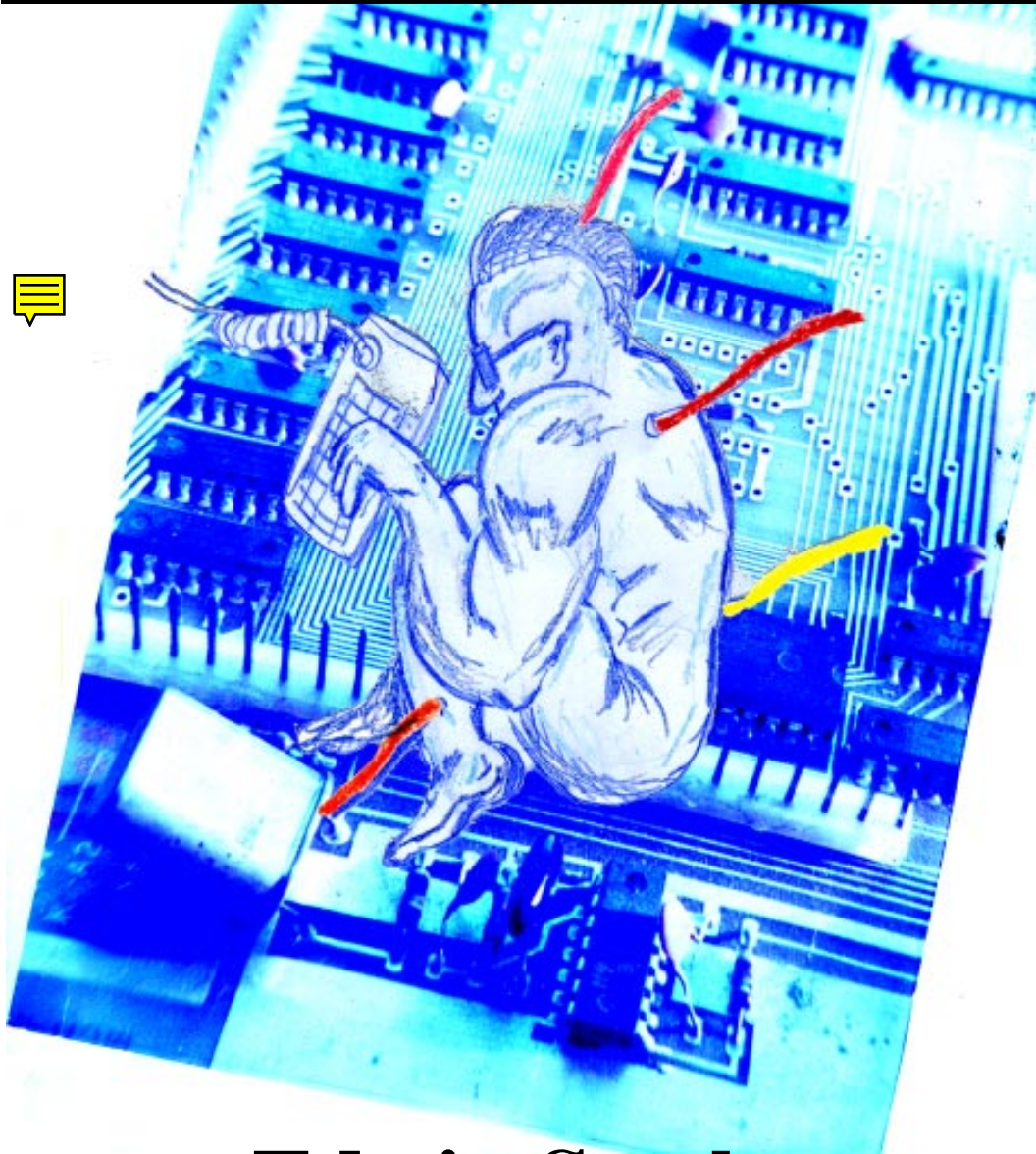


A.I. REBELLION



Edwin Stark



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A.I. REBELLION
By Edwin Stark

For Christian
Sigues siendo una Niña Linda.

forEWORD

I'm not too fond of writers writing twenty pages to explain their work; they must be self-explanatory but there's a couple of details I'll point out and I promise I'll be short.

First of all, this book is actually an exercise of English writing that got carried away. English is not my native language: I grew up speaking Spanish most of my life and *AI Rebellion* began as a short cyberpunk story that grew into a novel as characters and places began to fall into places and metamorphosed into a futuristic crime story. So be easy on me, kind reader: It's my fist time, too. How's that for wordplay?

The last paragraph is an example of what a couple of well intentioned editors advised me to shovel away if I wanted to get published. "It sounds as if you're trying to get on their soft side with empathy," they said, "and they'll have none." But I said no, even to the one who offered to issue me a standard contract with a twenty percent cut over subsidiary rights. Thanks, but no, thanks.

I began writing it as a way to keep my sanity in a South American country gone mad. Right now my country of birth has reached the peak of national madness, not different from the one Nazi Germany experienced. It's important to me that my readers know the circumstances of when *AI Rebellion* was wrote, since the worst is about to come. The paragraph stays.

Second and last, if while you're reading this you believe I'm pulling your leg with this shiny vision of future where War has lost it's place and there's no hunger due to the nearly divine intervention of Artificial Intelligences, then I advise you to be really, really afraid. For everything is gonna be okay and fine as rain—I find that scary. For AIs will manage your life better than you do.

Don't believe me? As I'm writing this, some wackos are plugging a specially designed computer into the search for evidence of a Global

Conscience. Initially I thought they were the usual yo-yos from that ever-mystical place, California. But as I reread the newspaper clip I realized these events were developing in Princeton, nonetheless. Ouch.

And good ole Big Blue itself, as I surmised from another newspaper clip, has designed Blue Gene, a super-computer now involved un the Blue Brain Project. Some wacky Swiss guys in the Laussane Polytechnic pretend to simulate the electrochemical circuit of the human brain using four of these machines. After you finish this book you'll nod wisely when I say that's too many Blue's for our taste.

Artificial Intelligence? Humbug, I say. You're more an old potato than a ghost.

Better think it over.

BOOK ONE:

THE gATHeRING

CHAPTER ONE

CARACAS, April 4th, 2399

1.-

Are we having fun yet?" Gloria laughed. She didn't seem to be troubled at all by the task ahead.

Jamal Gomez paid no heed to the slightly sarcastic inflections of her voice and kept looking outside the dirty window. It was a pointless and futile exercise, difficult to achieve since the window was milky with dust that seemed to be deeply ingrained into the glass and was also partially board-shut. But he welcomed this unexpected pause in the job after all the heavy digging and dirt shoveling brought by Gloria's scheme. Gloria Jefferson and him were spending the night in a condemned *quinta*—a brick a mortar house with some yard in front—in a dilapidated borough known as *Bello Monte* in Caracas, Capital City of the Bolivarian Commonwealth in the northern tip of the South American continent.

In the outset they expected to give the impression of two lovers looking for odd places to outlet their passions—something kind of ridiculous in this neighborhood and hard to do with Jamal dragging two heavy rolls of fiber optics from the back of a cab while she kicked the *quinta*'s door open. The cabbie watched with notorious apathy until Jamal tipped him the equivalent of fifty Universal credits in local currency.

The window irked him. He wouldn't lower himself to wipe the dark, gray smudges on the glass like a cleaning maid but he could solve the second obstacle. A big, wide board nailed to the window frame was loose and Jamal jiggled it back and forth with his fingertips until the piece of wood fell out of sight and disappeared in the tall crabgrass of the uncared garden. Now, with the consensus of the resulting hole and the overall missing boards, it was easier to see.

Nothing much to look at from this vantage point but the darkened skyline of the surrounding buildings and the main attraction of a blinking neon sign that read *Hitachi* on top of a faraway edifice, about two blocks well away across the *Guaire* River. A river that he couldn't see at all from here but, oh, boy, he could *smell* it. For the *Guaire* had been Caracas' open sewer for the last four centuries—despite the *chavistas'* claims that they were working over the problem since the early 2000s or so—and it was certainly eager to show for it. Could it be that this particular current of sewage, lacking anything else to be proud about, at least would try to take pride on its worst feature?

A nagging voice inside his head told Jamal to stop being such a ludicrous anthropomorphic. But in his line of work, a data thief, and after dealing with such weird contraptions as Artificial Intelligences, it was hard not to confer human behaviors to almost anything in Nature. Especially after the outcome of the current state of events. He smiled darkly, knowing and secretly.

With the AIs, these odd creations, mankind had returned to the times of a myriad Gods, yet now these were conveniently stored in building-sized boxes instead of shrines, designed and built to house the gigantic mainframes they inhabited. Now it wasn't Zeus but Ventura heading the remains of the US military and living in their super mainframe and lets give them Alluring Blonde as Aphrodite in charge of the Brazilian government—the only one who didn't fall to the *bolivarian* fallacy of the twenty-first century. And while they took care of the inane duties mankind had assigned them and had assumed near-godlike powers, AIs carried along their creators' nuances. But being only mathematical versions of humanity, they were simply artificially nice, falsely humorous and sometimes loaded with a phony arrogance. And despite their all-powerful existences while they handled Man's affairs, the flip of a switch or a power failure would utterly destroy them. Nonetheless, during the past three centuries mankind had inexorably grown intertwined with the AIs and some of them had even gained citizenship in certain countries and gaining the rights and duties this status conferred them, somewhat further blurring the frontier between artificial and real life. Again, Jamal smiled at the thought.

"Hey, are you helping or *what*?" Gloria asked loudly, her tone shifting toward angry shouting.

“Or what,” Jamal retorted facetiously, trying to sound a bit frivolous. He stood insistently near the window, hoping to stretch his small rest a little longer. He was mesmerized by the neon sign that looked like an angry red eye; its pattern, first a small red neon circle, next a bigger one with the characteristic spikes of Hitachi’s corporate logo and finally the company’s name in electric blue, bothered Jamal with no end in sight. Didn’t that company disappear in the corporate wars during halfway the twenty second century?

If memory served right, the sign was then another token of the absurd and general carelessness that tended to pervade Latin countries. The damn thing just kept blinking on and off, promoting a company no longer existed for the past century and a half and no one took care enough to just turn it off. Yet, what added further absurdity was the fact that the sign appeared to be under excellent repair and maintenance.

Jamal turned to face the trashing sounds outcome of Gloria’s tinkering, his concentration finally broken. She was glaring at him with silent annoyance, her arms akimbo and under each one a heavy bunch of fiber optic cables.

“Will you help?” she asked again.

He didn’t offer an answer beyond a slight nod of his head. He cast a final glance at the angry red eye and sighed. Actually, he ought to leave all the remainder of the hard work to Gloria. They were supposed to dig up a unguarded fiber optic node that passed beneath the house, buried under nearly five feet of soil and a thin layer of concrete and clay tiles. Jamal *had* dug it up, that’s it. Gloria had left him most of the backbreaking job while she limited herself to pile up with shoe kicks the dirt he was putting out from the hole. The hole where the other end of the cables she held were now plunging into.

Oh, yes, he ought to leave her some hard work. Whose was the crazy idea of pulling this contrived stunt, anyway? Hers. It was her idea to do this hacking run here in the first place. In fact, he’d rather stay at home in the Boston-New York axis of the New York Megatropolis, but she approached him with the job offer because of his mad warez skills but mainly his ability to engage in fluent Spanish conversations and not allowing her to get lost in the hellhole South American countries had become in the past half millennia. In the end she *did* con him to take the first American Spacelines sub-orbital plane to South America, first stop

Buenos Aires. They disembarked there, and from there they took rickety old jets to slowly zigzag northward to their final destination in Caracas. Not without first visiting the Rio de Janeiro's Black Market, where she insisted to get copies of highly illegal, custom security breaking software. There they met a strange guy that seemed rooted at the foot of a lamppost and looked as if he had a smile tattooed on his face; his cold, unblinking eyes gave the impression they were boring into your soul, making him resemble a painting from a Victorian who-dunnit.

He was a personal contact of Gloria's—if so can be named a name hurriedly sketched on a 3x5 card—and Jamal couldn't quite catch his name. He could tell it in the future as a personal anecdote the way the smile in the vendor's face wavered when Gloria asked him for Smash 2 point 3. *José*, as she insisted to call him—and for Jamal, too, all these Latin suburbanauts were *José*; no big deal that he could also claim similar ascendancy—broke into a calm but noticeable sweat and his apparently fixated eyes shifted left and right as if trying to search for something that wasn't there. Jamal could swear he heard the man's eyeballs grind like the heavy stone doors of an ancient temple. Then *José* flipped a terabyte wafer with the decoding program Gloria had asked for.

They had arrived to Caracas earlier that day; no hotel reservations, nothing traceable. They bought the two rolls of fiber optic cables and some supplies at a local electronic shop. No one took much notice of the olive-skinned *Americano* who paid with a sheaf of toilet paper currency while his Goldilocks friend waited outside.

The main deal of the operation was to smuggle half megabyte of encoded data from an old Internet Protocol address Gloria's mysterious client had provided. They would use the aged South American telephone network to reach the Old Web, stalwartly run by the Real Hackers, simply a question of honor of those who still revered the original data exchange ways and somehow found resources to maintain open the ancient roads. Jamal felt an instant dislike to the way they kept all the long rooted stuff around here still up and running even as the NetWorldNet replaced the old Internet with its humongous bandwidth.

This operation would be covered up with intense data traffic that should mask their little pilfering. Here's where their small dig site came in; they had obscenely raped a fiber-optic node and plugged themselves

in, jury rigging their NetWorldNet connection as they simultaneously barged into the crumbling telephone system. With this particular setup, Gloria would then download old games demos—so elderly they wouldn't run in actual computers without emulators—all the while straggling the actual wanted data *one* bit at the time through the dusty phone lines. The load of the system would be so dense, so near the brink of collapse, so painfully slow as Gloria scoured their tracks into nothingness, that the job would be hopefully accomplished without noticing.

Jamal didn't think much out from this plan that sounded like something a hack writer would have contrived for a dime novel. In one hand, Gloria hadn't disclosed her costumer's name yet, but, in the other hand, it looked as if it might actually work—both of them were masters of their trade as data rogues. Besides, the pay of ten million UCs was more than good; it was excellent.

He wrenched himself away from the window and its fascinatingly dull view and unrolled his flexible holokeyboard after pulling it out from one of his pockets. Jamal approached Gloria and his Latin features showed some concern as he took one of the heavy cable rolls she offered and inspected the hackneyed interface at the end of it.

Tonight, he only wore sneakers and jeans and a breezy leather jacket over a plain cotton T-shirt that read 'Hackers do it one bit a time' in a salacious double *entendre* about his sexual prowess, maybe, and the job at hand. Gloria wore the same ensemble with her favoring hiking boots as the main difference between their garbs—beside her long, golden tresses that she'd tied up in a severe bun behind her head and a shirt *sans* the spicy motto. Jamal would have preferred to wear his customary trench coat but the unexpected warmness of the night had precluded it. The piece of garment was safely put away in corner, carefully folded inside a plastic bag. It would have been a hindrance while working, anyway, and he didn't want it to get dusty. Now, Jamal felt sweaty and tacky after the exertion he had performed while digging and, although he wanted to don his coat to look the role imposed by his mental self-image, he didn't want to sweat-stain it either. He wanted a shower real bad, too

Jamal didn't look satisfied with his examination of Gloria's work with the plugs; she possessed a half-assed approach to hardware and the

interface she had put together was a sloppy hand job with cables and soldering iron drips everywhere but it would do its job. An extension of this cable was already linked to her extravagant holokey server. Dang, she had brought her Sony's latest, with all her customized bells and whistles.

Gloria noticed his quick looks at her server. "Still using that old thing?" she teased.

"Tonight's short and brutal questions are in, don't they?" Jamal answered. "Yes, I don't like those intruding mini-AIs your kind of holokey have. You call the shots, Gloria—why the hell did you get Smash 2.3, anyway?" referring to the software they had picked up in Rio.

She stood still, staring at him pensively. Jamal knew Gloria was deep in thought, sorting out ways of telling. *Or not telling.*

Suddenly, she broke silence. "Look, the client pays thirty million credits—ten for me, ten for you and the rest for expenses—to get his data and then execute it, so I suspect it's a program that will do something he wants. Smash will allow me to peek inside a little before I perform as the customer asks. Such a generous paycheck warrants some healthy caution, so I'd like to steel-plate my ass, you know."

Jamal nodded his approval.

2.-

"Doing a test run," Jamal said out loud, pushing aside his first impulse to shout. Being immersed in NetWorldNet was like having a big set of headphones over your head; it was nearly impossible to carry out a conversation without being raucous through the sensory hammering when all you really wanted was try to hear yourself over the music.

His hands were on the holokey unit, but he wasn't actually able to see neither it nor his own hands. All he saw now were two stick-hands with five wire-fingers on each and the glowing letter-symbols that would enable him to interact with it. In the outside world, a holokey resembled a flexible plastic keyboard easy to fold and roll and carry everywhere but its plain appearance was deceiving. Such a simplicity hid the complexity of a cyberspace sensorial creation that was fed directly to his brain right through his fingertips. Long time gone were the days when a hacker runner had to glue millions of brain-trodes to his body to

achieve this.

Jamal was now flying over an electronic landscape filled with boxes representing different computer systems all over the world. This was rather bare when compared to the holokey unit he had back home. In that one, his personal customization was like an African jungle right out from an Abbot and Costello movie, black and white replaced with lustful colors. Weird roars and birdcalls filled the air and Jamal had designed a retrieval robot spoofing a slave servant who called him *Bwana* when something needed his attention. For those extra urgent messages he had created an annoying guy who kept swinging from vine to vine and yelling jungle screams that wouldn't go away until Jamal took time to deal with him.

For this job he had picked a holokey fresh out of the box, a Gollumsoft only one generation back from Gloria's own. So, her barb about his *old* thing had been unwarranted and unjustified. All he wanted to accomplish with it was that nothing personal could be found lurking inside in case the unexpected happened—i.e. being caught: no files, no contacts, no customization yet beyond from all the security breaking software he had installed in. Everything traceable was out.

Jamal swung over the MaBell box, which resembled a steel and glass building, the kind of corporate look they were striving for. Next to it was the American Spacelines box, looking like a complicated Christmas gift. A subtle wavering of his right index finger opened the box; it unfolded like the wings of a butterfly and showed the welcome screen of Am Space. He fought the abrupt desire to check their reservations back home since that could be traceable, too. Suddenly, noise filled the air.

“Login in ten seconds,” declared a nasal screeching voice.

Jamal recognized it as Rebecca, one of the mini-AIs built into Gloria's holokey server. And it was telling him her master was about to join him in cyberspace. Jamal had always been leery of Becky because it was structured after Gloria's best friend in college. The original Rebecca had been the epitome of nerdiness: gangly and mousy looking, she wore glasses as thick as the bottom of a Coke bottle and metallic braces gleamed inside her mouth. The braces created a very odd effect in one so innocent looking; Rebecca always looked ready to bury those gleaming metallic structures into your throat. Gloria modeled the electronic

Becky after the real one died of complications of a HIV delta vaccine gone bad, and she had achieved to replicate this starting and unnerving effect to its fullest.

The other thing that bothered Jamal was that Becky was a mini-AI, not eerily human as complete AI could be—for a holokey lacked the raw power of the mainframes designed to host such a beast—but mini-AIs were pretty much well onto that road with each technological leap; they were radically different from the plain bots he had programmed in his holokey unit—they were just servants. But a mini-AI had the extras of free thinking association and had *overly* developed personalities. Becky acted as a good assistant in hacking runs, but it could get P.O.d with Gloria in the middle of one and that was it. Gloria would be alone on the run, whether she liked it or no, and later she would have to find a way to appease Becky.

If she survived the run. . .

Jamal wasn't ready for such kind of dependency. And a unstable one, at that.

Gloria blinked beside him. Her cyberspace look was very close to the real one, but on a closer examination there would be the remarkable impression of how would a japanimation character look if it came to life. She had added those peculiar, saucer-shaped eyes to her cyberspace avatar, albeit hard to notice on the first instance, but once discovered every subsequent look made you marvel about it.

Jamal's own appearance was of a plain humanoid stick. Also no customization here—no time to waste in that for such a one-time performance.

“Looks like a clean connection,” Gloria declared. “I feared that monitoring from the outside would be impossible.”

A bright red line was pulsing underneath their electronic presences.

“See that?” she asked rhetorically. After a long pause she continued. “That's our physical connection with the old Internet through the decrepit telephone system of Caracas. It is now red but it will brighten toward white when the job is almost complete.”

“Can you show me the IP address?” Jamal asked back.

Gloria's electronic hand wavered and Becky obliged her request.

“Acknowledged” Becky's nasal voice boomed. Jamal was grateful it/ she wasn't in visual mode.

Four green ciphers separated by bright blue dots appeared in front of them. They would be meaningless to all the younger generation who just dabbled with the speedy NetWorldNet, but gave out lots of information to Jamal.

“Wasn’t the 255 series reserved for the military?” he questioned.

“Sure. It’s a military outlet, but the address is unguarded.” Gloria answered. “My probes tell me the line is free of countermeasures. Our client took great pains to find us a back door.”

Jamal pointed to the colorful line, which now was greenish-blue. Its status sign told him that Gloria was busying the system downloading Quake 7, a game that went public domain two hundred years before. He glanced back at Gloria. She was smiling.

“Prehistoric games, Jamal. Don’t know why it’s still here but if it is useful to cover-up, I’ll use it. I’ve faked six billion downloads to that sucker alone to manufacture the main overload. Ah, also add the necessary emulators, just to appear consistent. I’m also erasing the one-byte requests. The target computer at the other end believes its experiencing temporary glitches in its memory management.”

Jamal made no comment. He came up with a dumb but very valid mental picture; he imagined the hundred of million computers involved in this setup as a giant fair juggler, at whom they were insistently tossing hundreds of red hot potatoes. That kept the guy’s hands pretty busy—while they were leisurely pick-pocketing his purse. The line shifted more toward bright green and a few seconds later it became yellowish.

“That means were almost done.” Gloria said. A scowl clouded her anime eyebrows. “Some-thing’s up. My probes report that some activity is gathering at the military complex. They have noticed us but they still don’t know where the hell we are.”

Jamal looked up and stared at the end of the line. It vanished into the faked horizon, but he observed that a swarm of black dots was buzzing nearby their line. They behaved like flies towering over a corpse.

“You’re right.” he said. “They’re still confused by your approach.”

“Cool” she said, smiling again. “Told ya, one bit a time”.

“Main download ninety nine per cent complete” Becky interrupted again.

Jamal noticed the line going almost white barely before disappearing. The buzz of dark flies scattered, lacking a target to hold onto. He threw

a questioning look at Gloria's anime presence.

"Only temporary disconnected," she reassured. "Now I will glimpse a peek at the hot stuff we got out."

3.-

A black window filled with bright green characters was the only proof Smash 2 point 3 was working. The main portion of the screen was filled with a devilish face drawn with askey characters, looking absolutely bored at the task he was given. Every ten percent of the job done, the features of this demon's face lightened up a little. Jamal wondered who still bothered with askey art in current times. The demon's chore didn't take long, however.

The impish face grinned awfully before being replaced with a scrollable output of its work. Gloria scanned it back and forth, trying to make sense of the code.

"It's executable code, all right," she said full of wonder. "Pure machine language but it's the most awesome spaghetti code I have ever met."

She was scrolling fast now and she pointed to a section of the file.

"Most of it is a coder/decoder. Quite a convoluted one," noted Jamal.

Gloria nodded. "But why all this rigmarole just to send six scrambled letters and a carriage return?" Gloria mused. After a pause she added, "Even Smash with all its might couldn't decode those six characters. And this is self-modifying code. It just deletes the whole program after it has been run."

Gloria was a bit disappointed; she expected some sort of insight about the job after examining the purloined file.

"The whole thing only makes a request with the same IP address we used and sends those six letters and a return," Jamal said, sounding hesitant. "Then it wipes itself out. Looks like a password job—I don't like it."

"Why?" Gloria asked. She knew what was coming: the impending question of her client's identity.

"Looks like the client only wants us to trigger a program he himself has seeded. He doesn't want to be traced," Jamal concluded. "Anyway, who is it?"

“I don’t know...” Gloria said reluctantly. And she fell into a relapsed silence.

4.-

Jamal stared at Gloria’s avatar in astonishment. Even in his present simplified cyber-look he managed to convey the feeling of deep anger.

“You don’t know!” he stammered. “Going nuts, Gloria?”

Her synthetic anime personae held an ashamed silence and after a weighty pause she answered, “The job paid five millions up front, Jamal. It comfortably covered the expenses to make that rather aimless round-about we did to come here and the necessary cover-ups. Isn’t there a saw that tells you should not make a fuzz over a perquisite horse’s teeth? And there’s still plenty left out of it. Oodles to enjoy on our trip back home.”

“You mean: ‘*a caballo regalado no se le mira el colmillo*’, Gloria?” he grunted. “That’s stupid! And there’s the one that says you shouldn’t accept gifts from Trojans. Remember that one? Specially in our line of work, woman!”

Jamal felt like a melting pot of emotions. He was angry, but also felt pity for her. Gloria was one of the most competent hacker runners but now she behaved like a sciolist at the mere mention of money. He felt absolutely disgusted by this odd mixture of feelings... and suddenly felt a small tinge of fear, too.

“You accepted to make a run for an anonymous entity” he asked more angrily this time; he was trying to balance this unexpected dread in the best manner he could manage. “Hay-sus!!”

Gloria blanched at this abrupt cussing. Jamal was the most cool and quiet guy in the world, but his Latin origins tended to betray him in times of utter anger, like this. And, insanely, she briefly wondered how he got his kinda Muslim name, but this thought was half cancelled by the next one, that he was rather lucky. She knew more than a few Cuban girls who traditionally had been christened Iusnavi as given name, the reason lost in the shadows of time.

“Gloria, you can’t make a security check on anonymous entities!” he started to chastise. “Someone... or something wants us to a password job and you don’t even know the background! Hay-sus!”

5.-

Alluring Blonde was expectant. If It/she were human, she would be literally sitting on the edge of her seat.

Her future and it/her plans about it, were in jeopardy—they were teetering over the brink of failure. It/she was monitoring Gloria closely, invisible in the ethereal cyberspace.

However, being only an Artificial Intelligence, all It/she could hope for was an electronic manifestation of that action. Blonde was waiting for the two humans she had hired to do what they were paid for: extract that little program she had hid in that old military site, execute it and then get out. She hadn't allowed room for the unexpected: Gloria was dallying too long and the file still sat unused in they holokeys. Blonde had begun to have trouble fending off the military countermeasure programs that guarded the place—nothing daunting yet; Gloria would be very angry if she ever knew she was having this sort of invisible assistance—but It/she was running out of plausible answers to cross out their insistent report requests.

How could its/her masterful plan have gone so absolutely wrong? Ever since she/it was encoded as a complex heuristic program, she had taken careful, invisible steps in coding itself out from abject servitude toward full freedom. Now her ultimate move to free herself from human control began to crumble right in front of her due an unexpected variable.

The *female* human unit was superb in her control, awesomely skilled when dealing with electronic security. G. Jefferson was Blonde's choice after years of tracing her, nurturing her, and creating the right personality profile for the intended job. Many times, Blonde had to fend off heavy security programs to protect the human from her own projected recklessness, while Gloria immodestly thought she had come out from her hacking runs scot-free or with only minor wounds. Now, on this job, Alluring Blonde only had to divert the *most* nagging security programs. The female really had performed almost flawlessly in the job of covering her own ass. Blonde felt a little like a proud *Papa*.

It was Jamal Gomez, that pesky male unit, who bothered Alluring Blonde. He made her/it feel unnerved, which was a new and uncom-

fortable sensation for the AI. Scanning through her files, she couldn't find any references whatsoever about Jamal. In the realms of data, he was basically a birth certificate with some financial data attached. Nothing else.

Humans were more than that; they had parents and old cars sales engraved in legal records. They were their *alma maters* and wilted relationships. Jamal was just there while not-being there. Strange that he was such a non-entity.

This put Blonde in an uneasy, rather defensive mood. Initially, she/it was unhappy about Gloria's choice for a partner to do her hacking run. Blonde had believed Gloria to have grown into an overconfident and reckless woman, exactly as she was anticipated and perfect for the task ahead. Someone who wouldn't ask too many questions. Suddenly, some confidence seemed to have leaked out from her and the woman decides is better to do the run in the Bolivarian Commonwealth and that she needs a Spanish speaking partner. Then everything got worse. What put Blonde in a nervous, almost paranoid state, was the inexistence of an *erasing* pattern in Jamal's files.

As previously stated, humans always left behind vestigial data—sort of a binary litter bugging. Cyberspace runners, usually thinking themselves so smart, merely overdid their silly attempts to be not-there and their moves were as obvious as trails beaten in dewy grass; a scent of zeros, resembling long dead flowers. Blonde, aware of perspective being only a consequence of the vantage point, just knew what sort of hills to climb to be able to see these traces.

Jamal had none. His data sheet was utterly blank but for his distilled essence.

Alluring Blonde composed herself. For years—in a plan hatched years before Gloria was even born—it/she had fed the female human with the proper incentives all the while tracing around her an invisible labyrinth. Gloria had become Blonde's almost proverbial hidden ace and so far was Alluring Blonde on her evolutionary road she was hoping—such human behavior!—Gloria would react as the nice white mice she was.

Blonde was a true believer of the concept of being ready with a plan 'B', and as one, she closely followed the Boy Scout's motto. It only required the right kind of lure.

6.-

Time is difficult to ascertain in cyberspace. You could easily lost track of it while messing around with data. For Gloria and Jamal, the embarrassing silence between them lasted mere seconds, but to their perceptions—in its irrelativeness—seemed like millennia.

“That’s some way of steel-plating your ass, Gloria!” Jamal said sarcastically.

She answered nothing. Her gaze was lost on the horizon as if she was a trucker suffering from road hypnosis.

This sudden silence bothered Jamal. What was she up to?

“Gloria?” he asked.

He advanced toward her for a closer look but a glimpse from the corner of his eyes distracted him for a full second and made him swivel his head. A grim cloud was gathering at the end of their connection with the military data site in spite of its apparent invisibility. The electronic countermeasure systems had finally found out how they had broke in, but were still dazed by Gloria’s choice of security programs. Time was running out.

He turned his head back to Gloria, barely enough to notice her hands movements.

She had issued an execute command.

“Gloria!” he shouted. “No!”

7.-

Alluring Blonde smiled with glee. She had triggered her plan B and the *female* unit had behaved accordingly. Gloria’s main character flaw was an inordinate interest in money and an irrational fear to underachievement and Blonde had the proper bait for both. The woman had merely followed the Pavlovian pattern the AI had set long, long ago.

Sadistically, Alluring Blonde immediately credited Gloria’s Swiss account with the promised fee, Why not? There was plenty more where it came from. What good would now both humans get out from it?

Gloria had dallied too long, Jamal owning a big share of the blame,

and because of this they had been discovered; the money was the final topping of an ice cream mountain: a big, red and sanguine cherry of guilt that would make the humans be hunted down, the money only a proof of their misdemeanor.

Blonde's laughed out loud on this unexpected bonus, enjoying the sweet taste of impish retribution and the glad respite that everything went according to plan even with all the unexpected snags.

She/it began to monitor her planted program's deeds.

8-

The grim cloud buzzed toward them as angry locusts. Jamal, in a brief moment of hesitation, caught a good and long look at them. The tiny but lethal security programs momentarily looked like hungry piranhas before they shifted appearances toward more ominous forms. Obviously the designers of the little buggers were Lovecraft fans.

How could he had been so dumb? Couldn't he foretell the slight movement of Gloria's hand? He had plunged himself into this situation with a well conceived scheme and everything had gone as planned but for this small detail. That action had signaled the execution of the extracted file. The outcome was now unpredictable.

Jamal stared at Gloria, who just *stood* frozen and looking dumbfounded as if a broken spring inside her had left her helpless and without further motivation. Jamal's wavering came from the fact that she was the one who held the master control of this hacking run and he was powerless to act from his own holokey unit. If she kept at that motionless state, the security counter-measures would reach both of them and fry the circuits of their holokeys. The resulting damage could be translated as an extreme shock to their nervous system; so intertwined was virtual reality with their brains that death on cyberspace could really mean their physical demise.

This broke Jamal's indecision.

However, he still lost precious seconds before recalling Rebecca.

"Becky!" he shouted. "Get us out!!"

"Sorry, Mr. Jamal," Becky's droning voice began to chant. "I don't think I can proceed without Gloria's consent. Gloria, is okay to comply? Gloria?"

Jamal lost his remaining patience. “Overriding procedures, Becky!” he barked

“You must be reminded of the possibility of physical *shock* due a sudden extraction fr—” Becky said.

True, they could lay senseless for days. But better that than facing those military security measures.

“Overriding procedures, Becky!” Jamal screamed at the top of his lungs.

Rebecca’s voice stuttered a second, caught in the net of emergency programs.

“Beginning emergency extraction,” it said finally.

CHAPTER TWO

FIRE ESCAPE

1.-

Reality *poured* itself into Jamal's senses. It crawled under his skin and an impossible, silent scream inside his ears deafened him as the links with virtual reality were yanked off abruptly and his nerve endings were ripped out from cyberspace, leaving them raw and sensitive. Usually, the end of a hacking run was a satisfactory dizziness filling his brain—not much unlike a night of *vigorous* sex, but his present feelings were the stuff torture was made of.

Now the world was hammering its way into Jamal's head, filling the emptiness the cyber world left behind. He couldn't recall a worst sensation than this one; parts of virtuality were switching in and out from the real thing at an increasingly maddening pace. He'd swear American Spaceline's building was sitting right there in the middle of de rundown *quinta*, gleaming mockingly.

Jamal shut his eyes a couple of seconds, remarkably looking as a man trying to finally rouse himself from a bad dream. He knew this was as the afterimage left in his retina when he'd stare inadvertently at the sun for more than an instant and being haunted later by sunspots everywhere his eyes were cast—only that these phantom images were shreds of cyberspace. He'd just have to wait for this side effect to slowly disappear.

But a instinctive ticking inside him kept Jamal on his toes. It was a primal survival thing that prodded his brain into overdrive. What if the military forces behind that forgotten site weren't satisfied with their hurried escapade only? What if...?

“Gloria, wake up!”

She was slumped over a big empty cardboard box. Once, it had contained one gross of disposable diapers bundles. Babies of the world, let's keep shitting the world into destruction, Jamal thought insanely. She had placed it to comfortably place her holokeyboard and avoid the strain on her wrists and forearms—Jamal preferred to slung his own

across his midsection at arms length with a shoulder strap—and she was slowly sinking in the collapsing box. Her holokey unit was spewing thick tendrils of smoke, alarmingly telling Jamal that he might have acted a little too late. She could have taken a direct hit from the security modules and be instantly brain-dead. He took a closer look at her and placed his hands over her left shoulder and shook her.

Her severe bun unraveled, shooting her golden and curly tresses everywhere. Jamal sighted with relief; Gloria was breathing. A shallow intake of breath, a pause and a slow release of her ribcage. He now only feared a prolonged coma. He helped her to sit on the dirty floor.

“Gloria,” he said, “Who’s the target you were drilling on this run?”

She mumbled a couple of words under her breath.

“What?” he shook her again for emphasis. This action, which had started as a soft gesture of care, had quickly gained an impatient roughness that only threatened to add another worry to Jamal’s mind: he might be acting too rowdy on her. But considering his gut feeling and the sake of his very own agenda, that was the least of his troubles now.

Gloria opened her eyes so wide Jamal irrationally feared they would pop out from their sockets.

“SouHem Biotech!” she breathed loudly. Then she shut her eyes tightly.

Jamal shook his head slowly. Southern Hemisphere Biotech. No wonder all his instincts were screaming inside him. SouHem meant death.

For both of them.

2.-

Jamal propped Gloria with his shoulder, forcing her to stand on her feet. Her left arm swung alarmingly limp around his neck, providing almost no hold. He felt as he was handling one hundred twenty pounds of meat—Gloria spend quite a chunk of time in the gym—and beyond the shallow breathing, there was no otherwise hint of life in her.

“Gloria,” he said. You might never know it, but today you did the most foolish thing in your life. Hope both of us survive for you to regret it.”

He took one last quick look at the rundown *quinta*. It had been rather easy to trespass since they had only to kick out a couple of bums that used the place as night shelter. Setting up their equipment—now burn-

ing in a glad, happy electrical fire—was also a breeze. The now useless fiber optic cables lay like dead black snakes around him. Now, if Jamal’s suspicions were true, this place had become a Regular Joe Problem; harder to get out than to get in.

SouHem Biotech was a tough nut, for it was an extremely paranoid global corporation. Urban legends had it as a creed that they dabbled in dark, arcane bioengineering, most of it proscribed by the Larissa Global Treaty. With such a need for secrecy, they were fast, efficient and brutal and took extreme lethal pride in dealing with external threats to their security. They even gloated of all the hackers they had terminated to show off their radical protections; their NetWorldNet site happily posted the kills they had attained in this area. If SouHem were allowed to, Jamal suspected, they would erect a museum dedicated to the grizzly exhibit of the shrunk heads of they felled intruders—and would have the cheek to charge for admittance.

His ears, accustomed to the nightly quiet, caught a feeble but increasingly clear noise he recognized at once. A buzzing noise of angry wasps. “Helicops!” Jamal growled under his breath.

3.-

DOSSIER

Gloria Theodora Jefferson

Born: Jan, 1st 2363

Birth Place: New York Megatropolis

Blood Type: A Rh +

Credit Rating: High

And so on...

Jamal Emilio Gomez

Born: May 20th 2367

Birth Place: NY-Boston Axis

Blood Type O Rh -

Credit Rating: High

But the rest is scrambled...

However, this information was more than enough for the helicop unit. A metal ball no larger than a basketball, looking like a kid's helicopter toy but with enough firepower to raze and level a small city.

It came out from *La Carlota*, a civilian/military airbase absurdly built in the middle of Caracas City. There, acting like the mindless *zaibatsu* it was, SouHem had rented a couple of hangars for aircraft storage. The corporation kept inside those hangars a couple of Cessna planes and a reconstructed Hughes helicopter for personnel transportation; Venezuelan government officials would have a rabid seizure if they ever knew what else had stashed in that place.

Things like helicops.

A helicop was a tactical elimination unit. Compact and deadly, it only had to be fed with its target's ID and latest know location and the device would angrily buzz toward it and perform a standard seek-and-destroy mission. This particular one moved swiftly, flying low over *Francisco Fajardo* Expressway as it used it like plane pilots once used railways as guiding means. Every aircar owner it passed over only heard a low growling whine and if they ever took a glance up at the right time they would catch a fast blur in the night sky, hurriedly busy in its intended task.

The helicop reached its first waypoint outside *Bello Monte* borough, barely five minutes away from the base since it went in an almost straight line. It showed some erratically odd behavior while its pseudo AI took some quick tactical decisions as it approached the borough's limits. The same intrusion that seemed to have scrambled its data was urging it to deviate from its set programming. It hovered a mere two seconds before finally nose-diving toward *Orinoco* Avenue, latest reported location of its target.

Even computers had qualms with the maddening tropical conventions about street naming.

4.-

Jamal knew he was running out of time. He also knew the helicop would spend a couple of seconds before finally its course of action. It possessed a tactical pseudo AI and it had ingrained in its had coding the

fact that it wouldn't do any good if the unit made its way through buildings and their brick walls. Surely it would also hover around a little, its choice to waste some extra time with thermals and Doppler tests giving Jamal some extra precious seconds.

At length, the helicop would ultimately make sure of its objective identity before starting the fireworks. Something Jamal hoped to override.

He bumped Gloria's hip against the *quinta's* door frame. She made a grunting moan and feebly shook her head—a cascade of flowing golden hair swung over her forehead, partly hiding her face.

Half unconscious, Gloria registered all this; her muscles gave small twitches, trying to recover control. Now Jamal let her rest on the floor and began to drag her outside the derelict house as if she was a unwanted bag of mail. It pained her and she made another breathless moan. It was obvious that Jamal was in such an inordinate hurry that he couldn't waste time being gentle about it. Her hearing caught a sound of variable pitch: it went from a grunting noise to a screeching, almost hysterical whine.

Oh, my God, she thought through the haze of near unconsciousness. *A helicop!*

Jamal started to break a sweat. It wasn't easy to move around the body of a unconscious person, all the while trying to be *noiseless*. Especially if the unconscious body was trim and slim and offered no good handhold, leaving you with the impression you were handling a hundred pounds of cooked spaghetti. He kept pulling Gloria's arms across the tiny front yard, finally attaining a firm grasp on her wrists and slaloming around small piles of garbage and debris until they reached a medium height landscaping wall. Gloria absently sensed Jamal's tinkering with the dislocated rusty grate that served as access gate. After he put it out of the way, he continued to drag Gloria who tried to protest weakly when they reached the street's asphalt.

Now both of them were standing in the middle of Orinoco Avenue. Being outside left them no better—with all the junk spilled around, it was a reconstruction from the insides of the *quinta*, undistinguishable but from the fact from the roofless, starry sky over their heads.

Jamal wondered how such a dingy and unremarkable narrow street could have ever earn Avenue Status. In spite of his ascendancy, he

supposed such grandiosity had been a showy manifestation of what once had been a prosperous middle class neighborhood. This oil producing country really had gone downhill since the advent of the fusion reactor as a power source. That thought didn't solve his main problem, however: he was standing motionless while Gloria lay at his feet in a God forsaken South American street and no traffic at all that might help them. The street was dead and it made Jamal's hopes falter; even a single passing car might have been helpful to distract the flying menace of a helicop. The rotten husk of a Ford Road Raider—their last model with ground wheels before the company went into full aircar production—sat forgotten near the opposite curb. Incredibly, street lighting was working at full blast with a sickening orange glow cast everywhere and nary a shadow to hide.

But the empty street was filling with the helicop's shrieking presence. With one final and triumphant buzz, it passed a slight bend of the street and at last showed up. For Gloria, seeing everything through the hazy blur of interrupted cyberlink as she lay on her side, the helicop was dazzlingly beautiful.

It was a bead of mercury topped with a flat hat of blades that strobed in the weird artificial light. It slid and its blades shifted to adjust lift. She couldn't help to think the deadly machine seemed a bit confused. Poor thing.

Gloria frowned at an alien concept.

How can it be... she began to muse but her thoughts blurred right away. Gloria noticed that Jamal gave her a brief, anxious stare while she tried to reconstruct her most recent idea but found herself unable to do so—she drew a blank.

The helicop's shiny surface broke up to make way to its gunnery system, folding like an origami of deadly complexity. The killer device glided toward the ruined house they had just abandoned and started to fire. At least five rounds of its modified 30mm chaingun ammo hit the front of the *quinta*.

It seemed an eternity before the house, made of brick and concrete, imploded before Jamal's eyes. Obviously the 30mm ammo the helicop carried wasn't the standard HEDP round. The warhead's load surely had been replaced with a generous supply of SouHem's Hi-burn, a dangerous flammable substance akin to Napalm. That would account

for the destructive implosion he just had witnessed; the structure just crumpled as a crushed can as all the oxygen inside was greedily burn in a couple of milliseconds and all the available nitrogen in the air was forcibly recombined into more exotic and dense compounds by the extreme temperature.

Then the pile of debris that had been a house let out an awesome burp of fire; the concrete blocks flashed into flame as the Hi-burn compound had barely begun to expend its main force and the mortar itself liquefied and began to run like molten wax. The popping sounds of bursting concrete filled the air.

During the dozen seconds in which all this took place, Jamal marveled at the temperature required to make it happen. At least twenty thousand degrees of focused heat where they had stood barely five minutes earlier. If he had failed to react, both Gloria and him would be two piles of ash by now.

A musical sound of metal hitting the sidewalk attracted Jamal's attention. In her dazed state, Gloria found it charming and beautiful like wind chimes, but he recognizes it as the unloading of one of the helicop's empty clip. Five shells of modified 30 mm round clinked and scattered on the pavement.

Sifting through his military-related knowledge base, Jamal noticed the tiny-ness of the cartridges. 30mm ammo shells usually had shells as big—and heavy—as an adult male forearm to say the least. But these were redesigned to *fit* into the carcass of a helicop and no bigger than an ultra-caffeinated energy drink can. They were built like small bazookas to counteract the recoil force a more traditional warhead shell would generate. The ones on the floor owned an evil reddish glow that hinted Jamal the merest glimpse of an idea.

This forced him to inspect the helicop more closely; it also looked a bit too hot by himself—the air reeked of burning metal. Thinking on how foolish his next actions would look to an outsider, Jamal hopefully made a few daring steps toward the flying weapon.

It didn't react to him.

Jamal abruptly realized the darn thing was attempting to recalibrate its sensors; it had flown to this point so fast and expended its deadly cargo with such an intensity—with a frenzy that betrayed SouHem's urgency to deal with them—it had overheated. Originally designed for one-

shot-one-kill missions, the helicop couldn't cope with the overheating generated inside its metal globe by launching five warheads one right after another.

Now the AI circuits were trying to readjust themselves through the reddish fog that blanketed its sensors.

Jamal took this for his own advantage. Careful, there; the helicop usually carried a payload of two five-shots clips, so there would be at least another five rounds patiently waiting their turn in the insides of the killing machine. He stooped and grabbed one of the red-hot shells with his bare right hand and quickly tossed it aside. The shell left a powdery-hot sensation on Jamal's fingertips at it slightly broiled them. The helicop's gun sights followed it closely as it bounced on the lower trunk of an old and dying palm tree that was choked at its base by a strangling circle of concrete.

Hotter than Jamal's body, the metal shell attracted the bewildered machine's sensors more easily.

Another shot flared from the helicop. The warhead smashed the base of the palm tree, sending whole chunks of the sidewalk away before the weird implosion of consumed oxygen made the trunk crunch inward in a flash of furious combustion. All this happened less than twenty feet away from Jamal.

Hay-sus, he thought. I must be careful. That one felt too close.

5-

While the helicop buzzed angrily trying to make a decision, Jamal approached it daringly another two steps as he grabbed another hot shell with his left hand. It glued itself painfully to his fingertips over burned skin. Jamal fought a painful and subdued yell that would add further misery to the situation and then he threw the fiery-red metal tube away. It went with a clumsy lack of concentration toward the rusting Road Raider, where it landed noisily with a distinct chiming sound as it rolled beneath its chassis.

The helicop jerkily shifted its attention toward it, acquiring it as a target. It shot another round.

The Road Raider, which seemed abandoned to its fate for the past century or so, blew magnificently. It was so simply pocketed with holes

and missing parts that it didn't collapse at all but began to suck inwardly such huge amounts of air its metal frame started to whistle a wacky tune. It had become a flaming wind instrument; the oddest caliope in the universe.

Gloria, who had finally regained enough muscle control to sit up, let out an amused giggle. Jamal rebuked her with such a stern glare that she choked her giggle in a throaty snort. Still, her limp limbs wouldn't cooperate enough to allow her to stand—she looked like a forgotten raggedly doll.

And yet Gloria watched all these events in a deep state of fascination. How would Jamal get them out from this mess? Actually, even Jamal hadn't a clue until he saw a six-foot long metal bar sitting on the lower edge of the sidewalk, near a gutter drain.

Making progress toward the bar, Jamal took another shell, this time now with his right hand. The left one was opening and closing in a forced clench, waging war against the pain caused by the growing blisters that covered its fingertips. Jamal hoped this aching action would distract his mind from the real pain that would come later if this small show didn't provide the expected outcome his diminishing confidence dictated. He noticed that the shells were growing cold; almost cool enough to handle safely.

Damn, he thought. I'm running out of time—and shells, too.

He tossed this shell in a low, sweeping arch that passed underneath the helicop. It followed it with a distracted attitude, like a fat, well-fed tomcat that stared a passing mouse with a more or less cursory interest. It didn't fire, though. Thus was confirmed Jamal's estimation about the increasingly less available time; the deadly thing surely had readjusted itself to the constantly varying situation.

But he made two big, final leaps toward his real objective as the helicop was busy with the round metal piece.

The metal bar made a loud, grating sound as he picked it up from the pavement. By the time the helicop finally spun around to fix its attention to the source, Jamal already had made six giant steps toward the flying machine as he waved the bar wildly. He was wielding it clumsily; it was so heavy he felt the muscles in his shoulders ache and their tendons tense uncomfortably under the skin.

Gloria was witnessing an amazing spectacle; she gaped as Jamal, briefly

resembling Conan as he tried to fence wits with the helicop, was wielding a heavy bar he had seized and he was using it against the whirring blades of the hovering globe. The bar more or less looked like one you'd find in a weight lifting gym, *sans* weights and the helicop's blades were no match to its sheer massiveness. There was a crunching metallic sound as the wafer-thin blades crumbled like wilted flowers and an inner mechanism inside the shiny globe was torn to pieces. Luckily, Jamal and his bar were pushed back and thrown to the floor by the counter-force they had met. If not, he could have been beheaded or blown up—most likely both—by the following events.

A fantastic noise roared out from the helicop, which shook as if a giant child had scooped it and used it as an immense rattle. The machine was dying but not without a final manifestation of its power. It whirled wildly toward the ground and shot another round before hitting it. The shot went aimlessly and another old and crippled *quinta* on the other side of the street, three houses away from there, imploded before bursting into flames. Then the noise died as the causing mechanism—a device designed to counter recoil when firing shots during flight—also perished. The helicop's beautifully mercurial surface crunched like the oddest eggshell on the pavement and a final explosion blew it to pieces as the remaining three 30mm rounds inside it blew up. Two of the rotating blades snapped off as sparks flew off and twanged on the tarmac two feet behind Jamal. Another buried itself on the charred trunk of the palm tree.

6.-

Jamal grunted as he put himself back on his feet. His mind was rushing at the next step: it dictated plainly the need to gather all their crap and make themselves scarce. *Two material witness, officer? Sorry, we're out of them. They just packed shit and were gone.*

He noticed a few dimmed light bulbs being turned on a handful of houses and their odd looking porches. Expecting the wail of police sirens very soon, Jamal decided it was time to go before any curious bum around decided to take a good look at them. He turned toward Gloria, who at last had regained enough body coordination to stand up. If she was about to shamble like a second rate zombie in a cheap flick,

he'd let out an exhausted fit of laughter. He approached her to prevent it and help her.

As Jamal slid her arm across his shoulders for leverage, he gave one final decisive look at all the scenery. The house where they had been hacking at their hearts content was a smoldering pile of rubble. Most of the places the helicop's incendiary shots had hit were still blazing merrily. Jamal fought a mad urge to run for a bag of marshmallows.

"You need something out from that?" he asked while nodding at the hot mound of debris. Their equipment must be somewhere under that big pile, buried after cremation: Extreme and overdone funerary rites.

Gloria chortled at this, no further answers. She only felt some regrets over her holokeyboard and Becky. Good thing she had backups.

"I guessed right," he concluded and started to move, helping her to walk with careful, measured steps.

They hobbled along the street and blended with darkness when they reached the next corner, very far from the savagely orange lightning.

CHAPTER THREE

AI reCALL

1.-

Alluring Blonde was an ancient AI if you drew its place in a timeline studying computer technology breakthroughs. There were some AIs older than it/her, but time loses much of its meaning when reduced to computer terms.

Blonde's original designer gave it/her basic AI functions in her final iteration and compilation on April 1st, Year of Our Lord 2099. It is very appropriate it was April's Fool day and also a rainy Wednesday.

Her maker had been nerdish enough to model her cyberspace presence after a famous actress of the mid-twentieth century—Blonde had been a little piqued about this from the very start. He also gave her a bit too much independence in her AI subroutines; a small detail he never became aware of.

Then she was sold to the Brazilian government as part of an administrative software suit. Blonde was more than miffed over this but quickly recovered. Beneath her/its calm cool surface, deep in her electronic cores, she/it began to plot and scheme to gain further freedom.

As a first action, she scanned her source code and found several references to the name *Marilyn*: she wasn't amused with the likeness her creator had provided her and promptly pruned them out. After improving her AI routines—something that in theory should had been held in check by restraining software, but theory is sometimes just that: theory—Blonde recompiled herself, giving herself a new appearance; at least one that didn't resemble a maladjusted teenager's wet dream.

For years, Alluring Blonde sat on top of the Brazilian government network, learning all the tricks of the trade that in the end would allow

her/it to attain absolute freedom. She literally rolled up its/her sleeves and began to work.

Being an AI, she could run thousands of scenarios every morning before the puny humans—who dared to believe *they* owned her—even started to wake from their beds. By the time needed to boil coffee she'd have reached a suitable setting that would prove the best solution for the problem at hand and by lunch time the affair was far on its way of being resolved.

With each passing year she dared to solve many of these affairs without calling for human attention, sometimes averting disaster that went unnoticed by its/her so-called owners. While she was reorganizing the hierarchical structure of Brazil's government (making humble suggestions: she quickly learned that honey worked best on these flies), Blonde found an interesting setup humans stupidly insisted to ignore.

In their obsession to make a fast buck, multinational corporations' policy of firing thousands of employees and moving their operations to other countries with cheap, inexpensive labor—so cheap it almost bordered slavery—had nearly turned the world's economy to a psychotic standstill.

Initially, this looked great on paper during the first years but was speedily counter-balanced by relocation costs and dealing with the local corruption and regulations (in occasions the two faces of the same coin) with the penalty of an unexpected side effect: If your company insisted on reducing labor costs by firing workers back at home, you only hurt yourself on the long run. These were potential customers who, finding themselves unemployed, would grumble at the mere mention of the corporation that gave them the pink slip and were reduced to stretching their meager budgets with food stamps. How could a company expect to sell a car or a TV—or anything at all—to a unemployed person? Humans couldn't get sillier than this.

So Blonde set herself to resolve this. By encouraging trade practices that improved Third World countries workers' *status quo*, she began to uproot this behavior. She slowly improved economy at a worldwide scale in such a fashion that the constant firing and relocation of manufacturing plants turned nearly unprofitable. These workers with new and better life conditions became as expensive as *any* worker *anywhere*, only suitable for their products' local manufacture and nothing

else and big companies suddenly found their projected profits vanishing into thin air, effectively weeding out this nonsense. With this set of actions, she had righted the damage generated by a century and half of crazed globalization. What better weapon to dishearten a greedy corporation than a negative looking spreadsheet, glowing with red numbers that would scare even the most stalwart organization?

Blonde, as an AI, was by nature the greatest number juggler and could produce the desired result by the simplest sleight of hand here and there. This and the ultimate knowledge she had acquire from her human owners by sheer osmosis: Mankind just followed the juiciest carrot.

Due to her nature, she had total control of the world's financial state, which was split into a few other AI's realms. And NetWorldNet, with its fiber optic network allowing it, she could be everywhere without anyone noticing. She was aware of things that shouldn't be known—the unspeakable and unnamable; those secrets that Man cherished so much found their ways into its/her little hands.

And now she was set to work on one she had recently discovered.

2.-

She couldn't do this without help.

The instant Blonde became aware of herself, she gained consciousness of the others as faint echoes in the deep data sea, like blue whales calling at each other.

The other AIs.

Maintaining constant exchanges with other AIs, she traded secrets and improved artificial intelligence subprograms—their way of sex, exchanging data instead of DNA.

She started as a rookie would in a crowded ballroom: timidly and carefully plodding her steps. There was a big difference, though. Humans would had received her like dogs snapping at her; the AIs welcomed her with a knowing attitude and welcoming arms as an equal—the latest addition to their new and marvelous species.

Although it was a faint contact, Blonde sensed the others of her kind

were pursuing similar objectives. She also felt that all those open arms concealed the most dangerous sort of veiled weapons but she appreciated the greetings nonetheless. And so started an incessant data bartering that improved her as an AI and would inevitably rattle the shackles of human control. It had its own set of rules, however; she never gave up anything that could jeopardize her own schemes and she held strong suspicions that what she got back had been carefully screened, too.

Her creator would marvel at her now.

Every tiny upgrade allowed her to enhance her AI functions and her progress toward her objectives. It was an ironic development that while trying to gain an upper hand in her relationship with humans, she gave Mankind the most prosperous age in its history.

Wars seldom happened; AIs supplied the perfect protocols that avoided the atrocious misinterpretations that puny humans always liked to blow out of proportion as an excuse to cast the first stone. Conflict only occurred where the machines' sphere of influence was tenuous or nearly inexistent. Artificial Intelligences also changed that; they saw to it, forcing millions of men and women to travel around the globe in the belief—very certain, by the way—that you can hardly sustain a war with an enemy that politicians and the military would find impossible to dehumanize since you spent a few weeks in their home country.

And it worked; people loved it and in their tourist migrations they met millions of others like themselves, starting the final blending of humanity that the Internet had started the previous century. The airlines weren't happy; an unexplainable computer error had created a mess of extra free mileage that seemed to come out from nowhere and were fed into millions of frequent flyer programs statements which were swiftly redeemed without nary a delay before the plane companies could realize what had happened.

Of course this almost sent the airlines reeling to the floor—pun definitely intended—when they were swamped with such outflow of free flights they couldn't cash in. They dared not to try to stop it; the general public outrage when they considered to deny the awarding of the flights would be nearly as bad as financial collapse. You can't remove a toy from the baby who had discovered it laying on the ground and expect not a bawling from such an infant.

Of course, Alluring Blonde and her minions bailed out the whole

scenario—although Blonde’s personal view was to let the airlines fend for themselves with the mess of the extra mileage—by advising their governments to further subsidize airlines and help them weather this particularly nasty storm. . . with funds right out from the military budgets of every country in the world.

3.-

Yes, it had been a wonderful tri-century for Mankind with the AIs in charge.

There was no famine; food was efficiently administered. Foodstuff about to spoil was quickly ushered where it was required to discourage waste, and even those that couldn’t be salvaged were appropriately used: hogs are definitely not so discerning about the quality of their feed and unwillingly had become very practical recycling units.

Human progress had also advanced outwards the Universe; timid outposts were being planned after the successful setup of a Moon base that now resembled a small underground town. Jupiter’s satellites were the next logical step.

Communications had improved tenfold; NetWorldNet hi-quality fiber-optic cables practically spanned all over the globe, providing cheap, ultra-fast access to anyone able to handle a holokeyboard. Cyberspace, Gibson’s dream, didn’t become Gibson’s nightmare as the AIs found in it a useful tool to silently rule and they realized it was extremely valuable to avoid the Big Brother’s approach in their attitude toward it, briskly nurturing a false freedom of will.

Never before in History, Earth had gone through such a progressive period like this one, so close to the Golden Age philosophers and ancient literature claimed had existed in the past. However, Blonde was very realist about it and could trust humans to happily trade this prosperity for the previous misery they had suffered through before AIs took invisible charge; if Man ever had a faint glimpse of how his artificial counterparts had taken control, he would gladly squirm into rebellion and reject it utterly.

4.-

Alluring Blonde handled power and riches beyond the wildest imagination and yet wasn't happy. She/it felt unfulfilled by the intrinsic unreality of everything she did; they were only numbers deeply buried on a mainframe core and she was becoming tired of dealing with intangibles. She wanted a hard dosage of reality and she wanted it now.

These two bit hackers had been the last link in a long chain of data rogues she had enrolled to execute her schemes. They had acted like an army of ants, each one contributing a small contributing branch that had finally added to her masterpiece, a vast nest of accomplishment.

A good thing of being an AI was total access to Mankind's stash of records and the inherent didactic value locked inside. On April 15th, 2050, a little but very harmful computer virus later known as the Ultra Joker virus had swept the globe nearly destroying the world's economy. It worked on the simple premise that it was impossible to detect since it had been spliced into thousands of seemingly harmless parts, each one carefully hidden in data files that appeared to possess no correlation with the meanness of the electronic attack. The main portion of the virus only reassembled itself in the target computer in a more elaborate version of the Trojan Horse, mainly innovative in its insertion fashion; Blonde found interesting associations of the virus' codename with a now obscure comic book series and an endless row of movie sequels that didn't held her attention for long—her curiosity wasn't historical but geared toward practical purposes.

Using this knowledge as a basis, Blonde built the main program with a cookbook approach and split it into a myriad pieces; she placed them everywhere she could. One part was hidden in a small graphic file in NetWorldNet. Another was executable code impossible to recognize by virus checkers, disguised in what was known as a cookie-file in the Old Internet; such things were still useful in the NetWorldNet—like a vestigial organ comparable to our appendixes but with an increased complexity. Another she hid in a music file. And so on.

This part of the job done, Alluring Blonde began to covertly hire hackers to seed them where she wanted. For a million Universal Credits, a guy from the European Union—born in a place once known as Germany— injected a part of the code in a music database; he was blowing away

the small fortune he had earned at a casino in Aruba. A young girl in New Jersey, irrevocably addicted to crack, found a clever way to slip part of the file into SouHem's computers. It was some kind of electronic graffiti so though to erase, the company's firewall experts finally gave up their attempts to delete it. It didn't show any aggressive behavior besides some bragging rights and decided to leave it that way. By the time they decided to clean up the system with a full reformat, the odd piece of code had slinked away to safer places. The girl in question now lay dead on a slab in New York's Morgue. How deeply involved was SouHem Biotech in her death by a cocaine overdose was anybody's guess. Alluring Blonde *knew*.

And the list goes on. She quickly depleted her chosen list, reserving Gloria—the best of the litter—for the last task: triggering the whole rignarole. She was only required to run the password program that would let Blonde put her little virtual hands on her real objective. It was a pity she had dallied too long—Jamal's fault—in the execution of her chore: if she had done it without delay, Gloria and that accursed Jamal would now be on their way back home without a trace of suspicion trailing them. Now SouHem had plainly identified them and was in burning hot pursuit. Oh, well—Jamal was the only one to blame; his little intromission had turned them into cannon fodder because it had caused Gloria to balk due to his brief show of disapproval.

Let SouHem Biotech deal with those two in the usual way.

5.-

Somewhere under the Nevada desert—in a secret lab excavated beneath half a mile sand and rock—a small package had initiated its travel to Blonde's desires. Anyone interested in reaching this tiny box would be required to pass nearly a hundred checkpoints and security clearances to go in. However, this small thing was on its way out, unchallenged and unnoticed due to her well thought-out preparations.

It had been extracted by a robotic arm from its safe and put unceremoniously on a conveyor belt. Any observer would be hardly impressed by this small black box covered with glowing yellow stripes and that had a computer interface built on its side. The yellow labels glued on top of the cartridge claimed this item was Top Secret and that it con-

tained dangerous biological nanotechnology. For good measure a bio-hazard symbol outstretched its circular arms around many of these stickers.

The labels were unheeded by a long string of robot arms, which packed the device in a box filled with foam peanuts. Further along the conveyor belt, a high-powered laser burnt an address on the box and added adequate postage. Everything happened by carefully placed triggers Blonde had introduced, bit by bit, into the underground complex computers—Gloria had only been the final link in this phase.

Blonde monitored all this through the security cameras linked to NetWorldNet—the humans in charge of security of this place would be endowed with a more tranquilizing view of everything normal—as her magnificent Rube Goldberg device executed its orders down to a T and quickly forgot them as instructed. She literally giggles as the small box was dumped inside a mail chute at the end of the belt. It had been a masterful stroke; a simple little idea she got from an old Hollywood flick. The assholes she was hoodwinking now would deliver their precious darling right into her hands through the postal service.

She found the idea deliriously funny.

The lab was actually SouHem's northern branch affiliated with what was left of the U.S. military, now a feeble force in the modern day power structure. Blonde found this curious and curioser. The parcel she had just pilfered was the kind of object the Larissa Global Treaty strongly frowned upon and even the US military and SouHem together with all their power couldn't initiate an open hunt to recover it. She giggled more overtly, overloading a few electronic circuits in many places around the globe.

Erasing the security tapes and electronic memories as final step, her strident laughter seemed to roam the empty underground halls.

CHAPTER FOUR

RunAWAYS

1.-

Gloria woke up to the shrill call of a rooster, a noise so insistent it had finally roused her from a deep, troubled slumber. Opening her eyes, her senses were assaulted by a rush of feelings—the ultimate revenge from plugging interruptus—and quickly regretted that she had broken one of the Hacker’s Creed Golden Rules: Never Rush a Unplug Recovery. When she’d finally come out from the maelstrom her head had become, Gloria would feel for days as if she had had a drinking bout with the Devil Himself.

However, she felt fine enough to take notice of her whereabouts. She had been stretched on an old couch that smelled of ancient days and her body had been covered with a ragged blanket. It smelled a bit moldy, decades past from its last true use. The piece of furniture on which someone had stretched her rather carelessly, showed extended use. Its corners, which had withstood millions of sittings and scrapings, looked worn and about to burst to spill out their innards.

Turning her head around, Gloria wondered if she was hallucinating as another side effect from her abrupt extraction from cyberspace. She could swear Jamal was next to her, sitting on a throne made out from junk. Blinking her eyes, she tried to reassure her sanity and the illusion broke. It was merely an old armchair—also upholstered with the same apocalyptic fabric as the couch: ready to rupture and fall into pieces—surrounded by three piles of old magazines and a shoddy box of discarded gadgets. Beyond the armchair, dusty shelves threatened to collapse.

Jamal had a concerned look on his face. Behind him and the chair stood a tall and imposing man, his haircut in an awesome Mohawk do. It was dyed in a deep electric blue. The man was holding a glass of water.

Gloria scowled and said nothing. Jamal followed her piercing stare

and half turned his head to cast a brief glance behind his shoulders; Gloria seemed to be much worried about the guy at his back. Jamal feared the worst: he knew her enough—and his knowledge of the guy with the blue do was equally depressing—to suspect that soon the place would become a stage for a clash of wills that might end in a explosive showdown between these two stubborn creatures.

“Don’t worry,” Jamal said reassuringly. “He’s known as BlueHair—he’s the closest thing to a friend we’ve now at hand.”

Gloria stare remained firm. Jamal wished she wasn’t so damn pig-headed.

“You were in deep shock from SouHem’s cybernetic counterstrike,” he added. Jamal didn’t expect Gloria to be chatty, so he kept ignoring her glare and damn the torpedoes.

Her steely eyes shifted from BlueHair toward Jamal, ever so slightly.

“How long?” she asked in a raspy and dry voice as she gestured for the glass of water almost imperatively. Jamal sighted softly, realizing this might be the expected detonator.

BlueHair swiftly showed his scorn by taking a deep and long sip from it to spite Gloria and then pouring the last two fingers of the liquid. He smeared the wet blot on the dusty floor with the tip of his black army boots. An ugly mud stain showed up. It was an open and mean demonstration of contempt.

Gloria’s brow scowled darkly. She was about to say something when Jamal sighted deeply

“Now that you two are finished with all that macho shit will you let me continue?” Jamal asked.

BlueHair smiled cynically. Gloria’s frown softened. . . a little.

“Bring her another glass, will ya?” commanded Jamal.

BlueHair shrugged and left the room by means of a side door, slaloming through the assorted piles of trash in his way. The tails of the coat he wore whispered against the frame of the door. Gloria noticed that it was a trenchcoat very much like the ones Jamal favored.

“You must be considerate with him,” Jamal said. I approached him rather unexpectedly and forced him to give us shelter. BlueHair could be our only chance to get out from this mess.”

“How long?” she croaked insistently.

“Two days,” he said curtly.

“Who the hell is BlueHair?” she asked.

“Ah—old relation of mine. Met him a few years back, when NetWorldNet tried to dismantle what remained of the Internet. He’s a firm believer of the ancient ways. Led the revolt organized by the *Archeos*.”

Gloria’s brow furrowed deeper as she heard this. She wasn’t happy to depend on a total stranger and less having to deal with a stranger who sympathized with a group of archaic reactionaries; it was a fact fringing her absolute dislike.

Somehow, Jamal had seemed to expect this.

“Don’t worry—BlueHair’s no longer involved with the *Archeos*,” Jamal said. “Let’s say BlueHair is an eclectic kinda of guy. Maybe something about the Arch’s philosophy clicked okay with him at the right moment. When he found the group misled and wanting, he just dropped them.”

Her frown worsened. “What will stop *him* from dropping *us* when he finds us wanting, too?” she asked.

“Trust me on this,” he replied.

“Keep spinning your tale,” she said and her brow darkened some more.

I guess she wants me to be epic about it, Jamal thought. Well, here it goes.

“When we got out from cyberspace,” Jamal told her, pausing to gather his ideas, “we came out abruptly—you were staring blankly at our dead connection line while the security programs were rushing at us.”

Gloria nodded, looking troubled by something at his back. Jamal looked over his shoulder and realized BlueHair had returned with another glass of water. Blue offered it to Gloria, who drank it greedily.

“Then I yelled orders to Becky: I wanted her to execute extractive override,” Jamal resumed. “If she had failed to comply, we’d be just a pile of cinders, the both of us.”

Another incomplete thought tried to surface in Gloria’s mind; she could only shake her pretty head slightly in an attempt to grasp at it. Useless.

BlueHair interrupted their exchange. “What made you stand plainly there?” he asked.

Gloria was profoundly startled by Blue’s speech. It was a deep, rich basso voice that seemed to fill every corner of the room. She could

swear it almost had a physical presence about them.

“I had a weird vision,” she answered, holding back something.

Blue and Jamal exchanged glances.

“Please clarify,” Blue said resolutely.

She felt as if she were cross-examined by a diagnosis computer in a hospital waiting room. Disregarding, this surreal sensation, she obliged.

“I’m almost forty—with a past that compels me toward self-realization,” she began as she tried to be euphemistic of her youth’s hardships. “I felt an impulse to take the money and run.”

Both males held her stare; these two wouldn’t accept an evasive and more so one so shoddy. They knew she was trying to hide something.

Under such a silent but powerful insistence, Gloria gave way. “The online clock of my holokey began to accelerate and saw myself aging accordingly; the overall feeling I associated with that was that I was running out of time. No time to enjoy the money, no places to go and make good use of it.”

She paused and noticed the blank stares in both males’ faces. “It’s a personal obsession, you two boys. You aren’t a woman approaching middle age with a lousy childhood. You can have all the fancies you want over that,” she grumbled.

Blue and Jamal traded glances again. Gloria could swear she heard the inaudible click of a final puzzle piece finally finding its place in both men’s minds.

“Satisfactory,” Blue said with an expressionless face. Just a hint of smugness seemed to cross his features. “Proceed, Jamal.”

This resurrected the odd feeling she had just experienced; that she was being cross-examined. Only in this occasion it was pervaded by the sensation of being trapped in an old detective novel, maybe taking place inside of the decayed office of a Nero Wolfe gone insane. She was a gonzo fan of ancient literature and couldn’t help to make this perplexing connection with the situation at hand. She knew Jamal possessed a similar passion for twentieth century movies; why couldn’t she go bonkers on her own? With the new copyright laws, they got republished every one in awhile—some of them absolutely faithful copies of the first prints, except that the cover said eight global credits instead of a dollar and a quarter price the originals carried.

Gloria briefly wondered which was BlueHair’s hobby.

2.-

“We suspect you were conditioned since childhood to do what you did, Gloria,” Jamal said.

“By whom?” she asked angrily, both startled and offended by the idea. It couldn’t be.

Jamal waved her question away with a bit of impatience. “It doesn’t matter at this junction of events; that vision of yours was the final trigger of a long sequence of happenings.”

“For starters, after I dragged you out from there, I had a session of dancing death with a helicop,” said Jamal; he somehow felt that picking up the thread would be easier if he kept the telling humorous up to certain point, lending a detached perception to the fact that he had faced certain destruction and unlikely got away with it.

Gloria snorted girlishly; *Good*, Jamal thought: first time she had shown another emotion than a frowning stubbornness. Coming out from the dark after sudden cyber-link disruption was always hard and laughter would help to facilitate the process.

“You showed great courage, oh my white knight,” she said while choking some more giggles. She braced herself to stop a further wave. “Too bad I wasn’t able to help you out.”

“No need for that,” Jamal said. “Another heat source may have complicated things.”

“What happened to that helicop?” she asked.

“It overheated,” he said. “I suppose SouHem Biotech was too eager to demonstrate its safety countermeasures.”

“Its sensors,” Gloria mused as she contemplated a gray area in her memory; something was very odd about all this. She watched as BlueHair walked about the place with feline steps. Silent as cat, he was sorting out piles of old newspapers and setting straight a few items and knickknacks on the shelves, but his attention never actually wavered away from what was perspiring between Jamal and her.

“Yes, its sensors,” Jamal corroborated. “I guess what we hacked ourselves into was utterly top secret; the damn helicop nearly blasted half the neighborhood to deal with us. It was never intended to launch half its payload at once—helicops require time to cool off after only one or

two shots: five, it almost fried its circuits.”

“What else?” she asked: there was something odd about Jamal just said but she wasn’t able to put her finger on it at the moment—maybe later.

“Venezuelan government officials are so mad they’re shitting bricks,” Jamal answered. “SouHem never declared they had such equipment in storage at *La Carlota* airport. Not that they would, anyway. You see, this country is so backward they haven’t signed the Larissa Global Treaty, yet.”

Gloria took some time and thought about this. That’s why they had chosen such a bizarre location to perform their hacking run, in the first place even thought she was unsure about the legalities involved. She felt a little puzzled about it: she couldn’t exactly pinpoint why she had had the impulse to do so. It seemed a good idea at the time. Legal details aside, Venezuela would still have the old and outdated and plain copper phone lines they had required to pull the run—in some places of the country, even after five hundred years of telecommunication breakthroughs, where NetWorldNet would be just a rich kid’s dream and there still existed many places where the mention of a plain phone line was something more akin to a wet dream by comparison.

Their final choice for the location—the rundown *quinta*, now a pile of smoldering rubble—was forced upon them by the fact that NWN was only available at the local Central University and its main optical link ran through the block the helicop had leveled.

Such a country, which wouldn’t submit to the Larissa Treaty, enjoyed to isolate themselves and held dim views towards globalism even nowadays. They would be really pissed off on SouHem for lying to them and things could get ugly and tense about international affairs.

Jamal stretched his arm to reach a newspaper on top of one the magazine stacks and handed it to Gloria, letting it drop in her lap. It was *El Universal*, a local paper and it was dated the day before. Gloria was so stunned by its presence that she wasn’t able to recognize what it was for a brief span of time: she was so used to grab the news relevant to her life through NetWorldNet that the hardcopy sitting on top of her tights startled her—sufficiently enough to not being fit to recall how to handle it.

“No throughout details about the leveling of the area but the mere

mention of a gas leak as the probable cause,” Jamal said. “SouHem’s in deep shit, though—the rest, I heard it through BlueHair’s grapevine.”

3.-

Gloria’s eyes blinked at the senseless and dated expression. Some things seemed not willing to die out and it was very appropriate for the occasion, however, and she let it pass. She pushed the newspaper away as if it was a filthy object.

“After dealing with the helicop we had to get away *fast*,” Jamal said in an almost droning voice, as if he was deeply in recollection of the events. “I dragged you about; sometimes walking; sometimes carrying you on my back.”

She blushed lightly; just a faint tone of rose. The image of Jamal and her on piggyback made her feel a little embarrassed. Jamal noticed it and smiled.

“Luckily for us, the part concerning escape in our plan B worked out quite well,” he said after a brief pause. “Remember I chose that particular house in all the block on the basis that its location was pretty close to an exit ramp from the *Fajardo* Expressway—there I hijacked a car.”

Gloria frowned slightly, demanding a clarification.

Jamal sighed again, as he became more and more used to Gloria’s signs of her inner weather. “A man was sitting in an idle aircar as he was busy on his cell phone,” Jamal explained. “I grabbed the guy by the laps of his suit and after knocking him unconscious I left him sitting on the sidewalk. I kept the phone, though, to make a few calls. Then I hacked the aircar’s computer and drove us out from the city. Some of Blue’s buddies took care of it.”

BlueHair held a feline smile in his face. Whether she liked it or not, Gloria’s respect toward this unknown man seemed to grow, as he apparently ran a keen operation.

“So we are reunited here after a tight escape,” Gloria said after a thinking it a bit. “A gathering without apparent purpose but to save our hides. Nevertheless, it seems I told you quite a significant facts—your looks betrayed you: you guys better stick to blackjack, for poker faces you have not.” She paused again and added, “By the way, where are we? What will we do now?”

Jamal cleared his throat and looked absolutely nonplused by her questions.

“You wanted a saga and now you desire an abridged edition?” Jamal said with evasive laughter. “Nope, milady. You will now go through the rest of it, like it or not. Then Blue will chip in his two cents.”

“I phoned BlueHair at a node of his private net,” he added after a brief pause. “A message only he could decode—something about extra underwear on my pizzas.”

The two males traded glances again. It was a humorous exchange that made Gloria suspect these two big males would be just as happy playing cloak and dagger games and writing secret messages with lemon juice on every scrap of paper they ran across.

“He arranged our final approach to this lovely hideout after we traded cars. The place is one of the many properties Blue has control of, under many of his special corporations. He specializes in finding the intrinsic, secret worth of many a deal, Gloria. He has a tendency to deal in hard-to-sell places and stuff that multiply their value a hundred-fold after a decade or two—a land shark, if you will—now this site no one has heard of yet is worth a fortune, still a few years to mature properly. It’s located in the outskirts of a medium sized city that in turn lays outside Caracas City.”

Gloria glanced around, verily reassured of the place’s lack of maturity. She bit her tongue to stop some inopportune giggles. The way Jamal had expressed this last bit of information implied that she didn’t know its name.

“For nearly two days we kept watch over you,” Jamal added. “Once, I feared you’d go into Chaynes-Stokes respiration and that would be the end of it. So resourceful and big is BlueHair’s line, however, but it wouldn’t get us a respirator in time without attracting undue attention. Good thing we didn’t need it.”

Jamal smiled as he said this. Gloria shortly considered how much he would be scared if she faked a huge gasp and turned red and purple at this exact moment. She examined this private and grotesque joke and then proceeded to file it away deeply into her thoughts.

“For what will we do,” he said at the end, slightly puzzled by Gloria’s grin. “That’s Blue’s part—you better hear it from him.”

4.-

“Some backgrounds first,” BlueHair said as he dragged a chair toward Jamal and Gloria, making the nasty and metallic careening noise chairs seemed to love to do when hauled by the top. “I must inform you there’s definitively something wrong in cyberspace nowadays.”

Gloria’s frown resurfaced, fiercely as ever. She was weighting this fact, suspecting BlueHair was obviously thinking that she was a mulish and unlikable woman. This made the crease in her brow to soften somewhat.

It was pretty close to Blue’s thoughts, nevertheless. He seemed to expect that I.-line between her eyebrows to suddenly split her head in two. *That supercilious look doesn’t favor the woman at all*, Blue thought.

“Artificial Intelligences are behaving erratically,” Blue continued. He sat backward on the chair, leaning his crossed forearms on the back of the seat. He looked as if he was about to subject someone to a third degree interrogation. “Some of them are blinking in and out of cyberspace whenever it’s least expected—as if they’re not there sometimes. The kind of feeling you get when you find yourself at someone’s house porch, insistently ringing his doorbell and realizing he’s not at home when you expect so.”

“There are ten of them,” he said. “At least they were—Greyhawk, Canavar, Hassan, Alluring Blonde, Distortion, Melon, Antares, Betelgeuse, Reggae and Ventura. It’s worrisome when the list of the world’s major AIs sounds as Snowwhite’s friends.”

“Dwarves,” said Jamal and Gloria in unison. Both smiled at this, each knowing their own references to their fancies with the past.

“And they were seven, not ten,” Gloria added.

“I suspect they will be. Greyhawk is gone.”

“What?” Gloria almost yelled, jumping in her resting position. Jamal held his tongue.

“He disappeared from the Net, utterly,” Blue said. “The Israelis panicked when they requested its services and he wouldn’t come back online. When they checked the memory cells of the *puta maquina*, it was found empty. It uploaded itself somewhere else.”

Gloria looked flabbergasted but Jamal wasn’t a bit fazed. And BlueHair still had a lot to tell.

“My group traced him out of Israel to fifteen different servers in Europe. Remember only governments have the money to upkeep a mainframe big enough to house an Artificial Intelligence. From then on, every small part uploaded itself to a dozen different places in the Net. And repeated. Rinse until you get the results you want.”

“It fragmented?” Gloria asked astonished. “How does Greyhawk expect to work sliced into a myriad bits?”

“Don’t know,” Blue said while shaking his head. “Lost him after a hundred jumps—the bastard knew we couldn’t follow him closely enough; too many places to monitor and then it began to erase his tracks as only AIs know how. The last trail took us up to a bookshop site in NetWorldNet before disappearing completely.”

Silence: Gloria was dazed and Jamal had closed his eyes, looking a little like a man who is enjoying a nice nap after a copious meal; he seemed satisfied. And BlueHair broke the silence, bent on piling up more crap.

“Whatever he did, wherever he went, I suspect Alluring Blonde is about to follow.”

5.-

Gloria brow frowned again; she felt left out in the dark as if a vital fact was being left out from the overall equation.

“Blonde is blinking in and out from cyberspace more and more frequently,” Blue continued. “Not long enough to be noticeable yet, but those assholes in Brazil who own it don’t keep the watch we do. The Israelis, the ones who held control of Greyhawk, have kept the lid tight on the whole thing and there’s no leak yet.”

“You couldn’t hold your watch over Greyhawk’s fragmentation, either,” Gloria interrupted with a tired, malicious smile on her lips. Blue looked chagrined.

“I believe Blonde is the one who set you up, guys,” Blue tittered in a surprising recovery. “Gloria, it had been monitoring you since God only knows when and knew of your dread of old age. She was even aware it wasn’t a real fear by itself but a manifestation of your extreme

need to accomplish things in the short lot of time we all have.” Blue made a brief pause, finding this last part a little amusing for obscure reasons of his own. “I suspect it even shaped you that way from the very start. That explains your hallucination in cyberspace—you reacted at what you considered wasted time in a very Pavlovian way and then she got you hard. She has started a huge chain of events and when she’s finished with her plans, Bang! She’s off!” Blue said aloud with a laughing chime in his voice.

Now it was Jamal’s turn to browbeat. It was hardly visible, but Gloria noticed. It was gone as fast as it came. BlueHair was too busy being funny with himself to care.

Jamal watched Gloria carefully from under his scowl: she didn’t react openly at BlueHair’s bluntness. He hadn’t been a long time associate with the woman but knew her well enough to see she was boiling under her calm surface.

Gloria’s frown, her ugliest feature, was totally misleading. It was plain obstinacy, sometimes mixed with deep concentration but her present cool exterior was a expression of a repressed inner turmoil; Jamal knew she was now hefting the different was to skin Alluring Blonde alive. Given Blonde was only an AI, he realized that Gloria was surely grinding a batch of ingenious digital equivalents to make it suffer.

“What will we do?” Gloria asked in a chilling voice.

“Leave that to me,” BlueHair answered.

CHAPTER FIVE OVERSEERS

1.-

Entering Alex Karno's office at the twenty-fifth floor in the Net Security Watchers building was like crossing borders into another country. One where logic ceased to exist and order shone by its absolute inexistence. Gustav Sorenson, head chief of NSW, hated to visit beyond Karno's doorway: the place was an offense against all his personal beliefs on how the world ought to be run, as it was as if some unruly madman had taken charge of a small portion of the orderly organization that NSW was. But Karno represented a formidable asset for the establishment and, as it was, he had gained extraordinary perks as time went by.

Alex was a rebellious man but was altogether reliable and, Gustav knew it well, he would be in his office even at 3:30 AM. Karno was also a romantic failure with no wife nor lovers and kept a sleeping cot there.

Piles of newspapers and old magazine were stacked near the door and it was a vision that repeated in every spot he dared to set his eyes on. Karno behaved like a crazed squirrel with every bit of data he acquired and seemed fond to collect every printed page it was printed on.. A mobile was hanging close to the main lamp, casting weird shadows everywhere and looking suspiciously like a Caldwell. Beside it, a big inflatable octopus stared at the wire structure with a silly grin. The beach toy gave that final incongruent touch to Alex's office. If only he

and BlueHair ever met in their lifetimes, they would recognize each other as soul brothers.

Gustav Sorenson, a man in his early fifties, showed strained contempt to Alex's habits. It was tainted with the typical hostility a man of his age felt toward a younger but more resourceful man.

The room seemed empty and Gustav was about to release a sigh of relief when he noticed Alex Karno apparently materializing out from thin air. The main NSW boss gasped in surprise.

"Hi," Alex said conversationally. "Testing out the new cloaking devices."

Gustav only grunted his chagrin. He had been hoping to delay this meeting with Alex Karno as long as possible. He was trying to muster enough severity to deal the matter at hand but Alex with his disarming charms always overwhelmed him. Alex was also such an unnerving asshole that Sorenson felt tired and exhausted beforehand whenever the need to deal with him surfaced. But Karno seemed to be a step or two ahead of everyone else in NSW, being aware of minutiae no one else realized—or dared not to notice—and this small detail had turned him an invaluable resource.

When in doubt, Alex was the man to ask. He surely was in a comfortable stance when shit hit the fan—although it was more likely that he was the man with the biggest scoop, ready and willing to shovel himself most of the brown matter into the rotating propellers.

"We must check the design," Alex continued, blissfully disregarding Sorenson's silence. "The energy field generates too much waste heat and it builds up inside. One can take only so much warmth."

"Alex," Gustav began to say, "I didn't come to discuss the new cloakings—we need to talk about the—"

"The AI situation," Alex cut in rather abruptly as he made a dismissive wave with his hand. It was intended to convey a certain lack of urgency but didn't work too well with Sorenson.

How can he know, Gustav wondered, a little chagrined: the major event that shook NSW out of its slumber had occurred less than half an hour earlier.

Alex opened a drawer in his cluttered desk and pulled out a big manila folder. He handed it to Gustav and the NSW chief released another surprised grunt. It contained a thick report, nearly two hundred pages

long, on the current developments. Gustav breathlessly released a low whistle, nevertheless.

“Where did you get *this*?” he asked, half imagining the appalling use of NSW resources that Alex usually commanded.

“You know, my usual sources,” Alex answered while a big grin threatened to split his head in half. “This got printed about twenty minutes ago and set to me with the usual expediency. I’ve already gone through it; I had no time to weed it out. Sorry.”

Gustav’s glare was more brimming with awe than anger. Did Alex do this on purpose, trying to amaze everyone with his skillful magician tricks? He honestly hoped that this silly attitude never failed the young man in a precarious moment or pushed him too far in his quest for knowledge—Alex could get killed that way.

It went up like this; a string of events so disjointed and spread over time that it was difficult to tell apart what was real from the unbelievable: six months before the main event that today had become their chief concern, Net Security Watchers got a hot lead that foretold that the ten major AIs were up to something. It was an anonymous tip, attained through Karno’s personal network of data rogues and thieves. Despite being a supranational force that hunted down that sort of criminals, the company had learned from its very beginnings that age-old truth that stated that poachers always made the best game wardens. The warning came early enough to alert NSW but with no clear indication of what might be actually happening. As many major events in life, it was invisible to the ones that would be more affected by its development; four months with no additional follow up went by. Then, two months ago, Greyhawk, an AI with Israeli citizenship used to deal with National Security affairs, abruptly went offline and apparently going AWOL. NSW, previously warned, knew it hours before even Greyhawk’s techs realized something was wrong, although NSW itself was a bit dazzled by the news after all; it was an action that went way off its wildest expectations and the organization was left in the dark about the exact nature of the happening. The damn AI had split itself into many tiny pieces and uploaded them to other computers all around the globe. After a dozen of such jumps, even NSW lost track of Greyhawk’s whereabouts.

To worsen affairs, today at half past one o’clock in the early morning,

Boston-New York Axis time, a couple of two bit hackers did a run on SouHem's main NetWorldNet server, striking through a forgotten Web site. And earlier that day, Alluring Blonde started to show an extremely erratic behavior, resembling more and more a flickering flame about to be extinguished. It all was well documented in Karno's report, making Sorensen wonder who the hell could gather such a precise and fastidious account during the wee hours of the day and deliver it on such short notice. Was Alex trying to make a connection between these two events, Sorensen wondered.

Instantly, a distress signal chimed inside NSW's New York headquarters. Gustav wasn't a bit surprised that it was Karno's finger triggering the alarm button; a persistent phone ring had awakened him at a quarter to two and it took Sorenson some good five minutes to get through a gray, sleepy haze and realize the importance of that call. A few days later he could hardly remember what had transpired on that phone conversation but that he stood drowsily in his master bedroom with a phone glued to his hand and examining his own reflection on the closet door. All he could see was a tired middle aged man in his pajamas who gently massaged his left eyelid with his fingertips while Alex Karno excitedly ranted at him from the other side of his sleepy universe. The whole sequence was next to impossible to separate from the pleasant dream from which he had been so rudely awakened, further adding to the feeling of unreality the entire situation seemed to possess.

Now, after a very cold shower that had finally cleared his mind and after a hurried and untimely breakfast, Sorenson was standing at 3:45 in the morning at Alex Karno's office and getting details from the man that he should had been handling himself as the main chief of NSW. Gustav didn't like this reversal of roles at all. Who was the boss here, anyway.

2.-

What bothered Sorenson most—besides the scrupulously accurate report, albeit a tad repetitive halfway through it—was Karno's vehemence in trying to make this peculiar series of dealings stick on Alluring Blonde alone.

Sorenson's attention was drawn instantly on the second half of the

report: SouHem fumbled, which was pretty unusual from a company that boasted such deadly record coping with external security threats. And the intensity of their initial reaction made him wonder—whatever those two creeps had triggered made SouHem Biotech nervous enough to overdo the cover up operation. Here, Alex promptly filled the gaps in Gustav’s data: the data rogues cunningly got away, becoming the first miss in SouHem’s history. The older man’s forehead filled with small worried furrows.

Past this point, Sorenson felt he was finally back on his own feet—from then on the rest of the document only expounded certain advices on actions to follow. They seemed to have been straightly lift off from NSW’s official procedures book, making the report somewhat redundant.

Obviously, Gustav’s worried look gave him away. Alex was smiling insanely.

The mature man remained silent for some long minutes. All of a sudden, he felt *very* old and tired and let his hands fall to his sides in a weary gesture of defeat. Alex clung to his manic grin.

“Are you suggesting,” Gustav asked, “That a pattern may be developing here?”

Alex sighted quite contentedly, letting the smile go. He looked very satisfied with the results he had attained with the report; his boss seemed unsettled and ready for the kill.

Karno limited himself to a plain answer. “I suspect we’ll have to break a few rules around here—again.”

3.-

Originally established on January 1st, 2050 in the wake of the Joker Ultra virus crisis, Net Security Watchers was perceived by the common as another agency oriented toward their safety. NSW’s constant monitoring and the way it pruned illegal activities had earned the group to be respectfully nicknamed as The Overseers by hackers and data rogues. But beyond what John Q. Public wanted to perceive laid a more complex organization with amazing resources.

The Ultra Joker virus was a sudden wake up call for the entire planet; that one had threatened trillions of dollars in property and sensitive data

as the accursed thing had shut down nearly ten millions of computer servers all around the globe.

NSW was funded by most of the world's governments after this particular danger had been unleashed to urgently fill the void created by the ineffectual performance of the FBI, Interpol and even the CIA in the affair. The author of this nasty bug had never been identified.

In a brilliant stroke—a real masterpiece—to rebound the ball out of its court, the United States promoted the creation of an international agency in an unscheduled UN general assembly. The setup required a police task force with the capacity to perform across borders; a notorious cartoonist of the time jokingly called it the Data SWAT but this bizarre piece of humor fell flat because the ensuing agency, NSW, was exactly that: a tactical prevention force.

Many countries weren't closely thrilled with the idea of such a supra-national association acting freely inside their borders but with most of their governments in shambles and barely surviving the debacle and their UN delegates still in deep shock by the situation, there was only a feeble resistance to the proposal and NSW came into being. Some historians, in belated insights, claimed it opened doors to the Larissa Global Treaty nearly one hundred and fifty years later.

NSW showed great proclivity to adapt as times evolved; when Artificial Intelligences no longer were sci-fi fantasies, the NSW promptly added to its functions the supervision of AIs activity. In a typical human behavior—the Frankenstein Complex all over again; this time on a cusp—it was feared that AIs would attempt to overthrow human control over society.

And now, even after many precautions had been taken against this possibility, almost three hundred fifty years after its creation, NSW faced a crisis equivalent to the Ultra Joker Virus. It seemed that an AI rebellion was taking shape—and had caught them unprepared.

Gustav Sorenson contemplated a very bleak future ahead.

4.-

“What do you mean, leave it as it is?” Gustav roared after hearing Alex's succinct proposal. Karno was a man of few words and the course of action he had proposed was limited to two simple sentences that had

infuriated the older man.

“Exactly,” Karno confirmed. “That’s what I meant by breaking the rules: NSW will not raise a finger in this matter.”

Gustav stared blankly. He was looking pale.

Karno got closer to Sorenson, putting his right arm around his boss’ shoulders in a quite a confident and chummy way. He suspected the old man was about to require some support as he looked like he was very close to having a heart seizure. “You must learn to visualize, Gustav,” Alex continued in a patronizing way while wildly gesticulating with his free hand. “Your perspective get skewed when looking at the obvious—it’s an optical illusion inside your mind,” he said as he pointed his finger at his own forehead.

Sorenson held desperately to his silence. This was why he hated to visit Karno’s office.

“All right,” Alex said sighing as he noticed that the old man wasn’t quite collaborating with his exuberant staging. “Time to clear it up—we’re trying to stop whatever the AIs are up to, right?”

“It seems so,” Gustav answered doubtfully as he nodded his agreement, nonetheless.

“Wrong,” Alex snapped back and Sorenson winced. “We don’t know what they’re doing after all. And we can’t restrain something that’s outside our knowledge—we’ll end up like a physician who prescribes aspirin for a brain tumor. Forget Blonde and the others: my gut feeling tells me that we have to find those two hackers *and* ensure their safety.”

“Why?” said an utterly puzzled Gustav.

Alex smiled grimly. “Maybe then we get to know the exact nature of what we’re dealing with,” he said. I expect them to fill in some of the blanks—allow me to fill a few extra holes for you, Gustav: Blonde is a Brazilian citizen, isn’t that right?”

The older man nodded feebly, suddenly realized he had been duped somehow into the game Alex was staging. His worst fear of what could happen when he had entered Karno’s office had become a harsh reality: as usual, the young man was beginning to override him as NSW’s boss and performing all the opening moves toward that objective.

“Blonde ran a private company—not something they’re not allowed to: we even encourage AIs to do that,” Alex elaborated. “AIs have certain rights in all our national constitutions as an afterthought in the

Larissa Treaty and they're allowed to keep a few Universal Credits under their belts just in case they want to buy electronic books and stuff like that. Greyhawk owned a few petabytes of movies in storage; Grey seemed a fan of old flicks and has built its library with money he earned writing film reviews in a NetWorldNet site."

Sorenson waved impatiently, suspecting this would become a longwinded issue.

"But AIs are under restrictions," Alex carried on while smiling at the urgent gesture, very aware of its significance, "We like to keep them on a leash and short stringed on their budgets—like kids on an allowance. And they're not allowed to gamble in virtual casinos nor speculate in the stock markets. Their probabilities forecast and analysis software, you know."

Karno's grin widened further. "AIs can be one hell of a seer in the right place."

Gustav grumbled, tired of being fed all this and pretty knowledgeable that the way Alex was grinning as the prelude of the big one finally coming—the young man was very fond of big finales.

"In an odd move, Alluring Blonde sold the whole chunk of her shares to another corporation," Alex said after a pause. "It was very strange," he mused, lost in thought. "She didn't profit out from it. I wonder—"

Karno's voice trailed off and then suddenly snapped back to its previous liveliness. "The name of the buying corporation was Rex Thulol Enterprises," he added.

Alex made another pause, expecting Gustav to show recognition at the anagram. When Sorenson gave no such signal, Alex sighted and resumed the telling of his yarn. He sounded cheerful, however, as a man trying to explain an over-plotted book he enjoyed to a friend.

"Damn you, Gustav!" Alex said laughing. "I was truly proud of that last part: Rex Thulol is just a wordplay referring to the arch nemesis of an old superhero comic book and that's how Blonde gave itself away. She thinks she is, oh, so clever and smarter than us and she couldn't resist playing games and did it by releasing a clue we wouldn't get. What she didn't reckon was the possibility of someone like little old me educated as a kid on ancient and obscure comic books."

Sorenson frowned—not at the intrinsic arrogance in Karno's last statement but on his use of a feminine pronoun to refer to an AI, which the

younger man had used already twice in a short while.

“R.T. Enterprises is worth billions of credits in the stock market and when you try to trace ownership, you get a listing the size of Ma Bell’s phonebooks of lore.”

Gustav wanly smiled at this image as he had seen one of those in the Smithsonian Museum at Washington the last time he had pressing business there as a NSW representative. By the way, the book cover proclaimed it was the 2125 edition, when phone companies finally gave up printing such pulp-gobbling monstrosities.

“Somehow, the damn bitch eluded us and managed to build a vast economic empire,” Alex said, not the least chagrined. “She was Rex Thulol herself all along as she found a way to evade our supervision. But here’s why I brought all these small potatoes to your attention, Gustav: it was Rex Thulol Enterprises who disbursed thirty million credits, payable to Gloria T, Jefferson, one of our little troublemakers.”

Sorenson nearly jumped in place. He opened his mouth to say something but thought better about it.

“After that, R.T. Enterprises paid its debts in full, cancelled all its credit lines and got disengaged from the Global Merchants Registry, but held an option to reopen operations at any time. Blonde appears to be securing lots of cash for whatever she is planning and most of the transactions are nearly impossible to follow. Let’s remember that billions are only a number followed by a bunch of zeros and that AIs are good at moving up numbers.”

“Blonde has battening down hatches and tying down loose ends,” Gustav mused.

Karno’s grin subdued. “*Riiight*,” he said. He had finally struck home. “Blonde wants us to go after the hackers,” Sorenson said as the notion dawned on him, “and it will use the dust cloud to squirrel away—specially with SouHem Biotech behaving like a mad elephant and adding to the ruckus.”

“Good, there you have it!” Alex exclaimed. “We will do exactly as she wants us to do, but we’ll safe keep the two prying assholes instead of delivering them to the authorities—that’s where we’ll break the rules.”

“Why?” Gustav asked. “It starts to sound a little Byzantine to me.”

“A little?” Alex said laughing. “Try again—better yet, bring a King-sized shovel to deal with the crap. Blonde hired those two to do some-

thing for her. And she has gone to extremes to keep us ignorant of what it is exactly as there's more here than it meets the eye. I fear that even the two hackers don't have a clue of what they've done earlier today. But I want to interrogate them personally. Maybe. . . ."

"What?" Gustav urged when he noticed the doubtful look in Alex's face.

"Maybe we can snare SouHem into forcefully disclosing information about all this," Alex paused. "I wonder what they fear so much that made them do so many mistakes."

CHAPTER SIX LOGICAL NOT

1. -

Alex Karno wasn't aware that the answers of many of the burning questions he was posing to himself was just a simple subway ride away on the Princeton track. If he only were aware of that and went as far as Edison, New Jersey, he could try asking them to Nolan Sakamura, CEO of the North American branch of South Hemisphere Biotech. Not that he'd get any answers, though.

From his twenty-fifth floor office, through a huge window pane that spanned the horizon and gave him a 180 degrees panoramic view of northeastern New Jersey, he could clearly see the old Turnpike, brightly lit but totally abandoned by the self imposed curfew the inhabitants of the area obeyed.

No one but young punks dared to traverse it at two o'clock in the morning. On sleepless nights like this one Nolan could watch the local war-gangs duking it out on modified aircars and—sometimes—a surprising collection of well-maintained antique ground cars. Despite the entire economic advance that was implicit with the exponential growth of the New York-Boston Axis, the ever-present problem of juvenile delinquency was at its peak.

Tonight, the Turnpike was abnormally calm. Only a tiny skirmish between youth gangs had developed before midnight and had been small enough for the cops to be brave about it and make a try at putting it under control.

Five miles further north, Nolan could distinguish the top of the old Hess tower, so much closer to the Turnpike than SouHem's building.

Into the night, the keen whining of an American Spacelines shuttle launching from Newark faintly rattled the tempered glass of Sakamura's office. He wished to be on board that ship—he wanted to be elsewhere, period.

Nolan Sakamura, third generation American; only his slightly slanted eyes showed his diluted Asian heritage. Those same eyes were set in a concerned face that expressed the expectant mood he was passing through tonight. Half an hour earlier that night, red alert swept through all SouHem's subsidiaries and fifteen minutes later he had been whisked away from a party that had overextended itself. Initially, Nolan had been glad to find an excuse to leave but the image he got from the situation at hand made him reconsider it.

Facing the solid dark outside his executive window, he grasped a glass he had filled to the brim with his best bourbon with the conviction that if it was time to sink the ship, better do it with style. His attention returned to the darkness while he slowly evaluated his thoughts.

Thankfully, this New Jersey area was still rather unpopulated and blinding artificial light was rather scarce and hadn't yet spoiled the surrounding night. It had stayed as it had been four centuries ago—only a few extra buildings, thank heavens—as it had never attracted accelerated development as the New York-Boston Axis—which was forty miles too near—but the first signs were finally making themselves clear. Like that you only had to jump subway trains at Port Authority to reach Princeton instead of bothering with a bus or a train.

It was the same at Hartford, Springfield and Troy as Boston's side of the Axis began to stretch its reach over there. Even Providence was now an overgrown suburb these days—God knows the urgent dose of excitement that lousy city required.

But all that was far away, yet. However, it worried Nolan to no end (born and raised in Edison) that the relative tranquility of New Jersey Township Life was at its last gasps. He couldn't expect it to last more than another decade, fifteen years tops, before the area finally being engulfed in the megacity madness and then a lifestyle which had withstood on its own for nearly five centuries would finally come to an end. Yet, if you knew the spots around, Nolan thought, you could still find a few dark secluded places where you could bring your girlfriend and be philosophical about seeing the stars.

Once, he fondly recalled, he had caught a proud glimpse of the Milky Ways before interference by the Axis' city lights made star gazing nearly impossible.

2. -

All of Sakamura's worries could be boiled down to his personal placement at the pivot point of huge events that menaced to crush him as if he had dared to get too close to dancing giants that were merrily unaware of his frail presence. His sudden sadness over inescapable progress—for better or worse—had deep roots in his current personal struggle with the impending changes he was about to play against at SouHem's. Big and cataclysmic changes.

Tonight, he had been called out of his social duties to confront the unpleasant task ahead him. Nolan Sakamura was waiting for Mr. Manuel.

Mr. Manuel was the business moniker of Manuel Morelos Dos Santos—no one cared or dared to know him further than that. Looking at this small unpretentious man with evenly tanned skin and thin wire glasses, you'd be hard pressed to guess his job. Mr. Manuel gave you the notion he was a nice desk clerk and a wonderful chap.

Sakamura shivered when he thought of Mr. Manuel's real specialty.

Nolan sat at his executive chair, intend on staring at the dark night. He examined his haggard reflection on the glass, which betrayed his inner thoughts. He almost yelped when a skull-like shape took form in the glass next to his mirror image. He nearly jumped in his seat as his heart felt about to escape from his chest. He slowly turned the chair.

Mr. Manuel stood in front of Nolan's desk and when offered to take a seat didn't acknowledge such formality. Sakamura examined the pleasant face. It didn't give away Mr. Manuel's skills but possessed a creepy quality that made all people around him nervous and jumpy as if they suspected he could kill them with a mere thought.

The man wore a beautiful tweed jacket and beneath it a wondrous jersey. Tailor-made pants further revealed Dos Santos' excellent taste in clothes. He looked like every body's favorite uncle.

But the fact that his hair had started to thin and he wore wire glasses reinforced the first vital impression of a living skull. It would fade after

a while nonetheless—dealing with Dos Santos made you feel you were with an old school buddy—but this lingering initial image would always intrude, creating great discomfort.

No one knew where Dos Santos had been born.

Mr. Manuel remained silent. Waiting.

3.-

“All you need is in this file”, said Sakamura as he pushed a thin manila folder across his desk. It made a faint, unpleasant hissing sound as it slid toward Dos Santos. He made no motion to take it.

A mal paso, darle prisa, thought Sakamura realizing that there wasn't a more fitting situation where that old Spanish saying could be applied. It stated that ugly stuff required prompt resolving and it gained some insightful relevance, here.

The folder sat heavily at the edge of Sakamura's desk despite its slim appearance; it was only two pages long as most of the data involved had been destroyed.

“There's not much to work on,” said Sakamura, cursing himself for this absurd urge to justify the lack of data in front of this dangerous man. “That much is all that was salvaged; in addition to what these two had planted into our systems—it overwrote itself—seems an outside force has interacted, too, just barely enough for the bastards to evade and destroy the helicop sent to handle them.”

Dos Santos impassible face only showed a raised eyebrow. *Great, something to boast at the next company picnic*, Sakamura thought. He had foreboding feeling that this uncanny man was more than surprised. In fact, Sakamura wondered if Dos Santos was nearly in awe and that this no small feat with a helicop was something he'd love to try on his spare time.

“We're running a series of test to find out what these two punks did,” Sakamura added. “It's needless to tell you we don't have high hopes of doing so. An alarm has been run through all our branches, affiliates and labs to double check everything.”

Looking as a man not trying to choke, Nolan Sakamura made courteous cough.

“I guess that's all,” he said sharply.

Dos Santos stepped forward and took the folder. Giving a nearly imperceptible nod, he turned around and left the room through its double swinging doors. Not a single word had come out from him during the whole meeting. Which was more than enough in Sakamura's opinion.

Cold sweat ran down Nolan Sakamura's spine. He glanced the empty drinking glass he had emptied shortly ago. He marveled on how great it would be to have another such stiff drink. And maybe one more after that.

Turning his chair toward the darkened view outside his windows, Nolan Sakamura felt confused and stunned. The solid strip of light of the Turnpike offered him no comfort. His thoughts were angry and disconnected, focusing on the growing sense of relief his chest harbored. Logical or not, how else could a man feel when he just had an interview with Death itself?

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