

# Second-Hand Memories

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FROM THE MIND OF

**RV A**

Ayman Shedani dropped off the pull-up bar and ran to the barbell across the room. Sweat dripping from his dark skin, he grabbed the bar loaded with plates. Hands wide, he braced himself, focusing on locking his core and flexing his legs to maintain internal pressure. He recalled the expression 'like you're trying to make both kinds of calls of nature' and, with a smirk, hoisted the barbell over his head. His elbows shook and he wobbled a bit but he managed to lockout the barbell snatch. With overwhelming relief, he cleaned the barbell and dropped it onto the pads.

With a loud exhale, he collapsed onto the floor sarcastically. Laughing, he laid there in accomplishment. A few of the others in the hot gym joined him in laughing. His friend, Kevin Freeman, appeared over him. Offering a pale, freckled hand, Kevin pulled Ayman to his feet. "You alive?"

"No," Ayman snickered as the sweaty pair made their way to the side of the gym. The whole class was detangling from the workout of the day, sweat covering the floor where gymnastics, calisthenics, and Olympic lifting had been mixed in a furious, fast-paced workout.

Ayman got his and Kevin's water bottles out of the mini-fridge. Breathing hard but not quite panting, they moved away so others could their water. "What'd you pull?" Kevin asked, pacing to cool down. He didn't drink his water; he just squirted it into the back of his throat.

"Quarter bodyweight," Ayman waved off. "I'm not ready to start setting records."

"I hear ya," Kevin breathily said in the early morning. The pair paced over to the front of the gym, where garage doors were rolled open to let in the warm summer air. What had once been an auto-garage's parking lot now had cracked pavement dotted with grass. It also had a gorgeous view of an abandoned golf course across the street where nature had returned to reclaim its space. Crickets chirped under the final few stars in the bluing sky. A half-moon hung low, near the tops of the trees. "So how's work? Get the new chip reader fixed yet?"

Ayman sputtered his lips. "Are you kidding? No. It's the county, man, come on." He held his water bottle to his head, wiping his forehead with the condensation.

"Doesn't that mean cases are gonna back up?" Kevin asked. He leaned on the divider between two open rolling garage doors.

"I mean, the old machine still works, it just sucks," Ayman told him. "The interface is like a DOS program. The imaging is crap. But, again, it

works. So long as I've got one machine to work, they don't make repairs a priority."

Kevin scoffed. "Remind me not to get arrested."

"You ain't got a priors' chip," Ayman told him. "Without a chip, it won't come across my desk."

"Yeah, but one arrest!" Kevin told him.

Ayman groaned. "You don't get a chip if you get arrested. You don't even automatically get a chip if you're convicted. The things are expensive. They're not gonna hand them out like candy." Ayman began to walk back into the gym. He passed under the boxy arrangement of pull-up bars. The dozen other workout aficionados were beginning to shower quickly in the half-stalls in the bathrooms.

"They're getting pretty generous with them, man," Kevin argued casually, following Ayman. "The other day, I saw one dude got one for unpaid speeding tickets."

Ayman nodded, irritated. "Yeah, I saw the same piece on The Daily Show. What they only mentioned once was that they guy had been doing over double. Like sixty-five miles an hour in a residential zone or something. And he had a bunch of prior arrests. Yes, for speeding," Ayman quickly defended before Kevin could argue, "but they were just as egregious and there was, like, twenty of them. AND," he further defended with a sarcastic finger to Kevin, "and it was part of a plea bargain the dude's lawyer negotiated."

Kevin looked unimpressed. "Dude, please don't ask me to defend this program," Ayman begged indifferently. "I didn't implement it. I got nothing to do with it except I read the chips. I make a report of it and submit it to the DA and the PD. That's it."

"So the police get confirmation, huh?" Kevin asked.

"Public Defender," Ayman corrected. Kevin shook his head, unconvinced. "Dude, I support the ACLU as much as anybody," Ayman promised, almost pled. "Even the ACLU signed off on this program. They said it was better than prison time, and it was better than ankle monitors and stuff."

"Yeah, I know," Kevin grumbled. "I just...Big Brother and all of that."

Ayman nodded, then giggled suddenly. "Dude, if you could see how my office works, you wouldn't be terrified; you'd laugh." He chugged some water. As one of the others came out of the bathroom, steam spilling out over the door, Ayman asked, "You want it?"

"Nah, I'm going to take the kids to the park when I get back," he told his friend.

"How the hell do you have the energy for that?!" Ayman marveled, collecting his bag from the corner of the gym.

"What, this?" Kevin laughed arrogantly as he swirled his finger at the gym. "This is warm-up."

"Screw you," Ayman laughed. "Later," he said, heading into the bathroom.

"Peace," Kevin said, getting his bag to head out.

Often one of the last to get his shower so that he could take his time, Ayman exited five minutes later in khakis and a light blue button-up. His bag slung under his arm, he passed through the gym, calling to the owner and trainer as he headed to his car. Outside, the morning was turning into true day. A bird flew overhead while traffic along the small road between the gym and the golf course was beginning to pick up.

Ayman clicked his door locks for his car as he neared, when behind him, a woman called, "Hey." Ayman turned as a lovely woman with red hair and dressed in workout clothes half-jogged towards Ayman. "Hey, sorry to stop you," she said.

"No, it's cool," Ayman assured her. "Uh...Kate?" he guessed.

"Karen," she smiled. "Kate's the Asian girl." Ayman snapped his fingers contritely. "So, I heard you and Kevin talking about the chip program." Ayman nodded. "You developed those?" she asked curious.

Ayman laughed a little. "Lord no. If I had that kind of money, you think I'd be driving this grocery-getter?" he asked her, gesturing melodramatically at his modest and dated car. "I'm a forensic data analyst for the county."

"Forensic analyst?" Karen repeated, confused.

"Yeah," said Ayman. "It's a five-dollar word that means I check computer data and body-cam videos."

Karen seemed disappointed. "Ah, okay." She smiled and said, "Cool."

"Why?" Ayman asked as she began to backpedal.

"I just...I just overheard you two and was curious," she said, already half-turned to head for her car.

Ayman nodded with pursed lips. "Cool. Cool." He threw his bag into the passenger seat and sat in the car. He pulled the door closed and sighed, irritated. "Man, I got no game." He cranked the car as he lamented the missed opportunity to make a connection. Pulling out, he headed towards downtown.

At Tropical Breeze, Ayman approached the dark wood-stained counter as three different blenders went full speed, mixing up high-content smoothies. "Can I get a Peanut Butter Tosser with extra protein?" he asked, putting a dollar in the tip jar. He handed over cash, got a receipt, and wondered over to the shelves against the far wall. Like the handful of others in the mostly empty smoothie joint, he milled about, waiting for his liquid meal. He spent that time eyeing the protein bars and jugs of powdered protein, trying to remember what BCAA stood for.

One by one, the symphony of blenders grew quieter, until it was just him and one other customer waiting on their mixes as the two girls behind the counter prepared them. Outside the big windows, cars went zooming by until one pulled up in front of the door. Stopping in the middle of the street, it got Ayman's attention. So did the man who got out and opened the door for another man. The car remained in the middle of the lane, next to two parked cars in the legal parking spaces. The driver stood by the car, not bothering to get back behind the wheel.

The man from the car came right inside the smoothie joint. A black turtle neck and a gray suit matched his gold rings, expensive watch and short white hair. He looked at the women behind the counter, as one brought the final two smoothies to the customers. He nodded to the pair of workers, towards the back. They immediately disappeared through the far door. The only other person in the smoothie joint took the hint and grabbed her frosty cup of fruity sludge and rushed out. Ayman looked to do the same, but the man stepped between him and the door. "Not you," said the older gentleman.

The suited man that looked equal parts distinguished and brutal pulled out one of the chairs nearest to the counter and sat at the small table. "Have a seat, Ayman." He gestured to the opposite chair. Ayman was too afraid to do anything but acquiesce. "You're a smart kid," said the man. He didn't actually make eye contact with Ayman, instead looking just off Ayman's shoulders or behind him. "Good worker."

"Th-thank you?" Ayman said. He was sweating now worse than he had been during his morning workout.

"Ayman, me and my boys, we got an issue," he conveyed. He spoke with his hands, leaning into his gestures. "One of my boys did something real stupid." He stressed 'real'. "Now, it has to be handled. But I feel like we, as his family, we should be the ones to handle it. You know? Keep it in the family. Keep it civil. Keep it quiet. You follow me?" That was the first time he looked at Ayman. Looked at him like he was imploring from one family man to another. "Your mom, your dad, your sister," he told Ayman very casually. "You want to take care of them, right? They do something out of line, you got to handle it but you want to be the one to handle it."

Ayman jumped when the man sat back suddenly. "It's like getting into a car accident, right? Little fender bender. Now the rules say, you got to call the insurance. But you don't want to call the insurance. Then your rates go up. Your fault or not, your rates go up. That's money. That's money you can be spending smoothies, so you can build up them muscles." The man reached over to Ayman with stunning smoothness and ease. He grabbed Ayman's forearm and squeezed him. "See that? That's hard work. And that's eating right. But you can't eat right if you don't got money because you're spending all of it on car insurance, just because some knucklehead rear-ended you." Ayman only nodded, terrified.

"Ayman, I want you to help me out," said the man magnanimously. Lines on his round face contrasted with bright eyes. "One of my boys, he did something dumb. He did something stupid. He did something he shouldn't have. He ain't getting off scot-free. I just need your help to make sure we – his family – we handle it."

Ayman stiffened again when the man reached with his right hand into his suit. From within, he produced a small white envelope. "This is an appetizer. Help me out, help us out, help my family out, and this is a tenth. A deposit. A down payment." He slid the envelope across the table towards Ayman.

The man waited a breath for Ayman to take the envelope. He glanced at it, at Ayman who remained motionless but with his eyes tied to the envelope. He took his hand back suddenly, again making Ayman jump. "I always like to pay when people do their job," he said. "Maybe overpay a little. I'm generous like that." His tone had changed ever so slightly. It was deeper. Fuller. Had an edge. "Do your job, I think you should get your fair share, am I right?" He didn't wait for a response of any variety. "But people who get paid and don't do their job...I got no time for them, you know what I mean?"

Whatever fear Ayman had felt before, it paled compared to now.

The well-dressed man stood, leaning towards Ayman and taking up some of his space as he did. He stood over the seated Ayman and buttoned

the top two buttons of his gray suit. "I hope you're the top of man who does his job. I'd hate to have to find someone else to do it. But there's always options when people don't do their jobs." He patted the table like it was a pet. "See you."

The man turned and departed, getting into the car that was still blocking a lane of traffic. He didn't look back at Ayman or the establishment. He left like this was one of many errands he had that day, an errand he trusted he wouldn't have to think about again. It was that cold indifference that scared Ayman the most.

His eyes trickled down to the white envelope, sitting right next to his smoothie. It lingered on the table, white clashing with the deep stained wood, almost like a warning beacon.

Ayman parked his car in his space, not backing in like normal. He just pulled straight in, between a two-decade-old SUV missing a mirror and a little coup missing the runner along the door. His MP3 player plugged into a cassette converted for his stereo was still playing but the trumpet solo of the jazz was lost on him. He was staring at the negative space beyond his steering wheel but before the dashboard. His cognitive mind thought to brush off the dust from the steering column and the plastic screen protecting the speedometer and other dials. His animal brain was screaming in paranoia.

Ayman swallowed and turned off the car. The engine's silence was abrupt and scary. Ayman looked with jerks of the head in all directions, seeing absolutely nothing out of the ordinary and determined to see that as confirmation that something was amiss. He finally unlocked his door and began to get out, only to remember some movie he'd forgotten about, where a car exploded the instant the driver took their weight off the seat. Ayman was positively frozen for a good minute.

When he finally worked up the courage to get out of his car, he couldn't shake the fear of an explosion. He knelt on the asphalt and bent his head down into the floorboard. He looked under his seat and tried to see a bomb. Then he stayed kneeling, determined to memorize how the seat looked. He decided he would check again when he left work, and he'd know what looked out of place. He also dug out a soda can and a fast food wrapper that had been down there who knows how long.

Ayman crossed the four rows of parked cars towards the municipal building, a squat unassuming building with the proportions and color of the brick that it was made from. Three stories, not including the basement where Ayman worked, it was here that most non-detective policework was

done. Forensic specialists and coroners were filing in for the day. They headed through the primary side entrance for employees, though only a few were around right now. Again, Ayman's mind invented a million explanations to justify his paranoia, but a glance at his watch told him he was simply a bit later than usual.

Through the white door full of windows, two uniformed police officers manned the metal detector. The seated one was on the computer, checking social media on one screen while waiting to man the scanner on the other. The standing guard was working a rubix cube that he'd been trying to solve for as long as Ayman could remember.

"Sup, Shedani," said the seated officer, scrolling along his feed. "How was the workout?"

Familiar faces and a friendly question helped dull the edge of Ayman's fear. "Fine," he said. He revised his statement. "Pretty good." He began to take off his shoes and his belt, placing them on the conveyor belt. He stepped onto the tube and let the scanners pass over him.

"You gonna compete in the games?" asked the officer with a snicker.

"Nah, man, I'm not that serious," Ayman chuckled. He began to redress himself under the following silence. He sat on the bench just passed the machines to tie his shoes. In the past, doing so had made him recall tying cleats on the soccer field in college but now, it felt different.

He looked up a little too quickly when the door opened and Dr Thomas shuffled in. The absent-minded medical doctor, he carried pressed to his chest a folder of papers that had clearly been blown half-open. He flopped them down on the scanner's conveyor belt, followed by his briefcase. Off came his jacket with elbow patches as if he was determined to look older. He stepped into the scanner and held out his hands a little melodramatically.

"Shoes, doc," said the standing officer. He'd put aside the rubix cube, preparing for the daily argument.

"Oh, forgive me, I'd forgotten," he said. He stepped out and hobbled on his bad hip to slip his shoes off. "Can't risk the chance I've got a bomb in my shoe," he told the two officers. He placed his shoes on the conveyor belt and returned to the scanner.

"Belt," said the officer as the scanner beeped.

"Should I drop my trousers too?" he asked.

"We go through this every day, doc," complained the seated officer.

"And every day, it's just as invasive," he argued.

Ayman left the senior official to pick his daily fight. He slipped the lanyard for his ID badge over his head and left for his office. He had to go down a half-flight of steps to the basement level, the temperature dropping a few degrees when he did. The hallway smelled of industrial cleaner more often than not and this morning was no exception.

The door to Ayman's office stuck, like usual, but with a kick to the base of the wooden door with the frosted window, Ayman was able to get into his office. He was supposed to lock it, but with everything already locked in cabinets and the door already so damn hard to open, he never bothered. His office was an ugly wood desk from a bygone era and a new-ish computer with a giant screen that hung on the wall. A half-submerged window that didn't open looked out on the southward-facing lawn at ankle level. The highlight of Ayman's day was when a squirrel or two would venture along his window.

His computer hibernating, Ayman swished the mouse and logged-in. He sat down in his office chair and looked at the near-solid wall of filing cabinets behind him. A mountain of documentation that needed to be kept for seven years after receipt. Each cabinet of blue metal was marked with dates when the contents could finally be destroyed, and the drawer repurposed for more recent work.

He turned back to the screen as his desktop appeared. "Okay," he said to himself, moving the mouse again to orientate himself. "What do we have today?" Just asking that question recalled the man in the coffee shop and it gave his hand pause. Ayman clicked on the office drive and summoned up a release program. Three files were pending review, the files' logo that of green circle with a white ball-and-tail, like some star in orbit around an alien world. Ayman downloaded the three files and selected 'Yes' when prompted to open the monitor system. The screen went black as if the system had crashed, and then an ugly, pale lime green cursor appeared. Ayman got up from his chair as a cascade of commands began to spiral rapidly down the screen.

He crossed the hall into the evidence locker. Sandra Moran was working the window, which gave Ayman a smile. The pin-up beautiful woman wore clothes designed to make jaws drop and had skills with makeup that would make movie stars envious. Today she was dolled up in a red suit with her black hair done up in a bun. Adding vibrant red lipstick and horn-rimmed glasses, she looked like sin.

"Ayman," she said in a sultry tone.

"Sup," he said, already taking the clipboard and signing in. "You got three for me."

"Yeah, I think so," said Sandra. She rose from her desk where she logged every last detail and went to a nearby rolling cart for the day's haul. She glanced for a moment, then grabbed a small plastic bag with three smaller evidence bags. "Here you go." She handed the bag through the armored window that divided her from the rest of the world.

Ayman accepted the bag, turned to leave, then came back. "Hey, look, I'm sorry to ask, and if this is too forward, I'm real sorry."

"I'm not going on a date with you," Sandra said with well-rehearsed precision and familiarity, not even batting an eye at the anticipated question.

"No, that's not it," he waved off. She seemed genuinely surprised. "What's with this?" Ayman gestured at her clothes. "You look good. I mean, good." There was real emphasis the second time around. "Better than usual. What's the deal?"

She just shrugged. "I felt good this morning. I like to look how I feel."

Ayman couldn't stop himself from looking down at her body and blushed. "You're gonna give somebody a heart attack."

"I look good," Sandra told him unapologetically. "I don't mind you looking. I get it. Just keep your hands and your comments to yourself."

"You think this is good work attire?" Ayman asked. He asked in a tone that was clearly conversational, even conspiratorial.

"Just because I'm good at my job doesn't mean I can't look good," she insisted, again unapologetically.

"No argument here," he insisted.

"Uh-huh," she nodded. "Want me to drop a pen and pick it up?" she teased.

"I'm not going to say no," he was quick to answer. She laughed and he told her, "I'll have these back by lunch." He knocked gently on the window as he departed, heading back across the hall to his office. With the evidence bag in his hands, now he shut the door and locked it behind him.

Ayman sat at his computer, thoughts of smoothies and Sandra drifting away as routine took over. He wrote his name and date on the evidence bag and tore it open, the surprisingly hearty plastic ripping unevenly. He jostled out the three bags within, writing his name and the date on each of them as well. He tore open the first bag and took from it a long, flat card about the

length of a cell phone, but half the width or depth. At the far end was a small, circular disc with a mirrored finish roughly the size of a dime.

From next to his computer tower, Ayman pulled a small drive about the size of a paperback book. He slipped the card into the machine and two LEDs atop the reader lit up. On the black screen, more commands and prompts automatically ran. Ayman leaned back and watched the code work through itself, recognizing certain commands and prompts, and intuiting others.

Finally, the lines of commands cleared out and Ayman was left with a relatively clear screen with a few numerical options:

- 1 - Eject Card
- 2 - Documentation
- 3 - Video
- 4 - Other Recordings
- 5 - Observations
- 6 - Duplicate
- 7 - Erase
- 8 - Other
- 9 - Exit

Ayman clicked two on his keyboard and the screen shifted up slightly.

- 1 - Overview
- 2 - Full Documentation

This time, Ayman hit one. A cursor began to write out text like an old-world typewriter, letters appearing briskly but one at a time in sequence across the screen. As the cursor shot by, Ayman read quickly.

"Suspect arrested for speeding (68mph/30mph), most recent in a long history of vehicular offenses. Suspect challenged the arrest on the spot, and at arraignment."

Given the option to close the overview, Ayman did and opted for three. A small window within the black field opened. A pair of inverted video feeds showed someone at the wheel of a sports car, driving. Ayman entered a few unrepresented commands and the pair of feeds inverted as flashing lights appeared in the rearview mirror along with a frantic search of the car. Ayman leaned close, crinkling his nose as he squinted. "Is that a joint?" he asked himself. "Dude," he groaned in disappointment.

He stopped the video as the car pulled over to the side of the road. He entered some additional controls and the video began to play back. The image was not crisp at all, but it gave a decent enough impression of color and movement. He played the video back to before the lights. A few more

keystrokes and the video resumed. Ayman squinted again but couldn't see the dashboard of the car. He could see the double-digit digital display of the speedometer but he couldn't make out the numbers. He wound back the video farther and looked instead through the windshield.

He watched as street lights shot by, their glowing presence leaving streaking aftereffects. He chewed on his lip, still watching. Finally, he just sighed. He closed the video and hit five. A pre-derived form appeared on the black screen, the cursor quietly blinking at him. He began to fill out the form, most of the fields the usual questions: name, investigator ID, suspect ID, case ID, etc. Finally, at the bottom, was a larger field described as: Observation.

Here, Ayman spoke as he typed. "Feed from internal chip reviewed. Unable to ascertain specific speed of the suspect's vehicle prior to arrest. Likelihood of adherence to traffic laws unlikely based off attention to ambient information (specifically time between street lights as seen out the windows of the vehicle in the video feed). Guilt is not in question but severity cannot be confirmed. Recommend evaluation of the location where arrest was made, comparing distances between street lights for at least one mile prior to officer contact. If the distances are uniform, the speed of the suspect's vehicle can be ascertained and full charges can be app—"

The computer beeped at him. He groaned loudly and collapsed back against his chair. "Oh come on!" he exclaimed at the computer, not for the first time. "It's a damn official report. Why is there a character limit?!" He backspaced a few times and rewrote the final sentence. 'If distance is uniform, suspect vehicle's speed, and thus charges, can be confirmed'. Satisfied, he confirmed his entry and selected eight.

- 1 - Submit Record
- 2 - Command Panel
- 3 - Display Options

Clicking one, the black screen was once again filled with commands spiraling into action.

Thoughts of the smoothie joint came back to Ayman. He thought of the man's hands on the table, white skin with calloused fingers. Calloused knuckles. Old callouses. Callouses from decades ago. Ayman's eyes glazed over as he thought about what kind of man had to fight, but no longer needed to. Had he grown peaceful, or did he now have others who would fight for him?

In a moment, the thoughts faded and Ayman realized his computer was waiting, the blinking lime-green cursor waiting for him to pick one through nine. He hit one and the card ejected from the reader. Ayman took

it, placed it in a new bag taken from a draw in his desk. He filled it out with all the pertinent data, then set it aside. He took out the next chip and slid it into the machine. Automatically, it began to read the data. It spun through the commands before it arrived at the nine options once again. Ayman hit two for documentation, and then one again for the overview.

"Suspect interviewed for leaving the county against orders of sex offender registry."

Ayman balked at the vagueness of the overview. Grumbling, he closed the overview, then opted again for documentation again, this time the full report.

"Suspect is a 73-year-old Asian male, widowed. Charged six years ago with possession of child pornography, allegedly obtained from a commercial site. Suspect maintained at the time of arrest that he was not aware of, and had no way of knowing, the site sold such images or that the pictures he purchased were underage. Pursuant to placement on the SOR (sex offender registry), the suspect is subject to periodic unannounced visits, which was the reason for this day's visit. Suspect was not home at the time of the visit. When contacted concerning the missed visit, he maintained he was at an early church service. Providing the name of the church, his attendance was confirmed but it was learned that the church in question was across county lines. Departure of the county for any reason is not allowed on SOR except with prior written approval from registry personal. In violation of SOR, suspect is to be re-processed for arrest and reincarceration."

Ayman's expression soured a bit. His hand on his lip, he rotated in his computer chair for a moment, staring. He checked the location of the arrest and minimized the window on the chip reader program. The switch from the primitive interface to the crystal clarity of the standard computer screen was always shocking. Ayman ran a few searches using commonly available web browsers. He located the suspect's home address where he had been living. Isolated and away from town, it was well outside any restrictions on the sex offender registry. A companion search found the church in question. It was across the county line. It was also the nearest church by over five miles.

He closed the browsers and went back to the chip reader. The blinking, green cursor was garish to look at once again. He exited to the primary interface and selected three for the video. He was immediately treated to the twin screens, this time orientated properly. The view was of the suspect in his car, driving along. String music was playing, so Ayman muted the video. He watched as the man arrived at his modest rural home, only to find three squad cars waiting.

The instant he exited his car, the uniformed officers came swarming around him. He held up his liver-spotted hands and followed their commands with total obedience. He was bent over his hood and handcuffed. What followed was a considerably montage of his possessions being searched with some callous disregard, all while he was interrogated in his driveway. Ayman's expression soured further until he was sneering at the officer doing the questioning.

Rather than keep watching, Ayman played back the footage. He guided it farther back from the automatic starting point, just one moment prior to police interaction which was the default setting. He kept going back, following the suspect all the way back to his church. Ayman smiled a bit as he undid the mute and listened to the old man singing a hymnal.

Satisfied, Ayman stopped the video and exited out before hitting five for observations. "Feed from internal chip reviewed. Suspect's guilt is confirmed," he said as he typed, "but well within reason. County line crossing is nominal and provides only access to reasonably nearby church for religious observance. Strongly recommend charges be dropped with no comment, or at the most, citation without penalty."

Ayman reviewed the details of the case for a moment, just to be certain, then returned to the main screen. Eight for other commands, he chose one to submit the record. Another cascade of rapid commands and quiet actions happening largely within the chip reader itself.

Ayman's eyes drifted down to the third and final chip. Unless something came in, which was unlikely as processing usually took some time, this was it. This chip contained what the man at the smoothie shop had been wanting addressed. Ayman's stomach wound tight as he waited for the computer commands to finish.

He prepared the second chip and placed it with the first, the bags on the edge of his desk. He sat back in his seat and stared at the screen for a moment, taking slow breaths. He didn't know what he was getting himself into. After a moment of readying himself, though, he stuck the third chip into the reader. Commands ran. Lime-green letters chased each other down his screen. And finally, nine commands. With an unsteady finger, Ayman selected two for documentation. He started with one for the overview.

"Suspect was arrested for violent assault of three persons at a gas station on East Riverton road. Pending charges include murder, battery, and sexual assault/rape."

Ayman died a little inside. This wasn't the first violent crime he'd reviewed but that never stopped them from being unsettling. Again, he

flashed to the smoothie place. 'Did something real stupid'. 'We should be the ones to handle it'. 'Keep it in the family'. Ayman closed his eyes and regretted so many choices he had made to bring him to this moment. Even as he lamented his actions, he opted for the full documentation.

"Suspect arrived at the Gas 'n Gulp on East Riverton road, just past the metro stop. Suspect filled up with gas, paying outside with a credit card. He entered the convenience store and interacted with the attendant (DOA #1), possibly addressing him with racial slurs. While in the store, he also began to proposition a young woman (DOA #2), attracting the attention of the woman's boyfriend (victim #1). An altercation began and suspect bludgeoned the victim with wine bottle, before smashing two beer bottles against his head. He proceeded to bang the victim's head into the tile floor well after unconsciousness.

Suspect attacked the woman, tripping her to the floor and attempting to sexually assault her. When she resisted, he struck her repeatedly about the face and head. The store's worker attempted to intervene by shouting at the suspect, but he engaged the worker verbally and then chased him to the door. The worker tried to flee the store but the suspect pinned him to the door, removed the worker's belt and then choked him with it. The suspect forced the still-conscious worker halfway through the door and then slammed the door repeatedly on his chest and then head. Suspect returned to the semi-conscious woman and sexually assaulted her. Once completed, he ripped away her clothes and beat her with the worker's belt, then choked her from behind.

DOA #1, the worker, suffered multiple broken ribs and succumbed to intense cranial hemorrhaging caused by skull fracture and repeated trauma.

DOA #2, the woman, suffered severe damage due to physical and violent sexual abuse. She asphyxiated due to vomit and loss of consciousness.

Victim #1, the man, suffered severe cranial trauma and concussion. Currently in vegetative state with uncertain prognosis from medical professionals.

Surveillance video from the store shows agitated engagement by the suspect with the store worker, suggesting the use of racial slurs (audio is inconclusive and largely lacking). Suspect propositioned the woman with lewd and vulgar language, before striking her partner with only verbal provocation. Suspect refutes all charges and has been released on bail."

Ayman was sure he was going to be sick. Against his better judgment, he summoned the video. Despite it being his job, he regretted it. Twin

video feeds played and Ayman was confronted with vulgar inhumanity. He watched first-hand as a man was degraded and a woman objectified.

And then the violence.

Clutching his fist, Ayman forced himself to watch what unfolded. His face shook as he tried to look away and he willed himself not to. His jaw shook and a tear ran down his cheek but he faced it all.

When the video mercifully ended, Ayman lowered his eyes and stared at nothing. He looked down rather than closing his eyes, for doing so brought a mental replay of the video. The video burned into his mind, a recap from the attacker's point of view, simply wasn't something Ayman ever wanted to relive. He couldn't recall ever having wanted to forget something so badly.

Exit.

Five.

But as the blinking green cursor hovered there, slowly flashing as it waited for input, Ayman's fingers didn't move over the keyboard. He remembered a smile and placed it back to the smoothie shop. He remembered the cold fear of facing the man who sat across from him. Without any thought, he turned in his chair and pulled from his coat's inner pocket the envelope. He opened it and saw the \$100 bill and didn't need to flip through it to see the others behind it. He didn't know how many there were but he could tell just by touch it was more than a few.

Behind money were the images. The video. The violence captured and burned into Ayman's mind forever. Ugliness he would never be able to unsee. So he put away the envelope and took out his phone. Highlighting his mother's number, he sent her a text. 'Just wanted to say I love you'. He highlighted it, copy-and-pasted it, and sent it again to his father. Then his sister. Then he set the phone to the side and placed his fingers over the keyboard.

"Feed from internal chip reviewed. Suspect guilt is absolute. Evidence suggests all charges valid. Suspect appears to be a threat to anyone around him and is likely to repeat any or all crimes with little provocation. Recommend immediate apprehension with all caution. Sentencing is urged with all expediency."

He sent his report and ejected the chip. On simple, automatic motions, he sealed away the evidence, and then sealed it all together as per procedure. On the legs of the dispossessed, he rose and exited his office. Back across the hall he went, feeling the specter of terror but not terror itself. He went back into the evidence locker where Sandra was processing

documents at the far end of her work space. "Done already?" she asked as she continued to write. She put the pages away and slid them across her desk. "That was quick."

"Yeah," Ayman said with an encumbered conscience. He slid the evidence bag through the window slit as Sandra approached.

She accepted the bag and saw the weight of the world on Ayman's shoulders. "What's up?" she asked, setting the bag aside and disregarding it for a moment. "Is everything okay?"

Ayman didn't respond for a moment. He stared for a breath, then told Sandra, "I'm going to take a half-day. I'm not...I don't feel...like..." He gave up and started to turn. "I'm going to go home." He was already to the door when he told her, "I'll see you tomorrow." It sounded like a hope, not a statement.

Ayman headed down the hall, his hands in his pockets. He didn't know if he was leaving for the day, or just for a while. He just knew he was leaving. He had a great sense of finality, like some page had turned. He exited through the scanner without a word or comment from the two officers. Everything was on autopilot.

He exited into the late morning with the sound of a single bird chirping loudly in the far-off distance. There was a rush of traffic to the air, but Ayman wasn't aware of any cars passing on the streets immediately nearby. He crossed the packed but motionless parking lot, chirping his car alive as he neared. He opened the door and sat down.

The instant his weight settled into the seat, before he'd even closed the door, the multitude of actions that could have been made lethal ran him over, bringing his every action. His body motionless, his mind went into overdrive as he reviewed his actions and realized where it all could have ended. Unlocking his car from afar could have triggered a bomb. Opening the door could have as well. Sitting down. Sliding the key into the ignition. The list went on like an emotionally abusive rollercoaster. Opening the door to his office. Just walking outside. His life was in a place new to him, a place of danger.

Ayman looked out into the blue sky and took a deep breath. Resolved, he shut the car door, cranked the car, shifted gears, and backed out. There weren't many other options.

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