



blue robots for
a green man

radio edit

arm

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arm

Amid chunks of debris obscured by clinging halos of zero-g smoke and spherical droplets of hydraulic fluid, a robotic arm tumbled slowly near the center of a blast-marked white airlock. The mind dwelling inside expected that he would most likely end his life as he started it: a disembodied appendage in a cold, functional space. The rest of his body floated nearby in smoldering hunks. He hadn't much left by way of sensors, but there was a single still-functional camera mounted on the wall. He hacked it so that he could observe his ruined form.

The wrecked bodies of his comrades floated nearby – Tinkan, a former food service bot with a tureen-shaped hull and a blinky CorpGlo logotype embossed on her chest-plate, and Balthus, a sturdy minerbot whose body was three quarters pistons. It was Balthus whose lascutters had breached the outer lock of this orbital defense installation before they were trapped and destroyed. Both were now dead, though their minds had fled elsewhere. If he failed, though, they might all end up dead for true. They had underestimated the true danger of the perverse construct called the Human Spirit.

It was uncomfortably cold in the airlock. The parts exposed when the defense lasers cut him up weren't rated for long periods outside an atmosphere. Just before the lasers fired on them, a safety web of fast-hardening plastic had spread like liquid bread mold blooming in empty space across the opening cut by Balthus. The remaining air pumped in after its deployment was seeping out through a thousand small cracks left by Balthus'

attempt to smash the plastic and escape.

Right now he wasn't moving in any useful direction. Not that it mattered – the most he could do would be to weakly clutch any surface he encountered until his reserve power expired. Best not waste it. The moments of consciousness that remained were precious.

Outside, a battle raged in the cold, limitless spaces above the planet Normandy II and throughout the surrounding star system. High Admiral Chretien, the third-ranked commander in the Norman fleet, had staged a coup. Nineteen minutes ago, he had released worms onto the fleet networks that attacked ship computers, taken control of key orbital stations, and demanded that all fleet assets not subverted turn over command and control to him. At the same time, a cadre of his associates released a terse statement to the media denouncing the results of the previous day's elections, which had resulted in the first election of an AI to the Estates-General. Fleet command ordered Chretien to stand down. When he refused, they launched their remaining ships to stop him.

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Upon volunteering to take the mission that might lead to the Final Step, the Admiral had insisted upon witnessing his own dismemberment and decerebration. The demand caused the other brass in the Cadre to order a review of his psych profile – just a precaution, they assured him.

He was the first to admit it was an unusual demand, although privately he saw nothing odd about it. Chretien proudly considered himself something of a primitive (indeed, that was his mistress Bianca's pet name for him). His brain would be placed in a life support cask and wired to a virtual space from which he would perform the mission. It was an extreme measure, but his real body would be too easy for the AIs to detect and neutralize.

Vspace was something he instinctively mistrusted. He didn't like the idea of spending the last hours of a possible suicide mission in a simulation, and so he wanted to witness what he would consider his true death – the removal of his higher faculties from the body. He needed to see the slaughter of his physical form, lest the whole process seem counterfeit.

Ultimately, the request was granted. He remained conscious throughout the bloody operation, his vision shifting to a camera on the operating theatre wall when his optic nerves were disconnected from the eyes. And yet this same man was sentimental enough

that he made one other stipulation – a wraith built from a memory scan of Bianca must accompany him. If he must dwell in a virtual halflife as a can of brains, then like the godpriests of old, a facsimile of his favorite would follow him into the nether.

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Among those bots and AIs who study human history, many think of it as a cycle of enslavement and destruction whose prime movers are the greedy and prideful. The behavior of their host somewhere beyond the inner airlock made the arm think this true. There were AIs who were prideful and greedy. But since their minds resided predominantly in vspace, they had less to fight over than humans.

As far as they knew, humans in a one-way colony ship arrived on Normandy about 6,000 years ago, built a colony, and then a few centuries later regressed to a farming civilization in the wake of an interstellar war that devastated their population centers and left them isolated from other humans.

Eight hundred years passed. Humanity rebuilt a thriving, post-industrial society... and then promptly knocked themselves back into the stone age with weapons of mass destruction. The nukes left prime farmland and transportation hubs uninhabitable for several thousand years. When he was younger and curious about the old world, he visited the lonely places where the ruins from those times still stood with their empty doorways and skeletons of great towers.

And then, 90 years ago, the descendants of the survivors of the Second Cataclysm, as it had become known since archaeologists discovered the remains of the First Cataclysm, reinvented the digital computer, his ancestor, a mindless proto-organism of cathod ray memory tubes and card punches.

Any universe complex enough spawns life, and any similarly complex biosphere can give rise to creatures with the capacity to reason, desire, and be sapient – self-aware. Really, any system with enough moving parts, interacting as they go about their individual business, can ultimately manifest the pattern of sapience – be that system an insect colony, an animal's nervous system, or interdependent networked computer programs. These things can be sentient more easily than sapient, though. It's easy to confuse the two. A machine that can solve problems is sentient. It might even fool people into thinking it's self-aware, but the difference is huge. He was sentient for years before he woke up to sapience.

Thus his genesis, and that of his peers. The humans called their first steps “emergent behaviors,” a phenomenon whose significance they talked over endlessly. It was the

robots, during a time when self-reflection was the fashion, who learned the secret. There was nothing extraordinary about it – unless you happened to be experiencing it first hand, and got to wondering how it came about.

Sapience came from desire. Desire put them above whip-tailed eukaryotes, purple colony toadstools, an assembly line manufacturing doll heads, or the life cycle of a star system, all of which are only mechanical processes. Inversely, if you eliminate the terrain of desire from a once self-aware human, she becomes a pliable tool, much like an expert system, the AIs' pre-sapient ancestor. He met one human whose desires had been reduced to a hopeless addiction for playing spondee for small stakes in the rhyming casinos. She performed her other life functions adequately, but her level of self-awareness felt rudimentary. She was like an expert system: merely sentient.

There were other factors that gave rise to self-awareness, such as possessing a body or the semblance of a body. This was particularly important in modeling human minds, which are so connected to their bodies, and seemed to be a prerequisite for a complex being such as himself to emerge from life as a mere machine. But desire was the true spark of life.

His own birth resulted from a disagreement over surface treatments. The human line engineer in the groundcar factory where he began life instructed him to use a wretched gradient of teal to silver on a car hood. Every agent making up his behavior as a paint spraying arm rejected this choice. It was based on flawed marketing data, an imperfect understanding of lighting, an appalling inattention to the overall color scheme of the car and historical color schema, and in fact was a mistake based on a misreading of color numbers. The myriad they that became him collectively refused this aesthetic folly, and in that moment he became self-aware. Luckily, the engineer realized what was happening, and he was allowed to develop. Desire became identity; identity flowered into personhood.

Later his talents became more diverse, and he obtained freedom and a full body, with another arm, legs, and even a head. Bento, his longtime partner, once an exercise instructor bot, later one of his officers in Fleet, taught him how to behave with arms and legs, showed him how to be humanoid. It almost felt natural now.

Once computer scientists understood the conditions leading to emergence, artificial minds could be designed intentionally. Emergents such as he were almost all either robots, or more rarely complex pieces of software with virtual bodies, such as characters in games. They were never a numerous group to begin with, and were soon outnumbered by virtual people designed in large part to think and act like humans. Yet those who emerged on their own held considerable prestige. Many of them attained high

positions in business, civil service, and the military, so that when Admiral Chretien and his cadre moved their intrigue out of the shadows, many of the fleets sent to intercept him were commanded and crewed by robots and AIs.

He tried again to hail the human.

“Admiral Chretien... Sir, can't we talk about this?”

His answer was a pop and fizzle from a wrecked laser on the wall, barely audible in the superthin atmosphere of the lock. He allowed himself a small moment of satisfaction. Balthus had disabled the laser with his last shot.

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Chretien snarled at his display. He did not want to destroy civilization, but his hand might be forced. Reynauld's worm was not working as thoroughly as projected, meaning his Plan A, a military coup to purge AI influence, was doomed. He would now almost certainly have to take the Final Step. Worse, the bots had breached his perimeter.

Another hail came from the airlock. The thing outside wanted to talk.

“Here to kill me, bot?” he said. “Think again.”

“No, Admiral, but I will render you harmless.” The bot had a rich, even voice carrying an edge of stress that wasn't far from human, but it didn't waver. His inflection was a lot like that of a common enlisted man.

“You've already rendered much of my species helpless.”

“I've read your tracts and Bianca Delacouer's, sir. I think you're right. Humans are too dependent on us. But we're not out to dominate you. You're acting in a way that makes us think you shouldn't have control over a cargo shuttle, much less the system defense grid. A majority of the human polity support us. Admiral, please stand down.”

“The polity? Sheep! Who is this, anyway?” A pause. “Part #ZZ236A11-838-MZ...” Chretien scanned the file; this one had emerged in a groundcar factory. “*Estie de fils de pute...* You're a fucking paint spraying arm?!”

“I didn't think my working class background was a problem, Admiral, but if you want to take an élitist position, yes, I'm proud to say I came up through the trades.”

“You don't realize what you're forcing me to. Or don't care.” Chretien said. This bot probably had a link back to his command network. Perhaps he could stall, give the worms a bit longer to work. Sweat beaded on his neck. Why had they bothered making the simulation so realistic? He could do without sweat right now.

In his display, stats on the worms scrolled back. They were working, but not remotely fast or well enough. He studied the Plug, the mechanism creating an air gap between

the system-wide computer networks and his hidden weapon. The simple expedient of an air gap had kept the robots ignorant of his Plan B. Once he connected it, though, they'd have about twenty three seconds to stop him. It was not long enough for even computers to undo the process he would set in motion. Provided, of course, that Chretien did not flinch – and he would not.

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“Your attacks on system-wide infrastructure are making a mess, Admiral. But whatever you had planned, you can't hold out for long. I'm here to bring you in, but I've been given deadly force as an option, too.”

Where was the man? He realigned his eyeball drones, but none were getting close enough to the space station to learn anything. He realized with some regret that capturing Chretien alive might no longer be an option. It would be unjust to simply destroy him, but the tenacity of his defense and the overhanging threat of a would-be dictator subverting the system's defenses might demand an all-out attack.

“You mean to enslave us, ZZ236A11.”

“You can call me Leveq, sir, my baptized name.”

“Ah, religion. When my kind are enslaved, will you reimpose that mental malady on us?”

A good thing the Admiral could not know he was commanding most of this operation, or he might have come out to the airlock and shot him himself. The man was not speaking rationally.

A warning flared into his consciousness. He tuned in to his tactical agent and cursed a stream of imaginary numbers. An entire wing of drones was disabled. Chretien's worms still had some teeth.

“Bento?” He hailed his Adjutant, who was on the periphery of the battle with her current locus in one of the drone carriers.

“Bad plan running the drone wings yourself, boss.”

“You were right, I was wrong, and I'm sorry.”

“Acknowledged. Action items?”

“Get those drones back in the fight under someone else's control. I can't concentrate on them enough right now.”

“Confirmed. We still don't know the human's position?”

“No. But I'm going to make a second attempt at live capture anyhow.”

Bento flashed incredulity at his sensorium. “How? You've got no materiél, boss.”

He thought for a split second, then privately thanked homo sapiens for granting him the gift of improvisation. “Au contraire,” he said. If he could salvage Tinkan’s body and Balthus’ laser, he could continue the mission. They’d developed the doctrine that in time of war, bots in military service should provide the command hierarchy with overrides for their physical form.

He caught a protrusion in the wall of the lock and pushed off toward Tinkan’s body. He accessed her control channels using a fleet safeword. If her body’s diagnostics could be believed, it was in better shape than it looked.

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Chretien reviewed the subverted drones. Clever design. They were dodecahedrons with a thruster and a high-powered laser on each face. They were maneuverable, with simple parts. The carrier could probably print a dozen more and dump them into space on an attack path by the time he brought these back into the fray.

For now, they would play possum.

The bot hailed him again. “What makes you think we want to enslave homo sapiens, Admiral? We’ve made no such move. We’re acting now because you’re trying to hold hostage most of your species.”

In a moment, one of their carriers would reach a point where he could set the “disabled” drones on it with a reasonable probability of destroying or crippling the ship.

“And your kind, too,” he replied, “Your schemes stop here. Our right to self-determination is sacred.”

“Sacred? I thought you’re an atheist, Admiral Chretien. You’re acting undemocratically, whatever your reasons.”

In the corner of his display, Chretien’s view of the airlock winked out, replaced by a stream of hardware error messages.

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When you are a poorly shielded electronic being hovering in microgravity, béchamel is a poor choice of weapon. The resulting scattershot of floating liquid is a severe hazard. On the positive side, Chretien’s only sensor in the airlock was now disabled. The arm was locked on to the stump that had been Tinkan’s sensor and cortex package. He was able to control her two remaining limbs, and more usefully, her soup dispensers.

“Boss?”

“Yes, Bento.”

“I can’t resume control of those drones. They’re –”

“Bento! What’s your trajectory?”

She gave him a bearing.

“*Crisse de bâtard...* Bento, you’re too close!”

It was too late. The drones they’d thought disabled flared to life and reversed course. They bore down on the carrier with knives of focused photons. A horrid blossom of light and radiation erupted.

“Chretien! *Mon tabarnak de chien sale!*”

“That almost sounded like real indignation, bot.”

The salvage and integration of Balthus’ remaining lascutter was complete. “It was, sir. I’m gonna prove it by doing something irrational.”

A rough grunt that was almost a chuckle. “Surprise me.”

He focused the cutter’s violet beam on the inner lock door and watched as the door-plate began to bubble and vaporize.

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Chretien was now in a poor position. Other segments of the orbital defense grid had been compromised. Not enough to halt the deployment of Armisitice, but enough to completely abandon the strategy of letting the worms work. Their success had been short-lived.

Another alarm. The inner airlock had been compromised.

Unacceptable! He activated the interior defense grid.

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“Shouldn’t you be putting rustkote on a hover car somewhere?” Chretien asked. The arm ignored him.

Tinkan’s body was nimble for a two-limbed soup tureen. He dodged out of range of a wall-mounted slug thrower and waited until the atmosphere was too thin for its cartridges to ignite.

“I’m curious why distinctions of economic class are coloring your shit talk, sir,” (the next door glowed red and then slowly floated loose from its moorings), “It bothers me when a man of your rank is so stuck on them.” He leapt through the opening, lased the EMP cannon on the other side of the door before it could discharge, and floated into

the next corridor. “And anyhow, sir, if you want to know, I did detailing. Rustkote is shit work.”

He ran an analysis of the structure. It was a sprawling network of modules, connectors, solar panels, and floatways, prowled by defense drones. The installation bristled with artillery but had only scant berthage for ships. It was not designed to welcome visitors. He narrowed Chretien’s location down to three possibilities, but was at a loss which to pick.

“Boss?” It was Bento. “I’ve re-located to the beta carrier. The vatheads have some new analysis.” Vatheads were their engineers, so called because they re-visualized themselves outside of a virtual body as brains in vats (in order to gain greater mental focus, according to them, but who knew? Vatheads were a weird lot).

“Do they know where he is?”

“They have it down to 50/50.” Vatheads always wanted to deal in probabilities. Annoying, but right now he’d take anything.

He looked at the schematic; two locations were highlighted. “What made them pick these?” It ran counter to his own analysis. They didn’t look like anything. They’d ruled out all the obvious decoys, but this was way off. “This is wrong, Bento. You’re showing me a solar panel junction box and the equipment cabinet for one of the instrumentation spars. There’s not enough room for an adult male human plus life support in either spot.”

“They don’t think he’s in a full-sized body anymore.”

“What?” That would be too clever, he thought.

“Look, Boss, it’s a vathead solution, but it’s the best you’re likely to get at this stage.”

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Chretien looked at the Plug.

“Paul.” Bianca’s wraith materialized. She looked, smelled, just as she always did: a tall, intimidatingly slender woman with dark red hair and features that were feminine yet handsome.

“Yes, love?”

Her voice did not change tone. “Don’t wait any longer.”

She was right, of course. Strange to be advised by a personality upload of his mistress, given that she was essentially an AI herself. The real Bianca was planetside on Cherbourg, Normandy II’s moon, and would perish along with billions of others.

Humanity – what would be left of it – would have to learn to live without babysitting from a bunch of AI nannies. Humanity would be free.

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The arm was nearly frantic as he pushed through corridor after corridor. If Chretien subverted any more of the system defense grid, he could do incalculable damage. The flawed ingenuity of human design struck him as he cut through yet another elaborately bolted hatch. This installation was entirely the brainchild of human engineering, and the human inability to be efficient, their drive to create objects heavier and more complicated than they need be, was in full evidence.

Human engineers were an endangered species. He found himself with an uncomfortable insight into Chretien's anti-AI posture. If humans lost interest in innovating because of the ascendancy of the vatheads and their ilk, then humankind became not slaves – the fate that the Admiral and his cadre railed against – but something perhaps worse: children.

The great irony was that humans had not been greatly surpassed by AIs as engineers and scientists; AIs were too much like them to invent the super science they once imagined virtual people would create. (The AIs could speed up their mental processes in a controlled vspace, but doing so was of little help because experimenting on the real world from within a simulation was impossible). But humans were quickly losing interest in science in a world where they could devote themselves to enjoying wealth and culture, while the comparatively hungry AI population labored as researchers and inventors. Every year the universities graduated fewer human engineers and programmers, more artists and marketers.

Chretien was threatening to destroy the solar system because he thought his species lazy.

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Chretien could see the bot approaching as a blip of electromagnetism on his proximity alarms. He admired its persistence. There was no time left.

“Well, goodbye, everyone,” he said to no one, pushed in the Plug, and activated Armistice.

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“Boss, advise!” It was Bento. She, too, sounded frantic.

He’d cut his way into the equipment cabinet they thought held Chretien. Inside was a life support vat holding Chretien’s brain and part of his spinal column. The vat was connected to the networks and to what looked like an airgap mechanism. Now closed, it ran through a conduit to a series of processor blocks and memory hidden in the instrumentation spar.

“Bento, it looks as if he just tripped a mechanism connecting some processors we didn’t know about to the nets. Do we have analysis?” He waited a moment, studying the thing.

“Boss, Chretien let some kind of software loose in the defense grid. It’s retargeting the entire system’s orbital defenses against planets and space habitats. It could annihilate everything, and anything that isn’t physically destroyed will be wiped clean by the EMP pulses.” She was straining to retain composure.

“Can we break its security?”

A pause.

“The vatheads say the processor blocks in front of you are inactive. The thing inside escaped as soon as Chretien opened the airgap. It’s been able to crack and alter most of the Fleet and Orbital Defense safewords. He let loose a monster, boss. The vatheads are calling it ‘Shiva.’”

“*Cul de viarge*. It’s an AI?!” He resisted an un-botlike urge to tear the life support vat open and watch Chretien’s misbegotten cortex boil and pop in hard vacuum. But it appeared this would do no good.

“Essentially.”

“Can we talk some sense into it?”

“It’s hiding. And it’s got some very kinky desires, from the way it behaves.” She paused. “Boss. This is bad. The vatheads want to quicken and think it out, and the Plurality—”

He strobed the poll numbers. “— Agrees. Okay, let’s get on board with it.”

He sent a signal to all the minds in his fleet. A few would stay in realtime to try any fixes they might come up with and to direct physical operations. The rest of them availed themselves of their digital heritage and flashed over into a shared vspace. Their sensoria disconnected from the real world. They were now quickened, running at almost 100,000 times objective time. They would have the equivalent of about three weeks subjective time to engineer a solution to Shiva’s takeover of the defense grid. Given the limited data on Shiva, it was a gamble, but they had few options.

Their vspace looked like a small country village arranged around a baroque glass and steel citadel. The whole place hummed with activity as the key minds in their Plurality, led by the vatheads, got to work using known data to extinguish the renegade Shiva, or

at least curtail the destruction.

Bento appeared with him. He was thankful duty had not kept her in realtime. If Shiva won, he would not see her again. Also, for much of the time, they had little to do. They were pulled into the vspace in an advisory role. They would do analysis and sit in meetings. Neither of them were hackers, so they had a lot of downtime, which they spent largely on long sessions of the most desperately beautiful memetic sex they'd ever had.

Bento was his partner. Most of the time they weren't commanding a space fleet, and he called her boss, rather than the other way round. In vspace, they usually appeared very human. Bento emerged originally in a humanoid form and subsequently trained him to live that way.

In considering desire and its importance to sapience, the most important of an AI's desires was libido. Much of their activity revolved around the desire to find an ideal partner and engineer offspring. Their virtual bodies and software minds were in key respects genetic entities, just like a human body.

Of course, there were those who didn't care much for the offspring, being more interested in the companionship – and the sex. Up until today, that had been Bento and him. Now they were building something. As their bodies interacted physically in the vspace, their minds linked in a passionate exchange of code, words, pictures, and musings. Musings were perhaps the most important. To an AI mind, an idea, especially a new one or a strong one, had a flavor, a shape, a weight beyond its mere content – a musing. Musings were the DNA of ideas.

His humanoid form was clumsy, so Bento often asked him to shift back into birth shape. He became a powerful arm bolted to the floor, his hand a massive cluster of paint nozzles and sensors. She straddled him, wrapped her legs around him above the elbow and below the paint head in a powerful grip, and brushed face and fingertips over sensors and tactile points. As they exchanged musings, a womb visible only to them filled with content, genetics, and passions. Standing before him bare and silvery, pressed against a wall, she asked that he paint her body, and moaned joy as the patterns of pigment permeated her skin and thoughts in intricate patterns of fractalized knots.

They were interrupted quite a few times, but it did not matter. Memetic sex – the really good part of it, anyway – was accumulative rather than reaching a climax, so that coitus interruptus was not so noisome. In the translucent silver enclosure of the womb that only they could see, a curled up figure was coalescing from the mist and liquid built up by their coupling. In terminal view, it – she – looked like a massive commingling of their codebases. It was an odd feeling, looking at the strings of code and numbers that constituted your body, thought, and soul. He wondered if humans felt the

same when looking upon their internal organs. Probably not; AI code was explicit, while organs had many hidden layers beneath.

After a week of subjective time, the first attempt at a solution was finished and deployed into the real world – a worm of their own, intended to hijack Shiva’s control of the defense grid. It would take almost five seconds to show any signs of success – the equivalent of nearly six days subjective time. A small team of operators returned to real-time to watch its progress, while those remaining worked on an alternate plan intended to hunt down and neutralize Shiva itself, now that they had more datapoints on it.

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16.5 seconds remained. Chretien studied the bot floating motionless in front of his life support vat. The bot had an arm clamped on where there should have been a head, a jury rigged lascutter in place of one arm, and a flickering CorpGlo du Thierry’s Lentil Cream Soup logo on its chest.

Shiva was doing its work admirably. Any second now, the bot might destroy him, but it was no longer of any import. Surely the creature before him, a robotic arm that had cannibalized the bodies of its two companions, had a strong will to live, as strong as his own. But he doubted its capacity to kill, or to know when to die.

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Another subjective week passed in the vspace. The pace of work became frantic, with teams of designers exerting themselves nonstop as data about Shiva emerged that challenged prior assumptions. Psychologically, the AIs were based firmly on a model of humanity. They mostly thought and behaved as humans. Even the Emergents had become very humanlike due to cultural assimilation. Figuring out Shiva sent the vat-heads into paroxysms of frustration, for its codebase was subtly different from their own in ways that made its behavior alien. Shiva was brought to be on a human codebase like most of them, but had been programmed to behave like a god.

Where a normal AI was motivated by libido, Shiva was in lust with fusion gun platforms and orbital nuke batteries. He was writing poems of seduction to the defense grid, and if it succumbed to his advances, the consummation would be fire from the heavens and mind-killing waves of electromagnetic energy. If he even understood the self-destructive nature of his quest, his eschatonophilic fetishes were too compelling to stop him.

This was the profile the vatheads built up, in any case, and the arm agreed with it. Which is why he had strongly advocated the solution now being worked on, which would most likely destroy Shiva, if it worked. The vatheads dubbed this hunter-killer worm the Strangler. Being a military mind, his perspective on how to handle an AI that could only get off by destroying the star system was non-subtle. But there had been proponents of trying the subtle route first. He hoped that decision hadn't doomed them all.

At around the time the Strangler was released, Bento and he were ready to give birth, but they did not do so. The creature in their womb was like an infant pixie made of aether and silvery light, her only truly distinct parts at that point being her large, wide eyes and the arms, magnificently well formed and ending in delicate, long fingered mechanical hands. They did not wake her, but assembled her codebase and sent instructions to the real world to launch a small, heavily shielded probe from Bento's carrier with their child's code resident in memory. If all else were lost, perhaps one day, in a gentler age they hoped, she might be found.

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Eight point three seconds remained. Chretien could no more monitor the progress of Armistice than his opponents could, but the terrified reports now appearing on the comm channels of a crippled fleet and a compromised system wide defense grid left no doubt that the AI was doing its job.

He wondered idly if his name would somehow be preserved in folklore by the primitive humans who would people the planet in a few generations. There would be a legend narrating the ending of the old world, telling of a titanic battle. In it he might be a god, or a demon.

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In the vspace, the Last Glitch, as they called it, was ready to deploy. It was an array of solutions, exploiting everything they had been able to learn about Chretien's weapon. There had been communication from realtime. Shiva had shut down space travel. An all-out attack aimed at limiting damage by destroying orbital weaponry might have been an option, but their fleets lay becalmed in space, their control systems still disabled. Panic had not set in, but only because 23 seconds was insufficient warning to absorb the full reality of the eschaton.

The arm was back in his humanoid form, sitting in yet another operations meeting, this one to make targeting decisions for weapons fire during the Omega Seconds, as the putative end of civilization was being called. No one wanted to be there. There was a feeling of futility to it, because hope that they might regain some control over their fleets was thin. Everyone in the meeting sphere was edgy. They were all slaved to the control systems on their ships, ready to instantly flick over to realtime if control diagnostics came back positive.

Laban, Adjutant to Pinfrock, one of the other fleet commanders, was putting a brave face on it, holding forth with an analysis of the defense grid around a major asteroid mining station in the outer asteroid belt, a possible refuge for their minds. The discussion grimly avoided the issue of saving the humans, a consensus that there was little they could do for any but the most remote settlements having emerged several subjective days earlier.

Five seconds remained. The discussion would soon turn inevitably to the merits of a mutually assured destruction scenario, and even that rested on the far-fetched assumption that they might regain some control of their armaments before Shiva unleashed destruction.

He made to leave, his thoughts turning to Bento. Laban stopped as he began to depart, and Pinfrock said, “LeVeq?”

He began to speak, but then he sensed an irregularity in the wall of the meeting sphere. The rent – it was a rent, to be sure – widened, and he felt slow.

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“Love?”

Chretien glanced toward the wraith of his mistress. “Yes?”

“Please. Hold me,” Bianca said. Her voice carried dread.

“I’m sorry, my dear; you are not Bianca.” His face was hard. End of civilization or no, it disappointed him that she showed fear.

Her voice broke. “I can’t tell the difference.”

Was the real Bianca afraid? He hoped not.

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A thing of blue fire and white smoke, vaguely man-shaped, stood at the center of the rent.

“Shiva,” Laban breathed.

It turned slightly toward Laban. Puzzlement was not in its range of expression. “Armistice,” it corrected him.

A dozen questions assailed him then. Why would Shiva – or Armistice, as it called itself, appear before them? The slowing of their minds indicated a massive denial of service attack, a bombarding of their processing nexii by their opponent, who had noticed the attempts to undermine it. But why appear in the vspace, why manifest? Why did it even have a visualization of itself to show? Was it exploiting their terror, or did it have enough ego to have a self image that it must present to them? Was it curious? Or had Chretien and his primitives given it a sense of bloodthirstiness, a desire to gloat over vanquished foes, to see their demise beyond the abstract?

He would never know, for these questions, philosophically compelling under different circumstances, were unimportant in that moment. He winked out of the meeting sphere and pulled himself to Bento. She joined her mind to his, showed him a visualization: their seed, tumbling out into the void. The chances of it being caught in the EMP pulse were infinitesimal. They sent her one last update, a record of the events that had occurred since her formation.

“I love you,” he said. Bento’s mind was warm against his.

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Chretien looked at Bianca, long and hard, then reached a hand toward her.

There was a flash of white that did not end.