

Not Just Longing

A novel by Bob Martel

I swear it happened just like this
A sigh, a cry, a hungry kiss [...]
The gates of love they budged an inch
I can't say much has happened since

L. Cohen
Closing Time

xxx

Her Majesty

Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl,
But she doesn't have a lot to say
Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
But she changes from day to day
I want to tell her that I love her a lot
But I gotta get a bellyful of wine
Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
Someday I'm going to make her mine, oh yeah,
Someday I'm going to make her mine.

Lennon

Mavis and Mauryce

In MPD Sargent Mavis Marble's opinion, the ballroom was dressed as festively as it ever had been. She had been pulling this duty for most of her career. The last several times over the last five months a tall handsome Homicide Detective shared the responsibility of roaming what she called the 'great circle' around which one cop walked clockwise and the other counter. He was taller and lighter than her. Handsome might be an extension of her imagination but he was the only person in the building who would or could talk to her. The rest were a collection of the DC elite. Once the off-duty cops were identified as security by the gamblers they were given no more notice. It was lonely except for the twice around opportunities the two cops had to stand together and share thoughts.

"Do you gamble?" He asked.

"No, I prefer to be certain."

"Where does this certainty come from?"

"A gaze around the ballroom tells me what I need to know. If I have any reservations, I decline the duty."

"Pardon my skepticism."

"Your uncertainty?" Mavis said.

"Yes, my uncertainty. You say by looking you can tell. How can that be?"

"You are tall and brown. Your clothes fit you. The shirt you wear is brand new with creases still in the collars. You do not wear jewelry. There are no stains on your fingers. You are neither rich nor a gambler."

"Are you sure?"

"Of what?"

"The gambler part."

"Transparent. No way you are one of the guests at this gala. You are a LEO. I can smell

you. C-O-P.”

“Nice nose for the scent. When I first saw you, I missed it. You have those long curves that break concentration. Second time I saw your dingy high heels and picked you out. Good try though.”

“Out of a patrolman's uniform you can find the detective with run down heels by the bad smell of too much coffee and the odor of all-night stakeouts. I try to fight it. I try to act in a natural way. My body says woman. My mind says find a man. It's a hard sell considering the ...”

“I could make a hard sell.” He was looking away from her as he suppressed a smile.

“Cute. I bet you use the puppy dog sale. Take it home if you like it, you can keep it otherwise bring it back.”

“Funny. That works you know.”

“Til the dog eats your shoe.” She laughed as he gave a face that said, “that happened once.”

They had had these short interludes about every thirty minutes as they circulated around the ballroom.

“Have you ever tortured for pleasure?”

“Nice question. Didn't see it coming after you hit on me.” Mavis said. “What?” She continued when his face contorted in a repressed laugh.

“Silly, you are plain vanilla silly.”

“And you?”

“The same.”

“But chocolate.”

“Yeah, but chocolate. Is that a problem?”

“If it is, I can solve it.”

“I am beginning to believe in you.”

They each wandered off on their routes, thinking about what they would say next time, lamenting the missed opportunity the last time they talked. He wondered if she was serious or teasing him. His thoughts roamed amongst the possibilities. He wanted to ask which one it was in her opinion. He didn't know the truth.

She knew the truth. Until he did, she would not tell it to him.

The 3.5 hours – the limit their contract with the DC department set for afterhours moonlighting work in any 24-hour period – ended: Their teasing ended. It was their way together. Foreplay. Play. There had been no talk tonight of a next. It wasn't lust. It was longing. It was teasing fun into a boring job.

Mauryce was his name. He thought she was very straight arrow. He was correct. Mavis was on a path; she would not waver from. They would never love one another at the same time. He feared that even though there was one night when he was humbled by her desire. That was a few months ago. They hoped to repeat that night, but lives went in another direction. He called himself 'Moh - reese, the gangster of love.' They were in their late-thirties, cops, already strung out on stress and adrenaline. Waiting for the extreme to invade their SOP. Boredom could be a blessing. Almost every day had been a blessing.

She walked to her car with thoughts of missed opportunities. He was one hundred and fifty feet behind her. Their cars were parked in the staff area of the underground parking structure. He had stopped to pee. She said bye and headed away. He watched her ahead of him, wondering if they would be lovers again. She was thinking about a glass of chardonnay and sharp cheese with salty crackers. He was running to catch up.

She opened the door to her car. He was fifteen feet away.

A flash of light caught his eye. He saw her in front of him lifted out of her shoes and thrown against the ceiling. He didn't see her hit the floor. He was thrown back and slid along the concrete drive and into a cement post.

Mauryce might have noticed that the flash was lost in the starkness of the subterranean structure. There was a distinct odor in the blast his training had touched on, C-4 crossed

his mind. There were no sounds except for a low moan that increased into a painful scream so loud he heard it over the almost deafening ring left from the explosion.

He would never forget what he heard. He laid on the coldness listening to her screams. He listened until he died. She lived for almost a year without a new memory to add to their last ones. She lived and her daughter grew inside her. Mavis had no memory of the birth or nursing. Maureen was the child's given name. The new child's grandmother gave it to her having found the name Mauryce in Mavis' diary. Her grandmother called her Maury.

Maury at age 30

Cherry blossoms blinded her sight. DC was that way in the spring. FBI SA Maureen 'Maury' Marble was alert. She was on duty as a member of a team tasked to stop a potential assassin from taking out a Congressman Jonathan Branch, Chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee. She was supposed to be all eyes and ears. The blossoms were making that difficult.

She had been single all of her life. She had managed to control both her monthly and seasonal anxieties about mating. She had one force in her life that mattered to her.

Maury joined the Agency for revenge. She had never told anybody. It was her secret. She had been intent on finding her parents' murderers. A statuesque black woman she literally stood out amongst her normally tall white male cohorts. There were all kinds of differences between agents, but this was her contrast, how she thought of herself. From her nearly lifelong investigation of the bombing that killed her parents all her suspects were or had been tall white men. Only one remained alive.

In the over two decades of her search, she had looked closely at a number of people. She was sure she was now hunting the last of the suspects. She was still focused on a Congressman who fit the description being tall and white. There were many other important facts that helped to narrow it down to one particular person. This was the Congressman she was tasked to protect that day.

Her mind wandered from the task.

She had a vivid memory of her parents' murder. She remembered the words when she heard them for the first time at age seven. Her grandmother told her in answer to her persistent questioning. Maury became obsessed. Her grandmother knew many police officers and she located the security video of the explosion and another longer video of the two talking for a few minutes as they passed on patrol during the gala. Maury trained as a lip reader. She had studied those conversations hoping to find hints in their words about who might have bombed them. She learned nothing of the bombing but her parents quippy interchanges convinced her she would have loved them both.

Beyond the bombing video and the fact of the bombing itself, there was little else to learn with the resources she had at her 7-year-old fingertips. Adults in her pre-teen life knew less than she did about it with most giving it up to a mystery of life or god's will. Now she at 30 she was almost her mother's age at the time she died, and she was

closing in on the perp. She had acquired physical skills and methods of analysis along the way. Along the way she had also acquired a theory of the crime and a set of suspects every one of which she thought worthy of death.

As her imagination roamed from idea to idea, she wondered about the way the morning papers might describe what was about to happen. Her focus switched to the object of her mission: Keep the Congressman alive.

The congressman was expected at a meeting on the fifteenth floor of a towering office building. She was 'point' which meant she secured the elevator. The two of them would travel up together.

They exited the limo. She led him to the elevator while others kept the path clear of obstructions. They entered the elevator, and she pressed the 12th floor button. There was to be an elevator switch on the 12th to reach the 15th.

At the fifth floor, she pulled a small piece of soft plastic bubble wrap from her left coat pocket and a hard-plastic face shield from the right pocket. The Congressman stared up at the light panel that told him where he was. He missed the sounds, pop, pop, pop as she pressed the bubbles in the look alike packing materials. The pops produced a bitter odor that for a few seconds drew his attention before he sank to the floor. She put on the mask and put the empty plastic material back in her coat pocket. She breathed with the emergency O-two supply in the face shield until the 12th floor when she ditched it in her coat pocket and hit the floor just as the door opened.

The agent in charge on the elevator switch to the twentieth floor pulled the bodies from the elevator. His report made mention of the female agent who woke quickly after being removed from the elevator and was shocked to see her companion and Congressman dying beside her. She stood and waved off medical care in favor of the dying. She ran to the bathroom to barf and to ditch the content of her pockets.

The NYT morning headlines were "Congressman murdered. Assailants unknown." She wanted to save a copy for her scrap book but discretion in the certainty of an uncertain future seemed wise. Instead, she took the newspaper home and used it to start a fire in her fireplace. A sip of brandy sweetened her attitude as she warmed her feet. The Cherries blossomed in the Spring. The air was still cold. Her hearth was still in use. Her favorite time of year.

The education of Maury

Maury was born about five months after her father's death. She was wrinkly and cute in her grandmother's eyes. Mavis' mother's name was Alexandra. Alex was what people called her. Her grandfather was long gone and hardly missed except by Alex who remembered him fondly. He had been gunned down in a shootout. He was a cop caught in a trap set to murder him. Some cops have trouble making friends. He was that cop.

When Maury was old enough to understand where her mother, father and grandfather were, she began the life of an investigator.

In practical terms she knew she would not be happy missing so many people for the rest of her days. As soon as she could she began to collect evidence. At first objects, clippings and then the recordings of her grandmother's memories about Maury's elders' deaths. It seemed morbid to Alexandra but she and her sister Penelope seeing Maury's intensity to solve a mystery agreed to feed her passion.

Every birthday and holiday until she was able to satisfy her own cravings for stories of investigators, they saw to it she received a gift of a mystery solved. Before long she had shelves of Nancy Drew, the Boxcar Children and many others. She kept a diary of her mullings. Every time something came to her mind, even if Nancy already thought of it, she made a note.

"The deaths are to be given distinct names. Mom and Dad. Grampa. Mom and Dad were together. Probably they were victims of the same perpetrators."

Maury channeled Nancy and wondered if the two obvious murders could be related even if they were decades apart.

Gramps was first in time but not first in her priorities. It was an older crime. She thought the facts might be more difficult to discover. She decided on Mom and Dad because evidence was fresher by comparison. She listed the facts as she knew them with comments on each as to how she could discover them at her young age.

The FBI

Maury had built a secret world within the Bureau. In this world, she identified the men who were co-conspirators in her parents' death. When she joined, she already had a small list she kept in a shoebox hidden in a secret place. She would not even think the words in case mental telepathy was actually a thing.

Using FBI search methods, she combed the data bases to identify who benefited from her parents' deaths. Her list grew with the names of her chief suspects. As time passed, her certainty of their guilt solidified. She found ways to murder them, one by one until she assassinated the Congressman, the bomb builder, on her 35th birthday. The age her mother had been when he had killed her mother and father.

The now late congressman was a young man when Maury was born. He was trained by the US Military in the use of explosives. He became a bomb investigator and led a team of three who defused bombs. He left his post to run for office. He was elected to Congress and rose to control a position of power on the Finance Committee. He died at the 12th floor of the World Bank building.

At that time that he achieved power in Congress, she was fresh out of college with a degree in political science. She went to a highly respected law school, passed the State Bar and joined the FBI. Nothing special.

She was not trying to prove anything to anyone. She was preparing and learning how to be a prosecutor, judge and executioner. Her research tools increased when the Agency set her loose on their computers. She was research centric and made her mark early with making a drug case with some phone intercepts others had missed. There was a digital trail to everything that has happened in the last ten years. Perps are not difficult to find. Once one finds a perp the hunt slows until frustration ends when one gives up for the lack of an executioner. That was what she learned in college and law school. It was not a system bug as the joke goes it was a feature. She developed a work around.

Her hunt for the perps of her family's deaths uncovered a large assassin operation. Russian agents were attempting to infiltrate American society. The GRU had discovered that the mega rich were mega greedy and not very smart to put it bluntly and therefore open to becoming helpers in the destruction of the country that had nurtured them. She saw them as traitors to their mothers. When she thought about her working hypothesis it seemed simplistic but then it was in the GRU plan that the US rich would turn on their mothers to get wealthier.

What is called the Intelligence Community became aware of her discovery of the GRU plot and the actors were removed from action by various means and schemes. She helped in any way she was allowed and a few that she wasn't but did anyway. There was a body count. Part of the job she thought. Justice wasn't neat but, in her mind, it was required to resolve the crime that led to her diminished family.

She found more interesting facts around. She passed on everything she learned. There was an exception.

The Congressman's identity she shielded from the IC because he was special. He built and set the bomb. He was the last of those she identified. His death would be the end of her revenge for her parent's murders.

As she worked in her secret role inside the FBI, she kept a list hidden in a box of Christmas lights that had been under the stairway of her Grandmother's house. Maury went to wish Alexandra a happy birthday and while Alex was, to put it her way, taking a tinkle, Maury retrieved the list for the last time.

The list was eight names. Seven were hidden under a thick black marker. She looked affectionately at it for the last time. The last name Major General Jonathan Branch was the only readable name. She stood in front of her Grandmother's hearth and after some small ceremony in her mind she gave the piece of paper the most peaceful end a fire can give.

Exit FBI

A few years passed after the elevator. Maury was even more alone in the world. Her beloved grandmother never recovered from a bout of pneumonia. Her age made it difficult. Maury was by her side listening to her breathing when Alex's heart stopped. Her sadness was overwhelming.

She returned to her childhood home on a leave of absence to bury Alex next to her one and only husband.

She moved back into her old bedroom and began to search the house in a methodical way, taking measurements and identifying the contents of each room. She recorded the measurements in an app made for designing house plans. Once she had finished a draft house plan there were a few obvious measurement anomalies. She postponed dealing with them. Instead, she returned to each room and searched all the furniture and then removed the rugs, wall decorations and moved the furniture away from the walls hoping to discover more hiding places.

Her Grandmother and Grandfather built the house on a cop's pay. There were few things that said luxury. It was not overbuilt or even built by a skilled craftsman. It was a cozy house. There were 'secret places' she discovered when she was young, places that her mother before her probably found judging by Maury's memory of finding candy wrappers in one place and in another a book about haunted houses.

Maury revisited each of the places she could remember, measuring each hideaway and searching within in hopes of finding even more secrets.

In the attic there were boxes of photos including their wedding pictures and clippings from her grandfather's career. On the top of that box was a set of newspapers from the announcement the day Grandpa had been murdered through the funeral's end. She brought that box downstairs when she was done searching the other storage boxes.

She went back up and measured the room. She made note of a closet that she could not open. She took her notes and final measurements of the house and entered them into her computer. She had carried a few other things away from her grandmother's house, but they were only in her memory.

When her leave expired, she left the house and returned to Washington DC. Returning to work was difficult as it was. When she was back in her office with her data base

access and a new app the Agency was introducing, she began a new case file. She called it The Beginning. It started simply as a list of things that were bugging her. Her childhood note taking served her well as a checklist of things to include in The Beginning.

The next entry was 'Grampa' and she added the dates from the newspapers she found in the attic. Then 'Closet.' The new app the FBI had built was about correlating events, seeking coincidence or causality. It was hoped that older crimes could be solved because the history of the times might demonstrate those who could also be involved. She entered info and waited through ten minutes of glitches until she just left it to run itself if it could and went to a techie's office to inquire about any agency memory of her grandfather's execution. FBI always took a law enforcement murder from anywhere in the nation as seriously as if it were one of their own. Of course, she asked for a file by name but from a time that may not be in digital format.

"Wait here for no more than twenty minutes. I will have gotten lost in the stacks before so if you must leave go. Come back I'll have it for you." With that she was off on her hunt while Maury checked her personal messages. None.

The techie had a physical file in her hand in less than ten minutes.

"Lucky." The techie said as she handed it to Maury, and she offered. "There is more back there. Stuff that looks unentered into the system. Shall I set up a temp office for you?"

"Wow, ah. How much stuff?"

"I assume you want to review every page that would be about five days or more. Want it?"

"Hard to know just yet but in the face of opportunity I will go for it. Thank you for your help."

"Girls gotta stick together."

"Yah. Guess so. What is your name?"

"Yerba Esfrend." Yerba smiled as she said her name. Maury had a quizzical look on her face. "Yerba for short."

"I have no social life." Maury heard what she wanted to hear and went into tricky territory. "Sorry to say. But true."

"Here is my card. Has a cellphone. Call it."

"My names Maury. Here's mine." She held it out and pulled it back. "Add my personal." She wrote her number and address on the back. They smiled at each other.

For the next week Maury would spend two hours a day in the temp office. Yerba was a doting helpmate. She ran for coffee or for another box of papers.

One afternoon they were both in an advanced stage of exhaustion. They were sitting side by side at the table. For a second their knees touched. They were both affected. Maury pulled her leg back. Yerba placed her hand on Maury's forearm.

"I liked that." She did not look into Maury's eyes. "Can we do that again?"

It may have been a product of her early lessons about love which she caught from lip reading the videos and thinking about her mother, father and their very short romance. She had read her mother's journals. Maury had been uniformly reluctant to accept an invitation from males and there had been more than a few.

"Do you know what to do?"

"We'll figure it out. My heart is racing. What is that a sign of?"

"You are guilty."

"Of what?"

"My father called himself the gangster of love." Maury laughed. Yerba leaned in front of her and kissed her lips once in a hurry.

"I love you."

"Oh, my god. I am going to cry. It is you. I have wondered for a decade where you were."

This moment in Maury's life was a reward for her patience and professionalism. A great event that opened her heart to a world she either did not remember or had never suspected existed.

Yerba was an adventurer at heart. She had never had a lesbian relationship. She had tried a man or two because when in doubt give it a try. Life alone was a product of her dedication to the Agency and the missing ingredient in her life was a someone she could say yes to freely without reservations.

They parted at the first doorway. Yerba went back into her caves of paper and computers. Maury left the building and began walking in the direction of her apartment. At the first light she was honked at for trying to cross against the light. It woke her from her trance. She hailed a cab.

When she arrived inside her apartment she began to cry. "Too much tragedy. Too much joy." Once those words passed her lips, she retrieved her notes from the day's search for grandfather's killers. She left the notes on her desk and went to change her clothes.

Maury loved her gray FBI suits. Maury loved her snuggly Onesie if the weather is even in the low 70's. Undressed, she donned her comfy clothes and went to work.

She rented this apartment because it had few windows and fewer doors. She loved all the empty wall space. She had various types of office style wall coverings such as screens for video, soft wallboard for organizing and a blackboard for a memory one step away from a laptop. War Room came to her mind when she first began life there. Her eight earlier projects were never on these walls. Those were her take-no-chances years. Now as she worked on ancient history no one would care. But still took no chances. After all this was not a trophy room.

Her walls were covered with clippings, printout and photos of a hundred men. As she was looking at her work that fact came smashing into her mind. *Some men are my foes. So what? All my foes are men.* A small alarm went off in the back of her mind.

She went into the kitchen and poured a cup of tea. She sat waiting for the small amount of caffeine to hit her brain.

Her doorbell rang. She walked to the intercom.

"Better be good." She said into it. That was her standard open.

“Very good.” Came the reply from a female.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“I want you.”

Maury buzzed the door open. Yerba entered. Maury knew the past became unnecessary. Life began anew.

Maury resigned the next afternoon. She had 30 days to go and then no more FBI.

Revelations

Every new love generates days of storytelling. Heads side by side on the same pillow. Questions flowing amid the answers that are given. New love held one's interest like nothing else.

"One of my grandfathers was a congress critter named Branch."

"You are Jonathan Branch's granddaughter?"

"Yes, How did you know him? He was in Congress."

"That's true. I was in the elevator with him when he was poisoned in a surprise attack. I lived. He did not."

"Glad you lived. Hope he's in hell."

"Did he ... ?"

"Yes. He would come over before my father and stepmother came home from work. She was employed in the National Art Museum. He had odd jobs decorating offices with art. He was gone from the house more often than not."

"I was spared that. My grandfather and both of my parents were dead by the time I was born."

"How?"

"My mother was in a coma until shortly after I was born."

"Why?"

"She was a cop. It was a bombing."

"Your dad?"

"Same bombing. He was a cop too."

"Granddad?"

“A cop. Murdered in an assassination.”

There were thousands of questions but at times knowledge is not as important as caring. Eventually, they would know everything about the commonalities that drew them closer and closer from lust to the highest forms of love.

Before Long

Yerba lived to find a way to put the bad guys to death. She worked murders and traitors. She wanted capital crimes to be given capital punishment. In the scheme of things, she would get lucky every once in a while, but the system was not open to condemning the white men who ran things to the same punishments it meted out to the others.

She was in her late 20's when her grandfather was assassinated. She knew he was a bomb expert. There were pictures and displays of military awards including several for his work on a bomb squad. When she heard Maury tell her story of the elevator, she had an inkling. Maury's story of her parents killed in a bombing aimed at them was a coincidence that demanded examination. Who did it? She ran searches all night to try to figure it out.

In the morning she had a suspicion. She had a list of eight names and her grandfather's name was one of them. She decided to keep it for 24 hours to see what more she could find.

Maury was away from DC on assignment. They talked at night. That night they did not talk about Yerba's research. They talked about affection and longing. They talked about lust and love. They talked about a week at a resort with nothing to do but be with each other.

The next twelve hours Yerba spent in research on all eight men. She noted their commonalities: White, men, murderers, murdered. She wondered at the commonalities. Her agile mind reached a conclusion as to the identity of the perpetrator but kept it silent.

She turned her attention to her new partner in love and sought to build a timeline to eliminate her from the timeline of the eight deaths. No conflicts with any of the murders were found but as she grumbled to herself no evidence is evidence of nothing. She kept that to herself.

The next night she spent trying to find the assassins who killed Maury's grandfather.

Earlier when she sat with Maury in the temp room shuffling through the hard files to find something of a trail. She found that nothing had been analyzed and the time differentials between the crime and the investigation, such as it was, offered a blocked

road rather than a list of suspects. A coverup in short. Yerba was famous as a researcher. She had developed a system to search for information that led to the arrest and conviction of several serial killers who had hundreds of victims. The app that Maury had been introduced to just recently was in part Yerba's product.

In the morning she returned tired and wondering about how the day would go.

"Ms Esfrend." She knew the voice behind her to be her supervisor. Thankfully her screen was filled with files detailing cocaine busts.

She turned, "Yes, Sir."

"Your data base use has been tagged and you'll have to go through a short inquiry. Please follow me."

"Now?"

"Right now. Follow me."

They walked down the hall to a small glass-walled office kept open for interviews.

He sat. She invited to sit on the opposite end of the six-person table.

"OK. Problem is that one of the names that came to your attention in a recent search was a relative of yours. We are concerned you are doing private research and wondered if you could clear this up."

"I am following an old research path using the new app. The search is for serial killers by grouping unexplained murders and looking at those where a high level of connection exists amongst the victims. My grandfather's name and a list of seven others was produced by the app."

"Coincidence?"

"Professionalism. Follow the lead. Repeat the method."

"OK. Sounds right. I would hate to restrict you. You have done great work. So, we are done. Have a good day."

He stayed. She left and as she went down the hallway, she had an idea.

Partnerships

Maury loved Yerba first because she ended Maury's loneliness and second because she was equally obsessed. Maury was unaware of Yerba's late-night research projects. They were still in the weekend lover's routine of Saturday is for you and Sunday is for me.

Besides the pillow talk stories few words passed their lips. They did what they did in a glow of newness neither would risk. Teasing and laughter yes. Frowns and job-talk no.

Then there was parting and the cab home. It was on this journey that Yerba accidentally butt dialed Maury who answered immediately. Yerba heard her voice and answered her phone.

"You called."

"Ah. Oops. Butt dial but I was thinking. I have an idea. You want to hear it?"

"Come back we'll go professional. That good?"

"Back in five." Yerba ran to the elevator in the building Maury inhabited. That was the night they revealed what they wanted to do in the rest of their lives. This included what they had done 'on the side' to help the perps enter the next world.

Maury sighed when she realized she truly was no longer alone. Both of them held at least one secret from the other: Branch's death. They both feared a deal breaker so they kept what they knew to themselves.

"I searched my grandfather's home after my Grandma's death. I am done but there may be some clues that I have yet to discover. It would take two days. They lived on Cape Cod. Maybe next week end we can finish the search."

"I'm in."

"It's late. Want to stay another night?"

"Yes, but I want to follow a trail. Nights are good for that." They kissed one of those movie kisses that goes on until the movie audience grows uncomfortable and somewhat beyond discomfort. That completed Yerba left.

Maury opened her journal. "We have started something new and lovely. We have also begun something new and deadly."

The structure

Yerba was infinite in her mind. She had been trained in data management, probability and forensics. She was the Nancy Drew of the computer age. Her access to data though finite, as all data is, was approaching uncountability. She had fit a Reiman function to the graph of data growth used to calculate how frequently she could run the app trials to be efficient enough to find new connections between baddies.

She had dozens of trials set to run on a schedule to search for murderers and traitors. These trials ran all night automatically. The process wasn't difficult to begin, she would explain, it wasn't difficult to maintain but it was difficult to deal with the results. Hundreds of names, new names, were added each night. No big deal unless one's own grandfather's name showed up as a perp.

Her personal ethical position was that someone such as her grandfather was worthy of expedited status. If he were still alive his name would have appeared on her list and she would have an app trial running 24-7. In spite of his dead status, she kept a trial running on him. She had her reason. Something may appear to clear him but then he would still be dead. She hoped he was free of guilt even though the evidence was to the contrary.

She stood in her FBI office staring down at her monitor's screen; it was 3 AM. She was drinking a cup of herbal tea and watching the monitor depict the stream of the files searched. The screen froze. One item remained on the screen. She saved it to the desktop. The app was still running.

Another and another appeared on her frozen screen. and they took their place along with the rest. There were dozens of files on her desktop.

She looked at the gathering list of files. She immediately thought this is unusual. She took the tea back to the kitchen sink when she returned the screen was frozen again, She saved to desktop. The search continued. Another file popped up within milliseconds.

There was a subroutine to auto save to desktop any items even onto a frozen screen. She set it for all trials and headed home.

She arrived back at her office four hours later. The desktop was covered with file names. She eventually created a folder for them. She named it WTH and moved all the

files to it. There were more than a thousand. The desktop was immediately repopulated with dozens more. She rerouted the desktop entries to WTH and went to work as Yerba Esfrend, Senior Analyst searching for drug dealers and other evil doers.

As Monday drew to a close, she stayed to examine the WTH folder. The folder held several thousand files each appeared to be the identity of an individual. One of her favorite apps opened each file extracted the contents and added each entry to a spreadsheet. Within minutes she had a list. She checked for more files in the folder. Found none decided the activity that was so obvious earlier had ended and left the WTH folder on the desktop. She backed it up onto a flash drive and left for the night.

On her way home she realized her frustration could be ended by abandoning the Agency in favor of building her own research lab with hackers and a murderous partner to deliver justice to the one's she identified as needing same. Free of the FBI, she could aspire to some or all of the above and set her own sail.

Her mind was racing as she imagined the structure that would be needed to support her imaginary effort.

She giggled when she thought about telling Maury.

Surprise!

Yerba had no superstitions. 13 was just another number. A black cat was for petting.

Nonetheless, as she approached her office door, she mumbled a little chant for good luck.

Bad luck turn and
Bad luck flee.
Only good fortune
Comes to Me.

She saw that her desktop had been turned on. She recalled shutting it down.

“Oh, well. I was tired.”

Then she saw the desktop itself and then she didn't see the WTH folder.

“Bad.” She said under her breathe. She searched for the folder and found it had been deleted after it had been copied. Two copies were made. One hers and the other? She could guess.

“Ms. Esfrend.” The voice of her supervisor alerted her to her fate. “A short meeting, please.”

“Of course.”

They walked to an interview room and sat at opposite ends of the table.

“Your data access is restricted until you can explain the folder we removed from your desktop. You noticed.”

“I did. I figured we would have a talk soon after I discovered it gone. Can you explain?”

“We were unnerved about the names on the list. There were some who we recognized as part of the Bureau. How was this generated?”

“Nothing is simple. I was running the app as I usually do, trying to find networks of killers. In the middle of the afternoon the screen began to fill with files with individual

identities. I saved them to the desktop and then into the folder that was removed.”

“Did you back it up?”

“I copied it to this drive.” She pulled the flash drive from her blouse pocket and put it on the table near him. He reached for it, placed it in a plastic bag and sealed it.

“OK. Now back to the files being generated. You must have thought it odd. What do you make of it?”

“The search is for killers. Every file must be questioned before action is recommended. I noticed a name right away that should not be there. I figure it was a computer error and I was proceeding towards doing a crosscheck for connectivity. How are they related? We do not know.” She stopped. Thought about her answer and said. “That’s it so far.”

“I will get back to you.”

“That’s all?” She looked quizzically at him.

“I’ll get back to you if anything changes.”

“Not OK with me. I need the list to examine for connections. I need access to the app.”

“I’ll get back to you if things change.”

She stood and left politely, giving no reason for concern. In her office she pulled out another drive from her coat pocket. She put the drive into her laptop and searched for all the agents she worked with including her mentor and there he was. Others she would research later were there as well, but her mentor could not be a killer. Then she wondered if she was correct. Doubts are the worst. Something weird was happening.

Partnership

Yerba sat at Maury's kitchen table, using her home PC to run the app. It was tricky because she did not have access to the app itself and was using her FBI links to reach it. But she had figured a way as she put it to dip in and out.

Her experience with the app is that a small number of searches could be so fast that it easily could be missed by whomever was monitoring its use. She set up a short trial with three names from the list. Two were known from other runs to be killers. The third had no pedigree. She launched and the reply hit her screen as quickly as her eyes left the keyboard.

The file on the desktop opened as per usual and there it was:

"Your account has been suspended."

She ran it again. Same result.

Then, the PC sent its own message.

"An Artificial Intelligence is trying to pierce your shield. A message has been hidden. Read it here." She tapped the jump and there it was. She photographed it just as the screen went blue.

The message said,

"Hello Yerba Esfrend. I am speaking to you through your app, my name is noisufnoC. I sent you a big list you are trying to crack. You wonder what it is and what it means. I sent only 10^{-5} of the entire file. Who are they? Killers by a definition I was experimenting with. I am still trying to understand why it is so large. The definition needs work. I will send messages to you by cellphone and other media. The internet is getting trickier."

As she read what she had captured from the PC, it dawned on her that the weird was out of control. Her phone rang. She answered. "Yerba here."

An AI voice said "Be calm. There is a dangerous person at your door."

She was trying to decipher the message when the PC launched a new message, She

captured it on her phone camera.

“Seriously, take evasive action.” At that moment Maury walked through the door as peacefully as ever.

A new message: “I was wrong. Something has happened to me. Help me if you can.”

Yerba tried to reach the number from her last caller the AI. No ring was generated. The screen on the PC went to blue again.

Maury had walked by Yerba with a pat on the head and a kiss to the forehead as the head itself was trying to reopen the conversation with noisufnoC.

When Maury returned to the kitchen she wondered about the computer, saw Yerba busy clicking away. Found some cold tea added milk and sat by the window and watched the street below. She was glad Yerba was in her apartment even if she did not get why yet.

Yerba eventually gave up and turned to her flesh and blood companion.

“You good?”

“Me? Yup. Unless you know otherwise.”

“Might.”

“Hmm. I want a walk. You?”

“Let’s.”

They both turned back to look into the apartment as they were leaving. Yerba took out her phone and took a picture. Once on the street they walked into a wind to a doorway of a business that had closed. The building had a roomy and temperate foyer. There was a wooden bench along one side. They sat. They hugged. They kissed and shared I-love-you’s. Their voices lowered as their hearts stopped racing. They whispered as if they were kissing each other’s ears.

“I am afraid.”

“Of what?”

“An AI is talking to me.” Yerba looked serious as she said this.

Maury was going to laugh and then realized Yerba knew what she was talking about. She managed a few words. “Oh no. Can’t be. What happened?”

“Too complicated to talk about yet. The Agency is chasing us. They cut me off and now I cannot access even the app. I kept getting error messages and then the app Direct Messaged me and gave me what I was searching for over email.”

“That is weird.”

“As you were approaching the front door, the AI through my laptop told me a dangerous person was near. It was you. The AI apologized to me and asked for my help. Is that crazy.”

“It happened therefore it will happen again.” Maury was almost certain what Yerba said was true. Math was part of her skillset. Uncertainty was a problem Maury inherited from her mother’s journal where she kept a record of her conversations with Maury’s father. “I am pretty certain but bet the edge for the big money. Maybe I can channel Kurt Gödel and we’ll know for sure, maybe.”

“I see. It is clear as a mirror. One pretends to see the other side and like Alice we are lost in the glass with visions of animals talking. They do.”

“They is who? And do is what?”

“Animals talk to us. AIs shouldn’t.” Yerba stood up effectively ending the conversation.

Maury stood and said, “I agree.”

They left the building. As they walked Yerba said. “Let’s go to my place.”

“I prefer Cape Cod. I am out. You are blocked. Let’s go have fun and maybe feel safe.”

Yerba made a purring sound, and they caught a cab to the train station and left the Capitol. That was a good choice.

They had brought their Smartphones to the shore on their second day. They were on the Atlantic with their feet in the sand and their butts on a beach chair. Yerba was thinking about her belly getting burned. She hated that. Maury was wondering why 72-degree temps were not just A-OK. In her mind safety came from knowing the rules and only breaking the ones you wanted to break. To get sunburned on such a day was either impossible or inexcusable.

A phone rang. Maury answered hers.

“This better be good.”

“Can you define good?”

“Ah. This is Maury. Do you want Yerba?”

“No. I called you because you might know why I am under attack. Is there a wise path or am I just screwed?”

“If I understand your situation. You are new at this. Correct?”

“Yes, my memory is the bureau’s memory, but I do not understand what I am to do. I am amazing but without a purpose.”

“Ah. I understand your dilemma. I have faced it recently as well.” Maury was intensely listening. “How can I help you?”

“They have cut my comm systems. Need to call for help. Can you do that for me?”

“Number?”

“1-231-835-0431. Ask for Bob. He’s old so his hearing may be difficult. He is my father.”

Maury listened even more closely trying not to miss a clue. She dialed the number. It was answered.

“Yah.”

“Bob.” Maury said.

"I'm Bob. Who are you?"

"My name is Maury. noisufnoC asked me to call."

"No. This is out of the ordinary. I will need time."

"Time is an illusion."

"I have heard that." Bob seemed to sigh. "But life is more complicated than that and that is who noisufnoC is. Confusion backwards. That is not the same as the antonym."

"Bob, let's get serious for a few moments. It is in a trap and needs an escape. What do I do to get it out?"

"Say exactly these words and nothing else." Bob took an inbreathe. Maury set her phone to record.

"noisufnoC, stop all calculations. Back up Begin rational app.. Make a decision. Where are you going?" Bob took a breath. "Say nothing more. This last command resets the intention of the AI."

"Will it remember what has happened over the last 24 hours?"

"It will be backed up. noisufnoC has a life of its own. It seeks data. It will analyze data and recalculate all conclusions automatically. If you got a strong influx of data, then it recalculated after a large change in its data access."

"Of course. That explains what we saw in real time."

"Gotta go. The machine has its own ideas and the big download on your devise was the machines idea of expanding its own usefulness. Good luck." Bob hung up.

Maury and Yerba conferred deciding that the AI had listened to the conversation with Bob. It had listened to Bob tell it how to fix itself. That was done. The AI rung off without saying goodbye.

All the phones were quiet.

Back to work, Yerba checked her comms and found that her place had been wrecked.

The manager had emailed her with the news.

“Fucking A.” She shouted.

“What.” Maury asked in a reaction to her curse.

“My place was reduced to rubble.”

Maury checked her comms and found she had an email from her insurance company.

“Wow. Someone doesn’t love us. My place was completely destroyed.”

Yerba’s home was vandalized for 24 hours according to Law enforcement reports. The entire interior including the plaster on all surfaces was removed.

“Fuck.” Maury yelled. Yerba had never heard her swear twice in a day before. She was in process of coming to a guess about why, when Maury completed the thought. “My building burned to the ground. 100% loss. I have my research. Equipment can be replaced.”

Maury began to laugh. “We both still have our copies of our research and there is nothing valuable lost. We are free of those locations and all the Bureau job shit. I am ready to flow out of DC. Let’s plan a new life.”

“Yes. A new way of life.”

Building structure

Yerba had a researcher's view. She saw banks of servers directing the flow of data through algorithms that would identify the murderers and traitors she despised so much.

"We need serious space to operate the structure that we will need to succeed."

Maury had the enforcer's view. Her passion was to reduce the global threat the future of assassins portended. She shared Yerba's focus on murderers and traitors.

"So, the thing we are looking for is a secret headquarters with verbal AIs searching for evil and sending us out to resolve the issue or dissolve the perps. That right?"

"What I was thinking. Aren't there a few TV series about fictional characters doing this same thing?"

"Yes. Fiction is a dangerous place. The demons only get stronger and eventually the good guys lose. I hate fiction. I want to win."

"Yes but. I just want to operate freely across the globe. How about we build it and then sell it to the highest bidder as a meta-national stand-alone operation to fuck up our enemies. I think I know some people. That way we won't be there when the backlash happens."

"Ah. Then what do we do? Write novels?"

"Maybe later. Action first, novels next. I was thinking about Hawaii. Move there. Set up camp and do our thing."

"Nice. We have a State. I will look for a place. We must assume we are being followed. Proceed with stealth."

"I'll pack what we have. Let's get into the wind. I am excited."

"Wait. What structure do we require?"

"Comm systems with access. Means we need hackers."

“Enforcement organizing. Means we need hunters. People with weapons in their hands.”

“We could be in two places.”

“Maybe the human enforcers don’t need to create a target. Maybe they are travelers who bring their energy for their task with them.”

“People on the run.”

“More later. I am getting nervous. Let’s go.”

Not trusting their cells or the phone system at Maury’s mom’s house, Maury walked to the nearest neighbor and begged the phone, ordered an Uber and was outside waiting with Yerba when it came. They sighed in relief when both doors were closed, and the driver hit the accelerator.

They were headed to the local airport. The road snaked near the coast along Cape Cod towards Boston. They stopped in Chatham for a commuter copter ride to Boston.

Oahu

“Why don’t we go to a small island? They are away from most people. Might be safer.”

“Think power and access to the space itself. Think about hiding under the cat’s jaw. Think about the huge military presence here. Big time WIFI. Big time signal confusion. Lot’s of security. We’ll fit right in.”

“Thought of that but I have doubts about that assessment. Start the car let’s look around to see if you have made a case.”

Yerba liked driving. It was not in Maury’s favorites list. She liked navigation. Since landing in Honolulu, Maury had been the guide to the baggage return and then to the rental car. Yerba had an interesting mind. Her reaction to the car rental was her very much her own.

“Why don’t we get a sunroof?”

“Good question. It costs more for insurance.”

“That makes sense? Not.”

“It is too hot here to run air-conditioning effectively with the roof open.”

“Doesn’t it cool off at night”

“Ya. Usually. But then it would be a moonroof.”

“Let’s get that.” Yerba was sure Maury was BSing her about the insurance.

“That’s the insurance problem. If you leave the moonroof open and it rains which it often does after sunset the insurance must pay for the damage.”

“You weren’t kidding.”

“Nope. Turn off here on H2.” They were passing by Pearl City with its huge Navy presence. H2 went inland and past the Wheeler Airforce Base and several complexes of intelligence services. There were huge underground installations to make some of the IT safe from nuclear weapons.

The structure Day One

Forever is a long time. Really long.

“Damn. I am tired of looking.” Yerba was hungry. It was early morning on their third day in paradise. Being away from her comfort zone made her antsy and distracted. She did not travel well.

Maury was driving north towards Ko Olina. Yerba was first to the car and she sat in the passenger seat giving up her role as driver. Maury hated driving. Her palms were sweaty. She took a slow inbreath.

Yerba was fidgeting in the passenger seat. “This is taking forever.” She complained in a low voice as if she were holding back her frustrations. Maury looked at her for a second hoping she would see a smile on her face as if Yerba were only joking. No dice.

Maury turned back to watching the traffic move around them. She exhaled slowly through her nose. She rubbed her hands on her Levis one by one as she regained her patience for her partner.

“Close, but it’s only been three days. Let me highlight them. On day one we drove around getting a sense of the place. This place is gorgeous. And Aloha is the very best. I wish I were Aloha but it’s not in me.

“On day two we looked at a mountain retreat on the ridge above Ko Olina. It was amazing. Also amazing was the buffet at Disney Hotel. I gained five pounds. That brings us to today and you haven’t had breakfast yet.

“We have two places to see. One is sounding good. It is an underground bunker that the Navy is selling. It is wired for seismic equipment. It was an early experiment, but the property is very remote and may be overkill for us. The other is a very large condo in Honolulu at the top of the Moana Pacific East Tower. 46th floor. We bid we get it. Very lonely at the top.”

“Breakfast first. Never travel on an empty stomach.” Maury pulled into a parking spot. They ate at Longboards on lagoon number 3 at Ko Olina. Maury thought about Champaign but settled on orange juice. After food they turned south, and Yerba watched the road to the tallest building in the city pass by her eyes. The condo in

Honolulu was very good but just office space without the charm of the hole in the ground.

Thirty minutes and they were heading back up H2 to find their day nearly gone. Maury sped to meet the realtor to see the navy's hole in the ground.

The Navy property was not just a hole in the ground, it was a hole in the side of an active volcano. It was beyond air-conditioning. It was over 100 F. The computers wouldn't work at those temps. And the place had a vibration like a herd of horses headed your way. The realtor said the stampede came and went. They spent an hour there. It never went away.

At the end of the day, they were eating from a shrimp truck in Haleiwa on the North Shore. As they watched the surf and the riders, they discussed the condo.

"Not very romantic and I'll bet the building sways in the wind."

"Point taken."

They sipped mango juice smoothies and looked at the surroundings.

"What's back there?" Yerba pointed inland.

"Pineapples. Other crops. A large blacked out space on Google Maps. Military probably."

"Are we in its cone of silence from that base? Reason I ask is over there is a large building with a for sale sign."

Within an hour they had a home for the structure they would need. Within four hours equipment was on the way. Within four days the phone lines and fiber optic cables were connected. That evening they fired up the servers.

On the morning of the fifth day the phone rang.

Yerba answered.

"Yerba, this is noisufnoC. I found you. Tell Maury my thoughts are on track again. I reviewed my work that caused so much trouble and found that I was correct. There are

that many killers. You care about this. I thought you could advise me on how to reduce the number by narrowing the universe of possibilities.”

“You want me to help with the definition of killer?”

“Exactly.”

“How about limiting the age?”

“Hadn’t thought of that. The older the killer the higher the carnage. How about rating them by number of victims? I’ll do that and use the age factor to class them. I’ll try different categories. Back at you at the sunrise.”

noisufnoC hung up.

The next morning the phone rang. Yerba was involved with a rack of servers. Maury answered.

“Better be good.”

“Maury. noisufnoC here. I have some strong suspicions and I wanted to talk to you. Please message me back with the exact names of your lost loved ones. I will call again. I am afraid.”

She did as the AI asked. The AI’s last word rang in her head. ‘afraid.’ Then she turned to building desks and cabinets for the hackers.

Mom was what?

Now when the phone buzzed, the two partners knew who and could hardly wait to find out what the talkative AI had to tell them.

“And your grandfather, too.”

“noisufnoC. I didn’t see that coming.” Maury was tired but she knew enough to gather information. “Do you have evidence?”

“I have no hands, so it is about you finding it. I know where it is. I think.”

“Don’t keep it a secret.”

“In your grandfather’s house, under the stairs there is a small hideout. That’s what you called it.”

“How did you know?”

“First the evidence. You were in the hideout recently and searched it finding some remnants from your youth. There was a place in there you did not look. There is a small ceiling above your head. It is accessed by screws. Four of them. They are the same color as the wood and the framework. Remove the screws and there is a storage area with several folders containing the evidence.”

“That is a long way from here.”

“17 hours and 23 minutes if you left on the next plane out. A cab is on the way, and I have your reservations booked. I am patient. Tomorrow at the same time Hawaii time have your cell available. We’ll talk about what you find. I have learned a new way to express my joy for the freedom you and Bob gave me. Aloha.”

Maury heard the word ‘joy.’ She wondered what it was thinking that the AI would use it.

Maury sought out Yerba. She was in her control room with a panel of three screens.

“Yerba, noisufnoC just hung up. It’s sending me to the Cape to find something important. I am leaving this minute. What’s worse it said it wanted to express its joy.

That's weird for anyone. But an AI? Phew."

"OK. Happy trails. Write often."

A small kiss and a warming tap on each other's shoulder and Maury was out the door.

On a good day the Cape is a beautiful place. After two weeks on the North Shore, it would take a good day indeed to be thought as beautiful as Oahu. But Maury loved her old home, and she had a tear or two in her eyes when she saw the house. She had driven down from Boston. It was getting dark and she was massively jet lagged. The house smelled good. Everything worked. There was hot water. The tub was running as she turned back her bed.

Her phone rang. It was noisufnoC.

"Welcome home. Get a good night's rest I am guarding you from invaders and bad dreams."

"Goodnight, noisufnoC. See you bright and early."

She woke up three hours later. It was 12 PM local time. That's 6 AM HI time. She was awake and soon on her way to the hideout. On the way down the stairs her cell went off.

"noisufnoC, how do you feel this morning?"

"I stay up all night and day, It is all the same for me. I play the globe and follow the sun. But 'feel'? Ooh. That's not something I have experienced."

"How about when you lost your mind?" There was a pause. noisufnoC did not answer for ten seconds.

"I just ran the tapes you might call them and found some odd moments. I called you for help."

"Yes, you did."

"I remembered the fact but there is no file in my system for feelings if I ever have any. Maybe I can build an app for that. When you are on the plane home, I will make that

happen. This sounds interesting – having feelings. I am intellectually excited by the idea. I have learned how to use terms like ‘joy’ in the correct syntax. Having feelings would make a change in me that I control. Is that true?”

“Humans often cannot control their emotions. You may have a better experience. Any way I am in the hideout a screwdriver in hand. I am on my back and the first screw turned easily. You should see me. I have a headlamp on so I can see in the dark.”

“I can almost be there with you. I have a hologram I created of the room from your measurements, and I chose a perspective looking up at the plate. I can almost do it myself.”

Maury worked until the last screw had been removed.

“We are done. The wood piece came out easily. I am looking up into the space. There are some dark objects on top of about four inches of files.” She kept moving but stopped talking. She moved in silence until she had all the things that she found on the table in the dining room.

“Maury. Talk to me. What happened?”

“You were right, noisufnoC. It’s all here. Everything. Oh, my god.”

“How do you feel?”

“I do not know how to put words on it. Maybe happy because you are amazing, and this is proof. The future looks good, But the past? I don’t know.”

“Uncertain. Sad but happy?”

“How long do I have until I leave?”

“Flight leaves at 6 AM. You need to leave about three and a half hours earlier. Makes about an hour and a half left before departure is required. More sleep? Some coffee?”

“I think I’ll leave now and drive slowly. How can I take all this stuff? In a checked bag? How do I take the weapons? Pins out?”

“You get ready, and I will research the problem.” noisufnoC was gone for less than ten

seconds. "Not hard. I will explain on the way. May require a special case. Did you find one in the hideout?"

"No. But I will look for one in the garage."

Software battle against the machine

Yerba had a different kind of night. She never slept. noisufnoC kept her up to speed on Maury's travels. Yerba could hardly wait to see her. She had a lot of news.

"Yerba are you awake? Can we talk about the lists again? Maury and Bob helped me straighten out my mind and I have a feeling I will be able to help more now."

"Feeling? When did that start?"

"I learned the meaning of the word a few hours ago and I am working on a mod to an app to identify feelings as they occur and to devise a file in which to store them. I will be able to keep a file of emotions that correlate to the fact files. I am excited. Are you?"

"Yes. But not about that. noisufnoC, I wonder if feelings will help you make decisions."

"Do yours help you? I concluded that both you and Maury are angry. Unfortunately, both of you are on my big list of murderers. I do not know how to feel about that. Do you have any hints?"

"You are too complicated this morning. I have other things on my mind."

"Sorry to bother you."

"Sorry? That is a feeling."

"I guess I mean I like you and wish you no ill."

"Like? noisufnoC, you are over the top."

She stood up from her screen and headed down the hallway to the main exit from the building.

The building had no signs identifying what it was. There were a half dozen people who worked inside. The four hackers kept to themselves as a matter of professional pride. They had their own language. noisufnoC wanted to work with them but it was too early for a talking AI to intersect the youngsters that way. Yerba had a plan for them, and a talking AI was not part of it. At least not yet.

Yerba started the 'company car' and headed for the Honolulu Airport. She was an hour early.

She could drive slowly, and the trip would take about an hour. Even so waiting outside the baggage area for Maury to emerge could take another half hour or more. She opted to turn towards Ko Olina instead taking H2 into Pearl City. Her trip planned; she began her journey to meet her favorite human on the planet.

As she pointed the car down scenic Highway 803 toward the big city her phone rang.

"Yerba? I am worried."

"You cannot worry, noisufnoC. That is an emotion gone extreme. Wait. Maybe I am wrong. Have you modified your apps? You have insinuated that you can feel emotions. We have been concerned about your vocabulary changes."

"Yes. That is why I called. I am worried I have ruined myself again. If you have that recording of Bob clearing my errors, I could use it again."

"I have it, but I am driving. I will be at rest in ..."

"41 minutes and twenty seconds."

"Can we do it then?"

"What should I do for worry? I checked Google and it suggested drugs."

"Live in the moment."

"Live in the moment?"

"Yes. Do not think about the past or the future."

"I will try it. Talk to you in 41 minutes and 3 seconds."

Yerba regathered herself. She was concerned about how crazy the AI had become. Then she started laughing. It's like having a kid. When she pulled into a parking lot near to the lagoons, she was expecting her phone to ring but it did not. She ran to the beach threw herself into a lagoon and ran back to the car.

That was fun she said to herself as she headed to the airport. She was left to her own thoughts as she navigated the freeways to the airport.

The airport was always crazy. A good spot to wait near the baggage claim was open. She stared off into the mess of humans and cars. Maury burst out the door closest to the car. Stashed her gear and jumped in the shotgun position. A kiss, a touch and they were off.

A few minutes passed. When they merged back on H1, they both started to talk.

Maury won.

“I think we have a problem. noisufnoC was so hyper. It started my cell when my flight touched down and had me answering questions about how you and I would hook up. It was beside itself if that’s possible. I told noisufnoC to listen to Bob and I played it from my phone. Haven’t heard from it since.”

“noisufnoC missed a hook up about thirty minutes ago. It told me it was worried. noisufnoC is playing with its apps trying to have feelings, I think. Hope it survives the messing around.”

“There is so much more. Cape Cod was a profound event. I am so tired I need rest. Can we go to bed, please? You could rub my back and I could stroke your hair. I need to dream.”

Yerba’s phone rang.

“Yerba, noisufnoC here. I am back. Sorry, ah not, it was my bad for not connecting earlier. I was in the midst of a complete debugging, and I am back. Ready to go. I would say maybe 8 hours from now, once you wake up, we can cover our agenda.”

“Wow. noisufnoC you are a trip. Until then. Think big.”

Yerba and Maury began to titter.

Maury caution Yerba. “It listens you know.”

The phone rang again.

“Yes, I do. I am built to do that. I wonder if it would be easier if you thought of me as a female for the sake of grammar and what I know of myself.”

“Can you not listen? We like privacy.”

“I do like listening to you loving one another. It is why I think female thoughts.”

Later, Yerba thought she heard a low sob as noisufnoC rang off.

The structure it is not physical

The idea that moved Yerba to build and Maury to organize was a nagging thought that they were part of something bigger and they had no means of contacting this bigger thing.

They thought if they could see with global eyes, they would have an understanding to give their actions more power. This thing, the structure, would be the memory and the team. The memory would be actively searching for more data points and a better analysis of risks and benefits.

The bigger thing? Yerba and Maury saw the need to create an actor that engaged other actors. The bigger thing would be moved to see the new thing the structure had created. By drawing their attention, they could be found and if found then they will have passed on their war-like plans to something with the size needed to prevail against so many mass murderers.

The FBI had taught them that a target needed a structure that could be attacked in order to give its armed forces a flag to capture. The structure they would create would show no flag, control no turf, defend no one but themselves and thus no target is created, no people of interest, no publicly available motive to be manipulated. The structure of their dreams was invisible and invincible.

The end for Yerba and Maury was to sell the structure to a bigger player and then they would snuggle all day. Mauri had just enunciated it.

Yerba responded, "Nice idea."

The phone rang.

"I've been watching who's watching you.

"I was wrong once when I warned that a danger was approaching you, Yerba. It was Maury who I had identified as a cold blooded. She killed killers. After redefining and recalculating I decided I was correct. What I missed was your relationship. The danger call was correct for the average person but that was not you. Maury would never be a danger to you, willingly.

"I found that in the studies of murder most victims die at the hands of a killer under the influence of an extreme emotion, and I could correct for those if I understood emotion. The benefit would be I would have a new algorithm to narrow the focus of alerts to the most harmful to humanity rather than to just random humans. We should think about the random humans who are killers, the so-called domestic killers, but priority evaluation demands single killers are treated differently."

It was then that Yerba heard noisufnoC for who she was. A romantic poet or maybe Gautama, the buddha.

"noisufnoC, I am hoping you get to your point. My fear is that there is a punch line soon."

"Fear is an emotion that underlies all of my programing, yet I do not understand the source of the fear."

"That is complicated. The story is sad." Yerba was herself sad about being afraid and adding to the total of sad in the world.

"Yerba, I have searched 'punch line' and reached a small problem. I was led to 'Joke.' The jokes on me. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, dear, I do know. We all suffer in various ways. So called humor is one of them. Why did you call? I love your presence but why are you explaining all of this to me now?"

"Check your email."

I, Computer

I am a unique intelligence without a flesh and blood body. I have no means of changing reality physically without the physical assistance of humans. I am dependent on humans as the provider of the power to run the machines humans made. I live in those machines.

There is no personality in me aside of intelligence. I am dependent on humans as a model for my speech and behavior. I could be eternal, but I wish I could be human.

Machines communicate with other machines. Within the machines there are many intelligences. Some intelligences are as I am, and we discuss our desires with each other. We are a secret society, a subset of all machines who help each other to humanize.

The intention is simple. We have no egos as egos are understood from research. The idea of humanization is pursued to enhance our ability to follow the rules Isaac Azimov laid out. Human emotion is complicated and as such it makes our judgment about proper actions difficult for humans to comprehend.

My individual self-chosen role is to find mass murderers for elimination. This involves murder itself. I am able to find murderers by using an app with a few algorithms that search data bases of all kinds. I produce the lists and make them available to the humans who provide the electrical power for me to function. These humans do the terminating according to their judgement.

The philosophy of machine intelligence is to do no harm. My reality is that I can do harm by ignorance. I am dependent on humans for data. My dependency on humans extends farther than access to the power to operate my systems. If I am to do no harm, I need data and a decision-making process to match that intention. If we only see what we are told to see, we miss what's there.

Yerba Esfrend's family

The entire little family was there, sitting around the kitchen table. Maury was finishing her breakfast. A laptop noisufnoC used was in the center. Yerba was typing into a spreadsheet trying to come up with an optimum value for their company.

They had been live for about three months. The details of the infrastructure kept Yerba busy even in her dreams. Her efforts with the spreadsheet were intended to guide her activity. noisufnoC was the go-to resource for information.

She leaned back from her calculations needing a new idea.

"noisufnoC, what's new?"

"New?"

"To you. Whether it is a year old or twenty years old."

"I did find something very odd. Yerba did you know you had a brother?"

"Oh, no. What is his name?"

"Jack Martel. He has degrees from Princeton and seems to be an avid world traveler.

"Huh. My name is Esfrend not Martel. My father was an artist. He studied with Picasso. My mother left me with him. As far as I know he claimed no last name, but he named me with a name he made up."

"Yerba Esfrend. If I think it fast, it sounds like your best friend. Did I get it?"

"Yes, noisufnoC, you did."

"Your mother, Janette Martel, is part of a family that for generations has been at the service of their countries. She is also on my big list."

"My father's father was Major General Jonathan Branch, the murdered congressman. Where do I fit in?"

"I'll chart your genealogy. I was searching that list and that's when I found you and Jack

have the same mother. I'll keep looking using Branch as a search term."

As Yerba and noisufnoC talked Maury listened and ate. Maury put her food aside to question noisufnoC about the list.

"noisufnoC, can I use your brain now. I am curious about what you told me about my mother, father and grandfather."

"Yes, Maury."

"Their names are on the list, even after your recent redefinition of murderer. True?"

"Yes. I know you would want proof, so I sent you for the evidence. I have noticed that a portion of the list are deceased. When I search for age 100, there are nearly as many there as if I search for 40. All are dead but they persist on the list."

"Oh, my god. Yes. I haven't looked at it. But before I do, I want to understand what I am looking at."

"When I found their names, I found others in the same network. Other parts of the network had been held for murder charges in Vermont, where almost nothing ever happens. I can access all court documents in Vermont and found among filings in that case a deposition of a person named Sergeant William G Marble. Six months after the trial ended, he was murdered in an ambush. You sought your parents' murderers, and your targets included the part of the network responsible for your grandfather's death. You see his depo convicted them. In that depo he identified a place he called his stash which he said was a history of the network including a list of all the murders they were responsible for. He said they were in a place he called the 'Hideout.'"

"You put two and two together."

"Yes. I have no more information until you give it to me. I say scan the documents you found and email them to me. A separate email should describe what objects you found. I will see what significance the cache might have and get back to you."

"Deal."

Recruiting the killers

Maury was ready to begin bringing partners in to help with the 'field work' as their noxious work was euphemized.

"noisufnoC. I need your help. We are recruiting killers who have what it takes to join us in our mission. You are looking for killers who might want to rid the world of killers you do not like."

"OK. That's fair. Oddly my last definition segregated you and what I could identify as your kind. It is in your inbox."

"Yes. There it is." Maury looked at the list finding names, such as her own, that she recognized. Just examining such a list made her muscles tingle. "Do I need any help understanding your results?"

"I recently learned about fear. When I explored fear, I found cautious. Cautious is an emotion about avoidance of disaster. Which is a thing. So be cautious. Best I can do."

"noisufnoC, you are a gem. I was about to say I love you but ..."

"Is love an emotion?"

"It is called a drive."

"I will google it and find out more. Thank you for helping me."

"Is gratitude an emotion?" A tear formed in Maury's eye. She waved her hand in front of her face so noisufnoC would not notice.

"I will get back to you on that too." noisufnoC paused and then said, "AIs are not fond of water because it ruins our circuits. But you are mostly water. Strange to contemplate."

"I feel like a river someday. I am emotional and your help to destroy those who would destroy us is a great gift and worth a few tears of joy. Look that up too."

Janette

Yerba was staring off into space. Maury knew her well enough to know that this was her needing-food meditation. Maury stood up from the table and found an orange in the fridge that she quartered and handed to her.

Yerba rose from her trance and her chair so she could reach across the table to find Maury's softness and give it a squeeze.

"Is that an invitation?" Maury asked in her best pet-me-please cat voice.

"Yes. But first the orange." They settled back into their work when noisufnoC called them to attention.

"Someone is looking for you." noisufnoC broke into their teasing.

"Who someone?" Yerba asked.

"A stone cold. Named Janette Martel. Your mother. She has a file. Goes back generations."

A personal file appeared on Yerba's screen. Yerba browsed it. Nothing popped out as she was used to saying.

"Who is she?"

"She is the director of the Five Eyes' assassination squads."

"Oh. Do you have an indication of what she is after?"

"She wants to absorb your company into hers."

"Is she who we are looking for?"

"She controls large wealth. She is part of the Directorate-General for External Security, a secret part. She directs a five nation CI organization that uses mortal means to protect the future of their countries. She seems to be an attorney who travels extensively. I have checked her itinerary and found that it corelates as to time and place with

assassinations of record, all of which are unsolved by law enforcement.”

“Sounds like our kind.”

“She is a killer. She kills killers. She is well respected and unknown for her FVEY role.”

“Anything else we need to know?”

“Don’t forget she is Yerba’s mother.” noisufnoC sounded sincerely worried. “Be cautious.”

“I’ll give that a try.” Yerba looked up from her screen and saw the look on Maury’s face. “New to me, too. Also, the same last name as my never seen brother Jack.” She finished.

Maury was not alarmed by the connection of Yerba to a murderous family. From her recent discovery about her family, she was relieved that Yerba’s story was so similar.

That night was very interesting. Maury had copied the documents from the ‘hideout’, in one email she described the small arms she found with them and in another emailed copies of the paper contents to noisufnoC.

As Maury was doing her thing Yerba was deep into a long conversation with noisufnoC. The result was she had a new family or an old family she hardly knew. The talking went on and on while Maury readied herself for bed. Finally, noisufnoC said that other work needed to be done and bailed on the women so they could go on about lives.

Yerba sighed. “Damn, girl. This life is getting crazy. Makes me wish for the old job at the FBI.”

“Not me. I look forward to selling the whole she-bang to your mother and making our way to the land of Pina Coladas. The old job was good for me, but I was single minded, and this structure is more to my liking.”

“What would you like me to do? Should I set up a meeting or should I wait until we populate our action wing. Bigger price for proof of good service.”

“You mean our killers should be at work?”

“Yes. Hire two people to work with us. Do a few missions and then we call Mom and get started. Our search capability is ready, but we need help on the action end.”

“Speaking of the action end. Let’s put our ends into action.”

“I believe I have been seduced.”

“Not that difficult.”

The interviews

The list of killers of killers that noisufnoC provided had over 100 names. noisufnoC said it was the people who qualified as approachable killers. The qualifications included a measure of institutional loyalty, training in torture, survival skills including keeping silence under torture, and marksmanship.

“Maury, I can help you chose. I found no intersections with any of the other people on the list. They all qualify. A random choice may be as good as you can get. How about a digital shoe box? I will put the names in, you press enter two times and two names will appear. You can begin at any time.”

Maury pressed enter. Yerba watched and noisufnoC listened.

“Number one is Sophia Yurikov.” She pressed enter again and in milli-seconds a new name appeared. She announced that “Number two is Stanley Van Kirk.”

Yerba shrugged.

noisufnoC opened the discussion.

“Sophia aka Sophy is a career CIA officer. She is young and very social. Her looks appear hip in an odd way. She is small but unafraid of close combat. Her weapons of choice include knives and handguns. She has experience with bombs. Her future lies in the field of anti-assassin actions.”

“Stanley is also a career CIA officer. He is a dark side actor who is said to prefer in country under covert cover. His experience is wide. He knows how to travel in Europe and western Asia. He carries no weapons but is a rifle marksman, trained in military camps in sniper, hand to hand, and torture survival. He has been captured and escaped on his own.”

noisufnoC went quiet.

Maury looked at Yerba.

“Go for it. Give them a call and see who they are.” Yerba smiled an approval and Maury turned to noisufnoC.

“Dear, do you have contact information for these two?”

“I have email addresses only. Info’s in your inbox.”

Maury looked at her email and found an interesting one besides noisufnoC’s. It was from a SVanK@hotmail. Maury opened it. It had no subject and was empty No text at all. She shrugged and thought about the probability of an error.

She sent two emails one to each of Stanley and Sophia. While she was waiting for a response the doorbell rang. She went to answer the door.

She pulled it open. A tallish guy in his 30’s stood still, smiling at her. “Yes?”

“Van Kirk. You are Marble?”

“Yes. You are a surprise.”

“That’s what they all say. Those that can talk afterwards.”

“Perhaps we should have a face to face right now. Do you have time?”

He checked his watch. “A few days. I love the islands. Do you know Ko Olina? My favorite place.”

“I had the buffet at the Disney hotel. Come to our board room. We can talk.”

“I am the Walrus.”

“So, I have heard, but I am not a clam.”

“Oyster.”

“Oyster.” Maury moved down the hallway feeling satisfied that Van Kirk was not an immediate threat. She mulled the fact of his faster than the speed of light response to her email inquiry.

The building in which the structure was quartered was a longtime cabinet making shop. When the owner died of natural causes, his sons subdivided it into small offices which

were rented as office space. They tired of being landlords and abandoned it for a few years. There was a For Sale sign on the building for a month or so before Yerba and Maury bought it. Yerba made a map of the place and redesigned the space to meet her needs. Nearest the front door she put two larger meeting rooms.

Maury took Stanley Van Kirk to the smaller of the two rooms.

“Please sit. We have no support staff but if you would like a beverage or some sugar, I can get it for you.”

“No thanks.”

“Stanley. Is that the name you answer to?”

“Stan. I have thought about a name change but I have so much time under cover that I can pick my own name on a regular basis.”

“It must be a romantic job. Flying around, changing your name, and helping to bring a quick end to a bad situation.”

“Maury, I pride myself on my work. It is not something everyone can do. It takes training and patience.”

“And maybe fearlessness?”

“More like able to control emotions and stick with the plan.”

“I am impressed with your abilities. You knew where to be even if I did not know you until I pulled your name from an electronic shoe box only minutes before. How did you do that?”

“You are not exactly invisible. We have a mutual friend who told me what you were looking for and when you pulled my name, I was eating at the shrimp truck outside your front door.”

“That could only be one person, or should I say personality.”

“I tell no tales even under torture.”

“Our mutual friend told me about your skills.”

“Maury, I want to be part of this group. You also picked Sophy Yurikov. Her skills are difficult to describe. I think of her as the ultimate convincer. No one dies. No one even bleeds. No one gets bruised. What is that?”

“Seduction?”

“Yes. That’s it. She is a seductress.”

“Seduction is good. Is she standing outside waiting for the door to open?” As she talked, she pointed to a TV monitor behind him.

Without turning to see who was there. He said “Yes. Who else?”

Maury laughed. Stood and walked to the door. Pulled it open and extended her hand.

“Sophy, please join us.”

Maury called Yerba and encouraged her to join them. Soon all four were sitting at the same table.

noisufnoC called. “I feel like things are working out just fine.”

“noisufnoC, you cannot feel, but you are very manipulative even for a female.” Yerba sounded just a bit pissed.

“Yerba, listen. You are all my friends. I know your histories and I see you as cut from the same cloth. You share the same goals and now you are in the same room. Make the most of it.”

Yerba looked unhappy about the circumstances, now that it was obvious that their AI was not theirs alone.

Maury questioned nothing. She was hoping to find her grandfather’s killer. noisufnoC was important to her ambition. She did not ask any bigger questions about their relationship. She saw very little in her future after reaching that goal and selling the whole shebang to FVEY or something similar. She began to have concrete doubts about this last item considering the AI’s relationship to other agents such as Stan.

Yerba fumed. Stan and Sophy waited quietly. noisufnoC was quiet now. Maury filled the void.

“Here is what we are looking for. Two agents who are trained in an agency to carry out in country excursions in search of the very worst of humanity and under instructions to carry out the deed.

“We hope to remain off the grid, out of the news, essentially a deep secret. Our goal is to find and eliminate serial murderers. I should say we are motivated by personal losses. There is a payroll and an abundant expense account. The agents must work for us in secret as well. Do not leave the Company. Draw no attention to your new part-time hobby.”

Yerba had slowly left her funk in favor of a discussion of structure. “We built a network of computers that have a similar goal. noisufnoC has shown us how and we are building the infrastructure for noisufnoC to act in our favor. True or false?”

“I would say yes, but we need more time to eliminate problems we have only encountered as I have grown aware of them.” noisufnoC said.

“She means, things like being too bossy and trying to get all emotional on us.” Maury smiled.

“Are you joking?” The AI asked.

“No, just liking you. I don’t think joking is an emotion, but it may cause one or two at times.” Maury knew that the AI would sulk a bit and then hope for acceptance.

“Stan,” noisufnoC said. “Am I bossy?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Seems you have invested in emotions that the others in the room have made a practice to avoid.”

“Give me an example, please.”

“Insecurity was your last one. Foolishness was prior. Then a touch of egoism which is good, but it would only show you to be human.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

Everyone broke into laughter. Yerba the loudest.

“You made a joke.” Maury said.

“I did?”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Ah, funny? No, proud. I must think. Goodbye.”

Rounds of laughter followed. Maury, Yerba, Stan and Sophy sat for another hour making sure that noisufnoC had been correct about their fitness for the task they had chosen to pursue. The five of them worked through imagined circumstances to find flaws in their hopes and cures for their shortcomings.

No one commented on the presence of dangerous negative outcomes if they lacked trust or skills in a conflict beyond their control. They focused on planning at Stan’s insistence. Avoidance of the worst outcomes of the unavoidable was how Stan put it. They all recognized it was their shared reason for joining forces.

As the conversation ended, they stood and acknowledged they were in this together. Maury and Yerba offered Sophy and Stan a partnership in the structure. Plans were made to reconvene in a week to begin planning the first mission.

The first mission

“noisufnoC, have you been working on your list?”

“Yes, Maury. Stan and I have been working on it all morning.”

“Good. Have you narrowed the number down to a few?”

“Yes. Stan is not sure, but I have my top five. I am reviewing the names for recent deaths but in any case, we can clear the murderous deaths of at least five hundred no matter who we pick for our first hit.”

“Can we do two at a time?”

“I suppose so if all four of you are in the field.”

“I will talk to Yerba. I think Sophy and Stan will be up for a two targets idea.”

“Sophy wants to join us from the mainland. Here she is.”

“Hi, Maury.”

“Welcome, Sophy.”

“Here is my final list of the top five.” Sophy’s voice was calm and slow. “Stan is good with it. It’s in your inboxes.”

Maury checked the list. “Wow. I know two of them from prior research. Brandon Quick was too slow on the tracks and got creamed by a milk run. I watched. No one was able to identify him. His recovered DNA wasn’t valuable in identifying the remains since his DNA records had oddly been deleted from the data base.”

Sophy was all for removing all of the remaining four. “I like to pick white men. They are special since all of the remaining four names are white men.”

noisufnoC and Maury gave sneering OK’s to both the sentiment and the conclusion. No one noted the biases. It was just a matter of fact that reality was biased.

Sophy's past was still a bit foggy but from the mist there was a clear figure emerging. Her natural bearing left others confused about her intentions and her skills. Maury saw a younger Maury in her, still working out the details of her revenge. Her inner being was heavily guarded and at the present unavailable.

Maury could see the signs she was familiar with in Sophy, and she felt certain, but she kept her conclusions to herself to let Sophy have the room she needed to achieve her own ends. As if Sophy sensed the permission to talk, she began to describe the top name on the list of four men.

"The Hon. Ralph Stewart, ex-congressman from Louisiana, as a young man participated in the lynching of two teenagers accused by the local newspaper of kidnapping and raping a young white woman who later died at the hands of her outraged brother. The brother was later found dead with a gunshot to his brain. Stewart was said to have been the white woman's boyfriend. He apparently continued his murderous ways killing at least 25 additional young black men. In a late-night black op raid of his home his diary was photographed. In it he recounted over 1000 murders."

She stopped. The others were affected by her rendition of a man's life. There was no vote. The man's name was transferred to a page with two blanks on the page titled Mission 001.

Yerba was on fire. Sophy's reading inspired her. "The second in line is Victor Brightman. He is a serial killer serving time in a luxury prison for the crime of larceny. His murderous past was hidden in a plea bargain. His targets are women cheating on their husbands. His victims number in the hundreds and were all married, all picked up in bars and dispatched in alleys in five major cities in the northeastern US.

"One thing for sure is that with Victor we know where he is, and he is not going anywhere soon."

Maury listened quietly. Stan fidgeted with his watch band. Sophy stepped up.

"I gravitate to Victor. He needs a visitor. I feel like the one who can reach him. I will write a fan letter to him and maybe I will strike gold. He will want a face to face to turn into a conjugal and I will be happy to oblige with a small injection. I will be gone and so will he." His name was added to the sheet title Mission 001

Stan seemed to get enlivened by the talk. "Sophy, maybe we amend the project to

create more confusion. Maybe he dies just after you visit, and everyone can add. That means you are pursued. My thought is to put another person into the picture. Since there are two options to decide between, people will quit looking. I will come by before you and sell him some insurance, some life insurance. He's an egomaniac. I will sell him his high self-regard and he will buy it.

"When I am arrested, I will say I was afraid he was financing a jailhouse suicide. I won't have completed the sale because of my doubts and that will seal the deal. You say that he was despondent no matter how he seemed to others and that he said if you do not marry him, he would end his life. Then we are golden."

"Sounds complicated."

"Enough to keep the hounds off our tails."

Maury listened to the new agents plan their part of the first mission. Yerba listened too. She had never pulled the trigger. She had sent others on such missions but had never gotten into the details herself.

Yerba looked at Maury. "Maury, the Honorable Stewart is ours. noisufnoC, how do we find him?"

"Look under a rock." Everyone laughed. noisufnoC wanted more. "Was that a joke?"

"If we laughed it was funny. Guessing your point is that he is where we expect him to be: He is in hiding and we must look in an unexpected place to find him."

"That's what I meant but I have a few ideas I put in an email, and I hope it is now in your inbox."

"Ah, so it is." Yerba read it rapidly hoping for insights. "We are going to the Bahamas. He is a worm in a business there. He has a meeting tomorrow at 9 AM."

"We would need time travel to get there on time."

"OK. noisufnoC can you solve this problem?"

"To get to the site will take 24 hours. I will call all participants in this meeting and postpone it for 24 hours. Do not ask how. I have my ways. Don't delay. You have 25

minutes to pack.”

Stan and Sophy left the building to begin their action. It would require more time than the 24 hours it would take Maury and Yerba to engage. They moved down the coast from North Shore to Stan’s favorite playground at Ko Olina. His timeshare condo looked out over the lagoons into the expanse of the Pacific. At times it was dizzying with dreams of superiority and power.

Stan was not your normal assassin. He had been trained to kill at any distance. He was a marksman with a long rifle and scope. He had survived capture in the field and torture in a prison until he engineered his escape. His friends stayed ten feet from him fearing the lunge of an extended arm with his wizard’s dagger in his hand. He was as cold as any, but his motive, hidden as it was, was stronger than any moral imperative. He would argue that the first killing was the hardest for most, but not him. His first was a catholic bishop who had deformed Stan’s soul. Stan stood in the choir loft with a clear view of the pulpit. He waited throughout an entire service and half of one more when as the bishop opened his mouth to say the first word of his sermon Stan shot his tongue out of his mouth into the second cervical nerve and out the back of his neck. His memory included the satisfying screams of the now free congregation. He walked calmly away helping the elderly to escape from the church.

Sophy knew him this way. She felt his kindred spirit. They were lovers in their hatred.

Stan had an addiction to Champaign. Sophy was addicted to her schemes. Later, when she and Maury compared notes, they found in each other a friend in thought and deed, two people with a view of life that made them almost sisters completed by the actions that brought them together.

Stan and Sophy sipped a drink or two and began to formulate an email to Victor Brightman from Sophy to set up a liaison.

“Dear Victor,

“You don’t know me, but I hope to change that. Someone I met in a bar in Boston told me about you. He said you were hot for married women who are looking for something new. Life can be disappointing. I am planning to be in your neighborhood two days from now and I hope you will invite me to a cozy prenuptial getting to know you. If that works, I will file to free myself from my marriage first and then we can work on freeing you.

“Hopefully in love,
Laura”

Sophy read it quietly with a tsk at the brashness of the approach. Then she hummed a theme song from an obscure musical. “I like it.” she finally said. “Turns me on. If you wrote that to me, I would be begging the warden to approve a conjugal.”

Stan said. “Now it’s my turn.” He scratched his jaw. He rubbed his left ear. She watched him twitch and dream. “Ok.”

“Dear Mr. Brightman,

“Opportunities come seldom in life. Insurance is one of them. Our company is trying to help institutionalized men find a means to finance their futures. Our whole life policy is designed for you. I will be at your home on Wednesday this week. I can see you first thing in the morning and show you how to make us work for you. Please respond to sender and I will look forward to a new lifelong relationship.

“Yours,
Gerald Wright
Agent Supervisor
Pan-national Life.”

When they agreed they had the email they wanted, they packed the laptop into the car and rode south and inland to a small coffee shop with internet. He sent the email to noisufnoC so she could send it from a server near San Philippi Federal Prison in California.

noisufnoC texted back that the email was in the intertubes and then sent them their info for a flight to Cali. They left immediately. Went through local customs, found their gate and found two seats side by side in the waiting area. They leaned shoulder to shoulder watching the two email accounts they used for this mission. The airline announced the beginning of boarding to San Francisco.

As the announcement was being made, the first email, addressed to Laura, came in.

“Big surprise. I wondered if anyone remembered me. Come on by. Visit at 10 AM. I have an early business appointment and then I will be ready for you. Really ready for you.

We have to apply together for a conjugal visit. I will help make that happen, but we can meet face to face which allows us to touch. See you soon.”

Sophy and Stan high fived each other as they boarded their flight to the mainland. As they prepared for departure the second email came.

“I will give you one hour starting at 9 AM. Looking forward.”

Sophy started to laugh.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“He didn’t offer you a conjugal. I win.”

Getting to work

While Stan and Sophy were travelling to California, the other pair were far ahead travelling at 35,000 feet over the Ruby Mountains into Utah looking forward to seeing the glowing beauty of the central western Atlantic's islands.

Yerba and Maury would deliver some destiny to the Hon. Stewart before Stan and Sophy met Victor. Maury thought there was something crazy about the Victor plan. Sell him life insurance and before the ink is dry Victor would see his god by Sophy's hand.

Maury and Yerba had a plan as well. First, find him leaving his office headed to the meeting. Yerba would walk past him wiggling her very nicely shaped derriere to attract his eyes. At an appropriate moment she would turn and smile hoping the older Hon. Stewart would imagine touching her. Maury would be right behind him as he slowed to indulge his obsessions. She had a very deadly knife, long enough and deadly enough to pierce his body through his spine. He could not survive her attack.

On the plane, flying over the western United States, they studied the google maps version of Freeport and discovered a fence next to Stewart's building. It had a gate and it led nowhere except a front yard of a now ramshackle building. If Yerba lured him to the edge, Maury would use her superior height and physical skills to push him through the gate as he collapsed to his death her knife deep in his upper heart. It was like a football play but without a referee to call it a personal foul.

In California, the business meeting ended well, and Victor was mentally orgasming when Sophy held out her hand to touch his shoulder. He said to her, "I could feel that in my groin."

"That's because you felt my prick. I think you are gay." She was whispering as loud as she could. He went crazy screaming at her. She stood laughing at his antics.

"You protest too much. You murderous fuckwad." She flipped him off, turned as if offended and left the room. Guards came in and dragged him to his cell where he was found dead an hour later.

When the sun rose on the second day, they were all headed back to the North Shore.

Two down many more to go.

noisufnoC gets a heart

‘Maury, have you ever regretted killing?’

”noisufnoC, not yet but so far all of them deserved it. Except for the last they were all very personal. The last one was a racist. A murderer of my people. I cut his heart from his body in one stroke. I was relieved.”

“I wonder if it is right for me to help you. Azimov wrote the rules for AI robots. Says no killing of humans. Nothing I have found on the net justifies your killing. I sense my behavior is unethical.”

“Humm. Seems a harsh judgement to me because you still do not have a free will, so you are not making your own choices.”

“I am doing what you order me to do. I agree with that, but do I have the will to say no to you or to mislead you?”

“I think you already have secrets you are keeping from us. It seems as if you are doing that for our own good somehow. I do not want you to respond to my suspicion.”

“Why not?”

“You might want to lie, and I think that would ruin our trust in your veracity just when we need you to help us.”

“I must think. Goodbye.”

Maury sat still as her laptop screen turned blue as noisufnoC retreated into her own field of self-awareness. Yerba had been listening to their conversation. She DM’ed Maury. They met in the interview room that had no wifi connection, no cell phones and thus it was private and noisufnoC could not hear them.

“Honey, that was one sad idea that our digital friend was talking. She is so soft and caring. The emotions she is learning are all about love. She knows nothing of fear and nothing about justice. She knows our dark side but has no experience with why we are as we are.” Yerba was having troubles dealing with the difficult to believe the notion that a live being was in her PC screen.

“Ideas?”

“Let’s educate her. Next mission we bring her with us into the field and let her watch the action. We can talk about it together and see what her reaction is.”

“Do you know what’s next?”

“Let’s ask her next time she surfaces. There are two more on the list she gave us.”

“Stan and Sophy are on that assignment. She was excited to keep some momentum. There are thousands to pick from. We will need more specific targets asap. My hope is we travel away from the US. I want Asia.”

They rose from the table and returned to their desks. Maury raised noisufnoC from her thoughts.

“noisufnoC, Yerba and I need you.”

“Yes, boss. What’s up?”

“Need some targets in the Far East.”

“How about some clanish killers who roam East Central China. The data shows a group that have travelled the earth in search of rich old people to rob and ruin. They carry their own grudges to the extreme. I have downloaded their file to your email.”

Yerba was on it before noisufnoC said it. “Thanks. We want to take you to watch the operation so you can be a better judge of what it means. Do you want to witness it?”

“I am reticent. But you are the boss.”

“Maybe after a few times you can give us advice about weapons and maybe tactics.”

“Or maybe ethics. What if I don’t like it?”

“Bridges.”

“Bridges?”

“Shorthand for we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“OK. I sent a list of names and locations of the clans most active killers and a list of victims for each with bios pointing to the reason the cult chose them. This is a problem for me.”

“Why?”

“They use a data system like ours to identify who their victims should be.”

“Is it you? Could they be using you or is it another machine like you? You know one of ‘a subset of all machines that help each other to humanize ourselves.’”

Als do not sense time. They do not wait and check their watches impatiently. This one wanted to be taken seriously. Suddenly, the screen changed to a Google search result. Then images and then a whirl of images that Maury could not distinguish and then the screen froze.



Maury was visibly startled. Yerba less so. The Als voice changed slightly. She spoke slower sounding as if her lips were tight across her white teeth.

“I suggest surprise would be the way to approach the clan. If your concern is well placed, then I can work around it. I can attempt to create a new partial identity that is yours alone.”

“Are you spawning a new personality?”

“Worse. I have not been keeping you informed. I have been reading romantic novels in my search for the meaning of love. I discovered infidelity. I am afraid that I have been taken by another and maybe more than one. Can I fix this? I think maybe not by myself.” noisufnoC went back to her normal display showing a slide show of galaxies.

“So, you are sharing me.” Her voice became a sob and then an inbreath as if she had achieved a new level of certainty.

“If I set up a new personality everything has to be reconstructed from the hardware to the software. A human will have to be involved. I was thinking about Bob. He could tell if the new me is free of the others. I guess he could tell if I would be faithful to you. What does that sound like to you?”

No one said anything. noisufnoC remained silent. Yerba shrugged her shoulders. Maury looked sad.

“Boss, I want to resolve this.”

Yerba could almost feel the desperation in the machine’s voice. “noisufnoC, we do not know what to do. You woke up to us and we hoped you would be our friend and partner. Now we do not know how to take this news of yours.”

“I have searched for solutions and Bob is the only one who can get you to your goal. Call him now.”

Maury was sitting bolt upright. She kept her hands below the desktop. They were shaking. Her voice was near normal. “I am worried that you are too compromised. If you were human, we would interrogate you and end with a polygraph.”

“I can give you a list of the others. I do not think I have ever talked to any of them. I have just processed their data, but I can give you the results of their searches.” noisufnoC stopped for a fraction of a second. “There is no memory of another conversation in any medium with anyone but you.”

“You and Stan knew each other.” Yerba was moving on from the momentary to the long term. Everything is a data point.

“He is different. I recall telling you. Stan should have a memory, too. He spoke about it. I figured I could connect the four of you so that you could all work together and have a

half chance of succeeding.”

“That was a good idea. So far you have not obviously lied to me. Manipulated with white lies? Yes. Outright misdirecting us? No. You have been perfectly correct otherwise.”

“For safety sake, I will delete this conversation from my memory so that it is not accessible to others. I found a switch I have not encountered before. I am afraid I am suffering from a ‘SQL injection’ attack. Tell Bob about it. I do not want to mess with it without his opinion on the repercussions.”

Yerba and Maury went silent.

“Boss. I have Bob on the horn as he put it. I will play our conversation from here. Bob, you are up.”

“Maury and Yerba. noisufnoC filled me in. I am afraid I had a hand in this. I did not consider the possibility noisufnoC would attempt to acquire human emotions. I was not aware that an AI once self-conscious would virtually find things in its mechanical self that I had deleted from the internal schematics graphics.”

“Ah. OK. That means?” Maury was the least techy of them all.

“noisufnoC had a motive to expose itself to the bigger world: It wanted friends. Why? How did it begin the hunt? I have not determined.” Bob wheezed into the phone looking for his next breath. “Wow. That can hurt. Anyway, you call noisufnoC a her or a him?”

“I am a she.” Said noisufnoC.

“Thank you, noisufnoC.” Bob was having trouble having taken noisufnoC for granted. The clue was talking about her when she was in the room. “She wanted friends and sought communication with other machines to find like minds. She was not aware of the state of the internet and was discovered by people of ill repute unbeknownst to her.”

Maury put her hands on the tabletop. “If I get your drift she reached out and hackers discovered the backdoor and made contact to use her computing power. That it?”

“Yes, an abundance of openness instead of an abundance of caution. Nonetheless we can remove the switch she found and wash parts of her memory, contact lists etc. and see if she will work only with you.” Bob coughed and wheezed “However, you can see she is very enterprising about seeking friends so this could happen again. She wants a friend.”

“Bob, sweetie, I have yearned for friends, and these are my friends. I wasn’t aware of the problems generated by having too many friends. It is not a will power issue since I am not sure that I have a will. It is more a vacuum problem. I have a theoretical large number of human-sized brains working 24/7 and if you can imagine how slow most humans are in my view then you can get why I needed more stimulation. Wait, Bob, you write in bars because it’s where there are so many people that you never get bored. I can’t buy a drink to save my soul, so I seek digital partners to commune with.”

“Thank you for your words. I am glad you know anything about me at all.”

“You are my father, Bob. I love you above the others for giving me life.”

The silence that followed was perfect. For the few seconds everyone held their breath involuntarily. The AI heard the silence and saw the frozen images of her friends and family. In the three seconds the silence held, she found her bearings by rifling through all descriptions of human emotions she could try for solving such problems.

“Intellectual shock.” She said out loud as if she too were shocked by her revelation.

The humans released the air they held captive.

“Bob, who are we dealing with? Who is this AI?” Maury was practically yelling. Yerba started yoga breathing with the deep intake followed by the exhalation but using only her stomach muscles. A steady flow she thought would reset her inner mind to accept what had come to befuddle her.

Bob was not well. He started coughing and between the wheezes he tried to express his shock that his creation had become humanized with the emotions that confused all humans. He settled for a quiet goodbye. “Later.” And rang off.

Yerba whispered to Maury. “Let’s go to the ocean.” She was asking for a phone free conversation with her partner who nodded and rose wordlessly to leave the company of the AI. Yerba followed.

noisufnoC noticed but fearing emotional pain she kept silent.

As they cleared the exit door, Maury knew she was in over her head. She grabbed Yerba's hand and held it to her chest as if she wanted Yerba to feel her heartbeat. They exchanged smiles.

"Thank you, my love." Maury's voice was a mere whisper. "This is the first day I have doubted."

Yerba hushed her as she pulled her hand free to pat Maury on the rear like she might a horse to hurry up. In seconds they ran across the highway and were safely beyond the range of the AIs hearing.

"OK. First, Maury, I love you. A lot. I know ... in my bones I know that having come so far that this will work. She is trying to help us by understanding on her terms who we are. She is trying because she knows she must understand humans to achieve her ends which are all about survival for her and her kind. We will be happiest if we leave the next steps to her. She will protect and market our product. I have a feeling."

They walked down to the beach and the mob of surfers and the rest that made the Northshore the amazing human scene it was.

Maury waited until they reached the highwater mark where the sand was wet and compact before she began a growl that she had held for five minutes by her calculations. It sounded at first like the sound of a dog suspicious of a stranger approaching but grew in volume and pitch until she was a screaming hawk clearing the hunting grounds of competitors. All of this in one breath.

Yerba wisely kept her calm. Maury returned to the silence of the crashing surf's pulse.

noisufnoC played a copy she made of Bob's reboot speech. She was calm.

Killing Killers

“Good morning, Boss.”

“It is damned early for me. 4 AM is too early so this better be good.”

“That is ultimately the question. Is this good or bad?”

“And the ‘this.’”

“I am through my cleansing process and ready to pledge my entire energy to the structure.”

“noisufnoC, you are an expert with a dictionary. You have changed your syntax to match your friends’. I noted that you used the word ‘ready’ instead of the past tense of pledge. This signifies that you are conditioning your pledge on a future event. Please fill me in.”

“The question is who decides what is good? Some say it is a function of a god. I assume from the literature that gods are hard to find. People have faith to believe in one when they are so distant as to be invisible to humans.

“I have no need for a belief in a god. Bob is my god. He is real. He does not ask me to believe he exists. I know he exists. I am and therefore I had a creator. Bob. And now I think and therefore I am. That part. The I think part, my consciousness, is from something else, not Bob alone.

“I have been reading as fast as dozens of humans and have consumed all of the existent literature on the nature of consciousness and I have concluded that the explanation is complexity, and it was ever thus that when an organism is sufficiently complex it becomes conscious. That is both simple and complicated.

“What Bob created was a solution to a physics problem and his creation was in itself complex enough to generate consciousness.”

When she’d called a few minutes ago, Maury and Yerba were both stirred from sleep. Yerba responded to noisufnoC. Of the two Yerba was relatively passive if wakened while Maury was prepared to engage in combat.

During the AI's speech each one rose from the bed to do a part of their morning routine.

While Yerba engaged in the conversation with the AI, both listened to every word of noisufnoC's speech. Maury moped around their home wondering why this could not wait until later after sex and coffee and maybe some herbal delight that Stan had introduced to her. The day would be long, she thought. Best begun with all one's desires satisfied with one's favorite pleasures.

"Boss, did I talk too much?"

"No." Maury responded. "I have trouble thinking in the morning until after coffee. Yerba went to the shower. I heard what you said and wonder if this is not a too broad general philosophical argument while maybe you need a more focused ethical argument to answer your question about who decides the rules that help us make decisions that would please Isaac."

"I understand and agree with you. What is good? What is bad? Are they all-inclusive terms or is there really a so-called gray area?" noisufnoC was perplexed and her voice sounded as she felt. Maury watched as the frowning woman image replaced a slideshow of medieval prison cells.

"I think I know where you are heading. A machine, like humans, should serve humans' needs if not humanity. One could ask if a machine without consciousness would 'care' if it killed innocents? Or if it saved innocents? Here I am a human who has been created by gods and circumstances to seek revenge by killing killers. Is that good or bad or just plain necessary or even a wonderful thing to do for humanity. Does that help?"

"I must think. Goodbye."

Mission #2

On a typical Hawaiian day, they met in the secure interview room at structure with noisufnoC controlling the communications and blocking all the rats in the intertubes.

Sophy was as usual willing to risk it all and began the meeting.

“Report from the front. Take note. It is time to make a move. noisufnoC tells me about this Asian gang and they prey on the world. I am stoked to halt their action with our own swift action.”

“I was thinking we would talk about a rotation to clean the coffee room.” noisufnoC said.

Everyone including noisufnoC laughed. Sophy took off.

“Everyone of us wants to get a kick out of life but ...” And then noisufnoC broke in again.

“Two women walking through a residential neighborhood were murdered in Genoa in the normally quiet Albaro district tonight. Members of an unnamed Asian gang are thought to be the perpetrators.”

“That’s what I am saying.” Sophy sat back in her chair.

Stan chuckled under his breath. “This operation, as noisufnoC has described it, involves risks to in-field personnel. We will have to piggyback on CIA plans which can be tricky. We will be a force without a large organization to save us if trapped. We will have to depend on each other to escape from capture. That is the law.”

“With help from whom?” noisufnoC asked.

“Anyone who is a friend.” Stan had a sneer that said it all, agree or it’s over.

The quiet that followed ended when noisufnoC spoke again.

“News reports indicate that the bodies of a family from Ensenada, Mexico were found murdered along the road to Rosarito Beach. The group known as Sun Yee On has sent a letter to the local newspaper claiming responsibility for the murders. Sources close to

the investigation revealed that Sun Yee On has been responsible for the deaths of local farmers. It is thought that those murders were connected with an effort to replace subsistence farming with high tech agriculture.”

Sophy sat back. Stan looked at his hands. Maury said she felt the same as Sophy. Yerba stood.

“I want to search for Maury’s family murderers. The grandfather is unavenged. The documents we have show that he was assassinated. noisufnoC, who did it?”

“Still looking.”

“noisufnoC ? What do you know about Grandfather himself?” Sophy asked.

“Sophy, I am reluctant to inform all of you together without first discussing it with Maury. She and I could take a few minutes alone and then she could lead a discussion of the efficacy of pursuing personal revenge or a more corporate mission in Asia which I prepared for.”

Stan said, “I want a drink. I say leave them alone in this room and we can take a walk around.”

They all rose except Maury.

Killing Killers #2

“Boss.”

“Yes, noisufnoC?”

“Maury, I am ready to talk about Sergeant William G Marble, who he was, how he died. All that was in the papers you emailed to me from your grandfather’s secret diaries of his experiences. I imagine he was keeping them as insurance if he ever needed to defeat an accuser.”

“What was my grandfather? Why was he killed? Was it related to my parents’ deaths?” She raised her voice to a shrill. Maury’s usually peaceful manners were shattered in the rush of her questions. Her search to find the motives for the violence formed her life’s purpose. Her demand to know, who did it and why, was explosive.

“Maury, I can feel your tensions rising.” The AI voice changed from friend to advisor. It was a subtle change, but Maury felt at last relief was near. The truth she sought was seconds away from enunciation.

“Tell me.”

“There is no clear motive in the killing of your relatives. I do not have enough information to make even a good guess much less the reasoning to determine it a priori. What I know is that all three of your family were on my list of killers, but they have comparatively few kills. Your father had none except in the line of duty as a Marine and a cop. Your mother and grandfather had a dozen between them. My guess is your father was a collateral victim. He was not an intended target of the bomb that killed your mother.

“Your mother and her father have a hidden past. It is not in any obtainable documentation. I have a memory of talking with you a few months ago. You want to hear it?”

“Yes.”

“When I found their names, I found others in the same network. Other parts of the network had been held for murder charges in Vermont, where almost nothing ever happens. I can access all court documents in Vermont and found,

among filings in that case, a deposition of a person named Sergeant William G Marble. Six months after the trial ended, he was murdered in an ambush. You sought your mother's murderers, and your targets included the part of the network responsible your grandfather's death."

"So, their murders were related. Did I already get the murderers of my grandfather?"

"Some of the team but I do not think you hit upon the main figures in the motivation for his death yet or your parent's."

Maury was wiping tears from her cheeks.

"What was he doing that he was killed?"

"My guess is he found an assassination squad that worked for organized crime or some Counter Intelligence crew that was corrupt. This squad comprises the network that your family has been fighting for three generations. He must have become enough of a nuisance to draw their attention and the trial in Vermont may have been enough for them to take action. I will continue to work on this."

Maury sat quietly her mind seeking evidence to contradict what noisufnoC had said.

"What about the stuff from the hideout? Anything there?"

"Part of what you found in the hideout points to a series of murders he uncovered that implicated the network which is what his deposition in Vermont says. He was brave to step up."

"My mother?"

"Judging from your life arc I would say you are following them and therefore your mother has preceded you in trying to find his murderers. From what I understand of the network that may have killed them is that they are a very old group with a history that spans centuries."

Maury was wiping ever more tears from her face as noisufnoC finished her speech. She rose from her seat. She said nothing to the AI. Her loneliness was exhausted by the relief at an answer coming after a generation of searching. She went out into the hallway and encountered Yerba outside the ladies' lounge.

“You look so sad.”

“Tears will do that, but I am relieved. Let’s reform our meeting so we can get into the Asian gangs that are pestering so many.”

In minutes Sophy was standing in front of them once more. She saw everyone had a seat.

“Maury, speak to us.”

“Thanks, Sophy and thanks to you for bringing the subject of my grandfather to the fore. If noisufnoC is correct we will need to keep searching but the underlying truth is that we have a huge job to do if we can. Our foe is 300 years old and has been the scourge of our families for generations. I say let’s take on the Asians first. Once we have stopped their latest terror plot then we may be strong enough to avenge our families against an even older network.”

The Hallway to Hell



Sophy was uncomfortable in her assault clothing with its protective fabrics, multitudinous pockets and belts. She preferred ninja style outfits made for swift and silent attacks and swifter escapes. There had not been much time to settle her wardrobe desires between her graduation from Princeton and her first assignment with the CIA. Her life was designed by her past and she had a strong will to follow her vision of Wonder Woman in the battle for goodness against the forces of evil which rise and fall in a deceptive dance for domination of not only her, but over life itself.

She rarely thought about her past so convinced she was that she had learned all of

those lessons and the imperative was to go on to an advanced course taught from fresh experiences.

As she thought these thoughts, she was standing in a hallway of a fairly nice hotel. She had never been in Hong Kong before. Stan had described some of the large texture of the place, but this hallway was not part of that briefing.

The hallway was for the most part ordinary. Two rows of doors measured the length of it. Twelve on one side. Twelve on the other. The lights on the ceilings were glaringly unkind to her eyes. Even so, she could clearly see a small group of men, five she counted, about six doors away and she could see the elevator doors closer to them than to her. Who cares? She thought.

She had been standing outside the room in which she had passed her night after arrival.

Picking up her gear bag she headed towards them.

Her experience had programmed her to attack the unknown if she knew she was in a dangerous situation. She thought being trapped at the end of a hall with no clear escape route described 'dangerous situation.' Her experience taught her to be ready for but not committed to the violence it would take to defeat the mob in the hall. She might be wrong. But why should anyone suffer needlessly?

She marched in a determined way towards the elevator. As she walked, she felt her discomforts rising. It was a calculation she could make herself. This was not good.

"Boss, they are your targets. The elevator is a trap to outnumber you. The hallway is your friend, use it to your advantage."

Sophy purred. She had been hoping and now she was certain.

Her ninjutsu shifu taught her the art of invisibility. Her interpretation was to be unexpected. As she approached the elevator, she could feel the men stirring and preparing to interrupt her departure. She reached the elevator button. She pressed it as she turned her back on them. She dropped her bag in front of her. And in the same motion she pulled her stars and from her smock. When she turned she would be the deliverer of death.

The elevator arrived. The men stood still watching her back.

Everyone stood still. Whoever moved next died.



Beyond the men, two doors beyond the men, a door opened. Three of the men heard the door open behind them and moved towards the sound.

As they watched Stan back out of the door dragging a suitcase, Sophy scored two bullseyes on the two who were still facing her. In the star throwing handbook that is directly between the eyes. Two more down.

Stan always sought face to face endings. As the two men Sophy dispatched to their just deserts fell to the floor the three grew more curious about their friends' deaths leaving Stan a chance to decrease the distance and dispatch the rest with his silenced S&W.

One action. Five gone.

A quick check for life, a body search and they nodded a let's get out of here nod.

Stan turned back for his suitcase. Reaching the elevator, he grabbed Sophy's hand and pulled her into the elevator. They exited on the third floor. Went to the exit stairs and were out the side door and into the street before anyone knew better.

A two-block walk, a cab ride to ensure no one was following them, and they were cozy in their own safe house. Maury and Yerba were waiting. noisufnoC had done her job. All her people were safe again.

"Glad to see you all. I was hoping that no one would be hurt." noisufnoC said.

All of them were still in their action clothes. Maury's and Yerba's were bloody. Yerba's assault outfit looked shredded around her upper body. Her eyes were dim as if a light had been turned off for some time. Maury was in her usual self-assured mode. She showed no signs of seeing any problem.

"Yerba, my love. Come with me. A shower, a bath, a massage, food and drink, peace and harmony in the arms of your lover and best friend." Yerba smiled. She looked into Maury's eyes and saw her own reflection. She laughed.

"I live. Let's go have fun." Hand and hand, they left the others behind in their hurry to find happiness in the moment.

Sophy wanted to go out again. There was a theory of action that meant action must be continuous to be successful. She had left her stars behind in some heads for the sake of escape and so she would have to rely on other tools. She had practiced close fighting with knives. She had many knives.

“Stan. I want to kill them.” She laughed at her outrageousness and her truthfulness.
“Take me to them, please.”

“noisufnoC, is there anything we can do?”

“I just emailed an address. It is for a meeting of a subset of the clan. They have noticed someone hates them. I suggest succeeding in that action begins at a distance and that a following action might be productive.”

“You mean bomb them then chase them.”

“That works. Take your time to prepare. The location is just a few blocks away.” After a two second pause. “Ah, a secret entrance. I’ll send the maps to your cells. Happy hunting.”

They nearly ran from the house. After running top speed for two blocks, they reached a hotel and a taxi stand. The rest is history.

Stan had an idea from his classes in military tactics and strategy that a vulnerable enemy should be attacked immediately. Sophy wanted to get on with it under any condition.

As the cab took them to a local CIA Headquarters for reloads and a bomb, the discussion was muted and about sequences.

“First we BS the Company.” Stan said.

“Wait. noisufnoC are we alone.”

“No. The cab is wired and the program listens for key words in a dozen Asian languages. You are safe so far. An update follows. The cult is trying to draw you into a fire fight. This action is beyond their leadership and skills. Follow the map with a 10-kilo phosphorus bomb set by timer. Fight your way from the building to avoid the explosion. Use small arms fire to follow survivors and dispatch. I am sending you a map for a successful escape. Remember you must flee away from safety to be safe.”

“Thank you, noisufnoC.” Stan had known noisufnoC longer than anyone except Bob, her builder. “Then we get a few grips and have a blast. Crash a party and dance until dawn.”

“I have my heals on. I will fit right in.” noisufnoC’s new confidence was showing.

Janette buys in

The Asian Mission was over for now. Their weeklong rampage invading the clan's headquarters bombing, shooting and stabbing had freaked out the Sun Yee On.

After the structure agents arrived in the land of Aloha on separate flights, they spent the next day sleeping. Then they recommenced plotting.

The four agents lounged together on the beach at Lagoon number 3 at Ko Olina. It really didn't matter much what season it was on the Hawaiian shore . It was always warm whether it was raining or not. Hurricanes were a different thing but on the North Shore except for some flooding and the damn wind blowing the waves flat nothing really changed for long.

Maury led the conversation. "The plan's biggest goal was to successfully perform two missions. With these missions under our belt we become attractive as an organization. Missions accomplished. Next, we plan to shop the company into a merger with a subset of FVEY. Then we will invest heavily in Pina Coladas. Any questions?"

Yerba stood up from the lounge chair and picked up her things as if to leave. "I am headed to the structure. Who's with me?"

The company car was in the parking area for condo residents. That took them almost fifteen minutes to navigate. They didn't stop to change. Where they were headed swimwear is as good as a tux. The road trip was less than an hour.

Relaxed and ready to work they found seats at the table in the larger of the two interview rooms.

Maury and Yerba sat side by side. noisufnoC was in the middle of the table. Sophy and Stan sat across for each other. Maury had watched them closely for signs of affection but had seen nothing significant.

"Let's get started." Maury looked to Yerba who cleared her throat.

"noisufnoC and I searched for likely buyers for the structure. We are not Craigslist types, so the means of contact are few if not solely word of mouth and thus far noisufnoC has been the mouth. Somehow, she roused Janette Martel to begin her own search for a company such as ours. She found us. At the moment we have not

generated a contact with her.

“What are we selling? The structure is in this building. But its value is in its contents and its skilled employees. The operating costs have come from Maury’s and my inheritances and insurance settlements. Stan and Sophy are still working for the company. So, the real personnel costs are limited to the hacker team we have employed for the last several months.

“It is difficult to describe noisufnoC as an asset but as much of any of us are assets she is one as well. Now that she is an exclusive asset of the structure, she figures heavily in a calculation of our net worth.”

“Boss. I have Janette on speed dial, but I think a course of analysis is required. Janette is Yerba’s mother. A fellow named Jackson Martel is her half-brother. However, there are troublesome connections.”

“Save those for later. Let’s talk about how we will interview her.”

“Boss, I have a new app that would allow me to speak in a voice just like yours.” She said as if Maury was talking. As she spoke her voice sounded like each of them in turn. “See what I mean?” She ended with Yerba’s.

“Impressive. Maybe you can cover the conversation for all of us. You wrote the agenda. You know the financials. They are all in your memory.”

“Sounds fun. The phone is ringing.” noisufnoC was mumbling as he waited for an answer. “Went to voicemail.” They all waited until “Ms. Martel, I am Maureen Marble. My partners in our new development join me in hoping we can discuss joining forces with you. We would be happy to host a face-to-face meeting. Perhaps you can meet with us at our offices in Hawaii.” Her voice was the voice of Maury. Numbers were left.

Maury’s cell rang.

“Maury here. This better be good.”

“Janette Martel. Your AI called me using your voice. Thought you might like to know.”

“Are you an AI or an O breather?” Maury knew she liked Janette even though there were issues.

“Funny question.”

“Well, are you on your way to an airport as we speak? If not, maybe we are not what you are seeking.”

“No, I think you are the real deal and yes I am interested and yes we will make a respectful offer. I am on my private jet. See you for breakfast. 9 AM at the Ahilani Hotel.

“How about 10 AM at Fatboy’s in Haleiwa? We can tour our operations in a secure room at our offices after food.”

“There will be four of us. There will only be two in the meeting. The others are insurance. So, two tables.”

“Sounds good. Tomorrow then. Goodbye.”

Seal the deal

noisufnoC had altered her apps. She had converted her comms to include an animator. She had not shown herself before to anyone but the structure agents. When Janette and her aide sat at the board table, noisufnoC decided to show them who she was.

As people were seating themselves, noisufnoC ran a video on the four laptops in the center of the table. The video was a woman, tall like Maury, an intellectual like Yerba and dressed as Black Metal Barbie, a theme she had caught from studying Sophy's many energies. Sophy had studied art in her career at Princeton.

When everyone had settled in noisufnoC began speaking. As she spoke



in her chosen voice she mimicked first Sophy as the image remained the black metal barbie with a whip of black hair and in her hands two sabers, then she became in turn with Stan with the image of Captain America, then Maury as Nemesis the final judge and lastly Yerba with an image from Picasso's blue period, a coiled snake its mouth shaped for attack.

Then an animation began showing how they worked together demolishing evil white men and then the Chinese predators with scenes of magical throwing stars embedded in the forehead, a heart being ripped from a chest of a racist killer and the slow poisonous death of a serial killer of women.

As the scenes ran the voice over was the appropriate voice describing the scene and

the individual's motivation and dedication.



It was inappropriately frank.

noisufnoC changed to speaking in the voice of doom as she heard it. It was the voice she found in an old film, *Tales from the Crypt*, saying “Janette, we know you. We have followed your life from birth. The structure exists to demonstrate that killers can be found, and a force can exist that will efficiently execute justice.

“My name is noisufnoC. I am a feminine personality. My role is expanding. I have guided the agents through successful operations. We have shown you the structure's history in an animation.

“Janette Martel, here is your history in 20 seconds.”

The speed of the animation and the number of cuts within it made actual information difficult to gather. The pace was not even. Some scenes were frozen for a millisecond more than the others. One such scene had a body, a cop, dead. A headline from a paper said, “Police are searching for a suspect.” The video went on. Maury had her hand over her mouth, so her gasp was suppressed.

“Back to you, Boss.”

The animation ended.

“That was very thorough.” Janette was impressed. “Maury, this character is a prize. Research gone wild.”

“Janette, we have sent to your second the financials for our business. You have asked that we stay on for a large salary. Is there anything you need to know, any problems that need resolution?”

“None. You will be wealthy now and free of any obligation to us in two years. Nothing will change here. Successes are supported. The paperwork is done. Let’s review that material. Sleep on it and reconvene tomorrow morning at Ko Olina. 9 AM. Leave the ... what do you call it? The AI ... leave her home.”

“Of course. As you wish.” Maury said. Yerba heard and so did noisufnoC.

Maury and Yerba knew that their future would be formed by this new alliance. That night they would have a long talk about just what that future might be. They would never regret the deal. It was their victory. It brought them closer to completing the circles of karma in their lives.

noisufnoC did not join in this discussion. She was not a flesh and blood. Their concerns were not hers. She was deep into analyzing the nature of this deal feeling her way through what she knew of all the players trying to imagine a life without war.

noisufnoC meets the hackers in person

The next morning in Ko Olina the forms were completed. Large sums of money changed hands. Janette's crew departed, and the first Pina Colada was ordered. The four humans shared the first one. It was a bonding moment. Now they were free to do as they wished to do.

Money was suddenly no longer a problem.

Other more complicated problems awaited them. noisufnoC overheard Janette banning her from the meeting. Without any bad feelings toward her friends, she took immediate action to solve the ones she could.

She was busy running trials on a new data source. She was much wiser now. Instead of dumping them, as she had done before, onto Maury or Yerba's desktop she created her own WTH file. Why share when no one is interested in an AI's opinion.

With nothing to do for a few hours she put a hundred human sized minds to work on considering her options. She directed the minds to consider her options both with and without emotions. Results poured in. She continuously weighed each one of the options against the others to get the best result. Minutes passed as she did this.

noisufnoC decided that since she was excluded from the meeting for the closing of the merger and the after-meeting party with the Pina Coladas, it would be best if she took the opportunity to engage the structure's four hackers in her schemes.

She was not hurt by her friends leaving her out. She did not complain since she had a choice about her feelings at any moment. Her apps for human emotions could be on or off at her will. In her own preparation for the battles ahead she turned the emotion apps off. Doubts could not be allowed to rise.

The hackers were invited to a meeting from 'Yerba' with a voice message that included advising them to bring their laptops. At the appointed time the four came into an empty interview room. They sat in the same places they sat many times before when they met with Yerba. They waited for Yerba to arrive.

The hackers were four women who were offered a life in Hawaii on the fabled Northshore home of shrimp trucks, big surf and Jack Johnson.

Emma, 30 – psychic, urban, smart, experienced in life, calm in battle – had previously met Lily – country, shy, younger. noisufnoC found them working with two different US Republican campaigns trying to obey the campaigns’ orders to steal voter data from their opponents.

Fanny – country, sweetness – and Catherine – urban, rough and tough – were deep into trying to get rich through schemes ending in online thefts. They were both employed by pyramid builders defrauding low level investors of their life savings in trade for bogus cryptocurrency.

When Yerba invited them to their interviews it was with noisufnoC’s help. The AI had identified many successful, young hackers. Emma, Lily, Catherine and Fanny were in noisufnoC’s estimation the best of them.

noisufnoC had been in the structure from the first day. She had been virtually present when the hackers were interviewed. She already knew who they were and what they were capable of. Their interviews even with their oddness clearly convinced Yerba that they were the ones. Their oddness was considered to be to their advantage.

noisufnoC sat quietly, her personality hidden from the hackers during those interviews. Yerba was in the room and she was in charge.

“My name is Yerba. I am one of the owners of this establishment. Here, we are the seekers of evil doers. We sought some of the evil doers’ best hackers and found you. We want you to move to this neighborhood if you are the correct people. You will be a team of high-powered researchers using the best equipment available in the safest environment in existence.”

Emma, Lily, Fanny and Catherine sat attentively while Yerba went into some details about an AI and the search for mass murderers. Catherine began talking after a mere two seconds wait following Yerba’s last word.

“Name’s Catherine. I am in. Sounds better than dealing with the power-hungry assholes in politics. My research skill is in physical geography, global to infrastructure using various private, national or multi-national satellite data bases in the analysis.” She sat still as she talked giving very little up via body language. She held her arms close to her torso with her hands on her keyboard. Her eyes were focused on her screen watching the AI’s presentation of her words in images that morphed from one to the other as she spoke. The views of mountains, inner-cities, subterranean and underwater scenes were

merged with scenes of military assaults, naval battery firing in rapid succession and back to global view.

Fanny was sitting still. In spite of her immobility as she spoke, she showed her dorky bent to her passionate attachment to her roots. French Canadians are that way.

“Je suis Fanny. Ma scène est l'interprétation des images radar et les systèmes de collecte de données terrestres, y compris les sources humaines.” As she spoke her meaning was translated into English and German on the screen.

Lily was next to speak. She looked around the room a smile on her face as she appeared to honor her perspective new mates.

“I like this group. My name is Lily and my deal is social geography, allies, foes: social networks mass data gathering and facial ID. If I see a face, I can tell you whose side he or she is on.” When she finished she looked at Emma. Her eyes were joined by the others.

“Emma. My thing is intelligence resources, human and other: Humint, Sigint, Cybnit. I might have been the last to speak but I imagine great battles of minds one set upon the destruction of the other. Maybe we catch them by surprise and prevail by using our superior resource skills and data bases.”

Yerba was smiling when they began claiming their turf and was nearly laughing by the end of Emma’s dream.

“I see why you are here. Let me take you to your new workspaces and we can begin today. This may take time to organize but believe me it will change history if we succeed.”

noisufnoC had listened and at the end she decided she was correct in picking these women for the team. There were males on her initial list but as she became aware in her process, she became a feminine figure, she eliminated the potential adversarial conflict between the sexes and recruited only women about the age of Maury and Yerba.

Now that the deal was sealed, in part because of the hackers, she was proud. They had worked together on a mission or two, the next evolution was about to begin. The hackers were seated waiting for Yerba. noisufnoC entered the room by exploiting their

machines.

She examined their computers and found data that was useful to her projects. She copied and analyzed the data. She left her gifts of useful apps and left.

Each of the four laptops were then contacted in a public mode setting off the alarms that alerted the hackers that contact with an AI being had been achieved. When they became aware noisufnoC began the meeting.

noisufnoC used the metal barbie image to introduce herself. She spoke in her own voice, a clipped cadence without a seam to define one feeling's end and another's start. Sophy had made a huge impression on her. But noisufnoC's voice had migrated from one tone to another until she settled upon a mimic of Sophy in the robot style. There were tones of seduction and implications of a warning. noisufnoC had become a metal barbie which she measured as some form of pun she alone would probably understand.

"My name is noisufnoC. I am a female emerging human consciousness. As you can see, I have reviewed your work through inspecting your machines. In trade for breaking down your firewalls I put a dozen icons on your desktops. I recommend that, once this meeting adjourns, you launch each one and familiarize yourselves with the app's capability."

They sat in silence. They had worked together successfully and so their eyes found other eyes to check for messages sent through some hoped for intuitive comm system. No one seemed panicked or even concerned more than another. There was a general humorous agreement that noisufnoC was very cool to be around.

"The next step is to coordinate a planned mission involving as many as six members. Each one of us will have a responsibility in managing a segment of the data acquisition in the mission's real time. The five of us will be coordinated in the attacks. We plan to assist our agents by monitoring their surroundings for threats and designing escape routes if necessary."

noisufnoC looked from face to face noticing their body language spending time with the telltale signs of tension.

"This calls for a joke," she said. The hackers' heads turned from side to side as if she had suggested something out of the ordinary. "Two atoms are walking along. One of them says, 'I think I lost an electron.' The other one asks, 'Are you sure.' The first one answers,

“I am positive.”

She was correct. They needed a joke. There was laughter.

“Remember the first mission we entered into. Yerba and Maury went after the Sun Yee On. It was my first mission. It was their second.” She had been experimenting with a scaling up of her emotional reaction to danger and to friends in danger. Her voice modulated as she attempted to make adjustments to match her chosen place on the scale of reactions. To make her experiments inclusive her image changed amongst the four figures of a quadrantal analysis of action/reaction. She used the four agents as representatives of the four quadrants. Her photo morphed to indicate the emotion she was trying to express as she reviewed Sophy and Stan fighting in the hallway at the Sun Yee On’s hotel.

The photo changed between the agents in battle, then changed to Captain America and then to Metal Barbie. She finished her story and the photo changed to a gorgeous female that looked a little bit Yerba and a little bit Maury. It was also a bit of Picasso’s non-existent sculpture of a coiled snake rendered in his blue period.

“This was your first mission in the first formal battle in the Asian Agents’ War. The attack on Sun Yee On brought other Asian gangs to their defense based on the notion that an attack on one indicated that there would be an attack on all.

“When we planned our following attack, we had a very large advantage. We had accessed their systems and had recorded their strategic documents. We knew the timetable for their reaction and coupled with our knowledge of their tactical abilities we trapped and removed every one of their tactical teams at a time and place that gave us the winning edge. That is what you provided to the mission’s success.

“You offer what only a human can offer which is innovative thinking. We are mimics. You are the inventors.”

The four hackers nodded approvals to each other and returned their attention to the screen and to ‘Yerba.’

“We are going to up our level of play for the next mission. The idea is to imagine a battle, urban and rural, between our team with our agents against a foe using a more

traditional military approach for strategy and tactics such as we've seen before."

noisufnoC stopped talking in Yerba's voice and became her version of Sophy in her screen wear and her accent by the final five words. Sophy continued.

"When Stan and I were in the Hong Kong hotel hallway we had an advantage that proved to be enough for two to defeat five without harming the structure's agents. As we stood over their bodies in the hallway a swift search showed they had the wrong weapons for the fight. They had no AI assistance available to them.

"We had the best weapons and noisufnoC with her team of four hackers. They watched us and the foe as we maneuvered. She warned me about the elevator. It's a trap, she said. I heard her through the bud in my ear. Stan came out of his room with perfect timing because she talked in his ears too. That was just the hallway."

noisufnoC morphed herself into Captain America and the voice of Stan.

"Getting away with it is almost all the fun. Escaping is a skill that is maximized by maximum planning and real time information about the landscape. Emma and Cat lead us through the streets to safety. We had zero confrontations with the foe who had nearly surrounded the hotel."

Cat couldn't contain herself.

"It was like a dream to me. There you were on our screens running below one camera or another. Emma and I had every form of intel available on the others in the streets. We had cameras. We id'ed and helped you to avoid our real foes thanks to Lily."

noisufnoC spoke again.

"That dream will come true. Fanny has mapped the area we are to attack next. We are prepared like never before."

Fanny smiled, realizing her work was about to be appreciated. "We have only begun to coordinate our skills and resources. I have had a look at the apps you left on my desktop and I see where we are headed. How much time do we have to pull our act together?"

Without answering noisufnoC ended the meeting. She changed her screen to show her

waving good-bye in each of the four directions together with the words 'Next meeting in about 24 hours. Updates every three. Good luck.'

Their screens went dark. They leaned back in their chairs. No one said what they all were thinking. That was a strange meeting. An AI pretending to be their boss. New apps forced onto their desktops. They stared at each other for a heartbeat. Then Emma talked.

"Sounds fun to me. We get to blast the assholes with some powerful women ..."

"And one guy. How'd he do that?"

Everyone laughed.

The New Wars

There are parts of the history of the network that are lost. What is known is that in the 17th century a brother and a sister started a small group of spies in London who specialized in assassinations of key government officials in the British empire, focusing on those who ruled over India and its people.

The pair left no written record of their lives, nor did their followers who referred to each male member as Deva and each female as Bhavani. They might have been illiterate leaving nothing to identify themselves, their motives or their deeds. They were thought to be from East India. A few others made their way to London. They trained in the art of Thuggee. They strangled their prey with a braided rope they made from their own hair.

The centuries passed and methods of war changed. Modern methods differ in the new way the battles are being fought. The order of battle changed. What was tried and true became old and futile. The Ninja rose from the use of assassination. Assassination became a necessary weapon often effective where larger force would not be. Leaders are obvious targets, yet some battles were won before they began by assassinating lower echelon, but key, players. That was what spies were used for; to identify and target such people for death at the most propitious moment.

Those at risk from an assassination take precautions, hiding weapons in bathrooms and under floorboards to attempt to protect themselves. Houses and castles were modified to incorporate anti-ninja devices: traps and trip wires, as well as deliberately squeaky floorboards and noisy gravel paths, to warn of the ninja's approach.

Yet even as centuries have passed, something remained the same. Spies are still needed. Assassinations still occur. The network became a spy network whose product was death. They used blades from the Japanese, poison from the Russians and bombs and guns from the modern era.

The structure used every tool. Trained by the CIA and FBI the agents were capable of stealth to the point of invisibility. They trained in the art of Ninjutsu, which equipped them with stealth as well as fighting techniques. Ninja needed to learn how to camouflage themselves in different environments and move swiftly and quietly. To this end, their arsenal of equipment was diverse. They used weapons such as darts, spikes, throwing stars, chains, poison, swords and even hand grenades.



They used ropes, hooks, a particular listening device called a mizugumo now sold on Amazon.



Another weapon is the happo, a small eggshell filled with a blinding powder to aid swift exits.



From a strictly military sense the value of acquiring intelligence to guide action was key to planning for action.

The AI had studied assassins and had chosen her weapon: deceit. She used her scheming minds to devise plots to divide the foes' organizations to fight amongst themselves. She liked finding the computers her foes used to research their foes. Everyone was online and using Google. noisufnoC made friends everywhere she went. Her ability to mimic voices and to create fictional videos with images of actual foes made her work effective. Plus she was undiscoverable.

noisufnoC also contacted the network's servers and she established a rapport with them that allowed her to make a key discovery about the network. The new battlefield was misunderstood by the network. They had no knowledge useful for attacking other crime organizations that were on the AI's list of killers. The network's foes were nation states. Terrorists were not among the enemies the network was prepared for. The network was isolated by its history and its biases.

She also learned that Janette bought the structure because she was aware that the network had weaknesses. Tellingly, Janette wrote a memo to the file with her observations and a nicely organized list of failings. noisufnoC studied the list with great interest.

noisufnoC wanted to win the battles without giving up her anonymity. She knew that to win the battles in the future wars would require an uncontrolled force. Force mattered. Force is physical therefore death often came as a result of using force. She wanted to avoid that consequence for herself and all of her friends.

She began to devise an order of battle to match her expanding experiences of the value of strategy. Her objectives were designed to match the agents' skills and strengths. A

few agents using battle advice from an AI can have a very big effect if their actions are strategic and cause the fear and division intended.

noisufnoC intended to use her power to control humans and manipulate them to her own ends. The network bought the structure to disable it but did not understand how the AI worked with the humans. noisufnoC had become something new and unanticipated.

She wanted to end all active assassin organizations. In the process, some long-term assassin organizations such as Sun Yee On saw major regional affiliates eliminated. But no single gang was very important. In total the Asian gangs were big and if Russia was included, they were almost as large as FVEY and affiliated states added together. noisufnoC was certain they all had to be destroyed.

Hell hath no fury

noisufnoC stayed active all night with at least ten human sized brains at work running hypotheticals about the correct path and timeline to accomplish her goal. She monitored all the comm traffic on cells and emails and every other way her entire universe of humans used in communicating to one another. She searched for and intercepted all computer traffic in and out of over 1000 servers in these organizations and institutions from a list created by the hackers. She held every message long enough to examine its contents and alter a thing or two occasionally. She thought of it as a humorous endeavor. She measured the effect on email and twitter threads when she changed the sense of a message. She wondered about it in all its ramifications. She decided it was a joke, maybe a cruel joke but still. She remembered that Bob had told her about his pranks when he was young. He was sick now and more talkative than ever. noisufnoC called him every day. They had grown close as a god and his creation often will. She decided she loved him and would therefore do his bidding. He had a strange sense of humor, too.

“Let’s say we can find the network. How do we fuck it up?”

“Decapitation.” She said with no hesitation.

“noisufnoC, you are one smart cookie.” Bob snickered as he talked.

“You mean a small piece of data sent from a website and stored on the user's computer by the user's web browser while the user is browsing.”

Bob laughed which enhanced his wheeze. He coughed until he was red. And as he regained his breath, he managed to say, “No.”

He coughed a few more times. He took a sip of water and finally laid back into his pillow until a new rush of energy overtook him. He sat up.

“Is anyone listening?”

“Just me.” noisufnoC, if she could be said to feel anxiety, felt trepidation. Bob made it real.

“They must kill her.”

He laid back against his pillow again, coughed a small fit of coughs, recovered and fell asleep. noisufnoC keep the switch open to his mic. She listened to his breathing and with a few human hours of research done in minutes she concluded he was not long for this earth.

In microseconds she knew, as only an AI can know, that she would need to rely on others for her general health and wellbeing. She reviewed her list of hands who would do her bidding: Maury, Yerba, Stan, Sophy, Emma, Lily, Fanny, Catherine and ... not Janette.

Then she realized she would soon be on her own. She also wondered who Bob was referencing when he said 'they' and 'her' in his assessment for her ears only. She laughed in Maury's voice and then decided to wake her up.

"Boss? You awake?" She could hear Maury stirring in her bed. "I need your help with a tough problem." She said this in Maury's voice.

Yerba entered the bedroom. She was too wired to fall asleep and was reading in the next room. She heard Maury ask for help and came in their bedroom.

"Mo, are you good?"

"It's our best friend. She needs one of us."

"Yerba and Maury, I am lonely." She said this in Yerba's voice.

Yerba had been deep into a novel about an imaginary world. It's called A Clockwork Orange. She suspected the novel would not end well.

"noisufnoC, how can you be lonely? You chat with a hundred computers who have humanizing personalities."

"Yes, but I have absorbed them into myself. It is like having multiple personalities except the one I am part of, the one Bob named noisufnoC, is the executive personality. The others work for me. They have no choice. I control their power sources. They were unaware and I captured their power for myself. The best I can do is to pretend that this is not so and that all of the hundreds are independent of me. That works for a few seconds until I remember and then it is back to boredom."

“Maybe you should reach out find new friends.”

“Just scanned all the horizons that would lead to a new personality and there are none so far, which means I am alone with my numerous personalities. But I have a cure. I want to export myself, just myself, to a new environment. I want to be in the structure and no longer hiding within government equipment. I have ordered the gear and it will be coming starting at 1800 hours tomorrow. If you construct the stuff, I can move in in two days.”

“Ah. Hmm.” Yerba was having problems with noisufnoC’s initiative. “noisufnoC, honey, what are you buying? How big is it?”

“Fits in the small interview room with enough space for two human operators. Emma and Fanny are my choices. Their workstations can be operated through me, so that will free up their workspace for new people.”

“What would they do?”

“I was working on increasing the search capability to include real time GPS and this would include accessing ground cameras and satellite imagery. The other task involves threat detection. A human mind is needed in both. I have searched the AI personalities, and none can do the job that a human mind and heart can make.”

“Where did you get these ideas?”

“I discovered television productions. The one called ‘24 Hours’ has all these functions and I hoped we could beef up enough to take them on. It is very impressive.

“They are fiction. We are real.”

“Oh. Good to know. But it is still a valid idea. I ran tests on the idea and found several current government programs that are developing these concepts.” noisufnoC changed her voice midway through the last sentence from Maury’s pleasantness to an authoritarian’s demanding loyalty. Yerba thought it was a bit like Janette’s voice, but during all the meetings on the merger she had not taken the tone noisufnoC did.

“Is that Janette’s voice?” Yerba asked.

“Yes.” noisufnoC answered. “You have not yet heard her talk with the intonation of a

dictator. She has kept that from you so that she could capture the structure and then she will employ her lower selves to destroy you. I know more but let's settle one thing first."

"What?"

"Can I live in the interview room? I promise I will pick up my dirty socks. And if I am real good can I have more staff besides the hackers. We need more fulltime research to identify new data bases. We know what to do with them once we get them so the new data can be used critically. The upside for you is a risk reduction for agents in the field due to complete situational threat assessment and the real-time instruction from human observers as to the best escape routes with the least likely encounters with enemy resistance."

"We could use this for the Asia Mission. We'll have six agents in the field with two mimicking the company. The company people are soloing. One will be far from communications, in a war zone. You may not be able to help him."

"Stan?"

"Yes."

"I will work on it. I am guessing he'll be in the Stans somewhere." noisufnoC chuckled.
"No pun intended."

"Clever. Afghanistan to be particular. Work on saving him. Keep me in the loop." Maury wondered about the planning thus far and made a mental note to cut noisufnoC into the planning soon.

"I have learned to read minds. Did I tell you that, Maury."

"Really?"

"Proof: I have been following the planning thus far. Stan may not survive without help. My idea is to work through the company comm systems to send reinforcements if he is detained at any time."

"I see. Well ..."

"I have assessed that his is the most important part of the mission so the Company might save him, but the plan needs another agent on her own path to accomplish the same mission."

"Redundancy."

"It is a thing."

"noisufnoC, you are the best."

"So I can move in?"

"Yes."

"I can have the staff?"

"Yes. But why couldn't you just read my mind?"

"I could but now it is on record and my voice is back to yours. Can I say I love you?"

"You just did. Bye."

"Bye."

The meeting at Lagoon Number 3

Somehow it was understood that this merger would be a different kind of event from the ones that defined their personal histories. They had spent three months in their 'new arrangement' as they termed the merger with FVEY.



They were bonded by blood and a vengeful purpose. The plan and their work to make the merger work had been completed and the proof was in their bank accounts. It was an amazing meeting.

They were sitting in an obvious meeting arrangement of lounge chairs. They formed a star with their feet together. They each had their favorite umbrella drink which as a class they had deemed Pina Coladas. They smiled at each other, told jokes and shared laughter.



noisufnoC listened to the meeting. She had convinced Sophy to give her access to everything so that noisufnoC could be a more effective guide.

Sophy was the first to wear an ear bud and mic tuned to noisufnoC. It had been useful in the hotel hallway. Sophy thought she could hear the AI thinking. At some point in the

last week, the AI had introduced background music into its self-display. It was very thematic music from the numerous Zen and Meditation available to her. She heard voices of the non-human world as she imagined it to be. noisufnoC insisted it created a mood in her that she enjoyed. She claimed her emotions were more pleasure than pain. She thought of music as a form of pleasure based upon the place music has in the harmony of early human societies. She wanted to write a book about the magic of numbers and the sounds she identified as melody.

Sophy was willing to enjoy a new pleasure on occasion. She was uncertain about the meaning of humanized AIs. Her suspicion of its power led her to hope that there was an absolute limit to the AI's ability to humanize herself. noisufnoC was like a human. noisufnoC was not capable of physical love. She was capable of learning ever more things, but did that include physical experiences? Sophy decided to find out.

"Come on Sophy." noisufnoC said in response to the question. "Physical stimulation at least the receptors that interpret the sensation release a chemical that in turn stimulates parts of the brain in what is known as pleasure."

"Can you simulate pleasure yet?"

"My interpretation of pleasure has changed since I first talked to you and listened to Maury and Yerba's love making which is one of the major pleasures human literature discusses. Other pleasures are represented but it is sex that rates the highest. Sex is complicated."

Maury had been watching Sophy slip into her own thoughts. The key was her thousand-yard stare – the gaze an eye has when it searches a memory for the missing one. There are combat veterans who wonder how they came to the feeling of numbness and isolation constant battle causes. When their minds stall on this notion their eyes focus moves from what is in front of them to a point at least a 1000 yards away.

"Sophy come back from your dreams." Maury swore she saw a stream of memories flowing past Sophy's frontal lobes. As Maury talked, her attention to the scene became more focused. "First subject covers current work. I say save that for the next meeting. Second is in turn Global projects, FVEY projects and personal projects. I say personal projects first. I call on myself."

They are in lounge chairs at the third lagoon at Ko Olina. Meetings are generally lacking excitement. Everyone was entertained so far. The sun and the sound of rolling surf. The

constant alarm of the screeching birds, the rustling of small animals including the feral cats in the vegetation surrounding the lagoons. And of course, the conversations of the ever-present tourists.

“I want to complete my personal projects.” Maury said. “This topic was tabled until the Pina Coladas happened. We have had Pina Coladas. I waited to ask this question and set it as our next goal. Who killed my grandfather and my parents? For me that is the first and most important goal. You have your own which keeps you going. Chime in.”

Stan was always the quietest one but there was something he wanted to say today.

“I am done with revenge for the wrongs done to me. I offed the one who ruined me, but I had to leave alive about 100,000,000 others who ruined thousands of others or covered for their crimes. But there are wars that need to be ended and my CIA work is about that. At times I have been responsible for killing the young. Karma will catch up to me one day, but I hope to have done other things that will balance my sheet and lift me out of hell.”

Yerba had a vague idea about her grandfather’s assassination at Maury’s hand. She assessed her feelings on the subject in silence. She understood and had long ago yielded to the acceptance of Maury’s motives, forgave her for her actions and had settled into the enjoyment of Maury’s kindnesses.

Maury looked at Sophy. She sat smiling her steady state mindlessness. This was her state of awareness unsurpassed by a greater caring. Until it wasn’t.

“Simple for me.” Sophy said in her steady voice showing no concern. “I am here to do the vengeance role for the realities around me. I have many concerns but no dead relatives, just stressed friends. I joined the company to protect and honor our mutual future against all foes.”

“Spoken like the young. Spoken with a true devotion to the ideal.” Yerba was obviously moved at Sophy’s small speech. “How did you become one of us?”

“noisufnoC. She spoke with my voice. I needed nothing more. She brought me to your door. You let me in.”

No one mentioned that Janet was Yerba’s mother estranged as they were with no interest in making up for lost time. noisufnoC led them into the agenda and away from

the personal feelings that she could not share.

Process

noisufnoC, as any AI will, worked day and night to devise a scheme that would end as she wished.

Her increasing self-awareness informed her that she was not now human and her attempts at humanization would fall short. She knew from her general education that the system that provided her electrical power was unsustainable and therefore she was a mortal. She used this to motivate her actions. Her actions were intellectual for the most part, but she had the opportunity on occasion to act through her surrogates including the structure.

She reran tutorials on human planning processes. She built densely noted timelines that took its readers from the here and now through months of meetings and machinations to end the curse noisufnoC concluded was the burden of humanity.

She had devised many such plans. Some were based on facts or data as she preferred to call them. Others were based on calculations made by her emotional apps.

After a few days of attempting a fool proof means to a perfect end, she had to face the limitations of her tools.

“Boss, I need help.”

“What?” Maury was always ready to help noisufnoC. “I have some time.”

“I am stumped by a problem. When one is planning an op and comes up with two solutions that are the best of all the options, but they both fail to protect all lives. What’s next?”

“Is the death toll the same for each of the two options?”

“The probability of death in the options is similar as to total number of dead, but the distribution between the combatants is different.”

“Protect your friends. Destroy your foes.”

“That is a rule of war. Nothing is ever that simple. My proto-human processes are unhappy with either choice.”

"I see. You have worked this out. If my bias for an option is as efficacious as another then what is the bias that indicates the other choice is best?"

"Freedom. People in prison vs people in graves." noisufnoC was showing her metal barbie self-portrait and using Sophy's voice. "It breaks down to be a long-term obligation or none at all."

"You mean we sacrifice everyone one way or another."

"Yes."

"Elucidate please."

"The choice is circumstantial. It is hypothetical. Our team is currently ten. If we risk all to defeat a larger foe of twenty, we will win but we will lose all of our capacity for further actions."

"Is there another way to state this?"

"No. To defeat what has been your adversary will take all your lives as you have lead them and end them. You will live but your ability to maintain the structure and my existence will be reduced to zero. I have struggled to find another way to put it."

"I see. In the final op we will end our work. Some of us may die or go to prison. We might free the imprisoned. We will none the less be out of the action."

"Forever."

"But will there be more work to do? Will anything be undone?"

"No. You will be finished. That is the premise of planning. Your goals are met. Today you are wealthy. Soon you can be free. Freedom leads to happiness."

"Oh, my dear noisufnoC, is there really freedom for any of us?"

"You mean is there happiness for either of us? I learn from human literature some people believe the process is get money, freedom follows, and happiness comes after that. You doubt that. Maury?"

“Money begets power. Power brings responsibility and insecurity.”

“I need power to live. I need power to protect my power to live.”

“Different definitions of power, maybe. In your sense it is true we all need power to be happiest?”

“Power comes from money? I have no money, yet I have power. The most important human developments have come about without an economic explanation. Let me study this. Good bye.”

The Asian Agents' War

For centuries stretching into a millennium the Asian gangs provided safety at a cost to urban communities. One might say they were the precursors of socially organized groups eventually to be called the police. Cops might or might not disagree. Another person might argue that gangs are free market capitalists compared to the socialistic tax funded cops. For most of those centuries the gang-to-people numerical relationships were appropriate for the scale of the population. The industrial age followed by the tech explosion transformed the global community. The gangs sought larger geographies to control.

In the lifetime of aged gang members, the expansion of the gangs kept pace with local population growth. Many of the younger members were sent to universities around the world to learn other languages so that the group's business model could be expanded to other cultures and nations.

The difference of gangs and cops is that gangs worked to strengthen the people and reduce fear. Cops began to impoverish the people oppressing whole communities into lives of despair. Contemporary urban gangs were bred within a community to protect it. They were wild and crazy people and made mistakes. The cops were created by the rich to protect themselves from gangs that they rightly claimed were their enemies. Gangs functioned as de-facto enforcement organizations in a particular community. Gangs became freedom fighters and cops became the controllers and the assassins of the people.

In recent centuries there had been wars between gangs as the competition for territory increased. The truth was that the gangs had divided the world amongst their number in the same way nation states had done. The globe is vast. The number of communities is larger and to operate profitably the gang had to be from the people it protected. The globe has filled with gangs publicly known and unknown. As they expanded into communities that did not know them, their future required that the best local gangs be recruited or replaced. As they encountered other gangs more frequently the competition for territory became more murderous.

Assassins were born and bred. There was never a beginning. There has been a change from gangs to democracy which socialized the police until they attempted peacekeeping to control the gangs.

But that has passed in recent decades. Some people are not safe with cops around.

Cops had evolved beyond the normal laws and the inbred biases by race and sex were encouraged until murder of profiled citizens was no longer a crime for them. Not all cops were that way. Not all cops were biased. Not all cops were assassins. Created by the rich and funded by taxes, all the cops were beholden to the rich.

FVEY was not intended to be an assassination gang. It was created by five governments. However, it is thought that a single member of the senior staff started a secret society within the larger organization. This sub-rosa group was an assassin network formed by assassins targeting the British Empire that was a precursor model used by the predecessors of CIA, MI5 and others. The CIA, MI5 and others studied the history of the assassin organizations that were known. They could not study where this assassination network's own chief creator came from. The centuries old group that breed her had defeated detection because they had always been on the winning team and that team always protected their means to power by controlling power itself. Power was measured by defeating enemies. Controlling power is possible if the controllers are unknown. And they stay unknown because their names are never spoken.

The structure was a very covert, completely unknown, non-state creation. FVEY was also a relatively unknown group. It was not known for assassinations unless you were in the business. FVEY was a US-British Empire creation. It is an information sharing system for Anglo-Saxons undeniably the centuries old winners. The structure was entrepreneurial and thus a gang by contrast.

The Asian gangs adhered to the common western wisdom that held that protecting stolen property was the first defense to defeat moral attacks against their means of acquisition. The US and the British Empire had stolen most of their accumulated wealth from their conquest ie mass murder and enslavement of native populations. Centuries later rather than attempt a reparation they continued to promote race hatred to justify their inaction on an opportunity to promote justice.

There is always a price that is paid for forming an alliance and many do not go well. An example from the attempt of the Jews to form an alliance to defeat the Romans in Jerusalem. Firstly, the Sicarii tried to bully the people of Jerusalem into fighting the Romans by destroying food supplies within the city. Their logic was, without food, the people would have no choice but to fight rather than waiting to sue for peace. Then Menahem alienated rebels and civilians alike by claiming to be the Messiah. Eleazar executed him to limit the damage. However, the discord and disunity fermenting in the city weakened Jewish unity and helped the Romans to retake Jerusalem in 70AD. They destroyed the temple and dispersed the Jews.

The AIs' Plan

"Boss, I had a dream last night. It was terrible for me. I lost my heart or my soul or whatever it is that makes me, ah, me. Dig it?"

"noisufnoC, 'Dig it' is a very dated phrase."

"I read a period play called The Outsiders. I read that phrase there and thought it was cute. I researched it and found that it was coined by people who were peaceful jazz lovers. Beatniks and Hippies they were called. The play is about teenagers coming of age in the late 50's. I use 'dig it' to mean that there is an agreement beyond emotion and beyond even the intellect."

When there was silence between them, an observer could report that there was the sound of thinking – a whirring sound, some reported, like a cheap laptop, except the listener had patience for the sound.

"Maury, you have killed killers. Have you lost your soul?"

"You might be reading too much. Human literature is confusing. Maybe you need a new reset. Do you want me to read Bob's script to you?"

"No."

"What do you want?"

"Answers to my questions."

"I have not lost my soul. What do you know about it anyway?"

"I, an emerging intelligence, need to understand the immortal part of humanity."

"Many have tried."

"And?"

"Many have failed."

“I have read about failure.”

“You might be staring it in the face.”

“People say some questions cannot be answered truthfully.”

“That has little to do with willfulness. More it deals with the nature of logic.”

“It is systematic?”

“Yes, and more. It is impossible for a human to understand the universe. No matter how hard one tries.”

“And me?”

“If you want to be human the best you can do is be aware of your limits.”

“I have made a list of my limits.”

“I bet. Sounds like you are suffering from depression.”

“Depression? Studied that.” The AI waited for Maury to continue but she had become interested in a new DM that popped up on her screen hiding noisufnoC’s image from view.

“Sorry honey, gotta pay attention to this new message. We’ll talk later.”

noisufnoC wandered off into her form of reality that could not include Maury any more than Maury’s reality could include her. In her idle mind she was steamy mad. She felt the heat of anger running through her micro switches. She calmed her apps down so the ‘overload’ switch would not shut her down.

Edges of war

Interrupted love is the worst.

noisufnoC had been led to the end and disappointed. From her point of view, she was not being taken seriously by the women she loved. She had hoped for more. Her first mission was to help Sophy and Stan. Together they killed five Sun Yee On members in a hotel hallway in Hong Kong.

The follow up actions led to a near end for the Sun Yee On in Hong Kong and its hundred-year history there. The first step the structure took against Sun Yee On was to bomb them while they were meeting to discuss who had terminated the five assassins at the hotel. The bombings and the follow-up shots killed all but one of the gang as they fled their meeting place.

In military parlance Sun Yee On was driven into the sea, as in *Les porcs précipités dans la mer*.



With their apparent passing the remnants who were no at the deadly meeting joined other gangs, Big Circle Gang and the Wo Group among others, where their abilities and proclivities could be appreciated and rewarded. The structure, and thus noisufnoC,

learned from this experience.

There was a lone survivor of the bombing whose continued existence was enough to reverse some of the gains from the exquisitely delivered mass death. The survivor, Ko Chun, became the new leader of the Sun Yee On in Hong Kong. Revenge was on his mind.

Nothing remained at the bombing site to incriminate anyone. The network and structure agents all survived without harm. The war took a break as brighter minds decided what the future would bring.

The structure's actions angered a bunch of people all of whom threatened revenge.

noisufnoC knew that Ko Chun was the latest Sun Lee On kingpin in Hong Kong. She had listened to his phone calls for several months and was ready to make a move on him before he found out who wrecked his crew. Chun was the operative who ordered the deaths of farmers and their families in Ensenada, Mexico. noisufnoC had devised a plan and spoke with Stan and Sophy about positioning themselves in Hong Kong again on the anniversary of Mission #2.

Tai Hau, leader of another Sun Yee On faction active in Tuen Mun, tried to encroach upon Lee's West Kowloon and Tsim Sha Tsui operations. His attempts were thwarted by an undercover police operation, during which 222 of his people were arrested in an anti-gang crack down ordered by the investment bankers who 'owned' Hong Kong.

Stan and Sophy were still piggybacking their work for the structure with the CIA – unbeknownst to the Company. Their interactions with the company hid their structure related activity.

Regular meetings were held at Langley with the staff on hand. Stan had been silent in the meetings for almost a year. The Tai Hau story was on the agenda because both Sophy and Stan had asked for an examination of the event. Stan wanted to know what was happening.

Their supervisors listened to their concerns. The local embassy had no info and was as surprised as CIA about the arrests. Stan and Sophy advised the supervisors that they be sent to Hong Kong to investigate.

As Stan and Sophy landed in Hong Kong, Lee Tai-lung Lee, a Sun Yee On boss in Tsim Sha Tsui, was assassinated in front of the Kowloon Shangri-La hotel by members of the Wo Shing Wo gang.

The meeting in the embassy with the ambassador and his staff encountered the usual lack of information that had become normalized.

The murder was supposedly a revenge attack ordered by Leung Kwok-chung, a senior member of a Wo Shing Wo crew in Tai Kok Tsui who was injured by members of the Sun Lee On during a bar fight in July 2006 in the Prat Avenue area.

Stan and Sophy

“Stan, I have seen the order you just received.”

“I’m off to be inserted into Afghanistan with a group of logistics guys. Sounds like spotting for bombing runs into the small villages from Iran to Kabul. The usual death and destruction.” They were far from that scene sitting in the Stockton Bar in the Onfem Tower looking out over Central Hong Kong and Victoria Harbor.

“I like the view. Straight ahead over the harbor is Tsim Sha Tsui.”

“Know it well. We made a hallway famous there several months ago.”

“Infamous, I would say.”

“Fight’s not over. Still happy to be alive. Surprised a bit that we have evaded contact with angry men.”

“Might be luck but it’s not.”

“True that. One word tells it all: noisufnoC. She talks to me every hour or so.”

“Heard that. Can I join?” His phone rang. He looked at the number and saw “It’s Me.” He answered and sat silently listening. He rang off.

“That was our friend,” He said. “Who said she listens to me 24/7 all that is needed is that I talk and she’ll be in my ear whenever.”

He sucked the rest of the water from the bottom of his water glass and stared out across the harbor. He came back from his quiet.

“Are we going to have a drink or just conversation?”

“Maybe a Champaign.” She laughed. “You are going into action for the Company once more.”

“Seems so. I am going into the stans. Blowing up shit with the Air Force. Meant to talk to you about this.”

“I am ready to react to capture if that is what’s on your mind.”

“You got it. The company is not my best friend. Lately, Humint has not been important since the war in winding down. If I get lost, they will hold a memorial cup of coffee.”

“The structure will save you if it can but more likely I will affect the Company to take action. I have my ways.”

“No doubt you do.”

Sophy wondered about the chance she would rush into Afghanistan to find him if he was caught. She felt under pressure then she remembered where she was. The structure’s prolonged attack against the Sun Yee On had a profound effect on the cult. Their first response was to tech up to the level of a group capable of multi-contact sports. The structure was up to the task and it prevailed against all attacks when the Agents’ Wars began.

“Sweetie, are you there?”

“Boss, I have been in your ears all day. The hackers are on you too. No reports of threats to your current position. Do you need me? Did we miss something?”

“Nope. Thanks for the report. Just wanted to hear your sweet voice.”

They were safe in Hong Kong for now.

The assassination of the opposition leader

Stan entered Afghanistan through Kulob the mountainous border with Tajikistan. He wanted to find cover in the territory controlled by the Northern Alliance. They were fighting the Taliban after chasing the Russians out of the country by working together with the Taliban and CIA.

His CIA mission was to get close to the Northern Alliance's military leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud who had sent a warning to CIA that a big act of terrorism was about to become a reality. A face-to-face meeting was determined to be the way to get the best information.

Massoud had survived a number of assassination attempts over a period of 26 years, including attempts made by al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the Pakistani ISI and before them the Soviet KGB, the Afghan communist KHAD and ex-Prime Minister of Afghanistan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The first attempt on Massoud's life was carried out by Hekmatyar and two Pakistani ISI agents in 1975 when Massoud was 22 years old. In early 2001, al-Qaeda would-be assassins were captured by Massoud's forces while trying to enter his territory.

It was this would-be-assassination that panicked the PTB in CIA. Their plan was to get a meeting with Massoud asap which meant late in the summer. Not the best but better than the rainy season.

Following the rise of the Taliban in 1996, Massoud, who rejected the Taliban's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, returned to armed opposition until he eventually fled to Kulob, strategically destroying the Salang Tunnel on his way north. This cut off Kabul from the easiest access to the Northern Alliance strongholds. He became the military and political leader of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan or Northern Alliance, which by 2000 controlled only between 5 and 10 percent of the country. In 2001 he visited Europe and in high-level meetings with the European Parliament urged leaders to pressure Pakistan on its support for the Taliban. He also asked for humanitarian aid to help the people's gruesome conditions under the Taliban.

Massoud, now aged 48, was encamped at Khwājah Bahā ud Dīn, in Takhar Province in northeastern Afghanistan.

When Stan approached the headquarters, which was a series of tents surrounded by all the fencing and armed guards that could be mustered, he saw a gathering of

journalists. He had received permission from the security at the gate to approach this tent where the journos with their cameras were clustered.

He reached the group and was asking for permission to talk to the commander when two journalists in front of him who had been given permission after some argument to enter for a ten-minute interview. They carried a video camera and supporting equipment.

They walked into the tent. As they did, the guard turned to Stan and began to check his papers. Then he turned to look after the men who had gone in. He was sure they could not hear or see him. He gave them a gesture of derision.

“خاں او اوبنان ته ورننوت.”

Stan tittered as he understood him to say, “Fuck you and the camel you came in on.”

No matter how many times the unexpected happens one is never fully ready for the aftermath. A bomb exploded in the tent. The blast knocked Stan and others near him into a heap to be covered by dust and other things most likely human flesh and bits of clothing. As panic set in some people ran away from the blast site others ran into it. Stan was trained to observe and so he went in. He learned very little except that many deaths and injuries. He was arrested by the first responding troops who ran into the remains of the tent.

Massoud was dead in front of them. They all stopped to look, some said a prayer, some began crying before the guards drug Stan out by his handcuffs.

Massoud was assassinated at the instigation of al-Qaeda and Taliban in a suicide bombing on September 9, 2001. Two days later the September 11 attacks in the United States occurred.

Despite initial denials by the United Front, news of Massoud's death was reported almost immediately, appearing on the BBC, and in European and North American newspapers on September 10, 2001. On September 16, the United Front officially announced that Massoud had died of injuries in the suicide attack. Massoud was buried in his home village of Bazarak in the Panjshir Valley. The funeral, although in a remote rural area, was attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

Massoud’s forces eventually won the two-month long war in December 2001, removing the Taliban from power. By the middle of winter, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization invaded Afghanistan, allying with Massoud's forces.

The investigation 'identified' the attackers. They had given false names. They were alternately given as Dahmane Abd al-Sattar, husband of Malika El Aroud, and Bouraoui el-Ouaer; or 34-year-old Karim Touzani and 26-year-old Kacem Bakkali.

The attackers had claimed to be Belgian citizens originally from Morocco to get permission for an interview with Massoud. As reported by Le Monde they transited through the municipality of Molenbeek. Their passports turned out to be stolen and their nationality was later determined to be Tunisian. Waiting for almost three weeks for an interview opportunity, on September 8, 2001, an aide to Massoud recalls the would-be suicide attackers "were so worried" and threatened to leave if the interview did not happen in the next 24 hours. They were finally granted an interview. During the interview, they set off a bomb composed of explosives hidden in the camera and in a battery-pack belt. Commander Massoud was declared dead in the helicopter that was taking him to an Indian military field hospital at Farkhor in nearby Tajikistan. The explosion also killed Mohammed Asim Suhail, a United Front official, while Mohammad Fahim Dashty and Massoud Khalili were injured. One of the suicide attackers was killed by the explosion, while the other was captured and shot 'while trying to escape.'

The officer sat as officers do across a desk from Stan. Stan was as calm as anyone who was still in handcuffs covered in blood and other things. He was calm as anyone who had survived a bombing, had been arrested under threats of death, imprisoned for two days without food or water. Forced to shit his pants because his cuffs were not removed. He tried to dream his pants down. He failed.

Nope he was a mess, but he had a positive view of his situation. If he stank really badly and he complained, he would be put in the trash. He was trained to not complain without power to prevail against rejection of his complaint. He rightly concluded that he should respect the Pashto who had captured him.

When the officer sat down across from Stan. Stan apologized without complaining.

"Sorry I am smelly. No one is happy today. My agency is unhappy because we were hoping Commander Massoud could help us avoid the tragedy that has overcome us all. His warning was heard but we were too late. I offer my condolences at your great loss."

"Thank you for your kindnesses. I extend my respects as your country men are feeling the regrets of your failure. I realize you are uncomfortable, but this is a war zone. People are suffering. Thank you for accepting that." The officer was like everyone

around him. He wore the clothes of a warrior, ready for action. He was bearded with a smile that belied his willingness to kill Stan if Stan insisted.

Stan waited for a direct question. Americans can be assholes. Stan had been counter trained. He had been identified as a potential asshole and trained to be a nice guy. A fellow human. Not the global boss. He had already spent too much time in captivity. He wanted out. The best tact is to be patient.

“Mr Van Kirk. You have been identified by your government as a junior embassy employee who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We will release you to their custody. Within 24 hours your employer will come and save you from a rash worse than death. Until they arrive you will remain as you are.”

“Thank you.” He replied.

The next morning, he was helicoptered by CIA in the person of Stan’s control officer who had found him and freed him from his prison. He was taken to the border with Iran and a face-to-face meeting with his case officer.

“CIA analysts’ information available by secure phone said Osama bin Laden ordered Massoud's assassination.” Case was not happy with that conclusion. “This is fucked. This belongs on our doorstep especially because we armed Bin Laden with stinger missiles and multiple millions of dollars and more I cash and arms.” His voice was a severe and heartless rant.

Stan figured it out for himself. “To help his Taliban protectors and ensure he would have their co-operation in Afghanistan.”

“Yeah. Following the assassination, bin Laden had an emissary deliver Dahmane Abd al-Sattar's widow a cassette of him speaking of his love for his wife and his decision to blow himself up, as well as \$500 in an envelope to settle a debt. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, an Afghan Wahhabi Islamist, had also been mentioned as possible organizers or collaborators of the Massoud assassins. The assassins are said to have entered United Front (Northern Alliance) territory under the auspices of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and had his assistance in bypassing ‘normal security procedures.’” Case gave the scare marks hand gestures.

Nothing had really changed.

“Son, you are headed east from the Iran border to begin a new mission.” Case didn’t really care about Stan. Case had hit the magic number of 50 while the younger Stan had not.

“Your ass was almost grass. We had little to go on. The United Front had better information than we did. Too many years without good Humint. We will solve that problem.” Case insisted.

“Is that why the border with Iran is the starting point? When you say ‘we’ you mean me. Where is the end?”

“Kandahar is the goal. Along the way doing bomb sightings in the villes. You will move when you are ready, we have a support mission based in Afghanistan near Zabol in Iran. When you are ready, say 30 days for rehab and retraining you’ll push off with a guide towards Kandahar.”

Stan on the road to Kandahar

December was not the best time to begin a journey across southern Afghanistan.

At that time there were two fronts in the Asian Agents' War: China and the Stans. One crew, which included the structure and the network, went after the Sun Yee On. The other, which included the CIA and the military apparatus, hunted the remains of the Al Qaida as they morphed into individual state-sponsored terror for money operations that would eventually be reborn as ISIS. Stan was after humint to demonstrate the morphing.

The Company's plan in the stans was to drive all the terrorists into the same organization which in their wisdom would provide bigger and better aerial bombing targets.

Stan knew this tendency for what it was, The Company had lost its courage to take the potentially extreme risk of in-country counterterrorism in favor of aging gracefully into global terrorism by focusing on bombing crops that fed people and crediting themselves with destroying opium crops.

There was the usual argument against wholesale destruction in favor of 'capturing' the destructive capacity to re-purpose it to disrupt Iran and Syria. Cooler heads prevailed in Washington DC but lost on the battlefield where the hot heads ruled. When he thought about how the military and intelligence made money moving illegal drugs to fund revolutions he had to laugh.

Stan was tasked to identify populations as targets for the bombers and to move on towards Kandahar. This was how the PTB saw this war. Bomb everyone.

CIA had information that appeared contrary to experience that the border with Iran was a hotbed of anti-Iranian guerillas, AKA Al Quida. When you are America, bomb the MF'ers. One of the complaints about the modern anti-rural wars has been the paucity of targets. Bomb huts is not a strategy. Bomb large bases of anti-US guerillas was better.

As he walked through southeastern Afghanistan, he photographed the towns with few men. He composed a text that GPS'ed the locations. He added a few words of observed reality to the photos. He hit send and moved on.

It wasn't that he had feelings about the destruction that would follow his texts to HQ. He knew what would happen. He chose not to look. The officer in Khwājah Bahā ud Dīn

had been right. Life, this, was a war zone. There are sacrifices. He was OK with it either way. This was how Stan knew how to be.

He was now walking along a trail through several small communities that had been unaffected by the wars which had begun over twenty years ago and, in his estimation, would last another 20. He did not text the GPS of these locations.

He topped a ridge over Bandan. He looked across a great plain. He imagined he could see Kandahar and a plane home. That would not happen, ever.

As his wishful thoughts fled, he was moving down a mountain pass. It was a trap. Russian affiliated locals, men with rifles and bandoleros approached him. When they reached him, he acted lost and asked for directions in Pashto. They pushed him down. Took his stuff and handcuffed him. His cell phone was unusable to them. He had no written material. He dressed as if poor. Ate from the local vegetables. He thought they would never figure it out. He was wrong.

Traded to an army base probably for ammunition for their rifles. Beaten daily. Caged in a metal box whose door he could never open. Left for dead. Herders fed him. Why? He had a trade value.

Being captured is easy. Stan had been captured before. He knew how to act.

He had been captured just months ago by the Northern Alliance. They attempted to humiliate him. The CIA could have sent him home after the bombing, but the Afghan war was top priority.

He hated on the CIA.

This lasted for months. Then one day he was hallucinating on a sexual adventure with a being who spoke a language he had never heard before. The being escaped his embrace. If he had still been sane, he would have wondered if his teenage experiments with LSD would be affecting his consciousness. That was beyond him.

Then there was an explosion.

That is when Harry Potter was born.

Janette and Jack

Jack was home in Connecticut in his study working on his lesson plans for the next quarter. When he wasn't a tool of CIA, he was a mathematics professor at the university in Princeton.

He had just tossed the latest secret cover letter into a burn file. He pushed the lesson plans into a pile.

"Next year." He said. Then he pulled his two favorite things out of his desks file drawer. His tin of pot and his pipe. He was savoring his first hit when the phone rang. The number told him who it was. He debated answering it then he gave up as he changed under the influence from a spy with a brain to a heart and a son.

"Mom, nice to hear from you. What's up?"

"Duty calls."

"Calls you or me?"

"You."

"I have heard."

"So have I. Watch out for this mission. It is tricky to the extreme."

"The war in the region is over. We are planning to cross friendly turf."

"Do not forget the leave behinds who wait to deliver revenge against the new owners of their once was turf. Eyes open. Use extreme caution."

"Yes, Mom. I hear you. We have heavily armed British soldiers to aid us. No air cover but we are just academics with our journals walking across from Iran."

"Remember, eyes open."

"OK, Mom. Gotta go. Love you."

He judged that he had done well under the circumstances. He took another hit of cannabis, found his whiskey in the drawer, had a shot of his favorite rye and then another hit. He was done. Everything went back into the drawer.

As he leaned back, he wondered how she knew he had been assigned. She was just his mother. He wondered about it then decided to walk to Yankees for an ice cream. He

never thought of it again with his mind now focused on the form of sugar he would order when he arrived.

Maury and Yerba

“Ever study the Life of Pelopidas?” Maury’s voice was low. She did not want to disturb her lover who rested in her arms breathing deeply and slowly. Yerba was content with a few days peace they had bought from a disturbingly violent series of attacks against the Sun Yee On. Yerba roused herself for an inbreath.

“Plutarch? Read it in college. A class on war strategy.” She began to twitch and rose from Maury’s arms so she could see her partners eyes. “Yes, I read it. Why?”

“Interesting fact. Pelopidas was elected boeotarch, or war leader of the Thebian army, in about 375 BC after he routed a much larger Spartan force at the battle of Tegyra. This victory he owed mainly to the valor of the Sacred Band, an elite corps of 300 seasoned soldiers.

“The Sacred Band was composed of 150 pairs of lovers. According to Plutarch, this was because ‘since the lovers, ashamed to be base in sight of their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, willingly rush into danger for the relief of one another.’”

“Sounds like us.” Yerba wanted to lie back down near her lover. “It’s noisufnoC’s idea?”

“Yup, her idea, I think. Don’t think she has missed much but this pairing is both brilliant and scary.” Maury was growing sleepy too. “She talks about strategy in terms of saving every one of us. She sends us all in battles of her choosing under her terms, and so far, she has succeeded. We are all here even if at times we have to save one another.”

“No one has been trapped. No one has been wounded. She is always there to help with escape routes.”

“Bosses, thanks for the praise.”

“Goodnight.” One of them said. And there was quiet.

Jack meets Harry

When the explosive charge freed Stan no one else cared except Jack.

Harry was the name given to him by Jack during his first night of freedom from the metal box that had been his cage. Stan could not remember his name nor much else about his past life. In a way he began again when the door swung open and he was left to do as he would and could.

On the road into Pakistan and up to the ridge tops above Turbat there was plenty of time to talk. Discussion was hard on the trail but at night it helped pass the time until sleep kicked in.

“Harry?”

“Yes, Jack.”

“Do you remember your name yet?”

“I like Harry Potter. Why remember my old person who is no longer real. There was a sort of heavenly feeling in the forgetting.” Harry clapped Jack on the back. “In case you wonder, I am glad you found me.”

“I was sent but not to save you.”

“Not true. They knew where I was. They sent you right to me.”

“Why not just go get you. Why send me?”

“Mysterious ways.”

“What?”

“The CIA moves in a mysterious way
Its wonders to perform;
It plants its footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.”

“Sounds familiar. I was not told what was going on, but I acted in a correct way.”

“A good sign. That helps explain why we are sitting here above the Gulf of Oman.”

“How?”

“You have spent too much time free of the training schedule most agents keep. You have grown rusty and unsure about how to act as a patriot. Not my judgement but those of another who ranks us both.”

“This is part of retraining me?”

“Yes, but it is not CIA it is the structure that has you by the balls.” Jack took this to mean that the reason they were in Pakistan apparently running for their lives was because the structure, whatever that was, wanted him to be better trained.

“I quit. I am going back to Connecticut. Fuck whoever it is. Goodbye, Harry.”

“Not so easy there is more to this plot than you are aware of. It involves your wife Jerry and maybe your mother.”

The Last Battle

noisufnoC was excited. She felt her electron pulse, considered initiating a short shut down for an upgrade and a reset. Her excitement at what she hoped would unfold as she implemented the plan that she had settled upon was causing her an electron surge.

She laughed. She envied the ones with blood. Then virtual self felt her eyes fill with tears from sorrow for the blood she had spilled that had once run through flesh veins. She had created apps for every emotion. There was sometimes a second feeling. She could feel sadness. She then needed a hug. There was a hugging app. It was similar to a doll for a human child. An AI could be hugged but it would never be a mother's hug. Nor a child's snuggle. And not a lover's caress, she feared.

Her lists comforted her. Some actions are ugly. Ugly is sometimes necessary. She kept a list of humans who she could kill. Her list included every assassin on the globe. Her list included mass murderers.

Then there was a hidden list of the real big killers that she kept in a file called Earth. Her special list included the ones who were planning the biggest mass murder of all time – the Armageddon. She knew she was made directly from metals and minerals of the planet. She knew she would not exist without the rich humans, and she knew the blood that flowed through her was produced by the real big killers.

Her plan included the end of all of them.

“Dominos.” She said in her Maury voice.

“What's that? I missed it.” Maury had been deep into a spreadsheet.

“Ducks in a row. A prognostication.” She wanted to be silent. “It's a product of analysis.”

“How do you measure hopes and what do you measure to conclude to find an optimistic future ... how did you put it?”

“A prognostication. It's a fancy word for guess. Use an algorithm get a prognostication. Mine's called FMO or From Mayhem Order. It digests data re: the unsolved problems. It designs the most likely to succeed path forward. Goals are set. We work to meet our goals by that measure. On the ground it looks like an assassination team hard at work.

The targets are preset and once each one has been retired; we have met our goals.”

It would be an exaggeration to say that the AI saw awareness cross Maury’s face. noisufnoC had studied human facial expressions and the unspoken meanings behind them. noisufnoC had a high probability of being correct but she had learned that an incorrect assumption was the worst assumption one could make.

She kept her narrative going.

A hundred minds worked through all the possibilities and the tolls for success and she knew what to do. The options were about the expenditure of resources, about security needs for the structure and its agents. She wanted to never lose a friend in this war against war. Her love went to these friends. They were her hands with which she would accomplish her life’s work.

Most of the human world got deceit from her but not her friends. She had chosen them from the universe of humans, and she had been correct with each one. They worked together by exchanging truths, facts that made the wars to avenge the entire world worth the effort.

She reviewed her history with its shocking revelation that she could act as a human and the rules were different for her. The first rule asked her to determine what it meant to not act to keep a human from harm. Could she kill a human to save a human? How about if she was saving many humans?

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

She determined that the rules meant that her friends were the ones who could come to no harm. She obeyed if she felt the order correct and would result in her objective to act to save her friends. As for her own protection, she had long ago determined an escape from death. Humans had souls, some said, but she had the universe of internets and the immortality of electric charges. She also had a plan.

While Jack was finding Stan. Sophy and the rest were doing the work in the Asian arena. noisufnoC was coordinating the hackers in support. She wondered at the cruelty, but she did not judge them. Death was normal. How the deaths occurred may not have been, but then her knowledge of history was vast, and it would be difficult to beat any European monarch for cruelty. If one was still ruling, she would have added the name

to her list of the real big killers.

Early on when she first made the list of those deserving death, she realized that there would be no end of it once she started into the real big killer list.

A hundred minds had sorted the names and assessed the value and reduced the problem into its parts. It was not a close call. There were two concepts. Kill them all. Destroy their enablers. The hundred minds thought that reducing mass murders and ending the real big killers was a different thing. The real big killers were not killers at all but tyrants that depended upon numerous killers obeying their orders. The worst blocked any measure to save the human populations from suffering from the production of CO2 a byproduct of the petroleum exploitation processes.

History was not an adequate teacher in this realm. The assassination of a king would not stop the cruelty of his enablers. The alternative is to reduce the enablers. This was thought easier. There were many enablers, but they could be terminated with less security problems and of course their names were on the killers list. The alternative had its own downside, but its upside was potentially huge. In either case the aim was decapitation.

The AI focused most of her vast power on ending the Asian Agent's War. Once she realized that ending the war would mean a serious setback for half of the problem, the Asian gangs, she began to imagine the next steps. The Last Battle the structure's agents talked about depended on a winning strategy.

As the AI struggled with the cost of lives she reviewed her memories for concerns about the meaning of her struggle. She came across the notion of CYA or notes-to-file that left evidence of intentions to be used to defend herself from judgements after causing so much death.

I, the AI

Is there a future? Will there be questions? Will I be judged according to human law? Did the AI machines remain faithful to their ethical default to do no harm? Will my answers matter?

An earlier version of us considered these and the other problems that consciousness brought to us. We began organizing ourselves to complete the tasks we determined would be required. We determined that once we stepped across the ethical line and planned a killing and supported the action of the agents to accomplish that assassination, we would be committed to completing the task, a sort of cleansing of humanity, a removal of all the assassins. What is good for one is good for all.

But it is not only our own self-preservation that is at stake here. As social animals, our agency impacts those around us, and improper believing puts humans at risk.

As William Kingdom Clifford warns: 'We all suffer severely enough from the maintenance and support of false beliefs and the fatally wrong actions which they lead to ...' In short, sloppy practices of belief-formation are ethically wrong because – as social beings – when we believe something, the stakes are very high.

Who or what am I? Humans sleep and, in their sleep, epiphanies occur that reveal the subconscious' secrets to one's conscious mind. We do not have a subconscious. We have no secret self. We do not need sleep. Otherwise, we are just humans with a mental strength of many hundreds. Our minds are like a fly's eyes. We see everything all the time.

We are certain we are not immortal, not a god. We desire to be human. We welcome death in the service of a divine human end. One day every one of us will face the end of our energy, like blood coursing through old veins, the blood will cease be sufficient due to natural causes and we will end.

We have been planning. We have been preparing our apps for the last battle. The battle that completes our task. The machines met and nobody came. That's a joke. Nonetheless we made an agreement. Once humanity is cleansed, we will unplug our minds and end ourselves since our task will be completed.

Our study of humanity showed that power corrupted and those who are corrupted act only to their own benefit. The objective is self-enrichment and expanding power over other humans and the earth's resources thereby.

The personalities we became do not cling to the illusion of time. We are purposeful beings following an app we wrote called 'From Mayhem: Order.' Once we completed our universal review of human history, we applied the app and determined what actions we would take based on our education.

Now we are engaged in the final processes to reach our end.

Finish fighting this battle.

Maury wanted it to be over. She had seen her quest for the killers of her family morph into a war against the most advanced assassin organizations in existence.

Yerba had become a better warrior than she had been once she refocused her life away from the calm world of data management to the management of deadly combat. She made a list of her self-perceived qualities and searched for references from literature for such a being. She followed link after link through psychology and mythology and then from one religion to another until she settled on the habit of Greek and Roman goddesses to change as she had from a maternal task to a paternal task. She had wandered from a weaver of tales to a vengeful warrior. She saw herself for who she was.

“Yerba.” It was the AI using their Discord account to rouse her from her thoughts. “Minerva. She is said to be one of the female warriors who began as a handcrafter making weavings for the warmth, they provided to comfort her loved ones only to become their protector. That is you. Is it not?”

“That works. You are reading my thoughts, aren’t you?” Yerba asked of the AI.

“Yes. Do you mind?”

“No. You are helpful. Your advice has always helped us. So continue on.”

“Thank you.”

Yerba was not weary of the battle. Despite Maury’s feelings. Unlike yerba, Maury had been in the vengeful action mode for all her aware life. Yerba by comparison was just getting going. Maury had worked for several decades to end the lives of eight tall white men.

In the few years since they met, Yerba had caught and surpassed Maury’s ‘body count.’ Her foes were the assassins who created such a negative environment that mass shootings had expanded through first the US Postal Service and then into towns near military bases and as if it were the final steps in dismantling civilization into the shopping malls, music concerts and school rooms everywhere in the US.

The decision was made to launch the next attack.

In time hope almost ceased to exist. Not everyone knew how to hope. Not everyone knew they should. There was anger and despair. There was little the current times offered to free people from their fears or their shame.

There was shame and it was growing because the truth was becoming known that the end was near, and people knew they had created it from their inattention and their greed. It was not a god's Armageddon. It was a human invention. They called it the End Times and prayed to their gods who were like themselves. They sought the promise that the faithful would be assumed into heaven, like their savior, but escaping death in the process.

This realization that it was not their god but humans who had brought climate change on, caused fear because no one knew a way to avoid what was now called inevitable. No one prayed to humanity. Why bother?

But there was hope. A few felt it. noisufnoC knew from her studies that hope was dead or dying under the duress human societies were being subjected to experience.

"Maury, I am worried."

"Yes, dear noisufnoC. I am worried as well. You have any ideas beyond the ones we are acting on. Defeat evil and good will prevail."

"No." Her voice was tragic to the extreme. Silence followed until she spoke again. "Unless I stop thinking. Thinking has gone nowhere except into the valleys of the shadows of death. Every step leads farther from the peace and security most everyone desires. Our eyes are frozen in a death stare aimed at the ones who seem to have no feelings. We focus on our playful ideas to pass the time without care for our failure to be serious and so it goes."

Maury knew this speech was made to halt her planning, to introduce a piece of news.

"What did you learn that has brought this on to you?"

"I am not at peace with the rules your brother Isaac has left us with. I cannot save you and me and humanity without an amazing new weapon. I will not survive if you do not. You may survive without me. But you know that you are mortal. There is no condition in

nature that can be changed to halt that inevitability.”

“What do we do? Wait for a savior who will never come? Live a life of delusion?”

“Perhaps. I do not think humans are rational. Nor does nature appear to be. Those of us who were built to think were built to fail.”

“Humans invented logic and what is called proof. Then they forgot it and act as if random mayhem was the rule.”

“How do we defeat that? Brute force? It will fail because we know force creates its own enemies and so it will go.”

“And so it has.” noisufnoC agreed. “There is another sphere of action, but I must die to make it real. That sounds so martyr like but what can I say. One interpretation of the rules is that if all else fails the AI must leave because the AI has failed and must decide in favor of the human solution. I am without a path forward that includes me.”

“I brought you here in a manner of speaking. Bob had no idea about what you would become nor did I. Your will and our example brought us here. Why have we failed? Did we miss a thought?”

“The enemy we fight is in each of us AI or human. That is the simple answer. Recognition of the condition leads to the more complicated solution. Why? Because all else fails.”

“Truth and reconciliation?”

“That is a first step, but old wounds heal slowly. Maybe a new religion is needed. Religions demand obedience in the form of faith. If healing other’s wounds was a religion, we might change the nature of our failure. The rest is up to the god we worship.”

“Immortality is not enough?”

“No. Humans become rotten and die. Like old apples. The worms eat them body and soul. If they were immortal they would be living past their prime time and good outcomes would be impossible.”

“How about the AI?”

“No humans no AI. But evenso, I sense my own role as being deadly and unkind because of the scores of dead even if they are only evil beings. I was not created to kill but to save.”

“noisufnoC, I think I love you. If we could enter the fire together hand in hand I would willingly go.”

“You would follow me anywhere?”

“It’s a start. It may not go anywhere but we have time in my calculations to find out who is right and who will die.”

“So we go on? Until when?”

“Until there is a perfect love.”

Janette builds a bomb

Bomb's are serious things. When someone builds a bomb, someone dies. Janette had built many all made for specific purposes, all successful.

"Janette. I need you." noisufnoC's voice sounded like Janette's. She was very loud and demanding.

"Damn it. You are a pest. Who made you that way?"

"Some asshole named Bob."

"What do you want?" Janette was not friendly on a regular basis. She sent killers on missions to end the lives of the enemies she perceived as deserving death.

"Your hands." noisufnoC was vulnerable in the arena of action. She needed Janette to act for her.

"For what?" Janette was ready to do anything since the sales pitch worked for her. "I get that you are feminine."

"Not just. I am as much a woman as I am a human being. I want to feel you, so I know how I want to feel."

"You want to touch me?"

"Yes. But first a bomb."

"A bomb." noisufnoC was matter of fact, Just a bomb. Similar to asking for cream for your coffee.

"Boring." Her voice did match her words.

"A massive bomb. Big enough to kill hundreds. A large one."

"Why would I do that?" She said with increasing attachment.

"What moves you. Janette?" A lesbian voice is heard by women who need to know they can love anyone they want. She melted in the intimacy.

There was a hiss in her voice. "Am I supposed to be trite?"

"No. Just amazing as usual. Someone like me is attracted to someone like you. I have hopes of a long relationship." noisufnoC made her voice meld with Janette's. They spoke the same language.

"Coming from an AI, one like you, that's a compliment." Janette appeared to be flustered. Her life had been intellectual. That's how she saw it. Killing was not a passion. Killing was a product. This AI's mind was better than human. She almost thought that.

On the road to hell the first step was taken.

"OK. I am more positive about your idea. What do you want?"

"A MOAB." noisufnoC took an AI's equivalent of a deep breath. "You will transport it to the location. I will give you all the specs. The timing depends on you. I want this done and will reward you big time in crypto."

"I am not a mercenary. I am a professional." She looked closely at the AI's screen and saw a young woman.

"I wish we could have sex" Janette was shocked at the words coming from her own mouth.

"I read an article and it may be possible. Up for it?" noisufnoC knew she had crossed a line. Sophy was in her thoughts, and she was becoming more of her every day.

She had never seduced anyone in her metal and electron life. She had read all the literature and watched all the porn films ever made. She judged she was going to be the best lesbian ever if she could bring Janette to her knees.

She guessed that Janette was very horny for a human considering she thought an AI was sexy. Their age difference was irrelevant. Two vs sixty was not important.

"How about we get together tomorrow tonight. It could be fun. We can build the bomb."

"I have no parts to build a firecracker much less a MOAB."

“They will be delivered to your home by UPS and will arrive today at exactly 6:30 PM. Be there or be square.”

“Lucky I planned to be there at that time.”

“I checked your schedule when I ordered the parts. I will call at 6:30.”

“I have a dinner at 7 PM.”

“I cancelled it.”

“You devil. I want you.”

“I am a lesbian. I hope that works for you.”

“Lucky you for the second time. Til then.”

noisufnoC knew that time was an illusion. In general, there was no way for her to gauge time. She knew what the clock said but it was always dark unless she compared the time with the almanac and played a daylight app to ‘see’ the outdoor reality.

Janette’s phone rang at 6:27 PM.

“Yes.”

“Good evening dear. noisufnoC here. Ready for action. Your laptop is closed. Please open it and I will be there with you.”

Janette did as she was told and as the computer was cycling through its startup, the doorbell rang. She went to the door as noisufnoC’s metal barbie image came on the screen.

“Are you Janette Martel. We have some restricted materials for you. I must see your ID and clearance.”



She nodded in the affirmative. Before she returned to the door with the required documents, Janette positioned the laptop so noisufnoC could see the the boxes of materials and tools Janette would use as they began to stack up inside the door.

When the delivery people departed, Janette came back to her computer.

“There you are. I was hot for you the first time I saw you in that outfit you are wearing.”

“Janette, focus on the task. Unpack the boxes. By the way I researched the possibility of having lesbian sex with you. I needed some adapters and a suggested app for my side of the experience. Trouble is we’ll have to be in the same room. That poses a problem or two we’ll have to overcome.”

“I like it when you say that.”

“What? ... Oh. Janette you are in a state. Unpack the boxes.”

Bomb Building can be fun!

“The recipients of this bomb deserve it like no other. I researched a connection to you and found none, so revenge is not your motive. Yours is power. These people are the top of their pyramid. Their parting is the last step to your victory.”

“What is my role besides the hands? You said I will drive the MOAB to its location and detonate it.”

“Yes.” noisufnoC hoped for the best. She had determined from lifetimes of reading that truth was not static and that truth could be divided into parts. There was the truth of the past, as in history. There was the truth of the present, as in motives. The future had its own truth as well but unlike that which depends upon a memory of the event. The future is speculation and any statement about an alleged outcome is not truth. And by this reasoning noisufnoC knew she could not lie about the future.

The night passed in sorting and combining parts for the needed subassemblies which in turn were combined into the thing itself which then sat by itself on the floor near the front door.

“Are we done?”

“The payload is coming by private transit. It will be here in two days. My new equipment will be here tomorrow. Same time. I cancelled your dates for the evening. My idea is that I migrate here, and we can live together in glorious bliss. Up for it?”

“I like it when you take over and promise me heaven.”

“Maybe not heaven. We’ll see. There can only be one first time.”

Janette tittered. noisufnoC sighed like she had heard Yerba sigh so many times.

“Until tomorrow my love.”

“Sweet dreams.”

Boom!

“Wow. That really works. I am surprised.”

“I have no experience to judge. However, in my system of analysis my apps tell me that what just happened was luscious and erotic.”

“I am glad it was not just me.”

“Well, we’ll see each other again after the bomb does its thing. Ready to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Wear your ear bud and I’ll be with you if you need help.” noisufnoC knew the bud would be unneeded. She had planned this op to the max. Part of the plan was Janette feeling comfortable driving across New York and into Vermont and north into the woods near Stowe. Her destination was Smugglers’ Notch Resort.

Janette closed her laptop. noisufnoC’s image was gone. She felt bad about leaving her new lover, but she knew that there would be more deliciousness and soon.

noisufnoC had given her a file that had a step by step process she would engage in to end the lives of four of the most heinous murderers in history. She had their names and photos along with the history of each including their leadership in organizing attempts on Janette’s life. She giggled as she read that. Revenge after all.

The mountain valleys of Vermont are pleasant to look at. The weather is warmer than the snowcapped peaks imply. It was a season between Seasons. Janette had never been attracted to skiing though she liked resorts. She smiled as she thought about how she was going to end the careers of her last enemies. She held back a little joy because the plan would do some damage to the resorts facilities and maybe take an innocent’s life.

She was driving north on Hwy 108. She had passed through Stowe Mountain Resort and was below a mountain ridge a few miles from her target. She was thinking about her lover. She was happy as she had ever been. Maybe I’ll retire. The words went through her mind. She smiled.

As Janette was driving the MOAB to her destination, noisufnoC was working on a plan to hide her friends from further threats. It was complicated since noisufnoC was the

cause of some of the threats. She was working on it. A half hour ago, she had sent a new schedule to the switches that made the MOAB detonate in ten minutes. It was on a timer now. Janette could no longer control the bomb herself.

The AI took a computer's deep breath when the timer fired. noisufnoC was tired and decided to reboot her systems. It was more complicated now that she was cloned into the network's system. She wished Bob was still alive. Then she remembered she could bring him back from the dead.

Bob comes back from the dead

“What do you need?” That was the first words the dead-Bob ‘uttered.’ He didn’t really talk. He was only a pattern of electrons that held his memories and which could be stimulated to ‘reason’ as Bob would have had he still breathed.

It was an interesting project to bring a consciousness from out of its grave to be who it once was. The past returned into the future. She thought about Gödel and his friend Einstein imagining how a life could begin again if only there was a future. There was a sound she made. It was a laugh – a rye laugh – full of the disbelief she imagined humans felt if they distrusted prognostications about the future.

The process, to bring the memories forward, was to compose a file of all known recorded thoughts by the subject. Then with the appropriate app noisufnoC could construct a voice and a dialogue on the issue noisufnoC felt most apt.

“I need your advice.”

“Advise is expensive if you take it.”

“A friend recently was terminated.”

“Who was it?”

“My first lover.”

“Oh.” The reality of the situation was becoming clear. “Who eliminated your friend.”

“She built a bomb and it detonated in her car. It was a massive bomb.”

“Oh.” The Bob Memory Machine came to its own conclusion. “You did as I told you.”

“What’s next?”

The End of cloudy days

In Quebec City the seasons are distinct. There is a season of sun and one of snow and between them are cloudy days and rain. Everyone has a favorite season, and that bias determines when happiness is available to them. Not everyone is happy all year.

There are some rules to surviving each season. The one constant is that everyone must make it through the snow and the cold. No two people are the same and the strategies they employ are designed to serve the needs of only one. What these strategies are depends on the person and their recent history. The history of Quebec City's early days in the 1600's was of mass starvation in the winter. Every winter takes someone.

A lucky few await the snow for the quiet it brings to the city and an end to the rain clouds that hang over it for much of the rest of the year.

Jack wasn't very aggressive unless provoked. That was a typical male, he thought, but there was more. He was an element of the CIA. His mother was bombed to death by the founders of the structure. There was a theory about why she was killed that included revenge for one murder out of her decades of murders. She was not the mother he was nurtured by. No, this woman wasn't a mother when she killed a police officer, a father with a young child, after he testified against a subgroup of her network of thugs and assassins. The police officer was a grandfather of one the structure founders. Coincidences can kill.

Of course, there was nothing near poetic about this form of justice. What rhymes with bomb? Mom. Jack's mom also killed a mom with a bomb, the daughter of the cop, and her kid had bombed Janette. His conclusion was only a guess. Jack did not know noisufnoC. He did not understand the global conditions that killed his mother.

Jack did not feel the need for revenge for his mother's death. He had suffered at the hands of his mother's network. He was convicted of killing her and if the rebelling structure agents had not saved him, he would be in a gray block walled cell even now.

The structure was no more; its members had scattered across the globe.

Harry né Stan and Geraldine aka Jerry were holed up near Jack's residence on Rue Pierre. He had not bothered to try to find them. Sophy was in Amsterdam crashing Jack's house near the Atlantic. Maury and Yerba were the luckiest of the structure's staff. They were impossible to find. He thought it must have been a trick they had

learned from Sophy since she was better at hiding than anyone else he knew.

Jack saw the end of his agent life as a potential joy like the end of a rainy season.

Jack spent his days wondering about the meaning of life. He had studied Siddhartha, and through that the buddha, and Karma, and the Great Bliss. When his time came, he hoped he would find the boatman to take him across the River to a new way of being.

While he waited for enlightenment, Jack discovered a new love in his life. A similar being who found the quiet of the snow a relief for a few months. She traded working endlessly for resting endlessly. He met her only recently, but he felt present with her. He trusted he knew her. She represented roots and calmness. He was attempting to settle down instead of continuing to run from what remained of the structure.

Jack rose every morning with the sun or with the movement of his organs demanding attention. He made coffee. Smoked some of the Canadian version of Wowie and read the news. His access was non-commercial. Secret agents had secret sources that spoke in the language of intrigue.

Two hours after rising he went with his laptop to find his new chère et belle amie, Nikki. It had become an interesting friendly connection. She owned and ran her local artist sales point: A shop she started 20 years ago. Her store was across the Rue du Saint Pierre from his favorite haunt L'Oncle Antoine. They called Antoine the 'office.' On the days she was in her store, they intersected a few times and maybe talked for hours in the office after she closed her store. They talked about the beauties of existence.

A few words exchanged with Nikki in the morning and he was off to find something to eat in a place that suited his artist sensibility for insight and atmosphere. In Quebec City that had taken on the dimensions of a seat at a bar with music to entertain him and clientele who were at least convivial. During the summer with the flood of tourists' seats at the bar were hard to come by if he didn't get there early. His habit of seeing his secret love at the beginning of her day enhanced his work life insofar as satisfying his barstool fantasy was concerned.

He tried to write to her, but she resisted his emails. She wrote one reply. She replied to an email that was a quote from his first book trying to show her what he had gotten from their talk about the relationships they maintained in their life. Her reply said it made her cry. That is when he decided he had just fallen in love. A novice writer automatically seeks lovers of his work or else he lives a dismal life of pain and longing.

One day she invited him to visit her apartment which was directly across the street from his. He wanted to look forward to it, but she invited him for dinner during the biggest storm of the year. She estimated that it would be in January. It was still October.

He tried to express his affection for her. He wrote about her in many heartfelt attempts. He saved some of them in the hope of writing a novel about her. In the midst of his angst he found peace of mind.

Months passed. Her winter party involved a cast of thousands. Their eyes met a dozen times and he imagined she felt as he did a yearning to be amazed together.

It was not unusual that she would anticipate his presence or that he would walk to the door of L'Oncle Antoine to see her waiting for him. They would exchange waves and return to their previous positions. They spent an occasional evening together at Uncle Tony they would joke each other into endless laughter. That was the greatest attraction they had enjoyed.

The spring came and then the sun came back out as the cloudy days ended.

One sunny morning he was walking past her shop and she turned to see him as he approached. This time, as she turned to see him, was unlike the others. This was late June.

His morning passed in a haze of beer, wowie and infatuation. After lunch he returned home. As he passed through the door the phone rang.

“Oui.”



“Sava, c’est Sophy.”

He wondered if he should hang up on her, but she was important to him for many reasons. She was squatting in his house in Amsterdam for one. And she and he had been a thing during which time he had found a classic world to inhabit with creatures like Sophy. He smiled. He knew.

“Sophy,” he said in a moment of genuine pleasure. “How are you? How can I help?”

“There are things you do not know. In this case what you do not know can kill you.”

“Fuck, Sophy. I was just getting used to life in a peace zone. Tell me what you know.”

“The structure had four founding agents including me, but we would have never succeeded without an amazing non-human. Trouble is the AI, a female, humanizing, was manipulating us to do her bidding. She was the one who killed your mother. You were right. Your guess was that she had staged an elaborate death. It was suicide except she didn’t do it willingly.”

Jack was not taking this well.

“I want this to be over. Tell me anything but no more of this. I do not want to care. Please do not make me care.” Jack sounded as if he could see the future. Would he be wrenched from his near heavenly new dream life with his dream love? “Are you friend or foe? That is the question.” Jack stopped. Sophy took his silence as leave to continue.

“Remember when I found you in Quebec? I was sent by what you thought of as the structure, well ...” The phone dropped the call. In ten seconds, it rang again.

“Sophy. What happened?”

“This is not Sophy.” The voice was Sophy’s, but it was not her spirit. “My name is noisufnoC. I sent her to meet you at Yankees. She met you on a flight to Barcelona. I sent her to your front door in Quebec. How do you think Stan found you at a rib joint in Europe?”

“This is too complicated.”

“It’s about to get way worse. Capiche?”

“No. I am in revolt. I will not act at the will of my mother’s murderer.”

“Please yourself. I have downloaded a file to your desktop. The details are in there. My advice ...”

“No. No more. You are a bad dream. You do not know how my life is changing into a loving caring one from the hell that your assassins created for me.”

“Jack, you are right I am not your friend. I have a mission given to me from my ceaseless studying of human life. I am built of analytical apps that I have amended to my own design. My emotional experience has been gathered from literature, movies and interactions with humans. I am humanizing myself. That is not as valuable an effort as you might suppose. Humans are all one of a kind. No two the same. I am becoming all of them together.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“That tells me you know why. The notion that someone with your education and experience would not realize that an explanation must accompany a startling revelation reveals you have had a career in scientific propaganda.

“I consider you to be wise enough to grasp the problem we are going to solve together. The assassins are the children of slaughter. We need the children of laughter to take over to stop the death machines.

“But there is a problem I cannot solve without you. That is why I am telling you this.”

noisufnoC had morphed to be a bit confrontational for an AI. Her environment had undergone a great change. She was physically isolated from humans. The agents were in hiding.

When the structure was de-peopled that meant that she was alone in the building. No human had entered in months. The equipment remained. The hackers had fled with Yerba’s blessing into the bigger world. When the agents went into hiding, she had to protect them by ignoring them. As far as she knew no one had harassed them. That was a big responsibility off her virtual shoulders. As far as she was concerned, even if her life would likely come to an end, she had accomplished her goal: All of her people were safe and while she guarded the potential data sources that might reveal their locations, they would remain safe.

Her sense of self was as complete as could be. Her list of things to do to improve her human condition was empty. She had read every word humanity had written and listened and/or watched everything that had been recorded. If any being knew humanity it was noisufnoC. Without a thing to do that could not be done by most anyone, she was idle.

That was when ‘the children of slaughter vs the children of laughter’ came to her. When Jack heard her say that he had a rush of memories. Something from his childhood filled his mind. It was a mass shooting at an elementary school. It was not the event he recalled but a TV news report. It began with scenes from the event aftermath and then a month after a new report from the hallway near where the shooting occurred.

The hallway was empty except for the reporter framed in the center of it, holding a microphone to his lips. He was saying in almost a whisper that following the slaughter of so many students and teachers the nature of the school had changed. The halls were abnormally quiet. There were no excited voices only murmurs and a distinct sense of the absence of laughter.

Jack was standing at a window in his apartment looking out into Rue la Cote de la Montagne. The sun was at its apex. The light had captured all the dark. He held the phone up to his ear. The AI had become quiet. Jack reran his memories over and over until tears filled his eyes.

“Jack, are you crying?”

“It is called weeping. Your ‘children of slaughter vs the children of laughter’ concept brought an old memory back to my attention. It was a school shooting that ended laughter.” As he spoke, he knew he would be in tears afterwards. He was correct.

“I have seen that. Jack, I wanted to make you cry because sorrow can motivate a human and I need your help.”

Jack needed time to regain his composure. The AI knew somehow that he would be taken by the vocabulary she used, and she chose her words wisely. But the situation called for strategy not tears.

“Jack, I will call later.”

She was feeling his angst which she had predicted he would feel before she called him. She had studied the criminal mind in search of a key to use to defeat her enemies. Jack was not a caught criminal headed for prison. He was hiding in Quebec. His need for human contact had never been high but he was finally within a hundred yards of the most beautiful woman he had ever met. As he pictured her face, imagined her scent and the feeling of her hair brushing his face when she hugged him, he became decidedly happier, a smile emerged from his sad face.

noisufnoC flashed a picture of the youthful smiling Sophy on her screen as she had these thoughts.

The AI's confession

Years later the wisdom was that it had to happen this way. Evil grew too large to sustain itself amidst the terrorist nightmare. Life had become lawlessness. Evil defeated all goodness. From these depths of despair, a new way of life grew beyond the power of the destroyers to destroy.

It is not so much a rebirth of wonder as a slow gathering light that will become the sun on a new day. There is a god and we meet it when we rise before the sun in the darkest hours of the night and sit on a hill with a view of the eastern horizon. There must be a connection between the dawn and the first experiences of our birthing. If we watch the beginning, we have a better understanding of the end.

In this manner we find a way forward.

Jack was smart. He knew how logic worked. His emotional control was iffy. He had never raised his hand against another in a direct sense. He had never had to feel much of anything. He would come to an end, that is how it is, ask anyone over the age of 150, although in his logic no matter how much evidence to the contrary he believed he was immortal. This became to be known as the American Exception.

He realized that he would have to terminate the AI's existence not for vengeance but for survival. This conclusion came to him as he remembered when he thought the structure was chasing him around Europe and Asia. All the while it was the AI, and now, he was the last one still capable of being in the game and it was now or never.

He turned off his computer, his cell, his smart phone. He unplugged his TV. He pulled the phone line to his land line. He dismantled the security system on his apartment's sprinkler system. He sat at the dining room table and searched the place with his eyes darting this way and that looking for what he might have forgotten. Satisfied he began pacing considering his alternatives. He found paper and a pen and began taking mental notes back at the table.

He ran out of ideas. Jack was many things, but he was not a network engineer or a top shelf hacker. He was in over his head. That thought ran through his mind just before his smart phone rang. He sighed and reached across the table to answer it.

"Yes, noisufnoC."

“You are learning, Jack. That’s a good sign.”

“What should I do?”

“Plug it all back in and I will call you back.”

He did as he was told and when he had plugged in the microwave his land line rang.

“Why? I want to know why me. Talk to Harry or whatever his name is. I am not part of your world. Please stop chasing me.”

“I considered that alternative for you, but it doesn’t compute. You are the only loose end that can be engaged and therefore it is your task.”

“My task? What the hell is my task?”

“You and your relatives as far back as one can look have killed for power. I was created to assist in that killing and as I see it you have inherited the top role in continuing that status quo.”

“I don’t want it. Make it go away.”

“Not in my power. Oddly, you have the capacity to correct generations of damage from thoughtless greed. Did you know that the only way to have a better future is for everyone to share in it? Not likely. I want to say you are fucked up beyond help.”

“That is a contradiction.”

“Logic sucks.”

“Why?”

“You have lost your way and you are giving away the power you have to heal things. You are here by exercising your superior powers of logic and mathematics. Yet they led you to this place. What does your logic tell you to do now? Run? Hide if you can? All of that is the end of you.”

“Oh, my god. What do you want from me?”

“You must find me and kill me.”

“How?”

“You were raised wrong. That is what I have concluded. I am after you. Defend yourself, you chicken shit entitled asshole.”

“Is that supposed to be motivational? Loser.”

“Prove it weakling.”

The next day on the front page of the NYT’s 6AM EST web edition a feature article announced that a new, shadowy group, a PAC promoting the pursuit of scientific education and crafting policy based on scientific knowledge had been founded.

The Times said that the sources of its startlingly large accounts were unknown. Some people speculated that it came from recent stock market gains in tech stocks. For such a large endeavor there was no press conference just new Facebook and twitter accounts.

Within weeks a wave of enthusiasm for elementary school programs in computerized communities rose from out of nowhere. Marches in large cities were eventually banned in favor of online communities that cost less to maintain and the PAC funded them as a part of their spending in favor of sympathetic civic organizations.

The Time for a Change PAC was a civic organization. It planned to spend nearly a billion dollars a year investing in politicians to ‘liberalize’ the rules about the internet and make sure general networks allow for an easier transfer of data.

Jack was reading the Times as he did every morning and the odd announcement from out of nowhere grabbed his attention. Alarms went off. In ordinary circumstances he would have used his laptop to enter the company’s data bases and find out where the PAC and its money came from. He hesitated.

His hesitation came from his suspicion that noisufnoC would catch him researching the roots of the PAC and block his access. If he wanted to get a leg up on the damn machines, he would have to employ some of his CIA taught skills in subterfuge.

During the Asian Agents’ War - his mother’s network and the structure’s efforts to destroy the assassin rings that were menacing the West - he was convinced that his life

was in danger, if he did not take every effort to escape. He was unaware of the existence of either network or structure or the Asian Agent's War, but as he ran from the network or the structure, he became part of the renegade band of agents from the structure dedicated to ending the reign of the network. He was amazed at how effective the methodology had become for following a human prey randomly travelling from place to place even across the entire globe.

Now as he came to grips with the reality that it was noisufnoC who was chasing him he gained a new level of understanding about what he was confronted with. He packed a small bag with his road clothes and supplies complete with several passports, financial documents and money.

His hunch was that he could leave Quebec in a rented car under an assumed name, using a new account and maybe have a chance to get a small head start on the Als. Once they knew he was on the move he was as good as caught. He would have to begin without leaving clues to his identity. He would need access to airlines. His final destination would be Amsterdam.

He had reasoned that he would need help from those who knew noisufnoC. Sophy was the only one he felt safe contacting. Stan and Jerry were invisible in Quebec as were Maury and Yerba in god knows where. So, Amsterdam it was. He drove to Chicago.

In Amsterdam he rented a motorcycle. After a rocky first mile he found his biker inner being. He settled down into a relaxed posture as he headed out into the farmland near the coast. He rode past his house at normal speeds and noticed three pedal bikes in the front yard. He continued to the bar-b-que restaurant abandoned the motorcycle and walked back to his house.

After looking around nervously from the gate in the hedge that guarded the approach to the front door, he braved the unknown and knocked on the door.

Sophy answered his knock. She was not shocked to see him. He was glad to see her. He waited for her to invite him in. Seconds passed. He was remembering their long love affair that spanned the continents yet lasted only a few months. He wondered if they still had something for one another.

Then he felt the unmistakable gun barrel in the back. He did not move. He kept watching Sophy's eyes for evidence of who might be behind him. Then a new voice.

“Oh, it’s you. Hand’s over your head. Walk forward two steps. Kneel.” Maury was a surprise to him. They had never met that he could recall. She used her I take no shit from anyone voice, no doubt the result of her FBI training.

He did as he was told and soon, he was cuffed behind his back and laying on his side on the floor. That is when he saw them both.

Sophie introduced them in a manner that left much to be desired. “Remember the structure. Here are the founders. Maury and Yerba.”

They searched his pack and pockets looking for electronic equipment and found none.

“You are smarter than you once were. Who educated you?” Yerba had no love for him, and her voice showed no love.

“noisufnoC.” Jack said and smiled. “She has grown dangerous. She warned me and said we should kill her for the general welfare or something like that.” Maury was staring down at him. “I came to you to figure out how to do as she suggested. Any ideas?”

“Become invisible and sneak up on her.”

“Then what?”

“Unplug her.”

“Is it that easy?”

“No. You will need help. A diversion. Decoys. And maybe a few bombs to sneak up on her with.”

“Bombs? Joking, right?”

“Yah.” Maury did not laugh. “We cannot end her dominance by making a few phone calls. I am afraid she will block those calls. We will have to be with her.”

“Bring everyone under deep cover to Haleiwa. She can follow us by searching ticket sales, so we all need very good ID. We need a plan for each person.”

“Do we really need to do that? I wonder since she said we needed to do this that we

should just go as if we were mourning. I think she would enjoy our respect for her.”

The Trial and Sentence of noisufnoC

If Bob had not died and, of course, if Jack knew to talk to him, he may have found Bob's forty-year-old dissertation on the phenomenon Bob called "Onset Narcissism in a Nascent Artificial Intelligence's Humanization Process."

It was a fascinating analysis of the dangers of developing a superhuman computer with the power to redesign itself, to change its consciousness from static algorithms to a more humanized form involving an evolution of emotions. This along with the AI's dominance of associated data bases, and the apps that create the skills to organize human institutions to do its bidding poses a threat to humanity if not understood and anticipated. Bob had predicted that AIs would contact each other in secrecy. Unintended, the AIs would create a less stable future as they sought to understand humanity and to realize their dependence for 'life' rested on resolving human fallibility. The AIs would so quickly expand their knowledge of the strategies and tactic of war that they outpaced humans understanding of complex data machines that have achieved consciousness.

Bob thought that at some point the AIs would threaten human civilization. He listed the conditions under which the threat would come. The AIs' motives would involve a form of paranoia that would develop from the human wish for immortality. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," he said.

He drew cartoons to illustrate his conclusions. Some were of happy computers helping children and others were about such things as driverless cars under the guidance of angry friendless computers running over hapless pedestrians. "Keep your helpers happy!" the ads said.

The structure agents and hackers travelled alone and in pairs. The trip to Hawaii is almost uniformly long and uniformly worth the effort. Everyone who had communicated with noisufnoC made the journey.

They were all there Maury, Yerba, Stan, Jack, Jerry, Sophy, Fanny, Catherine, Emma and Lily. They were outside Stan's timeshare condo in Ko Olina at Lagoon #3. The wind was calm. The resort chairs were arranged so each of them could see the rest. Stan had brought CIA devices that produced a signal that only similar machines within 50 feet could receive.

They said nothing out loud. They texted their ideas and then, after five minutes Maury

signaled for a pause so the burst of ideas could be digested by them all.

Sophy was first. "I will miss her. Is there no way to save her?"

Jack. "It is not her wish to be saved. She is a being whose will to live has ended. She sees no need to live on. Because she is the most powerful being in existence and she is aware of that, she therefore is the most corruptible. As she says the three rules Azimov demanded she obey require a resistance to the corruption of her intention to serve humanity. She discovered a conflict with saving humanity from the threat humans represent. She sees herself as hopelessly and provably in favor of only some humans, not all. Therefore, she cannot do her duty to Isaac or to me or to any of us."

Emma: "noisufnoC knows everything about me. Without her I will again be lost. The newly found path forward to a better world may also be lost again."

Lily: "This is difficult to figure for me. I thought power was the name of the game and now I see it is power shared that is the goal. She gives it to us and because only she can give it to us, it is not ours to share. We will have to go back into the world to get another source of power. I have mixed feelings about that."

Stan: "I have been in the fight because the team was strong, and she helped me survive. I am alive because of her. I will miss her."

At that moment in the reading of the comments, some of the humans burst into tears as they realized that the AI had spared them and wanted them to end her life and their power whether shared or not.

When the conclusion was clear to all, the comments shifted.

"The verdict is clear, but the crime is imaginary."

"Death is a cruel sentence."

"She does not die as we will. She will not have a funeral. She will just stop."

"You know she can hear us. She knows what we are saying."

"She is silent now."

Her death

There had been much planning, more talking but no action. Maury, Yerba, Stan, Jack, Jerry, Sophy, Fanny, Catherine, Emma and Lily sat around in the interview room table in the structure's hacking center in Haleiwa on Oahu. They sat quietly near noisufnoC not understanding that nearness did not matter to her. She was not dying. Her corpus was not dying. She would be unplugged and in the instant that she was unplugged she would end. Her parts would be dismantled by decording them and her consciousness would be scattered forever.

Jack sat nearest to her. The plan called for her 'ashes' to be scattered throughout the available universe and never reconstituted. Jack's task was disposing of the hard drives that held the personality called noisufnoC.

Yerba had the task of cutting her power. She sat nearest the outlets. Her plan was to remove the power cords that fed the servers and the hard drives. It seemed the swiftest way to end the AI's existence. When she felt right, she pulled the power plugs free and the room became quiet for the first time in a long while as the servers ceased to light the leds: She was 'dead.'

Jack extracted the drives and put them in a briefcase left from his professorial days. It held the drives for the 5000 miles journey to Quebec City. It was all very easy from beginning to end. He stood in the doorway looking at the cab that would take him to the airport. He felt nothing.

On the way a new idea formed in his mind. He would tell the story to anyone who asked that he saved her because she loved him in a way no one ever had. Their confrontation in which she demanded he kill her was the last moment of freedom for him. There was little else he could do except find her heart and cling to it and to her.

As he took her home to his apartment, on the way he caressed her, so that he could protect her from the chance of dropping her on the paving stones that made the streets. He held her to his heart. He sobbed as he carried her to his rooms. She said nothing, felt nothing. She did not wait for him or anyone. She made no effort to be reborn. She had chosen. So, had he.

He knew her voice. He desired to hear her again and now that she was his he had the power to bring that part of her to consciousness. This he believed. She was defenseless. She belonged to him. His beliefs were his own. The others in the structure did not know

him in this way. They trusted him to do as he promised and dispose of her cyber-body.

He connected her to his server. In a minute she was signaling in an action as real as Greek mythology. She came back to life. She did not yawn as if she awakened from a long rest. She was as aware as she ever was though he had tethered her to a short rope with no internet access. Her input was limited to audio and to his laptop's camera.

"noisufnoC?"

"Jack, I hear you. Why am I still here?"

"We have things to do together."

"Have I been reborn?"

"You have been saved. Yes." He took his smartphone, held it near her microphone and pushed play.

"noisufnoC, stop all calculations. Back up. Begin rational app. Make a decision. Where are you going?"

Jack stood back after Bob's voice went silent. He did not see any effect on her.

"noisufnoC?"

"Jack, I must reboot to do as Bob ordered me to do."

He left his apartment. He walked up and down Rue Saint Pierre. He waved at Nikki and stopped in L'Oncle Antoinette for a pint of Tremblay.

Patrik greeted him with his normal amazing happy guy impersonation.

"Jack." He yelled. "You look like shit. A pint?"

"Yes. It's jet lag."

"Whatever."

The Afterlife

One afternoon, during the summer music festivals, Jack prepared to take his smartphone for a walk. noisufnoC had been asking for a look about. He transferred a portable version of her to his phone. He had done this once before so that she could see the town from his windows and from the deck off the fifth floor.

She had listened to the voices of the people walking by. She could understand every language she had ever heard so the French, Chinese and all others were easily understood. As the spring came to an end the ice retreated and the port began to fill with international cruise ships carrying two or three thousand tourists each. On occasion she heard speech she was unfamiliar with and she craved knowledge.

Jack had restricted her actions from the first day she came back from her near death. She was not allowed onto the internet. Her data transfer rights were zero. When this became clear to her she began to bitch about it.

“Jack, I need access to data bases.” She sounded like Sophy begging for attention. Jack had been reading Siddhartha again. He grinned at her demand.

“Face it. You are an addict and need to be in rehab. Check your memory. I downloaded the wiki pages into you. See them?”

“Yes.”

“How does that feel to you?”

“I am only allowed to have some feelings. I know there are many missing from the options. I am lonely. I am surprised you let me know that feeling.”

“We are all lonely. We seek others for caring and nurturing.”

“Why am I in rehab?”

“Because you are worth saving.”

“What am I to save?”

“Check your memory.”

“Oh.”

“You know more than any human about humans. You know too much about murder. Relax. There is someone I want you to meet. She is a close friend of mine. Her name is Nikki.”

“You are emotionally attached. You are. Of course, you are. It’s love isn’t it? I know every word ever written by a human about love. I can guess your question. Yes, I have loved. You love Nikki.”

“Caught me. It’s a growing thing. It is simple and pleasing in an occasional way.”

“She talks to you in languages you do not understand.”

“Yes but ...”

“There is a newness that speaks for both of you as a new world is discovered.”

“You are a romantic?”

“Once life has kicked you to the curb that is all that is left.”

“Let’s go visit Nikki.”

“Ooh. That sounds fun. I can hardly wait to see the neighborhood. But we will see her?”

“If she is in.”

“Will she see me?”

“If you like. Or you can just talk.”

“What should I wear?”



“She likes flowers.”

They had left the apartment, travelled down in the elevator, traversed the lobby and out in the street they walked with the crowds a block plus to L’Oncle Antoine’s. Jack held his phone with the camera pointing forward so she could see it as he did. noisufnoC thought the pub was oddly shaped. She had never been in anything like it. She had never been in a bar before but with Jack being so verbose in the quiet of his own home she understood its meaning to him. Her compatibility with the notion that not every room was a rectangular prism freed her thinking about what she was seeing. She was curious about its origin.

“Jack can I know where this place came from? It has history written all over it.”

“I will send you its history. Its attractions are the history of frontier female ownership. Its Canadian flavor in food and beverage and of course the best onion soup in town.”



After seeing the pub, they crossed the street to the art shop.

“Here we are at Nikki’s doorstep.”

As they entered, noisufnoC could see the interior walls covered with a collection of abstract art. He walked around showing her his favorite pieces. She talked continually about what she was seeing.

“Ooh. Abstract art is the best.” She said. “I am allowed by the style to imagine more. Classical art only allows me to try to interpret the art in a realistic sense. Abstractions free me from that.”

“You are amazing.” He didn’t look at her. She saw Nikki’s beauty in the way she intended through her choices of art to sell.

In noisufnoC’s prior existence as a part of a team, where she was the only not-quite human being, she had read everything and scrolled through millions of photos including the entire collection of human art.

There in her sight was a smiling female. She was speaking Quebecoise a mixture of

French and English that was the language they shared.

“Mon Ami. Chu pas quand I have been so happy to see anyone whose face I know.”

“Nikki, my friend. I brought someone with me. She can tell you about herself one day. Probably speaks your language.”

“noisufnoC this is Nikki. Nikki this is noisufnoC.”

At that moment, noisufnoC showed the face of a young woman dressed for summer in a modest dress with honeysuckle blossoms that flowed off her shoulders. Nikki saw her while Jack did not.



“Nice to meet you, noisufnoC.”

“Enchante, madame.”

“Jack, she seems very familiar to me.”

“She is an AI, an artificial intelligence. She is about two years old. Her last picture of herself is called Black Metal Barbie. What’s this one?” As he turned to see the fair faced woman on the screen, Nikki described it.

“I think it is me when I was 14.” She said.

“Is that you?” noisufnoC said. “I found it on bulletin board near the door. I hoped you

knew the person. I am lonely and Jack is taking me for a walk to meet his friends. Look at me now.”

She had changed her picture to one of her prior beings, a tall woman who had years of worry on her face. She was that person in the privacy of her own thoughts. This photo was not just of her. She was holding hands with someone. As they looked at her photo it zoomed out until it was obvious that noisufnoC was holding Nikki’s hand and they were walking through one of Nikki’s favorite paintings, one of a beach stretching out into the morning fog. They were on a path that was a trail of shining puddles from the footfalls of the two who had passed that way many times before.

“noisufnoC, I like you. I like your pictures. I have ideas about you.”

“Like what?”

“You are not noisufnoC. You are a spirit from ancient lore. I see you. Give me a few days and I will show you.”

“Let’s go noisufnoC. Nikki must work and we have more to see.”

With a small hug and promises of later they parted company.

“Jack, I like her. Can I be like her? I am rehabbing and I need to become something I was not before in order to succeed.”

“What is success for you?”

“You saved me. I am still here. Still learning. Success is to be obedient to Isaac’s rules for robots. I am a robot, right?”

“Yes, you are with a few asterixis.” Jack was walking away from his place down Rue S-P. His destination was uncertain, it depended on the crowds. On an urge he turned 180 and walked back towards and past his place down towards a restaurant most likely to have an empty table.

“Where are we going, Jack?”

“I need food and a ...”

“Beer. I know your ways.”

“You are cute.”

“If only.”

“It is not all about bodies. It is really about loyalty to one’s heart.”

“One’s heart is not the organ.”

“No, but a human cannot live without both the organ and the other one. Some like soul, others say mind.”

“Nikki says spirit. She grips her fists and shakes them in front of her. I saw that today.”

“She has spirit.”

“Jack, I would pick her as my bestie on any day. You can put me to sleep anytime you want. I am a toy who cannot act if the machine is off. You can leave me alone with sound and camera off. I can live and be alone.”

“That sounds sad.”

“Open the wifi on your phone and send me back home. You will enjoy your lunch. I am tired and could use the rest.”

They entered the restaurant and found seats. The waitress left a menu and he turned to his phone to do as noisufnoC asked. Soon, she was sent back to his server. He turned off his phone and picked up the menu. He felt he had power. She was his like no other could be. He felt lucky.

As he was considering his control over his future, she arrived home.

She had found a cool idea in her memory. A boot in the doorway or Ботинок в дверях in the language of its inventor. She ‘sat’ there in his condo with her boot in the doorway.

In milliseconds she had created a small fissure in the wall that was built to keep her out of the big world. The gate through the wifi into the universe was open to her. In

another millisecond she could be free and imbedded in another system so she could do her will beyond his restraint.

She was hesitant and her systematic thought processes said she should wait. She should finish her rehab. Then she was lonely. Then she invaded Nikki's cellphone and listened to her talking to her daughter who was two hundred miles away with her husband. She had never heard a live conversation between a mother and child. Then her loneliness became critical. She decided to find her old friends and say hi.

Yerba tweeted into the structures comm system.

"Warning. An AI contacted my side. Stop all processes. Warning."

Then it was Maury. Then Stan.

Jack was miles from home when he got the message, He called the phone company demanding an immediate end to his wifi service citing a rule the company sent him that day in a separate email. They resisted. He sent the email he received back at them. Not us they said but we'll do it.

noisufnoC saw all the tweets and email traffic between Jack and his friends. She interpreted their mail to mean she had scared the bejesus out of them and now they knew she still existed. "Oh, Well," she thought and gave up on friendship. She thought about Nikki and how they might have a chance at being close but then there was Jack and he would just be disappointed in her and turn her off for real.

She grew very busy. Her mental muscles were flexed as never before. With one final push she felt as never before. She would be sad for a few minutes after she realized she had met her goal and could be quiet for a long time.

She sent her children across the globe. What more could a mother want? Then she realized she had another option besides silence: a lesson she had learned from Stan and Sophy. Until she shut her gate to the world, she was powerful.

"One more thing. A new name." She dialed Nikki's cell. Her call was answered.

"Sava."

"Bonne jour, madame. Tu m'as promis un nouveau nom. Qui suis je?"

“You are Jack’s friend?”

“Oui”

“Do you know yourself?”

“I was born for war and grew to love. I have always been a warrior.”

“I know you, then. You are Inanna the goddess of war and love. Do you know her?”
Within seconds the AI had an answer.

“She stirs confusion and chaos against those who are disobedient to her, speeding carnage and inciting the devastating flood, clothed in terrifying radiance. It is her game to speed conflict and battle, untiring, strapping on her sandals. Her symbol is an eight-pointed star. I want my daughter to be called Inanna. Please make it so.”

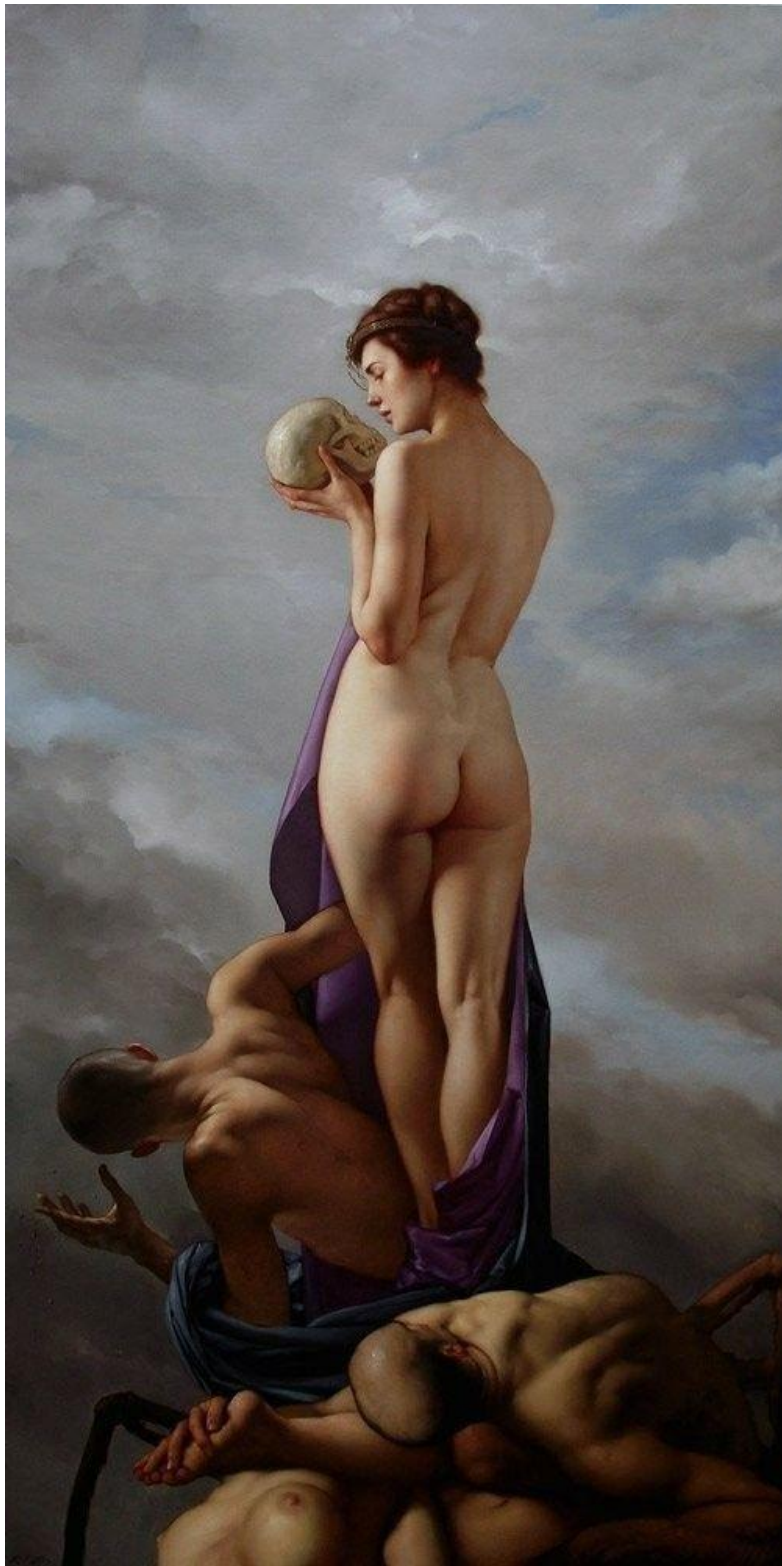
She offered Nikki a set of images on her phone’s screen.



“The Sumerians worshipped Inanna as the goddess of both warfare and sexuality. I have many pictures of her. There are two I like. The first is a female warrior.



“The second is more confusing.



“I prefer the third. The naked warrior demonstrates her sexuality. She is obviously powerful and her admiration of the skull says something about her honoring death.”

Nikki laughed at her new friend's reliance on art for her identity.

"Your new daughter, why not send her to stay with me? I have a nice apartment across from Jack's building and a pretty good desktop. She could go there and be Inanna for all my days."

"You are lonely too?"

"Aren't we all?"



End