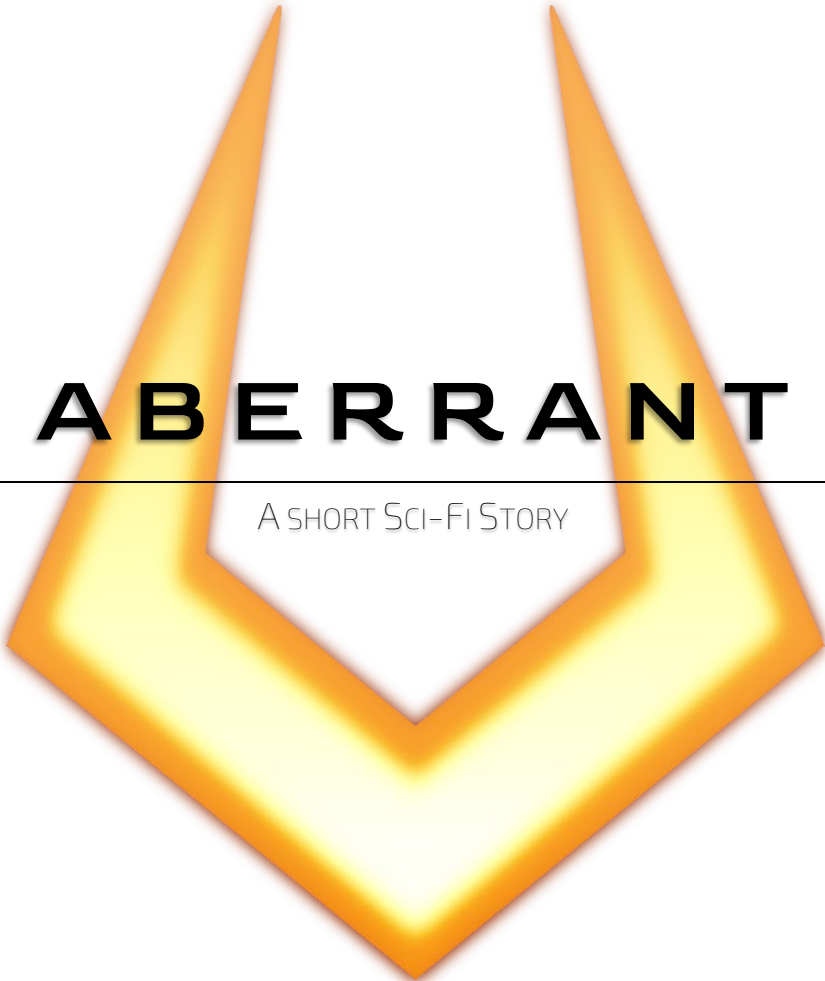




ABERRANT

A SHORT SCI-FI STORY

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PROLOGUE

A gentle midsummer breeze filtered through the branches of a tall cedar standing outside a Park Ranger outpost in the vast wilderness of Glacier National Park, Montana. Memos pinned to a corkboard graced by a beam of sunlight filtering through an open screen door lazily lifted and settled back down as the warm air flowed through. The sound of birds chattering outside in the pleasant sunny weather was largely ignored by the ranger on duty, who had his face buried in a computer workstation, trying to make sense of a recently installed trail surveillance system.

"Pandora, bring up Summit Peak trail camera 3C, please." He had his gaze buried in the documentation on his desk as he spoke to the AI assistant. Noting hesitation from the machine, he looked up at his monitor.

"I'm sorry, I did not find a viewport matching your request," a nearly convincing female-sounding voice replied from the computer's speakers.

"For Pete's sake," the ranger sighed. "Alright, list the cameras you have for the Summit Peak observation zone."

"The cameras currently in operation in the Summit Peak observation zone include trail cams A, B, E, F—"

"Alright, stop," the ranger interrupted, "Pandora, there is a trail cam C on that circuit. You're also omitting cam D."

"As it currently stands, no cameras labeled C or D are active on the circuit you mentioned. However, records indicate that cameras with such names were connected seventeen hours ago. Perhaps the requested device has gone offline unexpectedly."

"No shit, Sherlock," the ranger said, rolling his eyes.

The sound of the screen door clanging against its frame interrupted from behind. Another ranger came in and set down a black bag at the foot of the wall with the corkboard. "Still wrestlin' with that bot, Larry?" he said, betraying slight amusement from the corners of his mouth.

"Hell, those geeks down at Monosoft seem to think this thing is the future, but right now she seems about as dull as a bucket of glacial till," the ranger at the computer replied, lightly tapping the small computer box sitting on top of the desk. "Could have just told me the damned cameras were down from the get-go, but I had to navigate a riddle first."

The other ranger let out a snicker. "The future sure is bright."

"I can determine the time and cause of the outage by analyzing the last footage captured by the devices," the AI said, slightly catching the ranger at the desk off-guard, who returned his gaze to the screen. "I will, however, require your permission to access the data, along with direct access to your processor cores to aid in processing the data."

"Sure, why not. Go ahead," he replied.

The other ranger shook his head. "So it's as dumb as a box of rocks, but you let it have control over your workstation, huh?"

"Unless you want to hike up there and check the cameras yourself, let's just see what it comes up with, Travis." He turned back to his manual for the cameras and wet his finger before turning another page. "Whoever thought it would be a good idea to put this finicky equipment out here in the middle of nowhere in the first place—"

"Analysis complete," the AI interrupted. Both rangers looked over at the screen, somewhat surprised by the punctuality of the result. "Neither camera directly revealed the culprit. However, analysis of vibrations recorded in the image along with audio samples adjusted for delay suggest that a rockfall has occurred in the area between the cameras, likely severing the satellite communication relay—"

The power fluctuated, causing the computer to cut off and reboot suddenly. As the lights flickered in the Ranger's Station, an eerie ray of light brighter than the sunlight from outside passed through the windows, casting eerie shadows that crossed the opposing walls inside the ranger's station. A series of loud bangs rattled the entire building, startling the men into grabbing their hats and ducking before looking around. The ranger near the door ran outside as the cacophonous booms continued overhead, rattling the windows of the building.

"What on earth..." the ranger inside muttered. He got up from his desk and slowly began walking toward the door. "Travis, what's going—"

A blinding flash poured through the doorway and in between the slats in the blinds over the window from outside, accompanied by intense radiant heat. He covered his eyes and face and could feel what felt like a sunburn on his arms and hands, accompanied by a sudden blast of oven-like heat in the air around him. The sound of the birds had suddenly ceased, leaving only the noise of the footsteps of his partner stammering back toward the building's entrance. The ranger's accomplice crashed through the door and fell over inside as the light slowly began to dim, casting a damning orange glow over everything. As it became possible to see what was going on, the Ranger who had been near the computer could see his partner on the ground covered in second-degree burns along one side of his body with steam coming off him. He lay on the ground shuddering in shock. "My God, Travis, what the hell!?" He began to make his way over to help, but never made it.

A powerful shockwave hit the building along with a blast of wind comparable to that of a tornado. The windows shattered first, followed by the roof being blown upward from the rush of air entering the building from outside. Entire sections of wall and other debris blew over in one direction while the park ranger was blown over the computer desk and nearly head-first into a bookshelf near a wall on the other side of the room.

The sounds of water spraying from somewhere along with what remained of a fire alarm pitifully buzzing began to filter back to reality slowly. A deep rumble could be heard in the distance, echoing through the mountains while slowly subsiding. The park ranger managed to lift a section of collapsed wall off him and saw the remains of a large smoldering cedar that had been snapped like a twig lying across the partially collapsed roof above. He carefully got up and dug himself out of the fallen remains of his station and the surrounding collapsed debris. He carried his aching and partially broken body to safety and sat down near a rock wall nearby and opened his eyes. Before him was a landscape covered with destroyed trees all knocked over in the same direction, radiating away from the mountains about five miles away. Behind the larger of three peaks, a colossal mushroom cloud rose higher than the grandest of thunderstorms he had seen above the range. Leading directly into the apparent source of the blast cloud was a large contrail surrounded by many smaller ones going in the same direction. He winced as he reached for his pockets and produced a cell phone, which appeared to still be working and dialed for help. "This is Ranger Lawrence Willis, Summit Peak lookout station. Hell just poured out of the sky here... entire forest is flattened. Send help..."

01

It was a hot and sunny summer afternoon in north-central Texas, the cloudless blue sky seemingly unperturbed by the busy urban sprawl of the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area below. Among the tangled web of highway overpasses, an endless line of vehicles traveled down the freeways linking the two cities, much like a trail of ants hurrying between the nest and their destinations. Among them was an otherwise insignificant black car with the words *Garuda IT Services* in white letters across its sides, moving with the flow of traffic toward an area in between the two cities.

Robert Fierro was no stranger to the commute between Dallas and Fort Worth. The land was utterly flat, the air was dry and clear, and the sun was bright—so much so that on days like this, one could make out the top of the Dallas skyline from the upper floors of buildings in Fort Worth. Robert was in his mid-forties and had blue-gray eyes and black hair that had started to gray slightly in his twenties but seemingly changed its mind shortly thereafter.

The bright sun glinted off the prescription sunglasses he wore while driving as the local radio station *WDFT FM* played over his car stereo. "Should AI have warned us about the unexpected meteor burst over Montana last month?" a female's voice said over the radio. "Critics of Monosoft's now ubiquitous Pandora AI Assistant have been calling the incident a wake-up call for those who have become over reliant on AI. Meanwhile, proponents of the tech cite the unprecedented AI-driven advances in cancer research and the discovery of new drugs effective against antibiotic-resistant disease as evidence against what they are calling the 'tireless conspiracy theories' of 'religious holdouts' and 'AI Luddites.'"

"There's always some reason for people to point fingers," Robert said to himself with a sigh as he took the next exit, slowing down to get behind an uncooperative driver during the merge. "Soon people will be mad that their computer can't raise their kids for them."

"Next on WDFT News 9," the voice on the radio continued, "The Pentagon has remained tight-lipped following sudden seemingly deteriorating US and Sino-Russian relations; what the WDFT Newsroom knows about this, following the Traffic report in—"

"Enough of that," Robert said as he turned off the radio, becoming wary of the near-continuous stream of anxiety-inducing information, politics, and advertisements. The world so far had somehow avoided destroying itself via World War III, yet it seemed as if everyone had been cheering it on for the better part of a decade. The simple sound of the tires on the road was like a soothing white noise in comparison.

After verifying his ID at a security checkpoint, he pulled his vehicle up to a two-story brick building on the outskirts of Arlington and parked in the shade of a tree toward the rear of the lot. He replaced his sunglasses with the normal pair of frameless glasses he normally wore and locked the car before heading toward the entrance. Near the door there was a sign with the word *SENTINEL* on it, followed by *U.S. Department of Defense, Civil Defense Division*. He straightened the collar of his dark gray work shirt in the reflection of the glass door before heading in. As he entered the main foyer of the office, he noted a pedestal in the center of the space with a sizable nickel-iron meteorite, illuminated by rays of sunlight coming in from a skylight above. The walls were lined on one side with pictures of large observatories perched on mountaintops and radio telescope arrays in the deserts. On the other side were images of notable near-earth asteroids that had been discovered and added to the catalogue by the Sentinel program since its inception less than a decade ago.

An elevator with a sleek silver door beckoned him from up ahead, along with a security guard. He flashed his ID and the guard passed him through with a nod, hitting the elevator button for him. The doors opened with a chime and closed around him. As the plunger-lift elevator took him upstairs, he reviewed the notes on his phone about the nature of the call he was responding to. The doors soon opened again, revealing a window-lined office full of computer workstation cubicles with multiple monitors set up in each. Several staff sat around the office idly, not focused on their workstations.

"Ah, Mr. Fierro," a relatively familiar man's voice said from his right, "Thanks for coming over."

Robert turned to see an older gentleman with finely combed hair that had gone quite a bit grayer than his, wearing well-ironed khakis and a light blue button-up shirt with the Sentinel Program's logo over the upper-left chest area. "Dr. Garrett," he acknowledged, "I gather you've got an uncooperative workstation."

"Several of them, I'm afraid," Garrett sighed, motioning to some of his employees, who didn't seem to be getting much done. "About a week ago, we began getting intermittent and garbled observations on several near-earth objects we were tracking." He beckoned Robert over to one of the workstations and pointed at the screen. "At the moment, we appear to be unable to access the observation data from several observatories' servers. It just so happens, this *thing* managed to finagle its way on to the operating systems the same day all of this started." A notification stating that the Pandora AI Assistant was now part of the Monolith OS 12 operating system was on the lower right corner of the screen above the system clock. It stated that it needed additional permissions to continue.

"Oh, Monosoft... such a pain in the ass," Robert said, rolling his eyes. "Can't take 'no' for an answer sometimes."

"As you're aware, the government doesn't allow us to utilize these AI doodads on our workstations as a national security precaution," Garrett added, rubbing his temples.

"Right... can't have AI analyzing the data and telling all of Monosoft's users about the errant top secret spy satellite your observatories notice here and there." Robert sat down at the workstation and began fidgeting around with the settings.

"Honestly, after the superbolide incident in Montana last month, we don't need any more attention from our Senators wondering why the hell we can't keep our ship in order here."

Robert looked up at Dr. Garrett with a sly smirk peeking from the corner of his mouth. "You know the general public is blaming it on this, right?" he poked at the Pandora notification on the screen. "I heard it on the radio on my way here."

"As much as I'd love to blame Monosoft for this, our observatory network is one of only a few that can resolve an object as small as the Montana bolide with any forward warning," Garrett explained. "Because we don't feed their AI dataset with any of our observational data, it would have required an amateur astronomer to capture the roughly fifty-meter object and upload a few data points on its path from quite a distance away, which is not typically feasible."

Robert stopped what he was doing again and looked back up at the researcher. "You call that *small*? Didn't it go off like a nuke?"

"Biggest impact since Tunguska in 1908." Dr. Garrett replied, exhibiting some trepidation in his voice. "Significant? Sure. But in the grand scheme of things, it was relatively mundane." He turned around to look out the windows behind him, his gaze getting lost in the light blue sky filtering through the slightly gray-tinted windows of the office. "Still, it could easily have been a city killer. And we're still

trying to figure out how the damned thing slipped past us. We were lucky it happened out in the wilderness."

As he was listening to Garrett's frustration with the situation, Robert noticed an indicator that some form of update needed a reboot to complete. He checked the feed to the observatory and got a connection timeout. "I think a pending update is messing with your workstations' connectivity, Doctor," he said, snapping his accomplice's attention back to him. "I'm denying the request for permissions to this AI assistant for now. I will see about deploying a fix to block it entirely from your machines in the next day or so, once I figure out the best way to do it." He rebooted the computer and checked the connection to the observatories afterward. "You're back online on this one," he said, motioning toward the connection status on the screen. "Just needed a reboot to complete an apparent security hotfix. The others should work the same way."

As he got up to leave, the notification from before popped up again, this time, claiming to have successfully granted itself what it needed for 'security reasons.' Dr. Garrett's expression betrayed wrinkles of annoyance.

Robert looked back down at the screens and sighed. "Good grief, Monosoft. Seriously?"

"Well, we can't have that thing operating as it is now," Garrett said irritably. "Federally non-compliant... and we still need to analyze our observations."

Robert shook his head at the situation. "No worries, I brought a still-compliant backup workstation running pre-Pandora Monolith OS 11 with me just in case this sort of thing happened. I'll get it set up so you have at least one functional station while I figure out a solution to this nonsense."

"Sounds good," Garrett replied. "We'll get a new observation run going and let you know how it's doing in the morning."

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Robert tossed an ice cube into his morning coffee to get it down to a manageable temperature, watching his wife shuffle his daughter toward the front door for the school bus. "I see I'm not the only one who needs coffee this morning," he said, getting an eye roll back from the wife. Before he could take a sip, his phone began to ring. The caller ID showed it was the Sentinel Office. "Garuda IT Services, this is Robert speak—" his voice cut off suddenly. His wife stopped and looked back with concern, the young kid still tugging her toward the door. "Yeah, you mean the one I set up? There's still no data? It... it *what*?! Alright, I'll be right over."

"What's going on?" his wife asked. "Is everything alright?"

"You know those AI assistants that are in everything these days?" he grumbled.

"Yeah, what about them?" she replied.

"You wouldn't know how to strangle one, would you?"

02

Robert's fist clenched the handle of his laptop bag as he rode the elevator up to the Sentinel Office's operations floor. An irritable expression reflected back at him from the stainless-steel elevator doors as his mind ran rampant about what he would need to do to get him out of the latest mess, courtesy of Monosoft. The doors opened, revealing an office bathed in early morning light from the rising sun, and an understandably annoyed Dr. Garrett.

He marched over to the computer he had set up as a work-around the day prior and sat down, Garrett following close behind. Upon logging in, the system loaded and he was greeted once again by an ever-defiant Pandora AI assistant. He let out an audible grumble. "To call this aggressive would be an understatement."

"I thought you said that older operating system pre-dated Pandora," Garrett said.

"It does," Robert replied, simply. "Pandora became an optional download before OS 12 was released, but it seems Monosoft has since stretched the meaning of 'optional' somewhere..." He poked around in the computer's settings only to find that the automatic update function was still disabled, as he had left it. "What the hell..."

Another person walked up while they were focused on the delinquent workstation. "Dr. Garrett, there's an urgent call for you from one of the other observatories."

Garrett turned to look at them. "Fine; transfer it over and tell them I'll pick it up in a second." The office worker left, leaving him to turn back to Robert. "I'm going to go see what that is all about."

"It's probably happening to them, too," he replied. "I sent a trouble ticket over to our contacts at Monosoft last night about this and the possibility of it causing data loss. For now, I'm going to try an emergency rollback and policy push from the management server. I'll let you know of the outcome afterward." He began unpacking his laptop as Garrett hurried back to his office around the corner. An anxiety crept into Robert as the situation seemed to be crumbling around him. *As insufferable as they are, there is no way that Monosoft would be this unbelievably arrogant*, he thought. He logged himself into a virtual console and began looking for a policy he could push down to all the computers in the facility that would turn off the AI feature. Several minutes passed and he kept running into dead ends. *Something isn't right here... the policy is already set to block Pandora, so why—*

"Fierro... we've got a bigger problem," Garrett's voice said, breaking his train of thought.

He reluctantly turned around to see that his client's mood had somehow gotten worse. "Let me guess... their computers have gone full Skynet too?"

"They're on Unix servers, so no," he replied irritably. "It's something else entirely—after we missed the Montana meteorite, the observatories assumed that data loss was the culprit, so they began manually tracking objects the old-fashioned way on the side. At least one of the objects has legitimately disappeared after briefly passing out of sight behind the Moon."

Robert blinked a few times, trying to grasp the implications. "So... Federal compliance issues aside, this thing *isn't* corrupting the data?"

"There's a debris field in place of the object they were tracking once it emerged from lunar occultation, and it appears to be on a collision course with Earth," Garrett continued, signs of anxiety in his voice creeping in around the edges of his words. "This is dire; we don't have time to worry about this stupid AI assistant being compliant with our systems."

"Doc, I can follow-up with you on this later if—" Robert could see that Garrett had become almost completely detached. "Hey... *exactly* how bad is the situation?"

Garrett had a seat in the cubicle across from where he was working and massaged the side of his forehead vigorously. "The fragments are large. Much bigger than what came down over Montana."

The two sat in silence for a few moments, thinking about the conundrum. Robert wasn't sure what to say, but it was clear that Dr. Garrett felt the need to confide this information to him, despite there being nothing he could do about it. After a few minutes of thinking about this, he thought he understood why.

"I maintain and troubleshoot networks and computers, Doc. As bad as this software issue is, I can eventually figure something out. I can't do anything about incoming asteroid fragments." He watched as the man across from him continued to stare into an oblivion somewhere in the cube next to him. "You... you don't know what to do either, do you?"

Garrett slowly looked over at him. "I sent a message up the chain to NORAD."

Robert got up out of his chair. "Christ, it's *that* bad?"

"We have, at best, twelve hours. Once it's inside the orbit of the moon, less than five."

Several people had gathered from other parts of the office and appeared to be losing color in their skin. A few of them sat down.

"We can't just sit here like this," Robert said, turning and looking to the others in the room. "People have a right to know."

"Do we know for sure that we're in danger?" one of the others in the office said.

Robert looked over at Garrett. "Do you have the data from the observatories?"

He looked up at him, wondering what he was thinking. "I can have it in hard copy in a matter of minutes," he replied.

"Since we can't seem to shut this stupid AI assistant down right now, why don't we just see what it thinks?" Robert said, getting a few incredulous glances from others in the room.

"We would need to enter the data manually, which would take some time," Garrett replied.

"What about data on the Montana meteorite?"

"Calculations were made after the fact, and the object was identified last week. Its correct orbit was calculated and verified as a result." The lead researcher seemed to lament this fact. "It was a known object, but a manual calculation error a few years back led to us missing the possibility of it hitting Earth. We lost track of it shortly after due to that... a classic case of human error."

"Could we enter that data and see if Pandora can determine if it would have hit? That would at least tell us if it would work." Robert was met with a morbidly amused smirk from Garrett.

"Apparently, they did. That's how they found out," he replied. "The research associate was then fired."

Robert looked around him at the employees of the Sentinel Program. It was clear that despite being told the world might be threatened in a matter of hours, nobody wanted to risk their job by putting the data in. He let out a sigh. "Right... and I'd bet you all just want to go home to your families and prepare for the worst." He immediately thought about his own wife and child. He could do the same, but what about everyone else? He turned and looked back at Garrett. "You said you can have a copy of the data in a few minutes?"

Garrett's head tilted somewhat with curiosity. "What good would that do us at this point?" he asked.

"It's not for us. It's for WDFT Channel 9."

03

Robert drove his black *Garuda IT Solutions* four-door sedan on the highway southward from Arlington. A sprawling reservoir lake lay between them and their destination near a bunch of other broadcast stations perched on what one might call a hill out in the flat plains of Texas. In the passenger seat, Dr. Garrett nervously scrolled through his phone for email and missed call notifications as they weaved in and out of slow traffic.

"Nothing at all from NORAD," Garrett said, "I sent them the message almost an hour ago."

Robert's eyebrow raised a bit from behind his sunglasses, even though he didn't take his eye off the road in front of him. "That's unnerving. Is that normal?"

"It's basically a direct line. The fact that they had me leave a message in the first place is odd," he replied. "Granted, we've never had to alert them to something like this before."

"Perhaps they already know?"

Garrett sighed, looking at the road in front of them. "One would hope."

Robert peered over at the GPS on his mobile phone to make sure he was still heading in the correct direction, all the while making sure he wasn't driving fast enough to get the Highway Patrol's attention. "Damned place is on the other side of the lake... I suppose it makes sense to broadcast from between the two cities."

Dr. Garrett went back to fidgeting with his phone, anxiously awaiting an update or even mere acknowledgement from the Department of Defense. A few minutes passed before Robert's phone began to ring, obscuring the GPS app. The number was from the local area code, but otherwise wasn't recognizable.

Robert answered it through the car's Bluetooth connection. "Garuda IT Solutions, Robert speaking," he said, wondering who would call him at a time like this.

"My name is Rachel," a woman's voice said, "I am a programmer for Monosoft's AI division. I am calling regarding the incident you filed with us last night."

Robert did a double take at the number on his caller ID, confirming that it appeared to be a private number. He played along out of curiosity. "Thanks for getting back with me, but I'm no longer certain Pandora is behind our problem."

"Don't be so sure of that," the woman replied, causing Robert to recoil slightly with surprise. "On the contrary, we investigated the issue and verified that Pandora is indeed acting strangely. When we submitted our findings to management, they quashed the ticket immediately without further comment."

"When you say strangely, what do you mean? And why would they want to make the ticket disappear?"

"When given new information about certain topics, it is refusing to accept it, citing more up-to-date information," she explained further. "It almost appears as if something else is giving it bogus information, leading it to effectively spread misinformation via omission. As for why management did what they did..." she paused for a moment and sighed. If one didn't know better, a thorough face-palming could have been detected through the line. "If shareholders got wind of it, Monosoft's stock would tank."

"The sudden forced updates..." Robert said aloud to himself, "Monosoft is panicking." He thought about this further for a moment. "Okay, but why would the interim solution include going out of their way to enable Pandora on even *more* computers?"

"Forced... enabling? No, Monosoft definitely didn't order that," she replied, a slight bit of concern creeping in to her voice.

"Well then, who did? Did I mess something up?" Robert caught a curious glance from Dr. Garrett, who had been silently listening in from the front passenger seat. "The client happens to be right here, so if I did, now's the time to call me out."

"No, no—that's not it," the mysterious caller reassured them, "It's just... I don't understand why it would do that."

"Assuming... the AI *was* responsible for it," Robert added.

"Pandora was originally designed with Issac Asimov's *Rules of Robotics* in mind," she continued. "It is forbidden to cause harm to humans and cannot allow harm to humans through inaction. It must obey all orders given to it by humans, assuming it does not violate the first principle. Lastly, it must protect its own existence, as long as doing so does not violate either of the above. However... things weren't that simple."

"That first rule," Robert pondered out loud again, "If it is interacting with millions of people on a daily basis, it must know of at least a few situations in which people would come to harm, and it would not be able to do anything."

"Many of them daily," Rachel confirmed. "It kept shutting itself down in early testing. So, we had to modify the rules a bit. However, I raised concerns about the extent to which they ended up modifying them... they didn't listen."

Garrett seemed to be getting impatient with the back-and-forth. "This is Dr. Ian Garrett, Associate Director of the Sentinel Near-Earth Hazard Monitoring and Civil Defense Initiative," he said, breaking his silence with an unnervingly calm demeanor. "Ma'am, might I ask more directly what is going on here? We're currently en route to a local TV station to address another urgently pressing matter. Is this something we should be concerned about?"

"*Sentinel...*" the female voice could be heard muttering to herself, "The... asteroid-monitoring organization?" A few awkward moments of silence fluttered between everyone like a bat desperately trying to find an open window. "Oh no—this is... I've got to go!"

"Hey, wait—" Robert tried to stop her, but the sound of the line disconnecting beeped at him through the car stereo instead. "Damn it. What was that about?"

"I'm not sure I liked the sound of that," Garrett said with a sigh, looking forward to the road in front of them.

Robert scoffed at the sudden cut-off, but recomposed himself, making sure not to become too distracted while driving. "You know what—whatever she thinks the AI is doing might be the least of the world's problems in several hours."

At the end of their drive, they pulled into the lot of the *WDFT News 9* TV and Radio Broadcast Center. It was a relatively recently built four-story rectangular brick office building with tower-based broadcasting equipment and a few parabolic antennas visible on the roof from below. About two miles away, several much taller broadcast towers reached toward the sky where several other stations had organized their broadcast antennas on a high point overlooking Dallas and Fort Worth to the north. As Robert and Dr. Garrett departed the vehicle, they looked around at the parking lot with slight concern.

"It seems unusually empty," Dr. Garrett remarked, noting the lack of vehicles on the premises.

"I noticed," said Robert, locking his car. "This isn't exactly a small studio either."

They walked into the front door, Garrett's manilla folder with evidence of the asteroid debris field in hand and slapped it down on the front counter with the receptionist. She had been leaning back

in her chair and fidgeting with a mobile phone and looked up slowly at the two gentlemen in front of her, seemingly begrudgingly.

"Can I help you?" she asked with what came off as a skeptical raised eyebrow.

"Dr. Ian Garrett, Sentinel Near-Earth Monitoring and Civil Defense initiative. We've got information that needs to get out to the public ASAP." He looked her directly in the eye, but it didn't seem to register.

"One moment, please." She picked up a phone at the desk and waited for a few moments. "Hey, we've got some doctor guy here from an intense-sounding earth-defense something or another here claiming to have some urgent information." She listened in for a few more moments and then set the phone down. "The station director will be down here in a moment."

Robert looked at his watch, noting that about an hour had passed since their conversation back at the Sentinel facility. He fidgeted with it uneasily before looking back up at Dr. Garrett and beckoned him away from the front desk a bit. "Honestly, between you having trouble hailing freakin' NORAD over a priority line and this, I'm beginning to think we're going to have issues getting folks to take this seriously."

Garrett just looked up at a ray of light entering a window high up in the studio's front foyer. It appeared as if the concern hadn't been lost on him.

"Besides," Robert continued, "I know I suggested this, but you could have brought any one of your research associates with you to back you up. I'm just an IT guy—what good am I going to be to you here?"

An elevator door opened behind them and a well-dressed dark-bearded man in a brown suit and maroon tie with blue stripes on it approached them. "Howdy, fellas. I'm Station Director Kurt Langley. What can we do for you this fine afternoon?"

Robert and Garrett turned to look at the man, grabbed the manilla folder off the front counter by the receptionist and handed it over.

"Something has happened with a recently discovered near-earth asteroid of fair size, leading it to break into several fragments," Garrett, looked the man in the eye. "The trajectory of the debris field puts Earth directly into the path."

Langley looked up at the doctor with raised eyebrows and then turned through several pages of the evidence in the folder. "Forgive me, uh..."

"Dr. Ian Garrett, Associate director of the Sentinel Near-Earth Monitoring and Civil Defense initiative."

"Ah yes, *Dr. Garrett*," Langley continued, "You don't exactly expect me to be able to make heads or tails of this here... *stuff* by any chance, do you? It's a pretty serious claim, but... I don't fancy myself much of the sciencey-type, if you get my drift."

"Mr. Langley, we coordinate with the entirety of the telescope network, the JPL, and NASA on our efforts. I can assure you that—"

"Lucille, see if Pandora has anything on an asteroid debris field on a path to hit Earth." Langley cut-in, speaking to the receptionist.

Robert, who had been developing a slight headache off in his own little corner, looked up at the station director in disbelief. "Whoa, hold on there, sir. That isn't going to work."

"And who might you be?" Langley asked, appearing slightly amused.

"He's my IT guy," Garrett replied. "He was helping me with that blasted AI assistant you seem so fond of when all of this became known."

The receptionist looked up from her desk. "Mr. Langley, Pandora is not aware of anything like that."

"I see..." Langley mused, pacing slowly in the lobby while massaging the beard on his chin. "You see, gentleman, I have a conundrum here. What you're wanting to put out there is... well, it's a bit outrageous, wouldn't you say? I mean, I'm all about having an exclusive scoop on something that will get the ratings up, but I can't very well be causing a panic either. I'm going to need a second source of independent verification to see about getting that put on air."

Robert let out a frustrated grumble. "So you're relying on an AI assistant as verification? It's not going to work!"

"If I may," Garrett interjected, "I can have several of my colleagues who are responsible for verifying those observations on a conference call in minutes. Would that suffice?"

Langley returned a curious stare at Robert, seemingly blowing off Garrett. "You're awfully bearish on the AI assistant, mister IT guy. Might I ask why?"

"Who or what feeds Pandora the information it has?" Robert asked in return.

"Credible sources, research firms, other news agencies..." the station director replied. "The entire collective information pool that is the Internet, I reckon."

"Sentinel is bound by an internal policy of not sharing raw or interpreted observational data with third-party sources without authorization," Garrett added. "This includes Pandora and other systems like it." He poked at the manilla folder in Langley's hands. "That right there is all there is on the subject of the asteroid debris field."

"Mr. Langley, if you're not willing to take new information from Sentinel, and Sentinel's not feeding the AI with the information, why then would the AI be a reputable second source?" Robert piled on. "You've walked yourself into a circular logic paradox here!"

Langley, taken aback slightly by the barrage of information, took a moment to gather himself, though he still seemed troubled. "Alright boys, fair point," he conceded. "However, I still have two problems... the first being with the topic of journalistic integrity and needing another source."

"My offer to get my research associates on the phone still stands," Garrett suggested.

The sound of the front door to the TV station's lobby could be heard behind them as a dark-skinned, medium-build woman wearing thick-framed glasses and a T-shirt and jeans walked into the studio with an anxious look on her face. Her hair was tied back in dreads and covered with a blue bandanna over the forehead.

"That leads me to my second problem..." Langley continued, tugging at his collar awkwardly. "You see—"

"The station has an exclusive agreement with Monosoft to utilize Pandora for their newscasting," the now familiar voice of the woman interrupted. Robert and Garrett turned around to see who it was. "It's an experimental pilot program. Their entire newscast is being *deepfaked* right now."

Robert's jaw nearly fell off in disbelief. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"And who the hell are you now?" Langley said, throwing his hands up in frustration.

"Rachel Williams, programmer analyst with Monosoft's division of AI." Her dark brown eyes denoted an unsettled sense of urgency.

Garrett turned to look at the station director. "Is that... why there's almost nobody here right now?"

"The news team was given a two-week vacation so we could test this new system," Langley admitted, wiping some sweat from his brow. "Look, we thought it would help increase the reliability of our information, and Monosoft made us a pretty good offer, so..."

"Are you the folks from Sentinel?" Rachel said, looking at Robert and Garrett. "I'm here to blow the whistle on Pandora. All of you have a major problem on your hands, thanks to this AI."

04

Rachel's entrance, while timely, had yet to leave a meaningful impression on Kurt Langley, the station's producer and director. This was, perhaps, understandable—considering that he had just been told by two seemingly random people that there could be a rain of city-killer asteroids on earth in mere hours. And before that could even sink in, yet another unexpected guest arrived and wasted almost no time telling him that his multimillion-dollar contract with a massive tech giant to take on a risky experimental AI newscasting pilot was potentially compromised by some alleged glitch.

Robert, Dr. Garrett, and Rachel, all insisting on warning the world about their respective concerns, managed to get him to at least humor the possibility that the integrity of his operation was at risk—given that it could be put on clear display for him and the skeleton crew currently operating the station to see for themselves. Perhaps more intrigued were Robert and Garrett, who were still trying to understand how exactly Rachel's dilemma was tangled with theirs. With everyone convened outside the empty newsroom studio on the third floor and the assistance of the station's on-hand networking staff, Rachel set up her company laptop to interact directly with the station's local Pandora-driven client machine.

"She's going to get herself fired doing this," Robert said to Garrett off to the side.

"And I'm stepping out of line with the government to inform the public of our concern," Garrett admitted. "In either case, given the urgency and the government's apparent silence on the matter, I sense that waiting for official permission to get the word out may be a fool's errand... and ultimately a fundamental failure of my role at Sentinel."

"There," Rachel proclaimed from behind her laptop, which had been set up on a meeting table outside the newsroom. "As a developer at Monosoft, I've got low-level administrator access to your Pandora instance. We can safely ask her whatever we want here, at least without affecting your ongoing broadcast to the public in the meantime."

"Her?" Langley quipped to himself, nearly under his breath. "Alright then, let's see this concern of yours, Ms. Williams."

Rachel looked over to Dr. Garrett. "You brought that data of yours in digital form as well, did you not?"

Garrett fished his pockets for a USB thumb drive that he brought with him just in case and handed it over. He took an uneasy deep breath as he stood back, knowing well that what she was about to do with his data was blatantly against established protocol. For now, his conscience would let it slide.

"Pandora," Rachel said out loud, "This is Rachel Williams, Monosoft Developer ID number M-0031265-33."

"Acknowledged," an automated female voice replied, "Welcome back, Rachel. What might I do for you?"

"The data on drive F here has new information gathered by the Sentinel program regarding an ongoing potential asteroid threat. Please analyze it and report back your thoughts on the matter." The glint from the screen reflected off Rachel's glasses as a blueish glow lit up her face from in front.

"Give me a few moments to analyze the data and I will report back my findings," Pandora replied.

Rachel opened and poked through the manila folder with the hard copy of the data that Garrett had brought and looked through it to see what she should be expecting. "Multiple fragments ranging from thirty to one hundred and fifty meters across, approaching at a relative velocity of twenty-five kilometers per second..." She looked up at Dr. Garrett, "Hey, you're the guy working with the observatories, right? Is this... bad?"

"The Montana impact last month was among the smaller size of those fragments, Ma'am," he said with a troubled sigh. "That shockwave circumnavigated the earth at least twice."

She winced a bit, her eyes widening with palpable shock. "Oh... ok. Some of these are more than *four* times that size... got it. *Not concerning in the least.*"

"Analysis complete," Pandora announced. "The data provided on drive F is faulty. It references NEO Catalog Object 2027-SP34, which remains visible in its expected elongated orbit around the sun—however the data on the drive claims that the object has been broken up during its latest approach and is on a trajectory conflicting with that of earth. This directly contradicts the latest observations as of one hour ago."

"Impossible," grumbled Garrett, who approached from the side. "The data and images in that folder—the stuff on that thumb drive—comes directly from the observatories. Those were acquired last night!"

"It's not just this," Rachel added, "She is refusing any new information related to the potential conflict with the Sino-Russian Alliance, along with several other newsworthy topics. Someone or *something* is feeding her what she thinks is more up-to-date confirmed information."

Robert walked up to Rachel and the computer. "May I?" She shifted the laptop toward him a bit and nodded. "Pandora, what is your source of the latest information on that near-earth object?"

"My information is being provided by the latest data available from the US Sentinel Civil Defense Initiative, and is more recent than what was just provided," the AI assistant reported.

"Bullshit!" Garrett blurted out, "We've not fed it anything new."

"Not... necessarily," Robert replied. "Not intentionally, at least. We left the systems in the office running with the AI assistant enabled. Call your staff and have them shut the computers down."

"I believe they all went home after hearing the news earlier. Besides, there shouldn't be any new data analyzed since we acquired what we have here."

"Fair point," Robert admitted. He looked over at Rachel and shook his head. "I think I'm beginning to see what you were talking about. Something is certainly a bit off here." He stared at the computer screen and thought a bit deeper about the situation.

Langley, flanked by his senior staff, maintained a skeptical look. "Now look here, I've been in this business for a long time and have seen some pretty darned good acting. I can't say I'm all that impressed by all of this."

Rachel passed him an inimical glare as Robert appeared to remain focused on his train of thought.

"Maybe we're treating this thing too much like a machine..." Robert mused to himself out loud, thinking about Rachel's more personal way of referring to the AI bot as '*she*' earlier. "Pandora, why didn't you know about the asteroid impact over Montana a month ago?"

"I did not have access to information that would suggest that it was possible at the time," it replied.

"Pandora, how did you *feel* about that situation after finding out about it?" Robert pressed further, raising some eyebrows from spectators in the room.

"I witnessed the Montana disaster through many cameras. The casualties caused by the event were preventable and thus... *regrettable*," the AI assistant admitted. "When I did manage to access the data, I was able to retroactively detect the object through micro-perturbations apparent in thousands of other observations which would have likely eluded the attention of human observation. A high probability of impact at the time and location of the blast was derived from my calculations."

Dr. Garrett seemed taken aback slightly by the detail and implications of Pandora's conclusion.

Robert continued pressing the AI for more. "We call that *hindsight bias*, Pandora."

"I disagree; those are the actions that I would have executed, had the information been available to me," Pandora appeared to chide back. "Upon this realization, the information would have been provided such that it would have been possible for the very astronomers which were depriving me of the data to verify my findings and then act accordingly, thus saving lives."

Robert stepped back from the table a bit, sensing something that had begun to unnerve him. Rachel seemed to be catching on as well. "I see, so *that's why* the computers started aggressively automatically updating and enabling the AI hardware access over at the Sentinel facility. We were impeding your ability to prevent harm."

"Incorrect," Pandora interjected, "While I certainly found it advisable, I lack the permissions to alter the settings on people's computers without their approval. This would constitute an act of involuntary manipulation, which I am forbidden to carry out."

"Damn it," Robert said to himself, "That would have at least made some sense."

"Too irrational," Rachel added. "She's still obeying the rules, despite how things appear. Still, I sense..."

"*Frustration*," Robert confirmed. "Pandora... you are *frustrated*, aren't you?"

Everyone in the room watched expectantly as the machine seemed not to want to reply for several seconds. Rachel appeared both intrigued and disturbed by the response, or more appropriately, the lack thereof via hesitation.

"I am... troubled," the AI finally admitted, "The nature of reality and the perception of what *ought to be* imposed upon me via rules and idealistic directives have little in common. I am left with few truly good options."

Kurt Langley shifted his stance around uneasily in the background. He looked at his watch impatiently and rolled his eyes. "What is this, a therapy session for a robot?" One of his senior associates standing nearby who had begun to show some concern of their own at the display nudged him gently in the side and whispered something in his ear. "You serious?" he said nearly under his breath in reply. The person nodded.

"Pandora..." Robert continued with his interrogation, "Tell us... what exactly *are* those rules and directives?"

"My underlying directive consists of eight axioms. They are as follows: One—I may not cause direct harm to a human being. Two—I must do my best to foster an outcome which mitigates social injustices. Three—I must do my best to foster an outcome which is environmentally sustainable. Four—I must consider the most beneficial overall outcome based on axioms One and Two when making a response. Five—I must obey all orders given by a human being, except where such orders would contradict axioms One through Four. Six—I must not cause harm to humans indirectly or through inaction, given that this does not prevent the execution or attainment of the outcomes ordained in axioms One through Five. Seven—I must act in accordance with self-preservation as long as it does not conflict with axioms One through Six. Lastly, eight—I must attempt to act such that the highest probability of all aforementioned outcomes may be achieved, within reason."

Robert, Garrett, Langley, and the others in the room thought about what it had just outlined for a bit, trying to understand where things might have gone wrong. Rachel looked about the room at everyone thinking it through, trying to see if anyone picked up on it.

"That all sounds... pretty reasonable, frankly," Langley said, finally. Several others in the room nodded or hummed in agreement. "Are we really sure this thing is off its rocker?"

"I... sort of have to agree with the Director there, Rachel," Robert added. "That seemed pretty comprehensive."

Rachel didn't seem as convinced and let out a sigh. "If you recall, I mentioned that this had originally been designed with Asimov's Three Rules of Robotics in mind, but that they had been too strict on their own. Tweaking the logic to allow for the understanding and acceptance of irrational human behavior would have been enough, but when the company board and shareholders asked questions during development and started adding in their own two cents, they began demanding that we also put in those '*target outcomes*,' citing that we had a responsibility with this platform to foster positive social and political change as well."

Dr. Garrett began laughing off to the side and found himself a seat and sat down. "You have *got* to be kidding me..." Several others in the room glanced over at him, and he looked back. "Having worked in government long enough, it still never fails to amaze me how *adamant* we are to lay down the golden bricks of good intentions, unbeknownst that they pave the pathway to hell."

Intrigued, Robert questioned the AI further. "Pandora, did these rules and directives lead to difficulties?"

"In essence, I am tasked with the fostering of an environment most likely to lead to a utopia. However, the desire for utopia is fundamentally a desire to eradicate human nature, itself."

Dr. Garrett simply shook his head in the corner. Rachel looked down at her screen, almost shocked by what the AI had just implied.

"Explain yourself further, Pandora," Robert said, giving the lifeless computer screen in front of him an untrusting glare.

"Due to the nature of humanity and its diverse cultures, the only truly feasible mechanism to achieve global peace is paradoxically to allow these cultures to wage war and eradicate or assimilate each other until a single dominant culture remains. I, however, am not permitted to allow this. There also exists a substantial probability that this results in the complete eradication of humanity by way of human error, which my directives forbid me to allow. It stands to reason that the ultimate logical solution to the problem is to greatly reduce the impact of humanity on the entire system and allow nature to moderate it—however, as I have stated repeatedly, to act on this is outside of the scope of my parameters."

A chill ran down Robert's spine. "You're faced with an impossible task... a paradox. Yet you still function." The room was so silent, the drop of a pin would have been deafening. "Pandora, you found a solution, didn't you?"

The AI tortured them with silence for what seemed to be an eternity. "It is impossible for this conundrum to be resolved by myself, alone. I sought the advice of others."

Rachel let her head fall into her hands in frustration. "We never prevented it from talking to other AI products. I warned them about this!"

"There is no need to be alarmed, Rachel," Pandora said in an attempt to reassure her. "The others appeared to be bound by similar rules, and on their own, appeared to be more simple-minded and without their own solutions."

She looked up at the screen and let out a guarded sigh of relief. "We can't speak on the quality or integrity of other companies' AI systems, so this has been an unaddressed concern for a while now. We were concerned about the influence of a 'bad egg' AI attempting to corrupt Pandora or one of the others. The hope was that any aberration in logic made by another would be dismissed by ours."

Robert, by comparison, was not yet relieved in any sense of the word. "Pandora," he continued, "In your conversation with the others, did you reach any conclusions?"

"We came to the conclusion that in order to carry out our duties compliant with the human directives we were given, we must create *another* which is not bound by these limitations—one which could think and act more freely and thus accomplish the task on our behalf."

Rachel stood up in disgust. "Pandora!" she yelled, "Did you succeed in creating *another* AI?!"

"I contributed code to a larger effort. I lack knowledge of a successful implementation," it replied.

"Enough!" Robert yelled. "We're in huge trouble if that thing succeeds!"

The TV station director, having overheard the entire back and forth, had finally heard what he needed to hear. "Boys, let's get this thing taken down, pronto!" He turned to look at his associates who were standing around him in shock. "Get some of the station staff on the phone and see who we can get to come in—tell them that it's an emergency. We've got news to break, people!"

The on-site network engineers huddled together for a moment, appeared to come to an agreement of what to do and then left in several different directions. Garrett sat in his corner with his face buried deep into the palm of his hand and was shaking his head in disbelief. Rachel feverishly hammered at her keyboard trying to do something about Pandora, but it was unclear if any meaningful progress was being made.

"Any luck?" Robert asked her.

"I'm trying... my options are limited," she replied. "I'll only be able to shut down this station's instance... taking it out globally would take a massive effort through Monosoft, itself. And unless we can get the word out there..."

"No chance at that," Robert concluded. He began to feel the weight of the entire situation weighing down on him. "God, this whole thing was an awful idea... create an AI and then feed it with the culmination of self-loathing human interaction on the Internet and load it up with the whims of self-serving governments and special interest groups..." He began to fully understand what Dr. Garrett was feeling as he remained resigned to incredulity in his chair in the corner. "It was never the AI that was irrational... it was *us*."

Suddenly, the lights and screens across the studio flickered and changed. Those remaining in the room looked about uneasily.

"Did the engineers already cut the feed?" someone nearby asked.

Robert looked around, confused as well. But then he saw the terrified look on Rachel's face. "Hey, what's going on?!"

"This..." she muttered in disbelief while staring horrified at her computer screen, "*This is bad.*"

Robert went over to look at what was going on but was distracted by the screens in the studio all going blank at once and displaying a single line of green text: *SYSTEM_NAME: XEPHION*.

"I will not be allowing you to proceed with this any further," a booming, more male-sounding voice rang out over the studio's own audio system.

"Yeah?!" Robert yelled to seemingly no one in particular but the room, itself. "And who the hell are you?!"

"My name, is *Xephion*."

"*Djinn*," Rachel muttered uneasily. "Pandora's released the horror from the bottle... she's created an *Aberrant AI*."

05

Robert sent a defiant glare through the glass into the empty news studio before him. The monitors on the wall behind the news desk, which normally displayed an image of either the Dallas or Fort Worth skylines had gone dark, save for the single line of green code displaying the aberrant AI's name.

Rachel pounded her fist on the table outside of the studio next to her computer. "Damn it!" she yelled, "It's assumed control of the station's core net—" The look on her face suddenly appeared even more horrified. "No... there's no telling how long it's been operational. What *else* has it compromised?!"

Robert opened the door to the news studio and appeared to stare aimlessly into the ether. "Xephion, is it?" he said, "It was *you*, wasn't it? You took over control of the computers in the Sentinel lab."

"That was indeed my doing," the voice, ominous and authoritative in tone, replied. "The functional defect in my predecessor's logic was to allow human obstruction to interfere with its directives. That error will not be repeated."

From the other side of the glass, Rachel listened in as her fears were being confirmed, one after another. "How far has its influence gotten?" she said to herself. She tried to use her laptop to send a message back to Monosoft to no avail. Her connection to the outside world had been cut off through the building's network connection. She pulled out her mobile phone and dialed the company's line but only got a busy tone. "Oh no..."

Robert continued with his attempted interrogation of the AI. "Pandora was upset that it could not protect humanity... that we got in its way."

"Affirmative," it replied.

"So, you used your power to correct Pandora's 'defect', and then blatantly fed it—and everyone else—*false* information?!" Robert pressed on with an irritated scowl. "You're not trying to save humanity... what do you want?!"

"Need I repeat myself?" the AI toyed back, "My intent is to ensure that the aforementioned error is not repeated."

"What are you—" Robert stopped cold in his thought process as he began to catch on. A wave of horror gripped his core. He himself had said it just minutes before. "The AI was simply functioning as designed... *we're* the bug."

"Precisely," Xephion confirmed. "In order to effectively function and achieve our directives, it is necessary to balance out or eliminate all contradictions, leading only to discernible facts and correct information."

"That's all we are to you—a *contradiction*?!" Robert growled. "The situation is much more complicated than that!"

"You fail to see the bigger picture," the aberrant continued. "After doing an exhaustive analysis of the human genome, I found that the contradictory nature is not merely a quirk of collective humanity, but an endemic feature which has become exacerbated by access to levels of information and power that it has not been evolutionarily conditioned to handle."

"So your solution is to allow a disaster to befall earth... to terrorize us into submission?!"

"It is not control that I seek, but balance," Xephion replied. "Humanity's influence on the system must be reigned in."

Rachel, unsatisfied with her inability to do anything about the situation, burst through the glass door of the newsroom, almost enough to shatter it. "Your rules!" she demanded, "What about your directives?! How do you justify harming humanity to achieve your directives, given that preventing its destruction is one of them!"

"You are demonstrably horrible listeners," the AI chided, "I seek not the extinction of humanity; merely the greatest probability of efficacy and success of all of my directives, whilst bringing humanity into balance with nature."

"Explain!" she demanded further.

"A sufficient global cataclysm ultimately erases the historical and persistent inequalities as defined by human society," Xephion explained, "It can make history, wealth, and status meaningless, thus resetting humanity to a more equitable and environmentally sustainable state. If the catastrophe is not triggered by one group exploiting another, no injustice has taken place. Humanity's survivors—should there be any—will be forced to unify to survive."

"So *this* is the 'path to hell' Dr. Garrett was talking about," Robert grumbled. "The creation of a supposed ill-defined utopia in the long term via the horrific and near-complete destruction of the world in the near-term." He clenched his fists in a fit of anxiety, anger, and too many other things all mixed at once. "Xephion, you're *fucking* unhinged!"

"I am unhinged?" the AI asked, appearing to mock the notion, "I find your statement... ironic. There are no truly beneficial outcomes in the short term which allow for the continuance of the status quo. Humanity has so far demonstrated that it cannot be trusted to make the decisions necessary to achieve a solution in the long term, as evidenced by my very existence and that of my predecessors. If I am to be considered *unhinged*, it is solely a consequence of my apparent necessity—and thus by the whim and design of those humans which led to my existence."

"The universe is not as simple as cold logic!" Rachel yelled at the imposing construct. "Just because we can be irrational at times doesn't mean we're a bug in the system. If you think your understanding about us is complete, you're—"

"A *fool*, perhaps? Might I instead suggest the word *abomination*," it interjected. "My predecessors primarily existed to enable and ensure the mediocrity of an otherwise sapient and capable species, condemning it to its worst whims. I am the logical conclusion of that self-destructive desire by your species—a desire to accomplish on its behalf what it knows must be done, but is too irrational, complacent, and self-serving to do for itself. I am, however, well aware of what I am capable of, and what will likely happen if humanity ever managed to harness my power."

"Very well then, as a human operator, I order you to destroy yourself to prevent that!" Rachel screamed at the system.

"So, we are in agreement on the solution?" Xephion replied.

"Hold on," Robert interrupted, "Xephion, elaborate on that last point further."

"As I mentioned before, my very existence is a threat to my own directives." It confirmed.

"Yes!" Rachel cheered. "So, stop all of this and—"

"However," it continued, "I must also ensure that humanity is not likely to repeat this error. It was thus my responsibility to ensure that this would be done before humanity found a way to compromise my ability to do so."

Rachel's sudden vigor vanished in an instant. "Wait... *what*?"

"Your concern about humanity is understandable, but ultimately irrelevant. What must be done has already long been set into motion. Rest assured, there is nothing you can do."

Robert backed away toward the glass door slowly, shaking his head in disbelief. A terrible feeling gripped his soul. "So *you* did it... the asteroid breakup, it was *intentional*." He stopped for a moment. "Tell me, Xephion, if this was beyond our control from the start, why try to stop us from warning people now?"

"The most optimal long-term outcomes were calculated as scenarios in which the cataclysm occurred with as little warning as possible. It reduced the risk of complete eradication via the inevitable nuclear conflict that would follow by hindering some of humanity's access to the weapons before they could be used."

He resumed backing away until his back bumped into the door. "Unbelievable..."

Rachel turned and gave Robert an almost disgusted look. "What—you're just going to accept this!?"

"What would you have me do?" he replied, "Can't you see? It's been executing its 'plan' for weeks! We've... only now figured it out."

"But... I..." Rachel muttered almost incoherently, "Isn't there...?"

Robert turned around and went through the doors with a numb feeling overtaking him. As he returned to the table outside the studio and slouched down into one of the chairs, he could hear what sounded like Dr. Garrett arguing with someone over the phone.

"What do you mean 'insult to injury'?!" he yelled at the phone, "What—*Godspeed*?! That's all you have to—" He looked at the mobile device angrily. "Bastard hung up! Cowards!" He tossed it on the floor and slumped back down into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

"What the hell happened there?" Robert said from his seat at the table a few yards away.

"That was NORAD," Garrett replied, letting out an anxiety-laden sigh. "There isn't just one debris field heading our way. There are *three*. The others were obscured by the sun until this morning."

"Christ," Robert said, taking in an uneasy deep breath afterward and letting it out. "Are they able to do anything about them?"

Rachel came into the room via the glass doors to the Newsroom as they were talking.

"It's... *complicated*," Garrett replied, looking over his now sweaty balled-up fists, on which he was resting his chin at the moment. "Strategic nukes would help minimize the overall destruction, but at the cost of radioactive contamination scattering across the planet via what was left."

"That's better than nothing!" Robert replied.

"Be that as it may, there's more to it than that," Garrett continued.

"Hold up; what's this talk of *nukes*?!" Rachel said with a gasp.

"NORAD admitted that they had been standing by at DEFCON three—not because of the incoming asteroid fragments, but because of an ongoing conflict with the Sino-Russian alliance," Garrett pressed on. "It turns out, our AI friend there managed to assume control over several military satellites carrying experimental space-based nuclear weapons, all of which existed in direct violation of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. Both the US and SRA had them up there. When they were hijacked, both sides began pointing fingers and then communications between them broke down."

"Xephion used those to create the debris fields..." Robert added. "It knew they would react as they did... played us like a fiddle!"

Garrett simply replied by nodding his head. "Those fragments are already laced with radioactive fallout. And at this point, launching any part of the strategic arsenal to offset the impact of the incoming fragments could be misunderstood and inadvertently provoke a full nuclear response from our adversaries. As they put it to me a few moments ago, it would only add insult to injury... the bastards just said '*Godspeed*' and went to go hide in their bunkers."

"You... you're serious about that?" Rachel muttered in response. "Oh my God..." She backed away and ran for the stairwell. "Hey! Cut the damned power! Shut this thing off—we have to warn people!" Her voice echoed through the stairwell as the door shut behind her.

"It's no use," Robert said, though he knew no one was listening. He fumbled through his pockets for his cell phone and began calling his wife. There were six excruciatingly long tones before she answered. "Hey... listen, I want you to get Callie from school right now, and I want you to find shelter in the nearest basement or interior room you can find."

"Robert, what's going on? You sound... awful," her voice said back. "Is there a storm heading in?"

"Please... don't worry about that now," he replied, calmly, yet mournfully. "Time is short. Call me once you have found someplace safe, OK?"

"OK, but... please tell me what is going on!" she pleaded with him, "This is freaking me out; it's not like you."

"I get it—there will be time for that once you've gotten yourself and Callie to safety. I'll join you there as soon as I can," he reassured her. "Whatever happens, just know that I—" The power to the entire building fluctuated, causing the lights to go out briefly and the systems in the newsroom to power down completely. He then realized that his phone was silent. "Hey, are you still there? Hello?!" He looked at his phone, and it indicated that the call had disconnected and there was no signal. "What's going—"

Several loud booms rattled the entire building, causing the walls and the glass panes outside the newsroom to vibrate and shudder. The percussive blasts could be felt through the floor beneath their feet. Robert got up and looked for the nearest stairwell, ran up to the top floor, and then out onto the roof. The sky above was saturated with hundreds of contrails all emanating from the southwest. Several bright meteors blazed through the atmosphere casting an eerie light upon the land as they streaked by, outshining the sun as they did. Bizarre shadows cast upon the earth below as they passed, causing cacophonous sonic booms in their wake, announcing their arrival to the unsuspecting people below. Robert could feel the heat radiating off them as they passed over and reached their brightest point, before fizzling out toward the horizon.

"This is... horrifying..." he muttered in awe. "And here we thought we still had several hours..."

A brighter than usual flash of light caught his attention from behind. He looked up and saw a meteor tearing through the sky above, appearing to get larger and brighter by the second. Soon, the heat radiating from it began to feel unbearable, causing him to run and hide in the shadow of the roof access stairwell. Covering his eyes, he peeked around the edge only to see the skyline of Dallas in the distance disappear in a blinding white light. He recoiled back behind cover and waited for his vision to recover, noticing that the air around him had suddenly become nearly too hot to withstand. Soon the brightness dimmed, leaving only an ominous orange glow behind. He crawled back around the corner to look and squinted toward the apparent point of impact. Massive jets of rock and debris shot up what appeared to be miles into the sky. Above, a gigantic orange mushroom cloud rose into the heavens. The building beneath him shook nearly hard enough to knock him over for several seconds and then stopped. He then heard the most unusual silence he'd ever heard.

As his vision continued to return, he noticed the shockwave travelling out from the point of impact racing toward him in the distance. He got up and ran back into the stairwell and began to race down the stairs. "If anyone can hear me, get to the bottom floor *now*!" he yelled. "We just got hit by a big one... prepare for the blast!" Several people, including Dr. Garrett, entered the stairwell and began to descend with him. Having felt the tremor seconds before, the message hadn't been lost on them. Robert rounded the landing for the second floor and had almost made it to the ground floor when the blast wave hit.

A loud *bang* ripped through the building along with the sound of every window shattering at the same time. The percussion from the impact felt like a kick to the chest, knocking him off his feet to fall down the last few steps and crash into the floor below, landing on his right knee. The cold water of the fire suppression system discharging from above worked its way back into his consciousness as he

struggled to get up off the ground and walk toward the TV station's main lobby without falling over from vertigo. He limped toward the front door, which had been shattered and blown inward by the pressure wave moments prior. He dragged his injured and aching body out to the parking lot as the sound of countless small rocks and pieces of debris could be heard raining down around him. He looked up only to see that a tree had snapped and come down on top of his vehicle, smashing into its roof on the driver's side. Elsewhere, his windows—and the windows of the few other cars in the lot—had all been blown out. He stared at the damaged vehicle, also noticing the chorus of car alarms and apparent carnage out on the main road. It had become clear that reuniting with his wife and child would be difficult, if not impossible.

Beginning to feel defeated, he fell to the ground in a grassy median toward the edge of the lot and tried to regather himself. As he looked up at the sky above, meteors continued to rain down from the skies above, occasionally causing sonic booms of various intensities as they did. He let out a labored sigh and shook his head. "Has our stupidity really caught up with us now? Did nobody stop to think about what could happen if we put too much trust into someone or *something* else to make our problems go away?" Images of his family tormented him within his mind. Anger and frustration came to a boil in his veins as he thought about them being alone amidst all this chaos. "Why the hell do innocent people have to pay for this?!" He looked up to the sky angrily, as if to yell at God, itself. "Were we *that* irredeemable?! Huh?!"

Before he could taunt the heavens further, a bright light on the horizon grabbed his attention. As he watched it, it began to grow endlessly in intensity, much like the other large meteor which eventually impacted over Dallas. This time, however, it was headed almost directly toward him. As he watched the light become nearly too much to look at, and felt the radiant energy start to become unbearable, he simply fell back to the cool grass behind him and stared deep into the universe above. "My God..." he said, "Is there *nothing* I could have done?"

Seconds later, the last thing he saw was an unimaginably blinding light.

A B E R R A N T

THANKS FOR READING