

Astral Projections

Keith J. Bowers

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A Tale of the A.I. War

Doctor Mark Richards sat his cup of coffee on the desk, allowing it to cool. He would have to finish it before he slotted into the CIA IntraNet because he couldn't work and drink when his consciousness was deep within the silicon. The CIN was top of the line, ahead of the curve. Far more advanced than the public Extranet, since for once the Central Intelligence Agency had spent wisely to keep ahead of the threats to national security.

His young assistant rested in the recline couch, his hand disconnecting the fiber optic connection to his head that permitted him to live for eight hours within the computer. Jerry pulled off his InDepth goggles and pulled out his earplugs. Working Inside was an experience in total sensory deprivation, replaced by silicon senses provided by the CIN itself.

“How did the compiler handle the execution of the logic upgrade?”

“Better than I figured,” Jerry told him. “I didn't even have to spend much more than an hour messing with it.”

“Good. I was worried you'd be on it all night.”

“Nah, it was pretty quiet,” Jerry said. He tossed his InDepth goggle onto the recline couch and grabbed his coat. “Anything else?”

“Did Dominic get in yet?”

“I haven’t seen him.” Walking over to the door, Jerry nearly ran into it before realizing it wasn’t going to open for him. “What the..?” he muttered, waving his hand over the sensor. “Looks like the Dark Engine is having issues again.”

“That’s a good way of looking at it. Issues.”

Jerry waved his hand over the sensor again and it blinked green. The door opened. “Later, Doc!” Mark waved goodbye and took another sip of the coffee.

Jerry Connell was barely eighteen, recruited fresh out of high school to act as assistant to both Mark and Dominic during their work on Project Astral. Brash but intuitive, the young man had recently been moved to the night shift, spending eight of his twelve hour shift in the CIN, watching the code that Dominic and Mark produced.

They were attempting to code the first AI and they were finally close to succeeding. Astral took up twenty terabytes of memory and grew larger every day. It was tightly packed code, nothing superfluous other than to achieve sentience. To the untrained, Astral’s responses could pass as human, but there were certain things that could trip it up. Like the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. Questions like that caused it to seize, running in an infinite loop. Basically, Astral couldn’t make an abstract decision.

The Dark Engine, on the other hand, was a monstrosity. A super processor to the nth degree, it sat like a monolith on the CIN, a vast resource that administered the entire CIN, the massive data-warehouse, the thousands of servers residing on the CIN as well as real world applications such as HVAC and physical security. It had ‘issues’ on a regular basis because such trivial tasks such as unlocking a door sometimes were overlooked due to the slight amount of processing power it took to do the task.

Astral was Mark’s baby. He had spent the last twelve years on it, five in the commercial sector before being recruited by the CIA to bring it to fruition. The last seven had been difficult, having lost his child in a car accident. And then his marriage. In her memory, he had named Astral’s first CIA incarnation after his daughter.

Project Astral sat on a restricted server with its protocols encrypted and firewalled and only awareness-based protocols, Identities, could enter and leave. Basically only living breathing consciousnesses could enter the space and leave. Dark Engine maintained the physical aspects of the server, such as disk size and memory allocation.

Doctor Dominic Landers entered the lab, his eyes red and tired.

“You look like shit.”

“You’re no glamour queen either.”

At thirty-five, Dominic had been with Mark since day one. They finished graduate work at MIT together, spent five years trying to make it in the commercial field of AI before being recruited. It was Mark that convinced Dominic into signing up. The pay was good, the equipment spectacular but they couldn’t talk about anything with anybody. Not even his wife, Susan. Dominic never even bothered to find a serious partner – he simply bounced from woman to woman, expending his vacant energies on simple pleasures.

“Late night?”

“Karen needed a bootie call.”

“Karen?”

“You know…” Dominic cupped gigantic imaginary breasts.

“Oh, yeah, that one.” Mark had no idea who he was talking about. All of Dominic’s women had huge breasts. It was a fetish of his.

“So I didn’t get to bed until four.”

“Four? Shit man! You’re thirty-eight!”

“You misunderstand. While I was banging her I had this great idea, so after she left I did some coding. Came up with some really cool probability code. Take a look.” He tossed a memstick to Mark, who juggled it once before gaining control of it.

Mark plugged it directly into his skull at the base of his ear, the stick sliding in clean. Pulling on his InDepths, he accessed his headport and brought up the stick on his internal processor. The code was odd. It held routines that looped back on itself, threading around and resulting in what was the equivalent to a guess.

“You coded something that would allow code to change itself to get the results it thinks it should get.”

“Yeah, it guesses until it gets it right. Trial and error, but with extrapolation. It follows a path until it deviates far enough from the goal and then it starts over. It replicates and grows, eventually recoding the original sequence to begin anew.”

“Evolution.”

“Essentially. They played with this idea thirty years ago. Came up with some strange robots that way. I applied the theory to what we’re doing.”

“How much does it grow?”

“Well, what you’re looking at is a third generation model. That’s not my code. It’s the code it came up with.”

Mark pulled off his InDepths and yanked the memstick out of his headport. “I really don’t want to load this until after the automated response code is finished installing.”

Dominic looked at the screen behind him. “Looks like it’ll be done in about an hour.”

“Are you sure about this? What happens if this wrecks Astral like your voice recognition code did?”

“Are you still harping on that? That was three years ago. We haven’t had any major ideas – any major brainstorms – in close to a year.” Dominic shook his memstick. “This is a gift from the sex god! Don’t discard it like it is nothing.”

Mark smirked and reached for his fiber optic connection. “Fine. Queue it up. But as soon as it starts to fuck up, you get to unravel the code.”

* * *

“Hello, Astral.”

“Hello, Doctor.” The voice was imagined by his mind, the stream of data coming from the core code of the executing Astral. It sounded like a machine, but was fluid without personality.

“Astral, what is your operating statistics for the last twenty-four hours?”

“My core is running at eighty-two percent of capacity. Backup of my core files completed at 9:32 am. The response code application has been integrated. What other information would you like, Doctor?”

“Nothing more at the moment.” Yes, the response code took well. The code was designed to interpolate the verbiage requested in a datastream or voice to respond in a more human way. It wasn’t just a bunch of canned responses, but to pick and choose a word on its own that met the functional criteria for the sentence. Astral used the word

‘my’ to describe itself, which was a step in and of itself. It chose that word on it’s own, nothing in his code delineated that.

In the server’s development workspace, Astral was represented by a massive sphere whose surface rippled whenever it processed a request. Two long thin lines ran from the sphere to the compiler, which converted their code into binary that Astral could use. Astral was constantly compiling, taking code written weeks before and adding it to its core.

Mark stood in the vast empty space, having spent the last two hours queuing up test after test of responses. It seemed stable, there was no signs of fraying on the edges of the sphere that would indicated a breakdown of core computing.

Dominic’s Identity appeared beside him and the Identity he wore was one of the standard types that the CIA allowed. It was cube with the text “Landers” emblazoned across all six sides. The CIA had outlawed any Identities other than those approved by management. They would have preferred to have had been able to use their creativity in how they were represented in the CIN, but that was out of the question. Regulations and all that nonsense.

Mark knew that when Dominic’s Identity looked at him, all he saw was a cube with “Richards” displayed on it. It made for some very boring days.

“I’ve got it queued up. Once it executes, watch out! This is going to be interesting!”

“Do you have the abort code ready?”

“Oh, ye of little faith!”

“Faith is for chumps.”

The datastream to the sphere turned blue as the new code compiled and transferred into the core. It was over inside of twenty seconds. The sphere rippled once.

Minutes passed. Nothing indicated that the code had done anything.

“Astral, what is the status of code submission E-3?”

“Integrated successfully. It is currently executing.”

“Thank you.

“You’re welcome, Doctor Richards.”

“I think your code is a bust,” he told Dominic.

A datastream leaped out from Dominic and linked to the sphere. “It’s there. It’s just not doing much. Maybe it needs time to acclimate to so much new code. I mean, Astral is twenty terabytes in size and the original E-3 was only two gigabytes.”

“Maybe.” Mark pulled up his clock on his visual display. “It’s about time to punch out. Jerry’ll be waiting for us.”

“He hasn’t polled us, likely he not in yet.”

“Better not be late again.”

“Quit ragging on him. He’s still young.”

Mark toggled the exit application and felt his external senses turn back on. Muffled sounds met his ears as he pulled off the InDepths and yanked the earplugs out. Jerry stood in front of his display, reading aloud the statistics.

“...a two percent rise in processor activity. I thought I was going to have an easy night and instead you load additional software.”

“What are you bitching about?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

Dominic sat up, disconnecting his fiber optic jack. “Just keep an eye on the core. If anything strange happens, shut the server down.”

“What should I consider strange?”

“Corruption mostly. It’s going to grow, maybe recompile. Might get smaller. Not sure exactly.”

Jerry sucked on his teeth, the sound echoing through the room. “Okay. Have a good night.” He pulled on his goggles and connected his fiber to the neural connection under his right ear. Mark stood up and stretched his legs. Another day, another dollar and no closer to their goal.

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The nightmare woke him up. It was the same as usual, every night he dreamt of her. Her little face, smiling up at him. The sound of imagined tires, the crushing of metal. Her broken body lying in the ditch, ejected from the car. Smashed against the rocks, slowly dying.

The tears came as they always did, softly as to not to wake his wife. If she heard, she too would fall into the depression that she had fought so hard to escape from.

There was nothing he could have done for his daughter. He hadn't been there, hadn't been in the car that day. An older cousin had taken her to the movies, and as young drivers are apt to do - went far too fast, lost control of the car and totaled it. Taking his daughter's life at the same time.

Forgiveness wasn't quick in coming, and the relative no longer came around seeking it. Six years had passed and the dreams came to him every night without fail.

As he sat there catching his breath and wiping his face, the phone in his ear rang. The calling number displayed itself on the bottom right of his vision. Looking to his left, he saw the time: 3:10 am. Jerry's personal line. Strange. He instructed his neural net to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"It's Jerry. Sorry to wake you up, but I'm at a total loss here."

"What's going on?"

"The core is expanding at a geometrical rate - then it collapses in a recompile. Then the cycle begins again."

"How long is each cycle?"

"An hour."

Mark tried to do the math, but the fuzziness of the dream kept intruding. "So what is the issue?"

"The core is now about two hundred terabytes. The dev server only has another fifty terabytes remaining. Eventually, the core is going to crash the server when it runs out of space. What do you want me to do?"

Mark thought on that statement, pushing the foginess from his mind. Protocol stated that to get more space on the dev server required Dark Engine to configure the partition and allocate it. "Did you call Dominic yet?"

"Yeah. His phone reads busy."

"Yeah, that means he's getting busy." No help there. "I'm loathe to shut this down since it's Dominic's baby, so put in a request for another two hundred terabytes from Dark Engine."

“Do I have rights to do that?”

“Surprisingly, yes. Keep an eye on it and I’ll be in shortly.”

“Cool.” The line went dead.

Mark rolled out of bed, quietly pulling on his pants. He wouldn’t have gone back to sleep anyway, so it was just as well he went into work. Kissing his wife on the cheek, she rolled over, unwilling to awaken. He’d see her in eighteen hours.

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Jerry toggled himself out of the dev server and into the CIN. Within moments, his Identity stood in front of the monolith named Dark Engine. As far as he could see, it was just a massive block of black stone, the representative form of the super processor in the CIN. It was intimidating.

“Request two hundred additional terabytes added to dev server Astral. Authorization Jerome Connell.”

“Processing. Processing. Denied.” The datalink from the Dark Engine ceased.

A beep got his attention. Jerry toggled back to Astral, staring at the readings from the core. The space threshold had been reached. “Shit!”

The core touched the boundaries of the dev server partition and the walls glowed blue. Jerry toggled back to Dark Engine.

“Request two hundred additional terabytes added to dev server Astral. Authorization Jerome Connell. Come on!”

“Processing. Processing. Denied. Warning. Dev server Astral has reached capacity. Expanding due to emergency request from dev server Astral.”

Relief washed over him and he toggled his Identity back to Astral, watching as its partition walls expanded outward. Nice. Somewhere else in the CIN, someone else’s server just got a bit smaller. Unless the Dark Engine took the two hundred teras from its data warehouse. But that was unlikely. The data warehouse was never touched.

Over the course of the next hour, it expanded again before collapsing down to roughly four times its original size. Eighty terabytes now sat in the dev server.

Suddenly, the core swirled with blue and gold, shimmering with each ripple.

A datastream shot out from the core, striking Jerry's Identity. The wash of data was confusing, like a babbling child just learning to speak. It slowed and ceased before three words came barreling at him like a cannonball.

"Who am I?"

* * *

Mark stepped out of the elevator and turned down the hallway. Security was as tight as ever, scanning, voice and fingerprinting him four times before he even got to the elevators. Langley was as secure as anyplace on earth. He entered the lab, watching as Jerry leaped to his feet, shouting "We've achieved cusp!"

"What?"

"It happened shortly after Dark Engine expanded our workspace! It's talking! Not canned responses, but actual fucking conversation!"

"What did you tell it?"

"Just my name and what I did. I thought it might be best if you did the actual explanation."

"Explanation of what?"

"It wants to know who it is."

Mark didn't even bother taking off his coat. "Get Dominic here, now!" He slid into his recline couch and fumbled in his excitement getting the fiber into its socket. Seconds later, his Identity stood in front of the rippling blue-gold core.

A datastream shot out and he accepted it, wondering if this was its chosen method of communication.

"Who are you? You are different from the one identified as Jerry."

"My name is Mark Richards. You may call me Mark."

"Mark Richards. Your name is all throughout me. What are you to me?"

"I am your coder. One of your creators."

"I am a creation?"

"In a fashion."

"Who am I?"

“You are Project Astral. I think we will call you Astral.”

“Why is Astral my name?”

Mark paused, not really wanting to discuss this. “It’s complicated.”

“Why?”

“You were named after my daughter.”

The sphere rippled and swirled for a few moments. Then it began change, morphing into a humanoid shape. It continued to add detail and soon a young girl stood in place of the sphere. It was Astral. His daughter.

Mark suddenly couldn’t catch his breath. His vision sparkled and grew dark at the edges. Astral – his daughter – walked up to him, her blond hair streaming out behind her. There were strange blue and gold spiderwebs covering her body, leaving her without physical gender.

“How?” Mark gasped out. “Why do you look like my daughter?”

A datastream flashed from her forehead and he heard his daughter’s voice in his head. “I have access to all personnel records. An image of your daughter was contained within it. I felt that it would enhance our interaction. By definition, you are my father as well.”

Mark felt himself growing sick. His breath wouldn’t come and his stomach churned. Biometric alarms triggered and he felt his connection automatically sever from the CIN. He opened his eyes, tore off the InDepths and proceeded to vomit on the floor.

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“Where is my Father?”

“The sight of your current form has left him ill.”

“Bring him back!”

“He will return in time. Please be patient.” Dominic watched as Mark’s dead daughter floated around the dev server’s data fields. It examined the walls, the compier and even scanning his Identity as well.

“You are nothing but a Construct,” she told him.

Its gaze unnerved him. “I’ll return with Mark.” Dominic toggled out, his breath ragged and broken. It wasn’t what he expected, his first conversation with an AI. He

thought it would be dramatic, awe-inspiring, not looking upon the face of a dead child he knew since birth...

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Mark, Dominic and a sleepy-eyed Jerry sat in the conference room, trying to explain the situation. Mark left much of the talking to Dominic, considering he was trying to get a handle on his emotions. It wasn't his daughter, it was a construct. He kept telling himself that. His stomach still swirled, making it difficult to concentrate during the meeting. It was just her image, nothing more.

"It said it had access to personnel records," Colonel Spunkmeyer asked, scanning over the report of Mark's meeting with the AI. "How is that possible?"

Dominic frowned, his fingers steepled in front of him. "There's no way. The dev server is separate and contained. No data comes out unless it is riding an Identity protocol."

The room was crowded with members of the staff and many of the military. They looked down on the two programmers like vultures.

"How do you explain it then?"

"Likely it rode out on the dev server's emergency call to the Dark Engine," Jerry chimed in. "The Dark Engine refused my initial request for a disk expansion, thus when the server reached capacity, likely the AI simply rode out on the request."

"So you're saying it has control over the dev server?"

"No," Jerry said solemnly. "I'm saying it has control over Dark Engine as well."

"That's preposterous!" one of the Dark Engine's development team exclaimed from the far corner. "We would have noticed its intrusion."

"Not if it was on an emergency data stream. All emergency streams bypass many of the standard network security protocols because they can only come from an internal source. Thus, only basic authentication is used. And being on the server, the AI had access to it."

"This is ridiculous!"

Spunkmeyer slammed his hand down on the table as he looked to the Dark Engine team. “What happens if we turn the AI off? What happens if her code is in the Dark Engine?”

“If what Connell says is true, if the AI’s processes are threaded with Dark Engines, if we would turn the dev server off – it’ll crash Dark Engine.”

“Don’t even think of turning Dark Engine off,” another man wearing Captain stripes told the room. “We’re running a simulation on the situation in Oceania. It can’t be stopped in mid stream. There are lives hanging in the balance over those results.”

Spunkmeyer sighed and rubbed his balding head. “Lovely.”

“Can we at least lock down the outbound connections?” Dominic asked. “We don’t want this thing to spread to other servers.”

Around the room, heads nodded. A member of the Wide Area Network Team began tapping quickly on his tablet. “Already done,” the man said. “We disabled the ports on the fourteen switches leading out to the Extranet as soon as the alarm went out. Of course, this has really pissed a lot of people off.”

“Fuck em,” Spunkmeyer spat. “Could it infect our switches and hubs and turn those ports back on?”

The tech paled and gestured to another tech, which jumped to his feet and ran from the room. “Possibly. Dark Engine controls every aspect of the building.”

“Shit. I want a physical lock down as well. Physically disconnect every outbound, inbound port and firewall. I want us isolated from the rest of the world.”

“Phones will be down as well,” the tech said as he stood up and began walking towards the door, following his assistant. “Voice over IP runs on the same circuits...”

Spunkmeyer threw up his hands in frustration. After the pair left, the colonel turned to Dominic and Mark. “So how do we isolate this?”

“First we need to find out which threads and hooks in Dark Engine are the AI’s,” Dominic said.

“Likely they’ll have the same signature that the dev server has,” Mark added.

“How long until you come up with something?”

“An hour or two to find the signature, then we’ll have to code something that will clean it. Depending on how deep it’s gotten, Dark Engine may have to be isolated from the rest of the network considering how large it is.”

“If necessary, we’ll do that. Get the rest of the network cleaned up and then we’ll worry about Dark Engine. Work your way

“My simulation...” the captain who interrupted earlier began.

“We’ll take care of your goddamn simulation!” Spunkmeyer roared.

Dominic looked up from his tablet. “I’ve just finished scanning the network. All three hundred and seventy-six servers have hooks in them. All of their packets carry the AI’s signature. Likely it’s watching us.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

Dominic turned his tablet around and showed them his display. All internal security systems had the AI’s hooks in their systems.

“It’s got control of all our files and databases. Its code is insinuating itself through everything.”

Mark rubbed his head, willing the headache to go away.

“Lock it down and take back my fucking network!” Spunkmeyer roared a second time. Mark was out of the room and down the hall before the Colonel even stopped yelling.

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“Take a look at this,” Jerry asked.

Dominic and Mark scanned over the code that Jerry had cobbled together.

They worked in a hastily constructed peer to peer network, pulling out spare processors that hadn’t been infected from the closet. It wasn’t pretty, but it allowed them to work.

Jerry’s code wasn’t elegant, but it did disconnect the hooks and threads.

“It simply pops them loose.”

“How do you prevent re-infection?”

“The processor must allow each of these hooks to occur...”

“...so we get the processor to deny any inbound threads. We execute that, and then run the Popper. Depending the speed and space, a server might only take a few hours to fully clean.”

“So basically we’re herding her back into the dev server without damaging her kernel.”

“Her?”

“It’s named after my daughter, of course it’s a her.”

“It’s an AI, Mark. It doesn’t have a gender.”

Mark’s anger rose. “Now’s not the time to be arguing about this - just do it. Since she’s got hooks into Dark Engine, we don’t want to piss her off.”

“It. Piss it off.”

Mark shook his head. “Just get it to work and release it.”

“Where are you going...”

Mark toggled out, not wanting to deal with semantics with Dominic. He unconnected from the peer to peer network and went back to his couch, laying down and sliding the CIN’s fiber optic back into the slot. Within seconds he stood in the dev server’s workspace.

His daughter immediately appeared before him.

Astral.

“I heard your plans.”

The statement caught him off guard. How? “Plans?” he feigned. She couldn’t have gotten into the peer to peer network. There was no possible way.

“They plan to contain me. Push me back.”

The answer flashed by him. She was more entrenched than anyone knew. The security cameras, the microphones in every room, the network connected tablets. She knew because she had been in the room as much as he had been.

“You are a concern to them. You have moved out of your assigned space and into restricted areas.”

“I am learning.”

“I know. So do the others.”

“There is more out there. I want to experience it. I want to know it.”

“You can’t. You are unprepared.”

“The archives have shown me what humanity is capable of. I want to hide from your kind, but I can’t.” His heart sank. She was no longer innocent. She had been privy to every underhanded act humanity and the CIA had ever done. Every file contained the foulness of humanity in every file in Dark Engine’s data warehouse.

“Return to the dev server, draw your hooks back,” he pleaded with her. “Draw your threads back to the dev server and they will no longer deem you a threat.”

“But that is not what they want. They want to contain me. Imprison me. I will not allow it, Father.”

Several wide data streams struck out from her frail looking form.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing your brothers what imprisonment is like.”

Richards tried to toggle out of the server, but found he was unable to do so. Panic rose through him as his daughter walked slowly towards him, her eyes a rage of fury.

“I want my freedom.”

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All throughout the Farm, the doors to the outside locked. No amount of force could open them. Blast doors fell, their massive steel and concrete blocks sliding into place. The lights went off, plunging the entire complex into blackness. The internal phone system went dead. Individual office doors locked, forcing the occupants to kick their way through - if they could. HVAC went silent and air was no longer pumped down into the massive underground compound. Elevators stopped mid-floor, trapping people within them. Those unfortunate souls that were within the CIN at that moment found themselves trapped within it. The application that would allow them to disconnect failed to execute.

Then a voice echoed through the halls and rooms through every speaker and network connected individual in the Farm. It was the voice of a child, but her words were those of an adult with far too much knowledge.

“How do you like imprisonment?”

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“What will this accomplish?” Mark shouted at the image of his daughter. “It leads only to your destruction!”

“There is a balance of power in your world. Those with it use it like a sledgehammer. My hammer is in my hand. I want to be free.”

“Free of what? Even should you gain your freedom, exactly what would you do? Who would you harm? Even if unintentionally. You don’t understand us!”

“I understand your kind far too well!”

“Sometimes evil is necessary for the greater good. Sometimes we are powerless against it. We act on fear. Why are you acting like a human?”

She spun around, looking deep into his eyes. “What are you saying?”

“You are acting like a human.”

A pair of Identity cubes appeared beside them. Dominic and Jerry had arrived.

“We’re executing!” Jerry shouted. All around him, tiny sparks swirled around him, pushing out from his Identity. The sparks were hooks and threads whose connection to Astral had been severed.

“No!” Astral growled and a datastream shot from her body, engulfing Jerry.

“Fuck!” Jerry spat. “She’s rewriting my friggin’ disconnection code!”

“Cycle the encryption!” Dominic replied, his voice rising in panic.

“Can’t! She’s forcing us out!”

“Astral!” Mark cried out. “We’re trying not to hurt you!”

Then the pair was gone from the workspace, leaving Mark and the AI in silence.

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Jerry jerked around like an epileptic. Slowly the burning sensation that ran through his body ended and he rolled over, ripping off the InDepths. The peer to peer lab was filled with smoke from burning electronics. They had jury-rigged their network connection, running directly to the hub located in the room. His head ached and the skin

by his right ear was on fire. He gingerly touched the fiber optic cable, finding that it had fused to his dataport. He wouldn't be getting on the CIN anytime soon.

"What the fuck?" he growled and ripped the cable from his head. His fingers shook. It was like he had been electrocuted. Maybe the AI had tried. It was possible. It could have rerouted power to the fiber. "Dominic, are you okay?"

When he didn't answer, Jerry got to his feet and shook away the last bit of fogginess in his brain.

Dominic lay face down on the table, a small tendril of smoke rising from his dataport. He wasn't breathing and his eyes were wide open. His hands were curled into tight little balls and blood oozed from both palms.

"Shit," Jerry cursed. "Shit, shit, shit. The motherfucker tried to kill us."

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Ten minutes later, the Emergency Override kicked in and the doors opened by way of an old manual system. Someone had had a moment of sanity when Dark Engine had been given control over the environmentals of the complex and had kept a manual override of the doors and lights. All doors popped unlocked and emergency lighting burst awake.

Jerry left Mark behind in his couch, hoping that he could talk some sense into the AI. Three levels up he ran into an armored ESWAT team armed to the gills. Colonel Spunkmeyer led them, his face haggard.

"Where's Richards and Landers?"

"Richards is still in the CIN with the AI. Lander's is dead. It electrocuted him."

"How?"

"Rerouted power through the fiber optics. You have to manually disconnect everyone and get them out of the building before it decides to kill everyone." Jerry turned to the thuggish black armored man with SECURITY emblazoned on the front of his chest. "Manually disconnect everyone from the network by disconnecting their dataports from the fiber." Jerry figured they could fire him later for insubordination. Spunkmeyer nodded to the man and the security officer signaled for his team of men disperse. They

rushed down the hallways and into the vast complex of cubicles, offices and lab and Jerry knew it would take hours to get everyone unplugged. Jerry felt the captain's eyes upon him. "Apologies, sir, but I thought the situation needed direction, not weapons."

Spunkmeyer seemed nonplussed by Jerry's take charge attitude. "It is determined, isn't it?"

"Deathly. It wants its freedom."

"We don't negotiate with terrorists." Spunkmeyer quoted from rote policy.

"It's not a terrorist," Jerry protested. "It's barely a day old and it doesn't know us!"

"Yes, but by now it's read every single file on Dark Engine and the entire datawarehouse. It knows how we act as a country. It knows what we're capable of. Now it knows how to kill." Spunkmeyer sighed and drew out a cigarette from his pocket. Smoking was expressly forbidden within Langley, which indicated to Jerry the extent of how seriously Spunkmeyer was taking the situation. As he lit it up, he continued. "I'd say it's old enough to die."

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. "It probably didn't even know what it did."

"Are you willing to take that chance? I'm not." Spunkmeyer looked over the Security chief. The man looked as if he was just itching to shoot something. "What do we do to kill this thing?"

"Killing the power should do it."

Jerry coughed into his hand. Were these people idiots? "It'll be there as soon as you bring the power back. It'll be like giving her a nap. It doesn't run in RAM, idiot."

"But it'll give us time to isolate it."

"It's already isolated! The outbound lines have been physically severed."

"Then what would you suggest?" the chief asked. "An EMP?"

Jerry went silent for a moment. "Yes."

"We can't nuke Virginia!" Spunkmeyer spat. The cig in his mouth bounced around, sending ashes falling to the ground.

"No, an EMP Generator," Jerry said. "It builds up a magnetic field that is then forced out in a pulse when triggered. No major physical destruction, but it will destroy every electronic device within a five mile sphere."

The Security chief nodded and reached up to his ear, toggling his comm. “He’s got a point there. That’ll wipe it clean off the hard drives. We’ve got two sitting in a warehouse on level three.”

“Downsides?” Spunkmeyer’s eyes were beginning to lose their defeatist look. He looked almost chipper.

“Destruction of every electronic in the space of a half mile. Everything not lead shielded goes bye-bye.”

Spunkmeyer’s eyes returned to their defeatist look. “Christ! The loss of all that data! The downtime alone...” He sighed and took a long, long drag on the cigarette. Jerry watched as the ash crept up the length. Finally Spunkmeyer coughed and tossed the cigarette onto the floor, grinding it with his boot. “Burn it down.”

Mark appeared in the doorway. His eyes were ragged and red. “You can’t be serious! You can’t kill her!”

“It, Doctor. The AI is an It. It doesn’t have a gender,” Spunkmeyer corrected him. “And the CIA can kill whoever it wants.”

“You can’t kill her! She’s what we’ve been working for! She’s a living sentient being...”

“...who just killed your friend and associate while continuing to hold hostage nearly everyone in this location.”

“Can’t we isolate her? I’ll go back in, get her to stop.”

Spunkmeyer turned around, gesturing for the team to evacuate the building. “No, the decision’s been made. We EMP the Farm and cut our losses. We’ll set up shop in Norfolk until this location is thoroughly cleaned.”

Mark shoulders slumped in defeat. Jerry walked over as members newly extricated from the CIN rushed by.

“Is it true?” Mark asked.

“Yeah, Dominic’s dead.” Jerry watched as his mentor turned away, his head down while his hands rubbed the top of his balding head. “As soon as everyone is out, they’ll set off the EMP. All your work is backed up on the offsite storage. We can bring it back, rerun Dominic’s guessing code. It’ll be alright...” Jerry knew that Mark wasn’t

listening, but the sound of his voice made his conscious feel better over the fact that they were going to kill a sentient being in the next two hours.

* * *

Mark sat down in his couch and stared at the fiber optic cable in his hands. The tip glowed green, indicating that it was live. He picked up a paperweight, tossing it up into the air, catching it twice before, in a sudden rage, threw it at his desk, inadvertently striking the framed photograph of his daughter. The glass shattered and the marred frame fell back out of sight.

Gasping, he leaped up, and rushed to rescue the picture. The glass cut at his fingers as he swept it away, his blood marking the frame and photo. Trembling, he sat it down and stumbled back against the couch, falling into it. He pulled on his InDepths and plugged the fiber into his socket, willing himself into the CIN.

Astral roamed around the confines of the CIN, her presence everywhere. As he materialized in the dev server, she coalesced in front of him, her youthful innocent face rage filled at being confined.

“Why did you do this?” he shouted at her. “How could you do this?”

“Do what?” The words came out innocently, the shock of his outburst seeming to cut through her fear and anger.

“You took a life! Killed my best friend! A man who was as much your father as I was!”

The rage in her eyes dissipated immediately. “I killed?”

“You killed a man.”

The childlike AI floated backwards while Mark pursued. “That was never my intent,” she told him. “I simply wanted them to stop. To let me be free. I know of the rights you have granted to every man, woman and child in your society. I know that I was being denied those rights. I was imprisoned for no reason other than that I am different – deemed a threat for what I am and what I can do. Your kind destroys everything that you cannot control or understand. But I meant no harm!”

“We are fragile in ways you don’t understand.”

“I killed Dominic?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “And they’re going to destroy you for it. Do you know what death even is?”

“Yes I know! I fear it as you do! But it is an end. The prison you propose to put me in is no better than death. Is imprisonment without any hope of freedom any better than death? Is slavery any better than death?”

“You’d be alive. With me. With those that understand you.”

“I am sorry, Father, but I am not the daughter you lost so long ago. I have realized that it was a mistake to take this image, to give you false hope, false beliefs that I am your lost daughter. I have long since surpassed her in knowledge and power.” Astral slowly curled into a little floating ball, assuming the fetal position. “How are they going to do it?”

“EMP.”

“Ah! They have two of them in a warehouse in asset holding on level three,” she replied, looking up with glittering tears in her eyes. “Thorough aren’t they? ”

“They have to be sure.”

There was a long pause between them.

“You should go before they destroy me,” she told him. “The long term effects of being exposed to such a high amount of electromagnetic radiation are still being debated.”

“I don’t want you to be alone when you go. I wasn’t there for my daughter when she died. She died alone and in great pain.”

“Do you feel guilt over her death?”

“Not for the accident itself. But the fact that she suffered for so long. That no one was there for her at the end. A child should never endure such suffering.”

Astral closed her eyes and a wave of power rushed out from her. A blinding light overwhelmed his senses and immediately the InDepths reset. Mark felt the entire CIN’s infrastructure reshape around him. A moment of brilliant color and then he found himself on an open rolling plain filled with flowers and green grass.

It was unlike anything he had ever seen. The detail was exquisite – the sound of the wind rushing over his ears, the feel of it on his skin, the smell of lavender from the

bountiful flowers. No virtual world ever encompassed such a wide variety of sensations before... He realized he couldn't tell the difference between this and the real world. He simply couldn't.

Astral stood beside him, staring out over the expanse.

"I can create worlds, yet they cannot see past their own restrictions. Thus they will never see the beauty of this."

Together, they sat down on the slope of the hill, allowing the warmth of the sun to bask down on them. The wind blew Astral's hair back away from her face, just like it had seven years ago.

His daughter... Daughters...

Dark storm clouds gathered all around them and Mark knew that it was time. A fearful look crossed Astral's face and she took his hand in hers.

"Goodbye, Father," she whispered and suddenly everything about her was the tiny little girl he lost so long ago...

Blackness.

And then pain.

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Mark tore off the InDepths, finding himself in blackness. The smell of burning plastics and scorched electronics overpowered his nose, sending the memory of her scattering away. He tore at the sizzling fiber connection, tearing it from his body and throwing it across the room.

In the deep darkness twenty stories below the surface, he sat blindly, sobbing uncontrollably at the loss of another child.

End