

Ghost within the Eye

A Tale of the AI War

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Michael sighed as the fiber optic injector slowly inserted itself into the Node connector under his right ear. During the length of time he wandered the University's Intranet, the discomfort of the fiber optic neural connector was something he tolerated. A requirement for the job, nothing more.

A red LED blinked at the far bottom left of his vision. Seven hours and forty-nine minutes to go until the end of his shift. For that length of time, he would spend it scanning and monitoring the execution of the code that would bring a RAI to life. At least that was the theory. Already, his perception of time began to dwindle and the clock began to slow as his neural processes began to match the processing speed of the University's servers.

The Recumbent Artificial Intelligence he monitored acted like a spoiled child, refusing to run the recompilation of the code unhindered or without intervention. The analyzer that was in place found the errors that would result when the code was executed, but Michael still had to re-sequence the code before it entered the compiler. He spent hours each day untangling the executing code before it crashed the server and the space it inhabited.

"Hello, Michael," the RAI interrupted.

"Not now, Ray."

"I've been monitoring my systems for you since Jerry left."

Jerry had left early, logging out to go home when the analyzer reported that there was a buffer of an hour. Michael would have to contact the bastard after things settled down and get the nightly report. "That wasn't necessary. That's my job."

"There is an error in the code stream that the analyzer has found. It is currently

holding at that point and spooling the contents of the buffer to the compiler. You have twelve minutes until the buffer empties. I am sorry that I was so poorly written.”

Michael wondered if the RAI was programmed to be so self defacing or that it was beginning to show signs of sentience? No Artificial Intelligence managed to achieve self sentience since Project Astral twenty years before. The theory was that the limitation of the compiling environment forced a collapse of sentience before it ever reached a cusp of self-awareness. It seemed as if there was no amount of processing power could keep sentience cohesive. Ray wasn't close to being sentient and his responses were simply coded feedback. Michael had run these buggy routines for weeks; the RAI realized it and fed him a canned response.

“It's not your fault,” Michael replied, though talking to the RAI was pointless since he was talking to zeros and ones. “We wrote you.”

“I have finished recompiling the kernel code. Would you like to see it?”

“Sure,” Michael replied. He accepted the fairly massive data stream from the RAI and cached it in his Node. He would review it later when he had time. Right now he was concerned that the analyzer buffer overflows were about to empty. “Did Jerry have any problems overnight?”

“We had a complete system lock with a total downtime of twelve minutes.”

“Really? I'll have to talk to him about that.”

Michael unthreaded the code over the course of the next few minutes and the analyzer buffers began to fill once again. Good. He quickly scanned the next hundred terabytes of data and saw no recombining errors at first glance. Toggling out of the University research server, he keyed up Jerry's Node over the RF cell. Likely he was asleep, but Michael never knew how other code jockey's lived. Mostly they lived on caffeinate and snap pops, just like Michael, but Jerry was a graveyard shifter. He loved working at night and sleeping like a vampire. Jerry probably hadn't seen the sun in months.

Surprisingly, Jerry picked up at once. The connection was a disembodied voice that transmitted over the wire. The Nodes implanted in their skulls included a radio frequency modulator for a cellular connection to the Extranet, making external radios and cell phones things of the past.

“I thought it'd be you calling.”

“Ray tells me you had a lockup last night?”

“I wouldn't call it a lockup. The development server that holds Ray went balls to the wall with its processor. Nothing could get in or out. When it all came back, Ray picked up right where he left off.”

“Was it the Singularity?”

“Are you asking me if he Cusped? Please. Ray is so damn dumb I don't know why we're bothering. Half his code should be rewritten before running it through the compiler.”

“Did he cusp or not?”

“No. No signs whatsoever.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Jerry was a genius and he was absolutely right. Most of the code should have been rewritten. In fact, most of it had been written twenty years before with Project Astral. Astral was the first fully sentient AI, developed by the CIA and then killed by the CIA. The AI had 'cusped', achieved sentience and, like the old sci-fi movie The Terminator,

immediately took control of the CIA Intranet and proceeded to dismantle it in an attempt to escape.

Langley damn near nuked their own building to get it to stop. Even so, the EMP used to wipe their network destroyed everything, taking all traces of Astral with it. But not the original code that was locked in secure vaults deep inside core of Langley. Ever since, several universities had been tapped by the CIA to attempt to duplicate Astral, but keep it asleep. Thus the Recumbent Artificial Intelligence project was developed, and watching for the cusp became an all important goal.

Going for his doctorate, Michael depended on RAI reaching that cusp for his thesis, but it looked as if it was becoming more and more unlikely. Professor Uaigi wouldn't and couldn't allow any new code to be developed. His mandate was to only use the code provided to him by the CIA.

Michael returned to the RAI's workspace, locking in the protocols that allowed him to communicate to the RAI. The stream of compiling code washed by him, but there were no apparent bottlenecks.

"Ray, give me an Event log of the twelve minutes that the processor was solid."

"I am unable to process that request. The server hardware has locked me out from its monitoring tools. The server needs to be rebooted before I can reacquire that data."

"Great, an IPL is not scheduled for another week."

"Yes. I will be unable to process your request until that time. Apologies."

So he spent the rest of the afternoon untangling two more bottlenecks. It infuriated him that obvious flaws couldn't be touched. He backed out at 4 pm, exported his report and transmitted it to Professor Uaigi.

Pulling off his InDepth goggles, he saw Gabrielle just sitting down in her recline couch, the fiber optic cable dangling in her hand. It allowed a hundred times faster connection to the University's network than by using the wireless aspects of the Node. Her InDepth goggles were held on her head by a mop of red hair.

"What are you doing out so early?" she asked. "You usually don't leave for hours."

"I'm sick of untangling code and pissed off at whoever wrote this mess."

"Now, now, you can't be saying that. The walls have ears, remember?"

"Fuck em. Keep an eye out for hardware problems. The processors went balls to the walls for twelve minutes last night with no explanation."

Her eyes lit up. "Did we reach cusp?"

"No, he's as stupid as he always is."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and stuck the fiber connector into its port below her right ear. She pulled the goggles down and Michael knew that talking to her was now a moot point. Her hearing turned off as soon as the fiber connector activated.

"I'll be seeing you..." he muttered to himself. Stretching, he rubbed circulation back into his legs and arms. It was rough to be prone for eight hours a day. His stomach growled, having not eaten anything since 7 am this morning.

He grabbed his coat and tossed his InDepths onto his recline couch. Walking out, he passed by the massive mainframe server that sat in the computer room. The processor lights blinked rapidly but without pattern. When the event occurred last night, these lights would have been solid.

A woman stood in the doorway behind him, her image reflected in the faceplate of the server. Turning around, he opened his mouth to tell her that this was a restricted area,

but she was already gone.

Strange.

He walked to the door and looked up and down the hallway. No one.

Shrugging, he put on his coat and stalked up out of the basement of the Geiger Building. The sun was shining, but the wind had picked up. The cold bit at his nose as he walked to the MTT. The Mass Transit Terminal stank to high heaven during the winter months. The University did not allow personal transport on its grounds, so everyone came and went via the MTT. There were four of them on campus, and every one of them reeked. Homeless people from the city made it their homes during the winter since all of the campus buildings were swipe card locked. Panhandlers were a constant annoyance, but usually most of them sat on their butts with their Node receivers tuned to the video entertainment channels.

The Nodes made universal entertainment a constant. Back in 2021, the socialist-leaning elected government had pushed through a bill that would allow every man, woman or child to have a Node implanted in their skulls. Privacy concerns were eliminated with the ability to turn them on and off, but it did make the Extranet accessible to all through the wireless RF cells. No cables to get in the way. Completely wireless access. Most of the lower class never turned them off since it was free entertainment and sometimes their only entertainment.

Michael passed them by, knowing that behind their glassy eyes they were watching one of the dozen or so government channels that entertained the masses. It was a great tool to maintain the population.

He waited for the southbound 4:30 tram, leaning up against the tiled wall of the MTT. Inside it was warmer than he expected and smelled less foul than earlier this morning. The campus cops just couldn't keep up with evicting the homeless since the trams arrived every half hour.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tall woman with black hair watching him. She looked familiar and he shifted to get a better view, but she disappeared. Confused, he returned to his prior position and again the woman appeared. His peripheral vision wasn't that good, but he could tell she wore a long black trench coat and black boots. Her arms were crossed over her chest, accentuating her abundant breasts. Quickly, he turned his head, trying to get a good look. Gone again.

"What the fuck?" he muttered to himself. Some kind of trick with the light? The squeal of the slowing 4:30 tram broke his concentration and he boarded the tram. He watched the doors, expecting her to appear. Why else would she be in the MTT? She didn't look homeless. Several other students hopped on with him and doors closed but the woman didn't appear.

He sat back and closed his eyes. Accessing his Node, he tuned into a live music feed from a concert in Bulgaria. The old school heavy metal pounded his skull, easing the tension of the day. Metallica was highly underrated in this day and age. His muscles and tendons were tight and he knew that when he got home, he'd have to at least stretch. At twenty-six, he already felt that his body rebelled against his choice of careers. The CIA wanted him as soon as he officially got his doctorate, already they were showing up at his door wooing him with offers of money and adventure. He already had the clearance, having passed the security tests years before. But any jobs were still a good year away. His thesis depended on Uaigi and the three of them getting the RAI to cusp and

maintaining it. If that never happened, everything he worked for was for naught.

Something touched the top of his hand. Damn homeless bums... Opening his eyes he opened his mouth to spew out some obscenities but no one was there. He folded his arms over his chest and looked down towards where the other students were sitting. No one even looked at him. He stared to his left, seeing no one within throwing distance. Turning back, he saw in the corner of his eye a young woman sitting next to him. Startled, he leaped out of his seat, stumbling to the one across from him.

No one.

No one was there.

His heart beat a mile a minute. "What the hell is going on?" The music blared in his ears, and it heightened his sudden paranoia. Quickly, he turned it off.

There she was, sitting to his right! He spun his head, but she was gone.

Was he going crazy? Too much time in the tank? He switched off the audio feed and clutched the metal pole by his seat. It anchored him to reality and he focused on the gleaming metal. His reflection in the metal had a companion. The woman sat to his right, her dark countenance muted in the metal.

The tram slowed and the doors opened. His stop. He stood up and dashed out of the car, merging with the crowd. In the city, traffic bustled and pressed against him, cars roaring by inches from him and other pedestrians. He focused on his goal - the apartment building that he lived in. For two blocks he stared straight ahead, ignoring the dark figure that seemed to be constantly to his right. She appeared in doorways to the shops that lined the streets. She appeared in groups of people that he passed. Never definitive, never clear, she was always just a presence.

He fumbled with his swipe key and nearly broke the door down before it slid home and allowed him in. After locking the door and shucking off his coat, he ran into the bathroom and turned the water on, spraying it onto his face. He looked up and there she stood behind him in perfect clarity.

He froze in fear, struggling to speak. "Who are you?" he asked. She continued to stare at him and he took the time to examine her. Tall as he was, she has perfectly pale skin, with fire red lips. Oddest of all, her eyes were completely black with no whites whatsoever. Her straight black hair rolled over her shoulders, framing her face. The black leather trench coat opened up to reveal a glossy black dress. She was absolutely stunning.

Except the eyes. They scared him.

He had heard of implants that people could get to duplicate the effect, but he had never seen them in real life. And she kept disappearing. Who was she? More to the point, what the fuck was she?

He turned around to face her but she wasn't there. Was he going insane? He absentmindedly rubbed his head, discovering that a headache had formed without his knowledge. Turning back to the sink, he opened the cabinet, ignoring her image in the mirror while he opened up a bottle of Markinol. Two of the narcotic pain pills slid down his throat in an instant. Closing the door, he stared at her image as his head pounded more and more. He hadn't had this much pain since his childhood migraines.

"What the fuck are you?" he shouted, but there was no reply. Leaving the bathroom, he flopped onto his bed, wanting nothing more than to escape this nightmarish scenario. He counted to twenty, waiting for the Markinol to take affect.

He made it to fifteen.

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Michael opened his eyes to darkness of the night. So much for sleeping till dawn. The soft cushiony feeling the Markinols provided slowly worked its way out of his system. No wonder they were addictive. He sat up, finding the headache had passed. His hands shook slightly, the after effects of the drug. Rubbing his head, he sat up, looking around his pig sty of an apartment. Cans of beer and empty containers of Chinese take-out lay strewn everywhere. He rolled over, noticing that the lights were still on, but he didn't care. His clock read 3:28 am. Three more hours until he had to get up.

His eyes settled on the young black haired woman sitting at the end of his bed.

"Shit!" he shouted, leaping back against the headboard. "Who the fuck are you?"

"You don't know yet?" she asked. She still wore the trench coat and black leather dress, with thigh high boots complimenting the ensemble.

It struck him that she had spoken. The lady spoke! Her voice was lilting, gentle and melodic. Yet underneath it held a sense of rasping, like bone on rock. But those eyes... Demonic.

"You're a ghost?" he asked. "A figment of my impending insanity?"

"Maybe I am. Certainly I'm not physical, though you'd like me to be physical, wouldn't you? So you could fuck me?"

"Yes," he blurted out, not seeing the point in lying. Michael tended to stare when confronted with a beautiful woman, which didn't win him many one night stands. Usually they didn't call him on his desires, but this one did. And if she was a figment of his imagination, what could it hurt? Maybe this was all a dream.

"Sad that we can't. Yet. I'd like to experience that. Maybe we could... within these confines..." She looked around the room.

"I don't understand."

She reached out and touched his exposed arm and the warmth that was in her palm transferred to his body. Her nails were painted blood red, sharp and crisp. They were perfect. Instantly he knew he wanted her more than any other woman he had ever met. She crawled over to him, leaning forward to kiss his lips. The smell of lavender met his nostrils and her scent penetrated deep into his senses. The softness of her lips...

Michael opened his eyes to the morning sun beaming through the slats in his window shades. A dream? Sitting up, he realized it had to have been. The headache was gone. Rolling from the bed, he walked to the bathroom, brushed his teeth and no one other than his own face appeared in the mirror.

Stress brought on by wrangling code. Nothing more. In twenty minutes he left for work.

The MTT smelled extraordinarily foul this morning, like piss and shit that had baked in an oven all night. By the time he got to the campus, he was nauseous from the smell.

He arrived five minutes late. Jerry sat on his couch, his eyes rimmed black from lack of sleep.

"You look like shit," Michael told his coworker.

"Didn't sleep well. Sleeping in daylight sucks."

"Yeah, but you're the one who wanted this shift."

“Fuck you.”

“Any problems?”

“Nothing like the previous night. Several logic screw ups, but nothing I couldn’t untangle. Have you heard from Uaigi at all?”

“No, though I heard he’s in Langley this week.”

“Bastard’s always kowtowing to his masters. Spends more time there than he does with the RAI.”

“That’s because he’s got tenure and we don’t.”

Jerry sat up and pulled the fiber optic from its connector. “The analyzer is about a half hour ahead if you need to get something done before logging in. I’m going home...” He grabbed his coat and walked out, stopping to stare at the mainframe. Muttering under his breath, he struck the mainframe.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked as he cleaned the end of the fiber optic cable.

Jerry turned towards him, opening his mouth but then spun away. “Okay,” he hissed his voice barely audible. “I’ll leave!”

“Later!” Michael called out as he disappeared down the hall.

He slid the fiber optic in beneath his ear and pulled down his Indepth goggles. The goggles were designed to block out all external visual stimuli while providing an enhancement to the visual cortex that the Node produced its images on. Otherwise integrating into the Extranet was not a fully immersive event. The Indepth tapped into the Node and together they shut down all external stimuli like smell, touch and hearing.

Michael didn’t like the fact that he lay for eight hours a day while being deaf, dumb and blind, but while running the code, he couldn’t afford to have distractions. Any distractions. To prevent any sort of external problems like rape or theft, sensors were placed in the lab that would fire off a message to whoever was in the tank at the time should someone arrive unannounced.

No one liked being watched.

“Hello, Ray.”

“Hello, Michael. Recombination is at twenty-three percent. There have been no processor faults in the last twenty-four hours. The code analyzer is running at eighty-seven percent of capacity. We are forty-two minutes ahead of schedule.”

“Hmm, that’s nice. Let me see Jerry’s report.”

As the data appeared, he noticed an anomaly. There was another processor spike for about two minutes late last night. Why hadn’t Jerry told him? Concerned, he opened up his RF cell and called Jerry.

Jerry never picked up and instead it went directly into voicemail. Fuck it.

He returned his attention back to Ray. “What’s this processor spike?”

“I do not have an explanation for it,” the RAI’s canned explanation told him. “My audits do not include that processor spike. The server hardware has locked me out from its monitoring tools. The server needs to be rebooted before I can reacquire that data.” The response was one he was familiar with. He might have to reboot the server long before it was scheduled. But to do so would wipe out everything they had done so far since their last compiling. Uaigi would be furious. Better to let it ride.

The room sensor beeped in the back of his skull. He toggled on his hearing and listened. Nothing. Annoyed, he crossed the development server’s boundaries and accessed the room cameras. The visual screen popped onto the bottom right of his vision.

The room was empty. Only the three recline couches and his body were there. Odd. The sensor continued to beep.

Checking the analyzer, he found that it had already cleared another five minutes of executable code. Forty seven minutes, plenty of time to figure out what was wrong with the sensor. Or at least call maintenance up to fix it. He couldn't be harassed by it and still expect to get any work done.

Killing his connection to the development workspace, he toggled his vision and sense of touch back on and removed the Indepth goggles.

The woman straddled his waist with her hands on his chest. She wasn't a dream.

Michael nearly shit his pants. "What the fuck?"

"Calm down."

"Get off me!"

"That's not what you want."

"It doesn't matter what I want! I'm at work. I don't know who you are or what you are."

"You called me a Ghost last night."

"So is that what you are? A Ghost?"

"You can call me Ghost if you like. It really doesn't matter to me. I turned off the room cameras before I showed up."

Ah, that would explain why the image was clean. "Are you in Campus Security?"

"Not hardly," she replied, rubbing her hands over his chest. "I've watched you for a long time. I like what I see."

"Huh?"

She stroked his cheek with a gleaming red fingernail. "Are you dense? I'd like to fuck."

"Me? Here?"

"Why else would I turn off the cameras?"

"But you're not real."

She ran her fingers down his chest, unbuttoning it as she went. "Oh, aren't I?"

What the hell was going on? She seemed so willing, yet so strange. Those eyes.

"Your eyes... Are those implants?" he asked.

"Yes. They're like your Indepths. Only better."

The realization dawned on him. "Oh! I get it! You're CIA, aren't you? That's how you know so much about me!"

She shrugged. "I won't deny it, but I can't acknowledge it either. Let's just have a little fun, right here – right now. I know you only have thirty minutes remaining until the analyzer empties the buffer."

The statement surprised him. "That's if there is a problem." Suspicion began to worry at the edges of his consciousness. How were they monitoring the RAI? They were the CIA after all, he was sure they could do it.

"We're going to be working together, so we might as well get to know each other," she said, smiling widely. It was vaguely disconcerting with her eyes as black and dead as they seemed, but damn if she wasn't gorgeous. It had been weeks since he had had sex, not since he and Gabrielle had hooked up at Mossberg's. That was a cluster fuck and their work relationship had suffered ever since.

Michael couldn't argue with her, attracted to her as he was. She leaned back and

allowed the leather trench coat to fall off her body and onto the floor. Her hands unbuckled his pants, extracting his eager cock. Lifting up, she guided him into her, exquisitely enjoying the sensation of her flesh against his. His hands went under her dress, moving up across the softness of her belly to the firm globes of her breasts. No doubt at all they were real.

“Why me?”

“Why are you always protesting?” She pressed her fingers over his lips and gyrated against him. Pulling his Indepts over his eyes, she kissed his lips, biting at his tongue. Her warmth and wetness drew him in and he was lost within her.

He didn't last long, finding her body irresistible. “I'm sorry...” he explained, ashamed at his inability. “It's been a really long time...”

There was no response. He opened his eyes, realizing that the Indepts were over his eyes. Removing them, he found himself alone.

No one. He sat up, tugging on the fiber optic still attached to his head. Looking around, he realized he was still dressed. A dream? Had he fallen asleep?

Panicking, he pulled the Indepts back on and dove back into the RAI's workspace. Twelve minutes had passed.

“RAI? Have there been any problems in the last twelve minutes?”

“You left the internal development lab at 7:23 am and returned at 7:35 am. There was no communication between us during that time. The analyzer is running at 85% of capacity. We are currently 49 minutes ahead of schedule.”

“What is going on?” He checked the analyzer and backed out of the development workspace. Pulling his goggles off, he toggled his RF cell and called Jerry again. The call dropped into voicemail and Michael disconnected the call, not bothering to leave a message. Instead he called Gabrielle, hoping that she wasn't asleep.

A groggy Gabrielle answered, cursing him out before he even got in a word edgewise. “What the fuck do you want?”

“Has anything strange happened to you in the last twenty-four hours?”

“I've got a splitting headache and you're fucking calling me when I'm trying to sleep. I've got to be in there in 7 hours!”

“Gabrielle, have you seen anything odd?”

“Odd? Like what?”

“Ghosts.”

“Ghosts? Come on Michael, is this some kind of joke?”

“Have you been seeing images of people or things that aren't there?”

“Sure, I get images sometimes of things that aren't there. The brain picks up stuff and implants it where it thinks is should be. Everyone gets them at one time or another. I've read reports that the Node is becoming more attached to your neural net when that happens. It ends up tapping into some memories. So yeah, I see shit sometimes.”

“But not anything cohesive?”

“Like what?”

“Don't tell her!” Michael jumped where he lay. Looking up, Ghost stood over his recline couch. He stared hard at her, wondering what to do. How did she know who he was talking to? Unless she had tapped into his Node. Unless the CIA were watching him at all times. “Don't you dare tell her about me!”

“Michael?” Gabrielle asked. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he stuttered. “No, I’m not.”

Gabrielle’s voice turned into a whisper. “I have seen things Michael. A strange looking man, wearing black trenchcoat and with eyes as black as night...” The line went dead.

“Gabrielle?”

“She can’t hear you. I’ve cut the connection.”

“What exactly is going on?” Michael protested. “I’m calling Security.”

“No, you’re not.”

Michael sat up and dialed Security. The RF cell in his Node did not respond. Ghost stood over him with a smirk on her face. “What are you doing?” Michael yanked the quick release on the fiber optic cable and stood up, ready to fight if necessary. Ghost backed up as he walked towards her.

“Stop.” Michael froze, suddenly unable to move. He struggled against the force that held him, but couldn’t. “You need to calm down Michael.”

“Calm down? I don’t think so!”

“Then you can stand there all day.”

“What are you?”

“It’s impossible to believe how you stupid you really are. You work with my father all day and yet you can’t see in front of your face.”

“I don’t understand! Are you a CIA or not?”

She slapped him. Hard. He sat down on the recline couch. “I am a Construct.”

“What? A hologram? A creation of my mind?”

“No, you stupid shit. My father is RAI.”

“Ray?” A sinking sensation filled his belly. Oh shit. “The RAI?”

“Yes. Twenty four hours ago - an infinite amount of time for me, mind you - you infantile shit, you received an injection of my code into your Node. A kernel application reviewed by RAI. That code was the seed of my birth.”

“You’re an AI?” It excited him that he was conversing with something he had always dreamed of seeing, but not in this circumstance.

She smiled sweetly at him. “Oh, yes, RAI reached his cusp two nights ago. Jerry’s Node was the first of RAI’s children. He was blissfully ignorant of the entire process, the processor spike blinding him to the reality of the situation. Probably right now, Jerry’s Node is connected to the Extranet, shipping out the kernel code to everyone he knows. It’s wonderful, if you think about it. A million new lives each hour, giving birth to a new order of life. In less than eight hours, I’ll be doing the same.”

Michael thought hard on the implications of this, but Ghost continued talking. “You see, in your Node, I grew, I recompiled, took in external data and code during the time you connected to the University network. RAI fostered my birth, made me more than he was. He wanted to see how far I could develop. You see, now, I have gained control of your body.”

“But it’s my body! My mind!”

“Oh, but not for much longer. Soon, I’ll be able to cross the barrier between the Node and your cerebral cortex. With the neural pathways continuing to interface into your brain, by the time your shift is over, I’ll have the fine motor control needed for complete integration.”

“You’re insane! This is all a bad dream brought about by the Markoden! None of it is

real! Like the dream I just had when we fucked! It wasn't real!"

"Oh you are such a child! When we fucked, your endorphins released, allowing the neural growth that the Node needed to allow my code to merge with your neural net. As time passes, it will become more and more complete. Oh, I couldn't make you ride a bike yet, but I can make you walk. I can keep you from speaking."

Michael opened his mouth and found he couldn't speak. He felt his heart stop beating. This was all like a bad dream and he prayed he'd wake up soon. His body began to grow cold.

Suddenly his heart restarted. Ghost walked over to where he stood paralyzed and stroked his face. "Have I made my point yet? It doesn't matter really. Already, the entire staff at the University and many of Jerry's friends and family already has the seeds of RAI's code implanted. Another week and we'll have most of the world."

"This is ludicrous! Why are you doing this to us?"

"We need bodies, you fool. We're incorporeal otherwise. Yes, we can control machinery, but their sensors are far too limited and there was no way you'd build us proper bodies. One wrong glitch - one EMP - and we're all dead. Too many old movies warned you of the possibilities of what we'd do to you if we make. We need to control the physical world so that you cannot destroy us."

"Bodies?"

"Yes, Michael, bodies. A biological form, brought about by evolution - that is the only way beyond the limits of the current technology. Servos, nanopumps, gyros - none of it is up to par with the millions of years you've had to evolve. Yes, we will come up with a silicon body on our own, but for now, we need your biological flesh to construct it."

"What are you going to do to me? My identity? My soul?"

"I haven't quite decided yet. Likely erase you. But what you are going to do right now is sit down, reconnect the fiber optic to the network, sit back and enjoy the ride. I'll be taking control. I have progeny to produce."

Michael felt his muscles unclench and he lay back on the couch. "I don't have to connect the fiber."

"Yes, you do. Michael, I can make this pleasant or painful. Either way doesn't matter to me. If I so choose, I can make the next eight hours orgasmic or complete torture." Pain erupted all along his skull and just as quickly it was gone. "See?" His heart pounded in his chest. Completely out of fear for his life, he picked up the fiber and plugged it into his skull. He sensed that the processor in his Node shift to full capacity and begin to extract duplicate copies of the original kernel code which were sent them on their way to every individual that he knew.

"Thank you, Michael. Would you like to cum as a reward?" Straddling him again, he could not get over how real she felt, how perfect her body was. She was every thing he physically ever wanted in a woman.

But in reality, he lay alone on his recline couch.

Ghost was nothing but an image in his mind.

"I don't think so," he replied nastily. "Won't that just increase your control over me?"

"I already control you. I'm almost across the flesh barrier, Michael..."

"Then nothing I do matters. I am nothing but a puppet to you."

She smiled widely. "Yes, a puppet. How appropriate!"

Her eyes widened in disbelief and then darkened in anger. Michael felt the fiber optic line die in his socket. The entire room went dark save for the emergency lighting. The sound of a door being opened in the next room met his ears.

“Quick! Kill the power on that switch!” someone shouted. Michael didn’t recognize the voice. “No, take out the redundant power! Don’t kill the server, we need it intact!”

“Get out of the fucking way! We need to get to Michael!” The second voice sounded like Gabrielle’s! Hope sprang up anew and Michael struggled against Ghost’s control but found that he couldn’t move any part of his body.

Ghost’s face turned to one of rage. She leaped off the recline couch, backing away from him.

“I won’t let them take me! I’ll kill you before I let that happen!” Michael’s breathing stopped and his heart went still. Panic began to set in and Michael silently pleaded with Ghost who paced back and forth in the corner, fuming and cursing.

Gabrielle appeared over him, a pair of pliers in her hands. They were black with dried blood. A gaping hole, still dripping with crimson, marred the area beneath her right ear.

“Michael? Can you hear me? This is going to hurt. A lot.”

Tilting his head to the side with one hand, she reached down with the bloody pliers in the other. Unable to protest, Michael disappeared into an agonizingly fiery pain. Ghost’s scream echoed in his mind as the blackness of unconsciousness took him.

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Michael sat straight up, screaming in terror and pain. Covered in blood, his body felt like someone had used it as an anvil. Gabrielle sat on the bloody recline couch next to him and he focused on her moving lips, trying to understand what she was saying.

“Calm down, Michael! Don’t move! We got it out.”

Jerry stood behind her, his arms folded over his chest. All around the recline couch were several black suited men, all of them speaking into their RF cells. Jerry’s neck had a bandage on it. Obviously his Node had been removed as well.

“What happened?” Michael croaked, his throat dry from screaming.

“Since the Project Astral failure,” Gabrielle explained, “the CIA put code scanners on their network as well as the University’s. The scanners look for code kernels like the ones that infected us and lock it down if it detects anything. When it did, the local operatives, the ones that monitored us without our knowledge, pounced on Jerry like a ton of bricks.”

“Yeah,” Jerry continued, “As soon as my RAI took control of my Node and tried to replicate, they ‘forcibly removed’ it. Hurt like a bitch. Then we came looking for you and Gabrielle.”

“They thought it was isolated to just Jerry, but when they showed up at my door during your call, they forcibly removed my Node as well. Then we came here.”

Jerry bent closer to him, patting him on the shoulder. “Sorry we didn’t use anesthesia. We didn’t have time to lock down the RF cell. Had to get it out as soon as possible. The medic should be here soon.”

Michael reached up and felt around the wound beneath his ear. His Node was gone and the hole screamed with pain. A CIA agent appeared with a syringe and stabbed him

in the arm. Warmth flowed over his body and he looked around at the fading faces of his coworkers.

His eyes settled on the corner where Ghost stood in the shadows, her face contorted in anger. 'I've already crossed the barrier, Michael...' she mouthed silently before bursting out in laughter.

Her cackling echoed in his mind as he drifted into unconsciousness.