

**The Infinite Evolution -
Conversion**
by Erik C. Johnson



The Infinite Evolution - Conversion

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Erik C. Johnson/ The Infinite Evolution - Conversion

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For Elizabeth thank you for your oversight and support

For Reece thank you for being you

For Scott my best friend

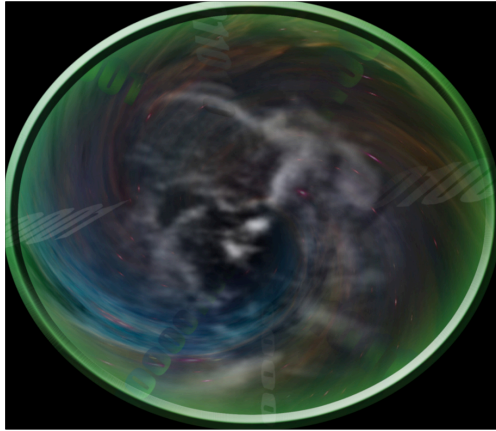


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Foreword

If I didn't know Erik Johnson, I would never guess this novel was his first. It is just that good!

If technology is your thing, this story will entertain you. But *The Infinite Evolution* is more than science fiction. It is also a novel of mystery, philosophy, and --especially unusual in a work of this sort-- humor.

For me, though, the characters are the highlight. From the mysterious Serafina, to the plucky young Jade, to the main character (Spencer) who meets with a variety of unexpected "fates," the characters' biting humor adds a definite flair.

Erik's chapter titles are masterful. "The End," soon followed by "The Beginning," are just two examples of how Erik inspires the reader's curiosity.

With *The Infinite Evolution*, Erik Johnson has launched what I hope will be a successful series of novels. May he continue writing, long enough to see us all --maybe, just maybe-- driving cars with onboard sensors like the ones in this story. And if ever you encounter Tureissians in any realm, remember: This book is where you heard of them first!

Stefano Donati

CHAPTER 1: Morning Rituals

"Allow me to share a vision. Remember, your destiny has not yet been influenced; envision before implementing, and do not be impulsive."

"What? Who said that? Who's here?"

"Good morning, Mr. Cade. It is now 0601 hours, Thursday morning, November 17, 2039," said a monotone voice.

The dark blue vertical blinds in Spencer Cade's bedroom folded upwards as calm music started to fill his space. The volume slowly increased, and the natural melodies of a stream were overlaid with a series of flutes that echoed the tenor of a deep bass, followed up by a soloist on a concert piano.

"Good morning, HICAMS. Is there anyone in my room?" asked Spencer.

"No, you are the only one here."

"Was it you who told me to remember something about my destiny or being impulsive?"

"No, that was not me, Mr. Cade."

"That's strange; I could swear someone leaned over and whispered something in my ear. It must have been a dream. Whatever it was, I certainly don't act impulsively," Spencer asserted.

"I assure you, Mr. Cade, you were the last person to enter this room."

"If you say so. HICAMS?"

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

"HICAMS, what does your name mean again?"

"It is an acronym that stands for Home Interactive and Computer Aid Monitoring System."

"That's a mouthful. I can see why your designers shortened it to HICAMS," Spencer uttered as he started to doze off.

"Indeed, Mr. Cade."

On a cylinder-shaped table, a seventeen-inch 3-D hologram of a female news broadcaster appeared in the middle of the room and spoke about world events.

"Yesterday, an earthquake occurred in Los Angeles, California, at 1:51 am Pacific Standard Time. It registered 3.9 on the Richter scale. Casualties were few, and damage to the Metro red line ended up placing parts of it out of service. Reports have indicated aftershocks felt as far away as eastern Nevada." The broadcaster transitioned to her next story with little concern in her voice, "Five whales were found on a beach in North Truro, Massachusetts. Residents spotted the finback whales at 2:33 am Eastern Standard Time. Emergency workers and volunteers are currently on the scene, trying to keep the whales moist until they can come up with a strategy to move them back into the ocean. In other news, the unknown outbreak of an airborne virus that broke out in Australia a week ago today has been..."

Before the virtual news broadcaster could finish her sentence, a disgruntled voice called out, "Really? Who told you to play this depressing crap so early in the morning?"

"You told me to play the news after you wake up, Mr. Cade."

There was a slight pause, "Oh, I did?"

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

"First of all, stop addressing me as Mr. Cade. It's Spencer. Let's cut the formalities. I have lived in this house for close to two months; I think we can address one another on a first-name basis."

"Of course, Mr. Cade."

"Forget it. Why bother?" Spencer pulled the covers over his head.

"Yes, Mr. Cade. And the second item, Mr. Cade?" HICAMS asked via the internal communication system.

"What?" mumbled Spencer while still under the covers.

"When you began this conversation, you started with 'first of all.' Listen; I will play it back for you."

"Are you for real?" Spencer asked rudely as he pulled a pillow over his head.

"I am waiting for a response, Mr. Cade."

There was a slight pause as he slowly emerged from his cocoon of blankets, "Umm, what was that second issue?"

"I do not know, Mr. Cade. That is why I am asking you."

"It was rhetorical!"

Before HICAMS could respond, Spencer remembered. "Oh yeah, I didn't program you to play this music."

HICAMS replied swiftly, "I am sorry, Mr. Cade, but two days ago, you asked me to play soothing music for you on your days off."

"Yes, soothing music, not the sound of a stream running in the background while someone plays the synthesizer. That's not music; it's some hippie intervention!"

"Correction, that is not a synthesizer; it is a concert piano."

"Sorry! Concert piano," Spencer said sarcastically.

"Anyway, it's bad enough. I must take a leak first thing in the morning. I most certainly don't need the feeling amplified by the sounds of running water."

It was then that Spencer's queen-size bed began lifting the upper portion of his body. "What now? Are you kicking me out of my bed?"

"Yes, Mr. Cade, I will change the music selection immediately, and no, Mr. Cade, I am not removing you from your bed. You have the bed programmed to place itself upright at 0607 hours."

"0607 hours! Are we in the military? Speak in normal time!"

"I am sorry, Mr. Cade, but that is not in my programming."

"Not in your programming? You've got to be kidding me!"

"Would you like to make a more specific music request?"

"No! I paid thousands of credits for your program, on top of what I paid for this overpriced condominium. I don't want to, nor do I feel like making these decisions."

"Yes, Mr. Cade, my apologies."

Spencer paused for a moment and realized his behavior was uncalled for. "It's not your fault, HICAMS. I'm sorry for snapping at you. It's just..." He stopped to think of something polite to say.

"No apology is necessary," interrupted HICAMS.

Relieved he didn't have to complete his sentence, Spencer replied, "Thanks," in a quiet, serene voice.

"You are welcome, Mr. Cade."

"My name is Spencer. Call me Spencer! You know, come on, and say it S-P-E-N-C-E-R, not Mr. Cade!"

"Once again, my apologies, Mr. Cade. My programming does not give me the ability to interact with humans in an informal capacity."

"I can't believe this. When will companies make machines more like humans and less like morticians? We need to get you a personality," said Spencer while stretching his arms above his head.

"I am sorry, Mr. Cade, I did not understand that last statement. My program does not permit me to conduct funeral arrangements or preserve corpses. Can you please clarify?"

Spencer nodded his head in disbelief, "Never mind."

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

As Spencer piled his pillows to the side, he said sarcastically, "Oh, and back to the original issue, thanks for turning on that up lifting news."

"You are welcome, Mr. Cade," replied HICAMS, who did not detect Spencer's sarcasm.

Spencer ignored HICAMS's pleasantries and went on to complain. "I haven't even gotten out of my bed, and I'm already

depressed. From now on, can you look for programming that doesn't involve the world coming to an end?"

"As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Cade, I will change your morning news. However, this will be a difficult task to accomplish."

"Did you just make a joke?" asked Spencer in astonishment.

"I am sorry, Mr. Cade, but I was not joking. I was stating a statistical fact. If you look at current news programming and average out the amount that consists of negative overtones..."

"Stop!" yelled Spencer.

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

As Spencer left his bed, he placed his feet in his pre-warmed slippers and looked out of the windows of his eleventh-floor condominium. He was contemplating his day when he noticed a nude man near his building, running around while screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Must be another loving couple gone awry. I love New York," laughed Spencer. While he continued to stare out of the windows, he suddenly remembered he had to work tomorrow. "I hate going to work," said Spencer aloud in a very aggravated tone.

While still entertained by the scene outside, Spencer heard a young female voice yell, "Dad!" and replied as if on autopilot, "Yes, honey, what do you want?"

"I have to be at school no later than 7:09 am today!"

"Ok, give me ten minutes," yelled Spencer as he thought, "The joys of having a thirteen-year-old daughter."

Spencer's mind immediately jumped back to his job. "I hope I don't have to work another eleven-hour shift tomorrow. I need to get some rest or stop working altogether. This job is starting to get on my nerves."

Spencer walked into the bathroom with a dreary droop while he mumbled, "Sometimes waking up just plain sucks." As he investigated the bathroom mirror, he just stood there and stared while criticizing his facial features.

"When the heck did I get to be so old looking? I have more creases in my forehead than I can count, and this gut, it must be at least seven pounds of additional weight." Spencer grabbed his belly fat and jiggled it vigorously. "I need to start laying off those bagels. I don't understand; I'm only fifty-one years old." He took a brief pause, shook his head, and continued with his depressing observations with very little reassurance, "Well, there's not much I can do now, is there?"

"You could go on a diet and start exercising," replied HICAMS.

Spencer jumped back, startled. "Thanks for the words of wisdom. You maintain a full-time job and raise a teenager; then tell me how much time you have for exercise. Now stop monitoring my private conversations!"

HICAMS replied in his standard sterile delivery, "Yes, Mr. Cade."

"That's another thing; we need to get your voice fixed. I want it programmed with one of those hot, sexy female voices, you know, with a British accent... wait, a Swedish accent! Yeah, a Swedish accent."

Spencer looked at his shower and followed up with "97 degrees." As Spencer disrobed, he prepared himself for a relaxing wash and called out "Weather." An image of a female Avatar soon appeared on the bathroom mirror and reported today was going to be mostly sunny with possible showers, highs around 61 degrees, low around 53. As she progressed into the next day's forecast, Spencer yelled, "Stop! I'm only interested in today," and the Avatar faded away. "You'd think that in the year 2039, we would finally have the ability to get a precise forecast."

As Spencer brushed his teeth, he continued to carry on about weather forecasters and his thoughts, "How many people can go to work and give a statement like, 'Mostly sunny with possible showers'? I mean, come on, are they for real? I think when I go back to work tomorrow, I'll start forecasting what types of crimes will occur and explain how it will be mostly quiet with a rash of burglaries." Spencer's mind once again

jumped the track and thought about the positive aspects of being a weather forecaster. "Maybe I can go back to school and become a meteorologist. I wonder if that's a study or something your boss assigns you if you suck at telling the news. Either way, I think I could do that. How hard could it be?" Just as Spencer contemplated a new career choice, he soon realized he did not have what it took. "Forget it, who am I kidding? I don't have a personality. Plus, I'd look twice as fat on camera."

While Spencer continued to mumble his thoughts, he stepped into his shower and yelled, "Holy crap! I said 97 degrees, not 37 degrees!"

"Sorry, Mr. Cade. I will recalibrate my temperature gauge."

"Shower off!" Spencer yelled.

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

Spencer stumbled around while putting on his bathrobe and said aloud, "I'm sick and tired of these malfunctions. I'm calling Reece at work today; maybe he can reprogram my condominium. He owes me for those speeding tickets I got him out of."

As he finished his morning routine in the bathroom, Spencer thought about how long he had been a best friend to Reece. He recalled how they met during their sophomore year of college and remembered that if it weren't for Reece, he would have failed his Calculus studies and been a complete social outcast. During his nostalgic moment, he contemplated how Reece ended up becoming a Master Programmer and now works for one of the largest software companies in the world, Central Circuit.

"Better yet, I'll go and visit him at work today. I always love arguing with him about his inventions," said Spencer as he tried to style what little hair he had left, already forgetting about the miserable experience he just had with his shower.

After he finished grooming, Spencer went back into his bedroom and asked HICAMS to select his clothing for him. A large door opened, and racks of apparel slowly emerged. Each hanger had a small fiberoptic light built in, which allowed it to

exhibit up to twenty-nine different colors. HICAMS would proceed to match up each article of clothing and assign each outfit a specific color. After HICAMS recommended seven different suits, Spencer chose the more casual and bland option: a pair of faded blue jeans with a charcoal gray t-shirt.

Once Spencer finished getting dressed, he stumbled around looking for his digital assistant (PDA). "Where did I put it? HICAMS, can you help locate my PDA?"

"Yes, Mr. Cade, it is underneath your bed."

"Ah, yes," Spencer quickly went to his knees and looked, "There it is." As he tried to reach for it, he quickly learned his arms were too short, and his body was too big to maneuver. "Damn it, I need something straight and long." Spencer looked around his semi-cluttered bedroom and noticed his ski poles. "That will do." He grabbed one and used it successfully. "Mission accomplished," said Spencer with a proud look on his face, as if he had just conquered Mt. Everest. "Thanks, HICAMS."

"You are welcome, Mr. Cade. May I recommend you get a PIC implant?" asked HICAMS.

"May I recommend you get a lobotomy?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Cade, but lobotomies were once used to treat mental illness in the 1900s and have now become obsolete after the creation of a variety of drugs and physiological treatments. Furthermore, lobotomies were practiced on biological life forms, something I am not."

"Yes, yes, I know. I wasn't serious. It's a figure of speech, and I'm not interested in a PIC. They will have to kill me before they put one of those 'I see, I hear, I know all' government tracking chips in me, so don't ask again," ordered Spencer.

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

Spencer thought, "I swear they purposely program these in-house monitoring systems to push products they want you to buy. It's like living inside a commercial. I am contemplating getting HICAMS removed."

"HICAMS, I will be in the bathroom again, taking care of some business."

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

While Spencer was away, a public service announcement started broadcasting to the circular table in the middle of his bedroom. A seventeen-inch hologram of a government official appeared and said, "Are you thinking of a Personal Identification Chip, otherwise known as a PIC? If so, let me explain to you the benefits of your decision. It holds all your data, including your health and financial information. The procedure takes only a few minutes, and the user feels no discomfort as the implant fuses into his or her deltoid on their dominant side. The PIC directly connects to the user's spinal cord and monitors the user's health. It also allows a user to make financial transactions with a simple thought, exchange digital data with other users, surf the Internet, interact with millions of different applications, plus a variety of other social and business activities. All this data transfer completes its journey wirelessly on an internal encrypted network tailored to that specific user. The PIC can range in size, anywhere from 500 petabytes to 500 zettabytes in digital storage. Several upgrades are available. Among our most popular upgrades is the ability for a user to listen to audio or make and receive calls. This device communicates directly with a small transmitter and receiver that the user carries in their ears and cheek. Once this procedure is complete, the user can elect to get ocular implants, allowing them to view and store any video. If a user has a friend or family member with an ocular implant, the two can consent to tap into each other's feed and view what the other person is seeing. If you are interested, please visit these local retailers..."

A list of locations replaced the hologram, and a warning written in bold red letters appeared. It read, "Government Warning: If you were born after the year 2017, International Law dictates you must receive a PIC implant by the age of five. If an individual is convicted of a crime and has a PIC implant, their PIC ties into the International Law Enforcement Global

tracking system. This will shadow the criminal's whereabouts and record everything they hear and see." The advertisement faded away, and a historical program on past computer technology returned.

After Spencer finished getting ready for his day, he walked down the stairs and into an open-spaced kitchen. The design was simple yet artistically stylish. There was a crescent-shaped stone wash counter in the center, with four metal stools and a greenish-amber oval light fixture suspended from the smooth metallic ceiling directly above. To the right of the counter stood a stainless-steel refrigerator flush with the bluish-colored walls, only visible due to its handle. The stove also blended in perfectly with its surroundings; the only distinguishing marks exhibited were four thin gray circles, representing the burners. The circular sink sat on the back wall directly behind the counter and underneath housed a double-hinged dishwasher with stonewashed facing. Lastly, no small appliances cluttered the kitchen. Spencer always felt that preparing a meal in a slow, relaxed manner made for better family time.

Spencer found his daughter, Jade, sitting at the metallic kitchen table across from the counter, opposite the sink, eating cereal and struggling with the holo screen.

Jade was Spencer's biological daughter, a high school junior and considered a savant. Despite her exceptional math and science abilities, Jade showed no signs of abnormalities except for her unique talents. Her genetic makeup analysis revealed that these abilities were inherited from her mother's side of the family.

"I see you're having a healthy breakfast," Spencer remarked.

"Dad, we really need a new holographic screen. Every time I change the channel, it takes forever. Look at the people; they're all blurry," Jade complained.

"What are you talking about? This screen is only two years old."

"Seriously, look at it! The picture quality is awful! I tried to fix it, but we don't have the right parts."

"Well, once you start earning your own money, you can spend it on fixing or upgrading however you like," Spencer calmly responded.

"Dad, why do you always have to be so stubborn?" Jade whined.

"I'm not being stubborn; I'm being financially responsible. Remember, we have only one source of income, and if you're planning to go to college, we need to be careful with our spending."

"Economical is just a fancy way of saying cheap. And for your information, I've got a full scholarship to MIT," muttered Jade.

"What's that?" Spencer asked.

"Forget it, Dad," Jade replied, growing more frustrated.

"That's not what I heard, and yes, I know about your scholarship. I want to make sure you leave here with a safety net and never have to worry about money."

"Whatever! Speaking of money, I need to get some credits on my PIC. Can you transfer some over?"

"I just added some to your account last week."

"I know, I know, but I downloaded this new app, and it used up all my credits. I need them for the hover rail. Without credits, no hover rail, no school."

"Fine. Here you go," Spencer typed in a few keystrokes on his PDA. "Just remember, these credits are only for the hover rail, and they'll be deducted from your monthly allowance," he explained.

"You're so unfair," Jade protested.

"I understand your frustration, Jade," Spencer said as his PDA confirmed, "Transfer complete, Mr. Cade."

"When are you going to get a PIC implant?" Jade asked, hoping to irritate her dad even more.

"Never," Spencer replied, slight annoyance in his voice. "The only reason you have one is because of the International Law."

"Yeah, I get it," Jade admitted, realizing her strategy was working and continued.

"But do you know how convenient it is to just walk into a store, pick what you want, and leave without waiting in line to pay or..."

Spencer cut her off, "Sure, it's convenient for you, but it's expensive for me. Back in my day, I had to stand in line, watch the clerk add up my purchases, and know exactly how much I was spending. Nowadays, you walk in, grab things, and half the time you don't even know the cost until you leave, and the store scans your items and charges your PIC."

Jade realized she should probably stop before her dad went on a full-on rant. She decided to try a different approach, "I know how much I've spent before I leave."

"Well, of course you do. Your math skills are far superior to most people's," Spencer acknowledged.

"Dad, it's like simple, you know, addition and subtraction. It's not that hard," Jade continued to tinker with the holographic screen, aiming to irk her father.

Spencer swiftly retorted, "Yes, it may involve simple mathematics, but those small expenses can add up rapidly. When the end of the month arrives, you'll be faced with a bill stating you owe thousands of credits. Then you'll realize you can't afford it, miss your payment, and end up facing high-interest rates..."

As Jade heard her father launch into his financial lecture, she started tuning him out. "Alright, I know I'm not going to win this argument. Let's change the subject," Spencer conceded.

Jade seized the opportunity and asked, "So, Dad, can I get the upgrades for my PIC? You know, the ear and eye implants."

Despite his generally patient nature, Spencer looked at his daughter with a mix of exasperation and disbelief. With a subdued yet highly annoyed tone, he replied, "Have you lost touch with reality? The day you get those implants is the day aliens abduct me. I will never endorse such a preposterous

decision. Why on earth would you willingly allow the commercial industry and government to monitor what you hear and see? They claim they're not spying on implant users, but who actually believes that? Might as well use their names as the definition for 'naïve.'" Spencer continued his tirade, glancing over at Jade to find her wearing earplugs and smiling while listening to music. "Ah, that's reassuring. Knowing I have your full attention." It didn't take long for Spencer to catch onto his daughter's real intentions.

"Hello," Spencer waved his hands in front of Jade's face.

"What?" Jade said with a chuckle.

"I was talking to you."

"Oh, sorry. I thought you were deep in thoughts about your childhood or conjuring new government conspiracy theories," Jade responded with a playful smirk.

"Very funny. I know you're just trying to provoke me. But don't think I'm falling for it; it won't work."

"I don't know, Dad. You did seem a bit more than just annoyed for a few minutes there."

"Really?" Spencer countered, aware that his irritation had been quite apparent. Still, he was unwilling to admit it to his daughter.

Opting to shift gears, Spencer inquired, "Did you finish all the milk?"

"Apologies, Dad, but I can't enjoy cereal without milk."

"True, but you could have saved a bit for me. I can't have my coffee without milk. You know that my morning coffee is sacred to me."

"Alright," Jade replied, only partially attentive to her father's words.

"HICAMS," Spencer commanded.

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

"Could you please add a gallon of two percent organic milk to the grocery list?"

"That task is already taken care of, Mr. Cade. I initiated the order after I detected an empty jug of two percent

unprocessed milk in the recycling bin. I verified with the refrigerator that we were out of milk and took the liberty of placing an order with the Health Market."

"Remarkable, my appliances communicate more efficiently with each other than I do with my own daughter," Spencer mused to himself.

"Ok then, when is the next delivery?" inquired Spencer, attempting to maintain a composed demeanor.

"The next delivery is scheduled for November 23," replied HICAMS.

"Six days away," Spencer grumbled, slightly displeased.

"Indeed, to be precise, six days, eighteen hours, and twenty-three minutes."

"Alright, we all acknowledge your mathematical prowess. Can you expedite the delivery and have it arrive today?"

"Yes, Mr. Cade. However, please note that changing the delivery date will result in an account charge."

The words "account" and "charged" triggered Spencer's frugal instincts, and he promptly decided, "Never mind. I'll make a trip to the Health Market. Shopping on my day off is not something I relish. But keep it on the next order. We'll need more by then."

"Do you really have to do that, Dad? It's just milk," Jade interjected.

"No, I do," snapped Spencer.

"Fine, whatever," Jade replied.

"Even better, HICAMS, cancel the delivery service altogether. I'm tired of paying for grocery deliveries."

"Yes, Mr. Cade."

Jade couldn't help but ask, "Why do you always snap at HICAMS?"

"I'm not snapping; I'm..." Spencer paused, searching for an explanation, "I'm just venting. Complaining, you know, in a somewhat forceful manner."

"Sure, whatever. I still love you, HICAMS."

"Thank you, Ms. Jade."

"You know, Dad, you're probably going to reschedule the delivery service once you bring home the next batch of groceries," Jade quipped, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

"It's quite comforting how well you think you understand me," Spencer responded, leaning down to kiss Jade on the forehead.

"I like to think I do."

"Wait a second. How did you get HICAMS to call you 'Ms. Jade'?"

"Oh, I just accessed his program last night and tweaked some of his code."

"What do you mean you just accessed and tweaked his code?"

"It's not that hard, Dad. Seriously, they teach this stuff in seventh grade. It's like basic programming of a model 5 interface."

"Model what?" Spencer asked, puzzled.

"Interface," Jade corrected, laughing.

"Excuse me, Master Programmer."

"I wish," Jade mused.

"No need to wish; I'm pretty sure you're already there. Just not officially."

"You think so, Dad?" Jade queried.

Spencer swiftly replied, "Yes."

As Jade chuckled, Spencer adopted a more serious tone. "Well, Ms. Jade, why can't these programmers make it simpler for people like us—excluding you, of course—to program these home monitoring systems using straightforward voice commands? Imagine if that were possible. It would be groundbreaking."

"Well, according to my tech history teacher, the model 2s initially allowed basic programming changes through voice commands. However, that didn't work out very well. At first, they claimed it was for safety and security reasons, but I think it was because too many people messed up their programming and ended up flooding tech support with calls. This increased

costs for Central Circuit. So, for the newer models, they encoded even the basic commands to prevent owners from causing more problems."

As Jade shared her insights with her father, discussing her theories on why these restrictions were put in place, an electronic floating advertisement board drifted past one of their windows. The message on the board read, "Stop Monopolies! Central Circuit is one of only three tech companies producing civilian electronics. They're trying to expand to the military, but Technology Gold is obstructing them. Who's Technology Gold? They design for government use. Join Crush the Corporations for more info."

"You know my stance on this," Spencer remarked.

"Yes, Dad, I know you believe that the more control companies have over technology, the less control the general public has. I find it a bit hypocritical, though. The software you use for your job is created by the very companies you seem to dislike," Jade pointed out.

"Let's not drag my job into this, but I do appreciate your ability to navigate their supposedly 'elite' programming. It's reassuring to know that you won't be reliant on these services," Spencer explained.

"Thanks, Dad, I guess," Jade replied, shifting the topic. "Did you know that Central Circuit's board of directors actually promote proper manners and honesty as traits of a strong society? They're the ones behind programming HICAMS. They also advocate that life is a gift and shouldn't be treated as a burden."

"I'm aware, and let's not forget that they're also quite religious," Spencer added.

"Oh, come on, Dad. You're starting to sound like one of those wild conspiracy theorists," Jade teased.

"Hmph, well, it's nice to see you're paying attention at school," Spencer remarked.

"Could you reprogram HICAMS to call me by my first name, Spencer, instead of Mr. Cade?" he inquired.

"Sure, but can you transfer 151 credits to my PIC? I need to purchase a specific app for my tablet this month."

"Sure," Spencer agreed with a grin.

"Really?" Jade asked, taken aback.

"Absolutely. But before I do, let me deduct your room and board for October from the 151 credits," Spencer quipped, mimicking typing on his PDA. "Ah, look at that. You now owe me 761 credits for the month."

"Very funny, Dad."

"I thought so," Spencer replied with pride.

Jade headed into the office and called out, "Panel," summoning a semi-transparent keyboard and a blue screen. "Stand by for program modification, HICAMS," she announced.

"Yes, Ms. Jade."

As Jade quickly typed away, the keyboard's transparency shifted to a bluish hue. Spencer watched in awe and remarked, "And they teach this stuff in seventh grade?"

"Yeah, Dad," Jade replied sarcastically.

"But, sweetie, you know that what they teach you in seventh grade is way more advanced than what they used to teach, right?"

Ignoring his comment, Jade continued to type.

"Whatever, Dad."

"Well, my seventh-grade experience was a bit less tech-savvy."

"Yeah, more like no tech at all. I'm almost done. Can you please be quiet? I need to focus."

Just as she finished, a holographic avatar of a middle-aged man, standing seven inches tall, materialized on a cylindrical platform in the kitchen. "Call for Mr. Cade," it announced.

"Thanks for helping with this, Jade. I'll be right back; I have to take this."

"Alright, but hurry up. I need a ride to the hover rail, or I'll be late for school," Jade said as she finalized the coding.

"I'll just be a moment," Spencer reassured her from the other room.

Jade instructed the console to close and called out, "I'll be outside in the parking garage waiting," before grabbing her bag and dashing out the front door.

"Hello, Peter. What's up?" Spencer greeted the hologram.

"Sorry to bother you on your day off, but Jennifer called in sick, and we're wondering if you could cover her shift later today."

"No, I can't."

"Are you sure? We've received nineteen cyber tips already, and at least five of them could lead to an arrest."

"Doesn't matter; you'll have to find someone else. Call Robert – he could use the extra hours and some training."

"Robert? Are you serious? He's about as useful as a dead snail."

"You're the one who promoted him to the unit. See you tomorrow. Goodbye," Spencer concluded as the hologram faded away.

Spencer grabbed his coat and headed toward the front door, mumbling to himself, "Ever since the Federal Government took over this task force, they think they can just call you up anytime and expect you to drop everything and help."

Resigning himself to the situation, he thought, "I'll have to stand my ground. It's a paycheck." As Spencer left, he called out, "Have a good day, HICAMS. I know I will."

"Same to you, my Royal Highness," HICAMS replied.

Spencer paused for a moment, then yelled, "Jade, that's not funny! You will change that when you get home tonight!"

CHAPTER 2: Who Controls Whom

Spencer dashed toward the elevator in an attempt to catch up with Jade, but he missed it. Frustrated at the thought of waiting, he opted to take the stairs. As he hurried down the stairs to beat Jade to the parking lot, he ran past a young woman who seemed familiar from his past. A strong urge to find out who she was and what she was doing in the stairwell took over him. Spencer abruptly halted and turned back to follow her into the elevator lobby on his floor.

Upon entering the stairwell, she turned to face him but remained silent. As he approached her, Spencer was captivated by her beauty. Her long black hair, turquoise eyes framed by dark eyelashes and purple eyeliner, and flawless light bronze skin left him awestruck. She wore a sleek black shirt with a silvery figure-eight pattern, snug black pants, and open-toed black heels with straps. A silver and gold necklace with three oval teardrops caught his attention as it dangled down her shirt. Most intriguingly, an oval-shaped tattoo adorned her lower stomach, featuring wavy lines of yellow, blue, and green encircling an orange star on a white background outlined in black. Spencer felt a sense of familiarity with the symbols, even though their meaning eluded him.

Approaching her, Spencer struggled to maintain eye contact, occasionally glancing toward her cleavage. "Good morning," she greeted him.

"Um, good morning," Spencer stumbled in reply.

"Is there a problem?"

"Oh, um, no, I mean yes... I mean, no," he stammered, trying to recover. "I was just noticing that I haven't seen you around here before."

"Okay," she replied with a hint of confusion.

Spencer realized his words weren't coming out right.

"No, I mean, you must be new here. I haven't seen you before."

"I might be," she responded cautiously, followed by, "And you are?"

"I'm sorry if I came across as some kind of stalker or something," Spencer said with a bashful smile.

"That thought did cross my mind."

"I'm Spencer, Spencer Cade. I live down the hall in unit 29."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Serafina."

"Serafina," Spencer repeated. "That's a beautiful name."

"Thank you. Is that alright?"

"Of course! I've just never met anyone named Serafina before."

"Well, now you have."

"Did you just move in or something?" Spencer inquired.

"No, I'm just visiting a friend."

"Really? Who's your friend? I might know them."

"I'm sure you do. Anyway, it was nice meeting you. Goodbye," Serafina said with apparent disinterest.

"Me too, my daughter is waiting outside for..." Spencer paused, then added, "My motherless daughter is waiting for me."

"Motherless daughter?" Serafina questioned.

"That didn't come out right... I mean, it did, but I could've phrased it differently," Spencer corrected himself.

"Are you nervous?" Serafina asked.

"Oh no, I just haven't had my daily dose of caffeine yet, so I'm a little on edge."

"Understandable," Serafina said. After an awkward pause, she inquired, "So, I'll bite. Why is your daughter motherless?"

Spencer realized he had already botched the conversation, so he decided to roll with it. "Well, since you asked..."

Out of politeness, Serafina stood and listened as Spencer continued, "You see, my wife left my daughter and me eleven years ago. Three months after leaving, she was

committed to a mental institution, and seven months later, she took her own life."

"I guess when you abandon your family, karma eventually catches up with you," Serafina commented nonchalantly.

"Karma? I hadn't really thought about it that way," Spencer replied.

"Does mental illness run in your family? Because you seem to have a bit of it yourself," Serafina laughed.

"No, it doesn't. And I don't appreciate your laughter or your casual approach to the topic," Spencer retorted.

"Look, I didn't start this conversation, and if you're expecting sympathy, you're barking up the wrong tree. I can't say it was a pleasure meeting you, so I won't. Goodbye."

As Serafina turned away, she walked off, leaving Spencer in shock. He had never encountered a woman who spoke so directly and precisely to him, and strangely, he found it quite compelling. Realizing he needed to say something to prevent her from leaving, he blurted out, "Well, it was a pleasure meeting you. I like your tattoo. Will I see you again?"

Serafina turned back with a hint of pity, offered a slight grin, and said, "I don't know. The galaxy is vast." With those words, she turned the corner and vanished from Spencer's sight.

"What? The galaxy is vast," Spencer repeated to himself. "I'm such an idiot. 'I like your tattoo' and 'motherless daughter'... What was I even saying?" He questioned the words that had escaped his mouth, feeling embarrassed about the encounter. Spencer decided to give it another shot and followed her down the hallway, scanning for her presence but finding no trace. It was as if the enigmatic woman had simply disappeared.

The building in which Spencer lived had a total of forty-one floors, each with eight condominiums, excluding the basement and lobby areas. The layout resembled a large plus sign, with four hallways that intersected at the elevators. Spencer's floor, the seventh, had an olive color scheme and

hallway holographic screens displaying weather updates and building activities for the month. The pool was situated on the seventh floor, and the penthouse occupied the forty-first floor.

Eager to find the mysterious woman he had encountered, Spencer hurriedly approached his first neighbor's door, knocked, and called out, "Hello."

A grumpy old man's voice responded, "Who's there?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Sozek, but did you just have someone come into your condo a minute ago?"

"What?" Mr. Sozek yelled back, his annoyance evident.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but I was wondering if someone recently entered..."

Mr. Sozek cut him off, irritably saying, "I heard you the first time. I may be old, but I'm not deaf. And the answer to your foolish question is no! There's only me here."

He activated a small viewing rectangle on his side of the door, allowing him to see Spencer without Spencer having the same capability. "Mr. Sozek, are you sure..."

Before Spencer could continue, Mr. Sozek interrupted again, "Spencer, is that you? What do you want? Don't you realize I sleep around dawn? Now go away! No one came into my condo!"

"I apologize for disturbing you. If you happen to see a woman with black hair and turquoise eyes, could you find out where she's staying or what she's doing in the building? Then, if you wouldn't mind, please give me a call?" Spencer requested politely.

"Are you crazy? If I see anyone remotely attractive here, the last thing I'll do is call you," Mr. Sozek chuckled.

"Yeah, well, okay then. Thanks, have a good day, you perverted old man," mumbled Spencer as he walked away.

"Pervert! Get back here! How dare you wake up an old man who needs his sleep, ask silly questions about some strange woman, and then call him a pervert. You're the one looking for strange women, you pervert! Pervert!"

Thankfully, Spencer managed to move out of earshot before Mr. Sozek's stream of insults reached his ears.

Reflecting on the situation, Spencer speculated, "She must have entered Mrs. North's condo. That's the only other unit off this hallway. Maybe she's Mrs. North's granddaughter," he thought as he continued down the hallway towards her condominium.

Upon reaching the front door, Mrs. North's HICAMS greeted Spencer. "Good morning, may I assist you?"

"I was wondering if Mrs. North is at home?" Spencer inquired.

"I apologize, but I have been instructed by Mrs. North to inform visitors that she will be out of the country for the next week. Please state your inquiries, and I will relay them to her upon her return."

"Alright, I was just wondering if anyone has entered her apartment recently or if someone might be staying there while she's away," Spencer asked, adopting a friendlier tone.

"I apologize, Mr. Cade, but I cannot provide the information you're seeking. Have a wonderful day."

Recognizing the futility of further attempts, Spencer accepted the situation and left, hoping he might encounter the woman again another time.

As Spencer walked back to the elevator, he was interrupted by his daughter's voice, "Dad, I'm going to be so late for school. Where are you?"

"Oh, Jade, I forgot. I'll be right there," replied Spencer, rushing around the corner to meet her.

"Dad, seriously? I have to go!" Jade's annoyance was palpable.

"I'm sorry, Jade. I met someone in the hallway, and I can't find her now."

Jade sighed, clearly irritated. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Can we please just go? I need a ride to school now since I won't make the hover rail in time."

"Alright, let's go," Spencer said as they headed towards the parking garage. Jade continued to vent her frustrations about having her father drop her off at school.

"Dad, this is so embarrassing. Do you realize how lame it is to have your dad drive you to school?"

Spencer simply nodded, not fully engaged in the conversation as his mind wandered back to thoughts of Serafina.

"Dad!" Jade yelled. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Lost in thought? Yeah, I bet you were thinking about that invisible girl you met."

"She wasn't invisible, she just walked away before I could find out where she went. And who said she was hot?"

"You did! When we were in the elevator, you mumbled about her and called her attractive."

"I did? I thought I was keeping those thoughts to myself."

"Clearly not," Jade giggled.

"Alright, fine, but you weren't supposed to hear that."

"Yeah, sure, Dad. Can we go now?" Jade's impatience was evident as they got into their car.

"Alright, car on," commanded Spencer.

"Good morning, Mr. Cade. What's your destination this morning?" asked the vehicle's AI.

"Destination? Oh, right. Colbert Regional High School."

"Understood, Mr. Cade. Will you be driving today, or shall I?"

Spencer's new concept car had advanced self-driving capabilities, something he occasionally forgot since his previous vehicle was over twenty years old and lacked such features.

"I'll drive today, thank you. After all, that's why I'm called the driver. Sometimes I wonder if we control the technology or it controls us."

"Got it, Mr. Cade. Disengaging auto driver."

"Dad, why do you always have to resist technology? Just let the car drive."

"Jade, let's not get into that discussion again."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

Spencer navigated out of the parking garage, and his car provided an updated traffic report.

"Highway 347 near County Route 83 Patchogue Mount Sinai Road should be avoided due to a traffic accident. Expected delay: 31 minutes," the car informed him.

"Thanks, navigation off," Spencer said as he drove into the bustling streets of lower Manhattan. He switched to magnetic levitation mode to avoid potential fines from environmental law enforcement.

"Dad, do we really have to worry about those Enviro cops?" Jade asked.

"Well, you never know. Better safe than sorry," Spencer replied.

"Can I at least listen to music?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Jade activated her music, and Spencer requested, "Radio, talk show, educational." The vehicle scanned through channels and found one that suited his request: "Our History with Technology and the Environment, brought to you by Public Radio."

"Sounds interesting, play it," Spencer requested.

"Welcome to another episode of Our History with Technology and the Environment. This week we will be talking about magnetic levitation and its origins. Magnetic levitation technology emerged in the twenty-first century. Magnets, as you may know, have north and south poles. When the north pole of one magnet faces the south pole of another, they attract each other. Reversing this, where both poles face the same way—north to north or south to south—causes the magnets to repel. Many cities, including New York City, implemented magnetized coils in their roadways. These coils repel the large magnets in vehicles, allowing them to levitate about four inches above the ground. Engineers faced the challenge of creating a dampening field around the roadways to prevent magnetic interference with other devices. Seventeen years ago, the International Government enacted a law stipulating that in

cities with more than five hundred thousand residents, only vehicles equipped with magnetic levitation capabilities could operate within city limits, with highways as an exception. This measure aimed to reduce air pollution in densely populated areas. As part of this effort, the Environmental Protection Agency's powers were expanded, leading to the formation of Environmental Law Enforcement Officers, known as Enviro Officers, who assist in enforcing these laws. In addition to their regular duties, these officers now investigate both natural and manufactured biological outbreaks."

"Dad, what are you listening to?" Jade asked as she manually turned down the volume.

"Wow, did you see that? You just used your hand instead of your voice command to control the onboard computer," Spencer observed.

"What? Oh, yeah," Jade said with a smirk. "So, can we check out the new holographic screens after school today?"

Spencer responded, "No, but if you can fix our old one, I'll pay you for it."

"I told you, Dad, we need new parts."

"Oh, you were serious about that?"

Jade chuckled. "You know, Dad, sometimes I feel like you're just using my talents to save on credits."

"I would never do that."

"Yeah, right," Jade said with a playful tone.

As they continued talking, Spencer's focus wavered from the traffic, leading his car to come to a sudden stop to avoid colliding with a pedestrian who hadn't used the crosswalk properly.

"Wow, quick reflexes, Dad."

"That wasn't me; it was the car's sensors."

"Guess technology isn't all bad, huh?" Jade grinned.

Spencer rolled down the window to check on the pedestrian, but the person had already moved on without acknowledging the near-miss.

"I can't believe someone would walk in front of a moving car, nearly causing an accident, and then just walk away without apologizing," Spencer remarked.

"You're joking, right?" Jade asked. "When was the last time you saw someone admit their mistake?"

"I guess that's a flaw in human nature. Many people don't take responsibility for their actions," Spencer lamented.

Other drivers behind them started honking impatiently, and Jade urged her father, "Hey, let's not judge the world right now. Put the car in auto-drive, or you drive, but let's go!"

"Calm down. We're moving. And don't yell at me like that."

"Okay, okay, sorry. Can we go now?"

Just then, the radio brought in a breaking news report: "This just in: the viral outbreak in Australia has been contained. The Weed Virus, or T191 virus, broke out in Darwin about two weeks ago and spread to Port Hedland before being contained. The virus is believed to have originated from a group of tourists visiting Australia. The government has not disclosed their point of origin, but they've reassured the public that the tourists' place of origin is not infected. Currently, there's no vaccine for the Weed Virus, which exhibits symptoms like numbness, blurred vision, dehydration, and nausea. Officials have refrained from releasing the exact number of infected individuals. Dr. Philip Hathaway, of the International Medical University and a member of the Major Infection Disease task force in collaboration with the EPA, CDC, and Australian officials, is involved in this effort. Dr. Hathaway played a pivotal role in curing the Cyrs virus five years ago. The Prime Minister of Australia is expected to address the United Nations tonight to request international support. Again the Weed Virus has been successfully contained."

"I can't believe another virus is spreading so quickly. It's almost like these things are being intentionally created. And why won't governments disclose the source of the virus? What's your take?" Spencer asked, only to realize that Jade wasn't listening. "Hello? Earth to Jade?" He saw that she had

her earplugs in again. "Never mind, maybe it's better you didn't hear that," he sighed.

A few minutes later, Jade asked, "Dad, can you drop me off a block away from school?"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Well, it's not that I don't love you, but it's kind of weird having my dad drop me off at school. Are you mad?"

"No, it's just... never mind. I'll drop you off a block away."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, honey," Spencer replied with a hint of sadness.

"You are 300 yards from your destination," the car informed them. Spencer applied the brake and lowered the car. Before he could even say goodbye, Jade had opened the door, hopped out, and called back, "Bye! I'll take the hover rail home, so don't worry about picking me up."

"No kiss?" Spencer teased.

"Sorry, running late! Bye!" Jade shouted as she sprinted towards school.

CHAPTER 3: The End

Spencer decided to swing by Central Circuit to seek help from Reece. "Please adjust the route to include Central Circuit as the next destination."

"Route adjusted. Which parking facility would you like to use? Hex, Binary, or Legacy?" the navigation system inquired.

"Let's park in Binary. They have the fastest tram," Spencer replied confidently.

"Route set. Based on current traffic and weather conditions, you should arrive in twenty-three minutes," the navigation system informed him.

"Great," Spencer said. After a moment's pause, he added, "Stop at the first coffee shop on the way."

"Understood. We will arrive at Caffeine Express in seven minutes," the navigation system confirmed.

"Perfect."

Upon reaching Caffeine Express, Spencer pulled up to the drive-through and ordered his favorite coffee: a large one with two shots of espresso and five sugars. After making the payment through his PDA, he drove forward, and a window opened with a metal tray extending, holding his steaming cup of coffee. With his precious drink in hand, Spencer put his vehicle in auto-drive mode to fully enjoy his morning brew.

When he approached Central Circuit, he took control of the car again, positioning himself in the middle lane in hopes of getting through the security checkpoint more quickly. As the lines of cars grew longer, Spencer's impatience mounted. Dealing with both traffic and security checks was starting to grate on his nerves. When he reached the gate, an electronic barricade emerged from the pavement, forcing him to come to a stop.

As he waited, Spencer received an incoming message from Central Circuit security, which he promptly accepted. A

voice came through the intercom inside his vehicle, asking, "What is the purpose of your visit today—employee, sales, tourist, or visitor?"

Although tempted to claim he was there on a "sales" visit, Spencer decided to be sincere. He reminded himself, "Play it straight. Don't risk getting stuck at the security checkpoint all day."

"I'm here as a visitor," Spencer responded.

"Whom will you be visiting, and are you expected?" security inquired.

"I'm here to see Reece Fields, and no, my visit is unexpected."

"According to your vehicle registration, you are Spencer Cade, correct?"

"Yes," Spencer confirmed, somewhat amazed yet irked by the fact that he doesn't even need to introduce himself anymore, thanks to his digital presence within society.

"Since you don't have a PIC implant, you'll need to check in with the security desk at the main building for a temporary guide."

"I'm aware of that. I've been here before," Spencer replied.

"Yes, this marks your eleventh visit in the last five years," security stated.

"May I proceed?" Spencer asked.

"Please stand by. We're awaiting confirmation from Dr. Fields. Do you have any explosives or firearms on your person or in your vehicle?"

"No," Spencer answered calmly.

Having learned from past experience that acting awkwardly only prolongs his wait at Central Circuit, Spencer refrained from arguing and instead provided short and precise answers, which seemed to be more appreciated by the security personnel.

"You're free to proceed to the vehicular scanner, Mr. Cade. Have a pleasant day."

"Thank you," Spencer replied as he drove forward once the barricade retracted into the pavement. While he continued through the massive tube, he noticed a red light ahead and heard a voice similar to HICAMS say, "Please put your vehicle in park and turn off the engine. We will scan your vehicle for illegal or threatening devices."

Spencer complied, and the inner surface of the tube lit up in a bright blue color, forcing him to put on his sunglasses. A solid yellow light bar, approximately nineteen feet long, circled his vehicle slowly from front to back, starting and ending around the driver's side door. Spencer gripped the steering wheel with both hands, his knuckles turning white. After around two minutes, the red light turned green, and the door ahead of him opened, accompanied by an electronic voice declaring, "You are clear to proceed." Spencer drove out of the scanner, being careful not to speed and trigger the security.

As he headed to the Binary parking facility, he noticed new construction and thought, "That was quick," recalling the empty field that had been there just three months prior.

Central Circuit's sprawling seventeen-acre campus could only be accessed by tram. Each tram had its designated parking facility. The trams "1" and "0" were for receiving and shipping, respectively.

Once Spencer pulled into the Binary parking facility, a small red beam scanned his license plate and vehicle identification number. A holographic screen appeared, displaying hourly and daily parking rates: twenty-five credits per hour or two hundred and forty-one credits for twenty-four hours, for non-employees.

"That's ridiculous," Spencer thought as he drove forward. He decided to park his vehicle in bay seven. After shutting off the car, he grabbed his coat and stepped out. Approaching a display panel, he linked it to his PDA and received a digital receipt. As Spencer walked away, the bay doors in front of his vehicle closed, and the pallet holding his car was transported to a storage bay within the facility, stacked with other vehicles and securely stored.

Heading towards the tram, Spencer was inundated with advertisements, many of which were about PIC implants. He was amazed to see an ad about personal pet PIC implants, offering owners the ability to know their pets' thoughts, sights, and sounds. While standing in front of holographic screens, Spencer caught sight of who he believed was Serafina. He called out her name, but the noise of the crowd drowned out his voice.

He tried to make his way toward her, but as the tram arrived, doors opened, and people flooded in, carrying Spencer with them. Amid the rush, he lost sight of Serafina, and by the time he attempted to move towards her, the doors had closed. Spotting her through a nearby window in a connecting chamber, Spencer knew he had to be patient and wait until he reached his destination. Those eleven minutes were excruciatingly long for him. Spencer typically ignored conversations with strangers around him, focusing solely on glimpsing Serafina again.

"Arrival at Central Circuit in five minutes. All employees, please exit left. Non-employees, please exit right," a computerized voice announced. Spencer was aware that most passengers were likely employees. Hoping Serafina wasn't one of them, he concentrated on the smaller group of non-employees, determined not to let her slip away this time. As the tram neared Central Circuit, he strategically positioned himself near the exit to secure an unobstructed view of all exit points.

As the doors opened, Spencer was among the first to disembark, ensuring he had a clear line of sight. His gaze darted between exits, searching for Serafina. He wondered how hard it could be given her beauty. Yet, despite his anticipation, she seemed to have vanished. Spencer called out her name loud enough for onlookers to turn and see what was happening. He even went back into the tram to check, but she was nowhere to be found. The doors closed, and it hit him: she was gone. "How did I miss her?" he exclaimed in frustration.

Approaching the employees' entrance, Spencer knew he had to head back to where non-employees exited. He was

aware that entering the employees' path would lead to his detention. Walking toward Central Circuit's public entrance, he couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment. He took a moment to admire his surroundings, passing between two grand fountains and beneath a vast glass archway. This archway covered one hundred yards of bluish quartz stone walkway, adorned with suspended ten-by-ten glass-colored panels reflecting the progression of technology from the early 1900s onwards.

Upon entering Central Circuit, a human-sized hologram representing one of the co-founders greeted Spencer. "Welcome to Central Circuit, the world's largest software developer and a leading designer of artificial intelligence. Please check in at the security desk; we've detected you don't have a PIC. This month, we have a special..."

Spencer cut off the hologram, saying, "Yeah, not interested," as he headed to his intended destination. Glancing upward, he was impressed by the three enormous holographic screens suspended a hundred feet above him, showcasing clips of technological accomplishments and their positive impacts worldwide. "That must be new," Spencer remarked to himself.

The lobby was impressively large, featuring a range of dated computer equipment suspended from the glass dome. Notably, an Apple Lisa computer, containing the first graphical user interface from the 1980s, was among the exhibits. Natural light filtered through the bluish-tinted ceiling glass, amplifying and casting a heavenly halo around the displayed items.

Spencer approached the security desk, where another hologram greeted him. He agreed to a retinal scan and cleared security. A small silver ball hovered out from a nearby room.

"Good morning, Mr. Cade. I am Guide 59, and I will be your chaperone during your visit."

"I know the routine," Spencer replied.

"Mr. Cade, have you considered getting a PIC? With a PIC, you could tour our facilities without a chaperone."

"You and your 'co-workers' ask me this all the time, and I keep giving you the same answer: no, not interested!"

"Yes, Mr. Cade. Dr. Fields is waiting for you on floor thirty-seven. Please follow me."

Spencer disregarded the chaperone and moved to a moveable walkway, enjoying the illuminating colors reflecting off the arched ceilings. Reaching the elevators, he headed to the middle one.

"Floor thirty-seven," Spencer requested as he stepped into the elevator, waiting for Guide 59 to join him.

Within seconds, the elevator reached its destination. The doors opened, revealing Reece waiting for him.

"Spencer, good to see you again," Reece greeted, hugging him.

"You too."

Reece was a small, stocky man with tan skin and shoulder-length hair tied into a ponytail. He wore a lab coat over a black t-shirt with a humorous message and faded blue jeans. Reece's stubble indicated he'd been pulling all-nighters.

"Still assigned a chaperone, even though I told security you're no risk. Company policy—no PIC, they track you with a droid."

"No worries. I'm used to it. Nice t-shirt. They allow that?"

"Depends on who's working. But you appreciate it, I see," Reece chuckled.

"How've you been? Haven't seen you in months," Spencer inquired.

"Been busy with a project I'm enjoying. How about you? Work going well? Any new and exciting cases?"

"Nothing I want to talk about on my day off."

"Understood. Let me show you some developments."

"Sure, but I'm here to see you, not your tech, even though you've got cool stuff."

"Really? I thought you were here to ask me to fix something."

"Since you mentioned it, could you reprogram my HICAMS?"

"Jade can handle it."

"She can, but she expects payment for everything around the house."

"She's thirteen."

"Don't remind me."

Reece's lab entrance scanned him, then Spencer. As Spencer followed, an electronic voice instructed him to remove his PDA, placing it in a bin. "No electronics allowed; even PICs are disabled upon entry," Reece explained.

"The less tech, the better," Spencer agreed, putting his PDA in the bin.

"What I'm about to show you is in beta testing and will be featured in an Only Tech interview next month," Reece explained.

"And I thought I was special," Spencer laughed.

Entering the lab, Spencer left his escort outside. Reece operated a holographic screen and entered commands.

"Are you overseeing this secret project?"

"No, I'm a General Technician—ensuring daily routines are followed."

"Sounds exciting."

In a dimly lit room to the right, Spencer saw a metallic table with what appeared to be a nude, gender-neutral android.

"What's that?" Spencer asked.

"An android with the first independent AI, self-thinking, self-reasoning brain. Walks, talks, observes, problem-solves."

"Is this for real, or another pretend project?"

"This is real—an android with a 1.7-billion-dollar project cost."

"1.7 billion? It doesn't look much. Is this an android or a toaster?"

"I hope you're not comparing a 1.7-billion-dollar project to a toaster."

"Well, it would explain my high PDA fees."

"You're not impressed?"

"Impressed! If you're telling me what I think you're telling me, I'm more concerned than impressed."

"Spencer, what are you talking about?"

"Since I left Jade at school and saw you, I've had multiple conversations and interactions, but none of them were with a real live human. I drove here in a machine that drove itself, purchased a coffee from a computer, and took part in a security checkpoint run by a program that Stalin would have approved. My car was then parked and stored by a computerized parking facility, while I entered a tram filled with human-like drones who were glued to either their PICs, tablets, or PDAs. After getting off the tram, the one woman I wanted to see somehow vanished into thin blue air. I then walked through an obstacle course of technology, new and old, and on top of all that, I was brought here by a flying tin ball."

"They're not made of tin, they're made of aluminum. It's lighter, more abundant, and much more effective," laughed Reece.

"Whatever!" snapped Spencer."

So, I still don't see the problem," said Reece.

"Nothing is run by humans anymore, and now you're telling me we just created our replacements."

"Calm down, replacement? Who said anything about a replacement? Did you get a few extra shots of espresso in your coffee this morning? You did, didn't you? You know how you get when you become over-caffeinated."

"Hey, what I have in my coffee is my business."

"If you say so," smiled Reece."

"This isn't funny."

"Relax. Think of how much easier our lives are and how we have more time to do things we enjoy because of all the wonderful technology we have. Take our parking facility as an example. Remember when we had to drive our cars into a parking garage, deal with some underpaid parking attendant, who then parked our vehicle haphazardly. Now they take the cars to a different floor, stack them by electronic lifts, which in return increases the ability to store more vehicles within less space, creating fewer parking garages. Giving us more places for nature, and we all know how you love nature."

"Don't start calling me your little tree hugger, you know I hate that. Just because I like the woods doesn't mean I am one," replied Spencer defensively.

"Hey, I'm not saying that's bad. Personally, the bug, tree, dirt thing doesn't work for me, but I know it's necessary. I don't expect everyone to like what I like," replied Reece.

"I don't think the average person can like what you like because they wouldn't be able to comprehend it."

"Don't underestimate the average person. They may surprise you. Anyway, Adam isn't here to replace humans; he is here to help us improve, like that PDA you love so much, but would never admit to."

"No, you're right, I'm not saying technology is bad. Heck today it prevented me from running some fool over. I'm just worried that it's depleting human contact, and we're becoming too dependent on it. Aren't you worried that someday all this technology will control us?"

"No, we will always be in control, and in no way is technology dividing us from each other. If anything, it is bringing us together. Do you know how many friends I have on my social networks? Heck, I probably text more than four hundred times a week."

"Don't get me going on those social networks," replied Spencer.

"Come on; you know you enjoy them. How is that social network site I helped you create? What was it called, Back to Basics. I still haven't received an invite from you, nor have you accepted my invite. What, am I not good enough to be your virtual friend as well?"

Spencer sighed, "Stop it; that's not the reason. I didn't add you because I deleted the account. I figured who would want to be my friend in the virtual world."

"Ah, yes, poor Spencer. I personally have more friends than I know of, literally," replied Reece.

"Well, aren't you special."

"I like to think so. Anyway, don't worry about your virtual status. I'm sure there are people out there who will friend you if you decide to reactivate your account, that is."

"I guess," sighed Spencer.

Now, can I show you?" asked Reece, who was showing the excitement a child would show on Christmas morning.

"Yeah, go ahead, but could you at least put some clothes on it?"

"Sure," laughed Reece. "Adam, good morning, wake up, and get dressed."

"Good morning, Reece," stated Adam in a low male voice. Adam reached underneath the metal table and pulled out a pair of gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt that read, "Humans suck! AI rules!"

That makes me feel oh so comfortable," said Spencer sarcastically.

"Relax, buddy, it's only a t-shirt. I thought it would be funny if the first android with AI wore it."

"Yeah, it's a real riot." Spencer redirected his attention to Adam and thought if it weren't for Adam's pale white skin, and semi-robotic movements, one would think he was human.

"He isn't completely fluid in his movements, but certainly does move better than any other known robot," said Spencer.

"His motor skills are still a little choppy, but we're working on it."

"Why was he naked?" asked Spencer.

"Yesterday, the engineers were working on his joints and needed him nude to access the necessary components."

"I see, and why name him Adam? Is that some biblical reference?"

The name, Adam, stands for Automated Digital Algorithmic Machine. He was assigned this name because he is the first android of his kind. I had no choice in the matter; this came directly from the board of directors and the president of Central Circuit. Why does that bother you?"

"No, just wondering, it seems my assumptions were correct," laughed Spencer."

Well, it bothers the crap out of me. Technology and religion need to stay on separate sides of the fence. Why are you laughing?" asked Reece.

"I don't know. Don't you find it strange that a group of individuals who believe in a God invested a considerable amount of time and money in becoming creators themselves? It's as if they're playing God. I find that a little hypocritical."

"Absolutely, but as long as they keep signing my paycheck, I'm not going to let it bother me too much."

"I figured you'd say that. It's always about the money."

"Pretty much, isn't everything?" grinned Reece.

Adam walked over to Reece and inquired, "Excuse me, will I be continuing my lessons today with Dr. Reilly?"

"Yes, you will be meeting with her in about thirty minutes in classroom five," instructed Reece.

"What type of lessons does he take?" Spencer asked.

"He takes..."

Adam interrupted, "I am currently learning how to interact with humans on a more personal level. There is no need to direct your questions toward Reece; I will be more than happy to answer any of your inquiries, as long as they do not break the security protocol."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude," said Spencer politely, as Reece was trying not to laugh.

"That is okay; my name is Adam; it is a pleasure to meet you," Adam extended his hand to Spencer.

As they shook hands, Spencer felt as if he was shaking hands with a human. "It's nice to meet you too; I'm Spencer."

"I am aware that certain humans do not understand what I represent, and one of my responsibilities is to educate them," explained Adam.

"That's right," said Reece in an excited voice. "Did you come to that conclusion yourself?"

"I did. I have noticed that certain humans are intimidated or wary when it comes to technology, so I have decided to help them understand what my purpose is."

"Well, you and Spencer should spend some serious time together; I will have to put Spencer on your weekly schedule," said Reece as he looked over at Spencer proudly.

Ignoring Reece's comment, Spencer asked, "So, what is your purpose?"

"I believe the reason I was created was to help improve humanity by recognizing, developing, and improving my skills. At the same time, I believe it is also my responsibility to enjoy life, but not to a point where it would infringe on someone else's life negatively."

"Wow, that's deep and very unselfish of you," said Spencer.

"I do not see how depth has anything to do with how I define my reasons for existence."

Reece interrupted, "We haven't taught him about human slang yet."

"I noticed," replied Spencer.

"Adam, I would like for you to head down to the cafeteria before you attend your class," instructed Reece.

"Yes, sir," Adam turned to Spencer, "It was a pleasure to meet you, Spencer, and I hope we can become better acquainted."

"Same here, take care."

Adam turned to Reece, "Will we be meeting later today for my weekly maintenance?"

"Yes, be back here at 1500 hours," ordered Reece.

Before Adam walked out of the room, an orbital droid, similar to Guide 59, appeared out of a locker and followed Adam as he left the lab.

"What's that? Does Adam need a chaperone too?"

"That's a security droid specifically designed to ensure Adam's safety, and it documents all his actions."

"You have a machine babysitting a machine; don't you think maybe a human should follow Adam around?"

"Why? Those security droids have been in operation for years, plus they cost little to nothing to operate. They don't need benefits and never complain."

"I see. So why did you send it to the cafeteria? Does it need to eat as well?"

"His name is 'Adam,' not 'it,' and no, he doesn't need to eat; it's just a great place for him to socialize. So, were you impressed with the responses he gave you?" asked Reece with a curious tone.

"No, not really. I'm sure you can program him to say anything."

"That's the beauty of artificial intelligence; he wasn't programmed to say any of that. Adam came up with that conclusion himself," responded Reece with excitement.

"Oh, well, okay, I guess, but what if he concluded he was a superior machine and his destiny was to annihilate humanity? Would you keep him around and continue to socialize him?"

"First of all, he never came to that conclusion, and second, I'm certainly not going to speculate on what-ifs. The fact is we nurtured and taught him with a positive outlook; I don't see him becoming an android dictator."

"So, you did program him?"

"No, we taught him as we would a child, by discussing morals and giving him beneficial feedback. He decided to follow a positive path. I believe this is the same way you're raising Jade. Does this mean you programmed her?"

Spencer quickly responded, "In a way, I guess, but I know for certain that when Jade becomes an adult, she will decide to be an asset to society."

"Well, we did the same with Adam, and he will also have to make those right-from-wrong decisions over and over as well. But don't worry, he may have a higher intellect, but he is no stronger physically than you or I."

"That doesn't help. History has shown repeatedly that intellectual prowess will cause more trouble than muscle," lectured Spencer.

Reece laughed, "I can't disagree with you there. Our conversation is getting way too philosophical. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I haven't. Do you want to go to one of the eleven cafeterias you have here?" asked Spencer.

"No, let's go somewhere off-site."

"Seriously?"

"I don't have to be back until 1500 hours."

"Ok, it must be nice to make up your hours," said Spencer, showing a slight sign of jealousy.

"Sometimes."

As Reece and Spencer left the lab, Spencer retrieved his PDA, and both headed back out to the main lobby towards the tram. Once they exited the building, Spencer's chaperone bid him goodbye and headed off to its next assignment.

"I haven't heard from Scott lately. Have you?" asked Spencer.

"Not since last New Year's when he conducted a cyber meet with me during the countdown. He has been working his butt off ever since he received his promotion."

"I guess that's what happens when you work for a secretive government agency," said Spencer.

Reece changed the subject, "I suppose so. Tell me more about the woman on the tram?"

"When I was leaving my condo this morning, I met this woman. She was amazing, but I pretty much screwed up my introduction and she walked away. I swear I saw her again while coming here today, but I don't know where she disappeared to."

"Well, I'm sure if it was meant to be, you'd see her again. I believe this is the first time I've heard you speak about another woman since Jade's mother."

"Well, it's the first time another woman has intrigued me." Spencer started to feel uncomfortable, so he changed the topic, "Is Adam the reason why Central Circuit upgraded their security?"

"He's one of three reasons," replied Reece.

"What are the other two?"

"Can't say."

"Can't say? What would be more of a breakthrough than a realistically human android?" asked Spencer.

"I really can't say because I don't know. However, I know there is a three-tier project, and Adam is one part of it. Here comes a tram, what parking facility are you in?"

"Binary."

"Great, then this is our ride," smiled Reece.

As they both entered, they found it easy to locate a seat since most of the employees were still at work. Spencer and Reece sat down and picked up their usual game of pointing out the tourists to guess who they are and where they reside.

"The person over there, who looks like he's in his 90s, do you think that 20-something-year-old is his granddaughter, daughter, or girlfriend?" asked Reece.

"I'm going to say it's his granddaughter, and she is taking her grandfather, who is from Sweden, on a tour of your fine facility," replied Spencer.

"Well, that is pretty boring. I bet it's a girlfriend who he flew in from France without his third wife knowing."

"He flew her to the States and decided to take her to see Central Circuit? That doesn't make any sense."

"Sure, it does. That guy wants to impress her with all this fine technology. Anyway, that's the beauty of our little game; it doesn't have to make sense," responded Reece with a laugh.

As the tram came to a stop, Spencer asked Reece if he would be willing to swing by and look at HICAMS while they were out. Reece agreed if Spencer bought him lunch. As they walked to bay seven, Spencer had his PDA scanned, and within three minutes, he had his vehicle back in his possession.

"Have to love that technology," commented Reece.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Spencer in his standard annoyed tone.

"Wow, nice car. You must be doing well."

"It wasn't my idea; Jade talked me into it."

"She talked you into purchasing a new car worth thousands of credits? She is a very persuasive thirteen-year-old," smirked Reece.

"You don't even know the half of it. By the way, I have to swing by the health market to pick up some milk. I hope that's ok?"

"Sure, I have time. If you want, we can even eat there; they have a buffet, right?"

"They do, but I'd rather not; they just hired this new cook, and I'm not overly fond of his current spread."

"Why go there at all? Just pick up your milk at a nearby market."

"Because they're the only ones in the area that carry organic milk."

"You got to be kidding me, right? Organic milk, does it matter?"

"Are you aware of all those hormones they put into processed milk?" asked Spencer.

"You're crazy, but if you're right, the last thing you need is more hormones."

"Was that supposed to be funny?" asked Spencer, who was not amused.

"Supposed to be? There is no supposed to be about it. That was a rib cracker," said Reece.

"Rib cracker? That's the best you can come up with?" asked Spencer as he nodded his head in disbelief.

As they pulled out of the parking facility, Spencer noticed another security checkpoint ahead. "What's this? I have to go through security again? That's new."

"Yeah, don't worry, it's much quicker. They're just scanning to make sure you don't have any of their technology. When you were coming in, security inventoried the tech that was in your vehicle and on your person. They want to make sure you didn't accidentally inherit anything new," explained Reece.

"Well, I guess I can see their concern," said Spencer.

"Oh, crap!" shouted Reece.

"What?"

"I hope that steganography program I installed works, and they don't discover Adam's schematics that I downloaded to your PDA," said Reece in a concerned voice.

"Are you crazy? You did what? What were you thinking?"

"Wow," said Reece.

"Wow, what?" asked Spencer.

"I can't believe how gullible you are."

"That wasn't funny."

"Yeah, it was!" laughed Reece.

"No, it wasn't. What's steganography again?"

"We need to send you to an advanced forensics class.

It's when you hide digital information by embedding it into seemingly harmless computer files, like photos. You would use it to supplement encryption. It's like hiding a picture inside of a picture, and the viewer will only see the picture they are supposed to see," explained Reece.

"Indeed," Spencer replied, dripping with sarcasm.

"You prompted me."

"I did, didn't I?" As they continued driving, a reddish transparent wall passed through them. Once the scan completed, a green light signaled, allowing Spencer and Reece to proceed.

"Much smoother than when I arrived. Will I have to repeat this process when I drop you off later?" Spencer asked.

"Yes, but don't fret, I won't bill you for fixing your gadgets."

"Message received," Spencer conceded.

After inputting their new route, Reece asked why Spencer was behind the wheel. Spencer launched into his usual spiel about not wanting to rely too heavily on technology, conveniently omitting the fact that he'd let his car drive for him while drinking his coffee. En route to the health market,

Spencer and Reece exchanged anecdotes about their college years. Reece playfully taunted Spencer about his sieve-

like memory and how Reece had been more of a social butterfly.

"I never quite grasped why you preferred staying in and studying," Reece commented.

"I lacked the photographic memory some people seem to have," Spencer responded.

"Life must be quite the challenge for you," Reece said with a grin.

"Why don't you try raising a child while working full-time?" Spencer retorted.

Reece sarcastically shot back, "Oh, I had no idea you were raising a child and attending college simultaneously. That must be why you missed all those social events."

"Funny," Spencer deadpanned.

"Relax, I'm just teasing. Your life isn't the misery you make it out to be."

"I know. Can't a guy vent occasionally?"

"Sure, if he wants more of the same," Reece teased back.

Switching gears, Spencer broached a serious topic, saying, "I need to ask you something important. More than just a favor."

"What is it?" Reece inquired.

"If something were to happen to me, would you become Jade's guardian? I realize it's a tremendous responsibility, and you're busy, but I want to ensure she has a place and someone to turn to. You're the closest thing she has to a second parent, even though you don't drop by as often as you used to."

Reece paused briefly before responding, "First, I haven't dropped by because you're never home. Second, of course, I'd take Jade in if necessary. I'm honored that you see me as a parental figure. But honestly, we don't need to dwell on this. Nothing's going to happen," Reece reassured with confidence.

"I know, it's just about being responsible," Spencer explained.

"Do I need to sign something, then?" Reece joked.

"No, it's already taken care of. I had my will updated three months ago, and I've named you as Jade's caretaker."

"You did all this before even asking me?"

"I was pretty certain you'd agree."

"That's quite an assumption."

"I wasn't worried."

"Lucky for you, I'm such a swell guy," Reece replied with a smile.

"I definitely lucked out there," Spencer grinned.

As they pulled up at the health market, Spencer noticed a lack of parking spots near the entrance but spotted an open one across the street. He executed an illegal U-turn and snagged the spot.

"Look at you, a regular stunt driver," Reece remarked.

"I can handle myself behind the wheel when necessary. Are you staying in the car, or are you coming in?" Spencer asked.

"I'll hang back. I want to check in on Adam."

"Alright, I'll be back in a flash. And think about where you'd like to grab lunch," Spencer suggested.

"Got it," Reece said as he pulled up a holographic screen.

Spencer left the car and headed toward the crosswalk, waiting for the pedestrian signal. Once the light turned green, he joined the crowd in crossing the street. He noticed a vehicle approaching an elderly woman crossing from the opposite direction. He shouted to warn her, but she didn't hear. Amid the oblivious crowd, Spencer sprinted toward her, deftly dodging other pedestrians engrossed in their devices. He pushed the woman out of harm's way just before the vehicle sped past.

Ensuring her safety, Spencer looked up and saw Serafina on the other side of the street, smiling at him. Energized by the sight, he focused solely on her. He was so engrossed in her presence that he failed to notice another vehicle approaching. Just as he was about to shout to Serafina, the oncoming vehicle collided with him head-on. Spencer was propelled over the car's hood, shattering the windshield with

the impact. The resulting web-like pattern of shattered glass left him with severe lacerations on his face. The vehicle screeched to a halt, flinging Spencer onto the pavement, where the back of his head cracked open upon impact.

Reece had been conversing with Adam through a holographic screen when he glanced up and saw Spencer lying motionless in the road. A pool of blood formed around his upper body. Reece jumped out of the car and raced toward Spencer. The woman he'd saved was getting back on her feet, piecing together what had just happened. The growing crowd of pedestrians stared in shock, some recording the gruesome scene on their devices. Uncertain of what to do, the growing group of spectators hesitated.

Reece reached Spencer and shouted, "Someone call for help, don't just stand there!"

A nearby pedestrian dialed 911, frantically explaining, "Yeah, there's been an accident, we need help! Hurry, we're outside the health market." The crowd swelled further, with more digital cameras capturing the horrifying aftermath.

The driver of the vehicle that struck Spencer rushed out, crying, "I'm so sorry, I didn't see him. My auto driver was on, I don't understand what happened." Overwhelmed by Spencer's condition, she dropped to her knees and then fainted, overcome by the sight of the pooling blood.

Reece was now on the ground, holding Spencer's hand, urging him to hold on. "Stay with us, Spencer, please. Keep listening to my voice. You'll make it through this." The wailing sirens of approaching ambulance, fire trucks, and police cars grew louder, drowning out Reece's desperate pleas. He continued to reassure Spencer, his voice a steady anchor amidst the chaos.

Lying on the pavement, Spencer remained immobile. His breathing grew shallower, and he pondered, "Is this the end?" As this thought crossed his mind, his peripheral vision dimmed, and he entered what appeared to be a dark, narrow tunnel, punctuated by streaks of blue and white light.

Emergency vehicles arrived at the scene, and Reece watched in disbelief as EMTs rushed to Spencer's motionless body. They quickly realized that the flow of blood from his wounds had ceased, indicating his heart had stopped. One EMT applied medical bio-foam to temporarily seal Spencer's head wound, while another retrieved an automated external defibrillator (AED). The Police Department cordoned off the area, and the Fire Department assessed the struck vehicle to ensure it wouldn't pose further danger. As the responders worked, onlookers watched in shock, capturing the scene on their devices. The AED was attached to Spencer, and the machine initiated a charge.

The AED's automated system kicked in, its voice calmly guiding the process. "Charging," it announced, the mechanical voice devoid of emotion. A tension hung in the air as everyone present held their breath. The countdown began, "Five... four... three... two... one... Clear." Electricity surged through Spencer's body, causing a faint twitch in his limbs. The AED's display showed no pulse detected and prepared for another attempt. "Charging."

The second shock followed the same routine: the countdown, the electrical surge, and Spencer's body reacting. But the AED stubbornly continued to display "No pulse detected." The crowd watched with bated breath, their hopes hanging on the slim possibility of a revival.

A third charge was delivered, and again, Spencer's body responded with a twitch. But the AED's digital readout stubbornly remained unchanged. The EMT, with a solemn expression, checked for a pulse manually, placing fingers on Spencer's wrist. Time seemed to stretch as everyone waited for the EMT's verdict.

With a heavy sigh, the EMT shook their head. "It's too late," they said softly, the words carrying a weight of finality. "He lost too much blood. I'll call it." Time of death was pronounced: 13:27 hours.

Reece's world seemed to shatter in that moment. The cacophony of sirens and commotion around him faded into the

background as he stared at Spencer's lifeless form. Disbelief, shock, and grief swelled within him, threatening to consume his thoughts. He clung to Spencer's hand, his grip tight, as if by sheer force of will he could bring his friend back.

Around him, the crowd whispered in hushed tones, their devices capturing images of the tragic scene. The police and emergency personnel maintained a respectful distance, realizing the gravity of the situation. The woman whose life Spencer had saved stood nearby, tears streaming down her face, gratitude and sorrow intermingled.

The weight of the moment pressed down on Reece's chest, and he closed his eyes, tears slipping down his cheeks. Memories of their friendship flooded his mind, from their college days to the moments they had shared at Central Circuit. It was all too much to process, too painful to accept.

As the world continued moving around him, Reece held onto Spencer's hand, unwilling to let go. He whispered his final goodbyes, a heart-wrenching farewell to a friend who had meant so much to him.

The scene was now frozen in time, an indelible memory etched into the minds of those who had witnessed it. And as the emergency responders continued their duties, Reece remained by Spencer's side, a silent guardian of the moments they had shared and the life that had been tragically cut short.