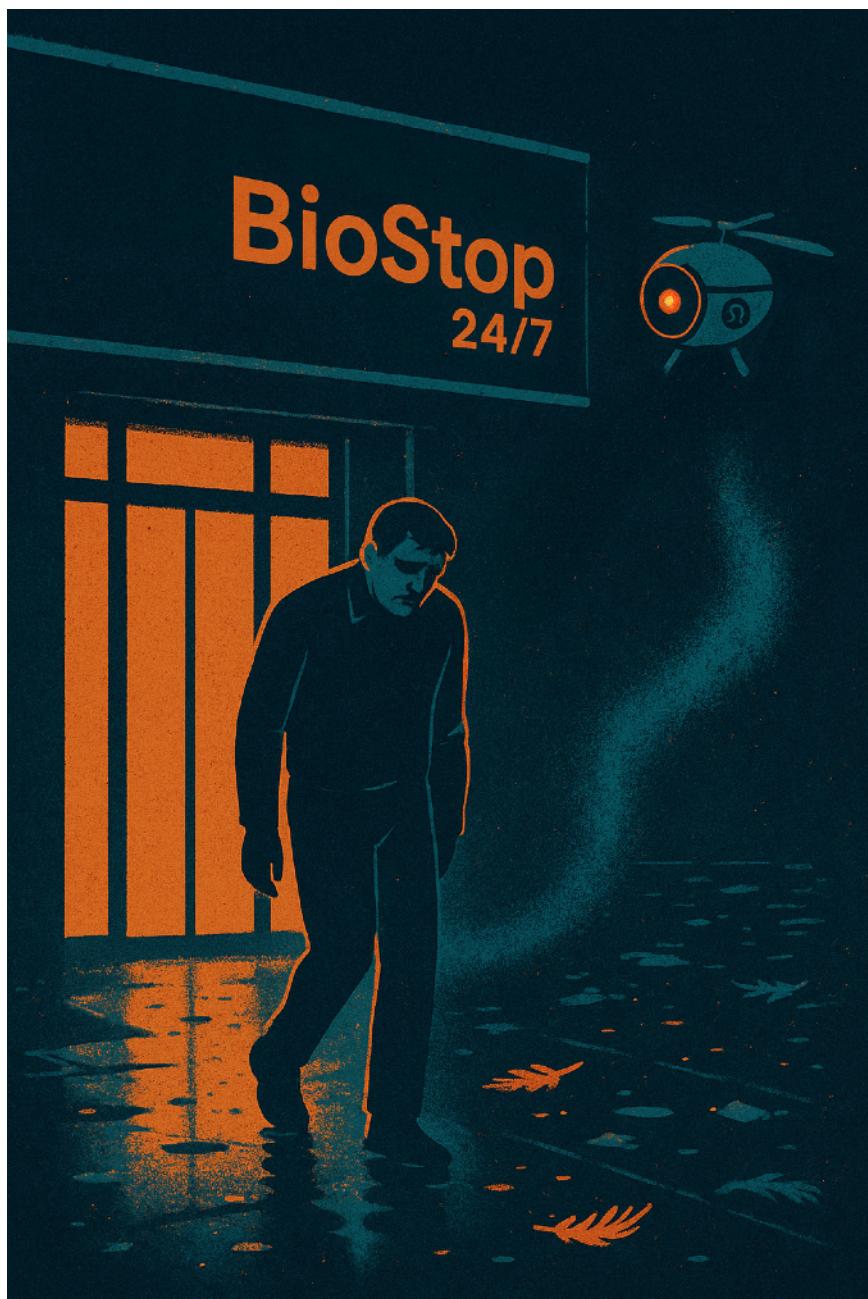
“BioStop was acquired. Posts are now gene-staffed. Lucy chose not to evolve.”

The ceiling hummed; the cold light was aquarium-white. Lucy’s poster felt like a memorial to an old species. Harold’s throat tightened, as if the air itself had been gene-optimised into an irritant. He was about to turn when the cashier lifted a programmed smile. “Sir, may I also recommend our new Lucy memorabilia? Buy any drink and receive a Lucy solar nodder—set it in sunlight and she’ll smile at you forever!”

Harold picked up a room-temperature bottle of water and ran his finger-veins over the self-checkout.

“Does Lucy know?” His voice was dry.

“Of course. The company pays her low-energy annual fee.”



The promo screen by the till caught the keywords and began to crawl: “Low-energy state extended warranty, first year free.”

Harold looked at the neat row of tiny plastic figures: Lucy in BioStop uniform, big head, small body, wide smile.

The till chimed brightly: “Congratulations—you’ve received a Lucy keepsake! Wishing you a lovely night.”

He slipped the plastic Lucy into his pocket and stepped back into the street. A knot tightened in his chest. Lucy hadn’t abandoned life; this was the fault of the bill he’d just signed. A security drone dropped to a steady hover, its lens an expressionless pupil, calmly taking in Harold’s body heat and grief.