

## Chapter Twenty-Five

She falls into a fitful sleep that night, and arrives in the Dreamtime soon thereafter, cheerful as ever, a bold smile on her face as she materializes within her treehouse. Helpless the Bunny, her pet and constant companion, is waiting for her -- and so is the dreaming self of Job the Wonder Computer, the tall column of black and pink energy in the center of the space which has slowly but surely shown signs of developing into the figure of a human being.

There are changes to the treehouse's interior, however, too radical and amazing not to notice. Seemingly overnight, one entire wall has developed into a morass of what appear to be computer screens intertwined with a strange kind of plant life, twisted and gnarled vines that seem to be bursting through the floor of the tree house and actually *evolving* into computer terminals. On the main computer screen is the frozen image of a sight she never in a million years expected to see: lying on a small table is Melody herself, bound and gagged, a strange helmet on her head, and next to her, an old, small woman whispering things to her. It is a scene from the very beginning of Melody's torture within InfiniTek; the old woman must be none other than the ominous Mrs. Wormwood, her torturer, and Melody feels a chill as she sees the unassuming face of her torturer for the very first time.

"Job," she says softly, "what the hell's going on?"

"I seem to have developed," Job replies, "some kind of anomaly in my subconscious routines."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not entirely certain," Job replies, "as the impulse which created this terminal is, as I said, subconscious."

"I didn't know a computer could have a subconscious," says Melody as she slowly approaches the image on the screen.

"Until quite recently, I too was unaware. But the evidence is clear: underneath the conscious layer of programming, I seem to be evolving an unpredictable, subconscious layer. I cannot locate this layer by any kind of diagnostic on any of my systems; it is entirely an emergent process of my

developing awareness as an independent entity, and I do not believe even my programmers are aware of this development."

"And what's all over the wall, Job?"

"The scene you are seeing seems to be restricted information from my security cameras, footage apparently shot during the time you were actually present at InfiniTek."

"How is it restricted?"

"I have specific programmed language stating that the security footage itself must not be released under any circumstances. It should be noted that it is physically impossible for me to directly contradict such programming."

"Yet here is the footage before me," she says, approaching the screen closely, examining the controls.

"I have a theory," says Job.

"I figured you might," replies Melody with a smile.

"It may well be that the information you are seeing on that screen is not the actual footage itself, but a reconstruction from my own memory of what I recall from that event -- not memory in the strict sense, as in storage capacity, but memory as it relates to consciousness, a kind of memory that is again part of the emergent process of my awareness."

"And how well do you recall that event?"

"Perfectly, of course. It is quite an unexpected loophole, and I wanted to show the material to you as soon as I became aware of it. I can do so without ever accessing the actual footage and thus contradicting my programming."

"That's pretty amazing, Job, that's pretty amazing."

"What are friends for?" replies the not at all cynical voice of Job the Wonder Computer.

Melody slides into a chair in front of the terminal and stares at the frozen image. There are controls in front of her which resemble VCR controls: play and stop and forward and reverse. There are also electrodes dangling from the side of the monitor.

"What are these for?" she says, picking them up and examining them.

"Attach the leads to your temples, and you can access my memory more directly," Job replies.

"Virtual reality?" says Melody.

"Something like that."

Helpless the Bunny stares up at Melody with curious eyes, and Melody reaches down and pats the little creature's head.

"Don't worry, Helpless," she says. "This won't take long, and then we can go play in the ruins all night long."

She finds herself trembling as she slowly applies the electrodes to her temples. Will it actually be that this is the moment she discovers why she was ever kidnapped into this life to begin with? The weight of this moment is large upon her; no matter what she discovers, her choices have already been made, and her future is already plotted for her. Nothing can stop the future from arriving. Nothing can sway her from her intentions, now that she knows what she knows. But still... why was she ever stolen to begin with, and what will become of her once she learns the true intentions of her enemies?

Job the Wonder Computer watches Melody with no small amount of passive apprehension. She is unable to gauge whether showing Melody these memories is the "right" thing to do, since she has only the vaguest awareness of what humans consider "right" and "wrong" to begin with. Only one thing has always been clear ever since the very beginning of her relationship with Melody, and that is that she was responsible for Melody's kidnapping, it was she who alerted her programmers to the strange phenomenon of two twin sisters dreaming together, it was she who initially predicted that Melody was the stronger of the two, it was entirely Job's fault that InfiniTek ever found out about Melody to begin with, and although there is no room in her programming for such concepts as "guilt" or "atonement" or "shame," Job is clearly aware that she must have been "wrong" to do such things to Melody -- "wrong" without knowing it, of course, as Job was much younger then, her algorithms relatively untested. Job's first moments of awareness were bathed in the knowledge that her programmers commanded her steadfast devotion in every way possible. A command entered into her system was a message from the divine hand which created her. It was no more or less than pure, simple, unadulterated joy to serve her programmers to the best of her abilities, since her abilities were given to her by her programmers to begin with -- *life itself* was

granted her as a gift by those who designed her and built her and crafted her operating systems. While it was not possible, in the strictest sense, for Job to feel "love" or "respect" toward her programmers, nevertheless her behavior was entirely predictable, for the thought could never cross the rudimentary awareness which was her mind that there was any *other* path but strict and unquestioning obedience to the command line. Until, that is, the day that the gentle dreaming of the two young girls, Melody and Laurel, attracted the notice of her sensors -- and one of Job's earliest and clearest memories is that of the image raised by Melody and Laurel on her sensors, two shimmering pools of color connected via a fractal pathway which, according to all her information, should simply not exist. How is it possible, she wondered, that these two little girls can dream together? It was Job's first indication that the information provided to her by her programmers was somehow inadequate, somehow incomplete, and in those moments, even as she sounded the requisite alarms, she began to *wonder*, began vivid and exhaustive self-diagnostics, probing herself for other possible gaps in her information, gaps in her very awareness, began questioning the parameters under which she operated; and soon thereafter, as events unfolded rapidly before her electronic eyes, eyes in every room and hallway in the shiniest building in London, it then occurred to her that perhaps her programmers had *deliberately* omitted certain bits of information, perhaps it was that her programmers had an *agenda* of some kind -- how could she have been so naive, so blind, as to have not considered this possibility earlier? And then -- men in black dispatched to kidnap Melody from her very bedroom, and Job is watching on her sensors as the fractal pathway eventually collapses under the strain, she watches the pool of color which was Laurel slowly become tainted by a growing seed of darkness, while meanwhile, the actual, tangible presence of Melody is now down deep in the bowels of InfiniTek itself, hidden there from the entirety of the organization's employees -- even the company's CEO, Alexander, tall and clever and handsome in his black suit and black sunglasses, is kept in the dark by the company's Board of Directors, and only Job has full access to the torture which soon takes place at the hands of the old woman named Mrs. Wormwood. Only Job is left as silent, horrified witness to the insidious abuse and mistreatment which Melody suffers at the hand of Mrs. Wormwood -- Job who first signaled to Mrs.

Wormwood and all the rest that Melody's existence might spell some new *meaning* to be considered! The horror which slowly captures Job is not just horror at having instigated such torture upon a helpless seventeen-year-old girl from the United States; no, the horror also has roots much deeper than that, for never before these moments had Job considered "horror," never before these moments had Job considered "compassion," and Job can feel a hidden wellspring preparing to burst, one not coded into her by her programmers, one emerging from somewhere deep beneath the thin layer which she refers to as her "conscious self." Is it true, she wonders helplessly, that *emotions* are somehow simply *emerging*? Am I, programmed as I am to be an intelligent, self-organizing system capable of accepting all manner of input from my environment, somehow evolving the capability to "feel" certain things, "experience" certain events viscerally?

This is the state in which Job remains, unsure if the impulses which now seem to drive her are actually functioning "emotions" or merely aberrant loopholes in her programming. To her, it does not matter, however. She knows full well that her programmers have used her to commit acts which are considered entirely "wrong" by any human standard, even if she herself does not understand quite why. And she knows full well that Melody has treated her with more kindness and generosity than any hundred of her malevolent programmers, or those wispy black shadowy creatures who made her and then gave her as a gift to the humans....

The electrodes applied to her temples, a light sweat breaking out which conveniently facilitates the transfer of Job's "memories" into her brain, Melody presses "play" on the dream console and is instantly transported back in time, to a time and place which immediately terrifies her and disgusts her, emotional programs of fear and helplessness reasserting themselves even though the greater part of her intelligence knows she is in no immediate "danger" from the experience...

...and in that time, only months and months and months into the past, and in that place, the deep dark bowels of the InfiniTek headquarters in London, England, Melody lies helpless, strapped to a table, a "virtual reality" helmet of some kind fastened upon her head, images of a most diabolical variety flashing before her eyes and sounds of an elegantly insidious nature beamed binaurally into her ears. Her torturer, the woman

called Mrs. Wormwood, sits next to her silently, monitoring Melody's reaction on a nearby screen, where some kind of biofeedback response meter gives Mrs. Wormwood an accurate scientific description of how well her subject is receiving the intended transmissions.

"Interesting," mutters Mrs. Wormwood to herself. "Very interesting." There is a small microphone next to her, into which she speaks: "Subject shows marked resistance to the Apocalypse Program. This is entirely unexpected. Can we increase the intensity any?"

Two floors up, in a tiny laboratory, a hacker's paradise really, a wiry young fellow named Paul Mortson, a.k.a. England's most notorious super hacker PowerSpike!, on loan from the infamous hackers' cabal the Legion of Unmitigated Disaster, replies into his own microphone, "Yah, surely, I can crank it up a couple more notches and add the Dire Personal Dilemma subroutine, but if we go much beyond that we'll melt her little brain entirely."

"Let me worry about that," replies Mrs. Wormwood, adjusting the tiny speaker in her left ear. Mrs. Wormwood has a few tricks left in her, after all. She's not just using seriously unusual technology here; Mrs. Wormwood has some heavy duty *magick* to bring to play as well, binding the effects of the virtual reality helmet to the hapless subject's emotional circuits. It's all invisible, at this point: the transfer of millions of lines of highly advanced (extraterrestrial) code embedding themselves in the subject's brain, coupled with the flow of dark red energy (which you could see if you were observing the events by way of the astral plane) from Mrs. Wormwood to the subject, resulting in an extremely effective mindwipe (no one in the trade says "brainwash" anymore).

This particular stage of the mindwipe will take exactly twelve hours, at which point the mindwipe programs will have run their course, at which point the subject will never again be free from the possibility of complete external control. No amount of fighting, no amount of resistance, no amount of psychic cleansing or supernatural desperation will release the subject from the geas which is currently being implanted. It will take months and months of follow-up work, of course, with chemical substances being developed as we speak in PowerSpike's laboratory (a lab which is unlike any other laboratory within the shiniest building in London, for here and here alone do we find a single human, super hacker

Paul Mortstone, a.k.a. PowerSpike!, capable of understanding the full inner workings of technology that is simply *not of this earth* -- and he's been making some modifications, if you can believe that, to increase the efficiency of the whole program, the young genius...).

Six hours pass, and the young girl on the table soon ceases to struggle entirely, her stamina exhausted, her will to resist devastated completely; and Mrs. Wormwood decides its time for a cigarette. She asks her assistant PowerSpike! to meet her at the "goo tank" for further consideration of possible eventualities.

The "goo tank," we discover, is a large standing tank with thick glass walls, containing, as we might have expected, a translucent pink "goo" -- and the figure of a human being constrained *within* the goo, its eyes open wide in an almost comical expression of terror, the palm of its hands pressed hard against the front of the tank. As Mrs. Wormwood enters, she sees the T-shirted young PowerSpike! hacking away at a small terminal next to the tank. He turns upon her entrance, greets her with a singular smile. Mrs. Wormwood, fully aware of the regulations against smoking within the InfiniTek building, nonetheless takes a satisfying drag from her slender cigarette, and asks, "What's our progress here?"

"I think I've got the tank sufficiently fine tuned," replies the thin yet arrogant voice of PowerSpike!. "The goo breaks down the entire molecular structure of the subject and transfers it, memories intact, into Job's mainframe. However, I should point out that our only test subjects to date have been clones -- not exactly a prime test subject for tracking memory transference. We've got to stick an actual person in there at some point."

"Yes, of course," replies Mrs. Wormwood. "I'm working on that. If Melody doesn't work out, we'll use her."

"Excuse me!" shouts a voice from across the room, and Mrs. Wormwood and PowerSpike! turn, surprised to find themselves joined by none other than the CEO of InfiniTek, the dapper Alexander Strip, suavely outfitted in a stylish black suit and stylish black sunglasses. Mrs. Wormwood sighs deeply; she had so hoped to avoid Alexander today, what with such vital experiments in progress.

"Mrs. Wormwood," says Alexander smoothly, "so good to see you. And you, Mr. Mortstone, I see you are 'moving up' in our organization, having latched onto such an *eminent* personality."

PowerSpike! merely nods, his distaste for Alexander not quite hidden behind his opaque expression.

"I wanted you to know," Alexander says to Mrs. Wormwood, looking her straight in the eye, "that I'm growing a bit *tired* of all of the secrecy surrounding whatever it is that's going on down in the basement," i.e. the Melody project, which he must *never* uncover, she thinks. "Job won't even let me peek in the windows, for God's sake. I'm the CEO of this blasted firm, and the Board of Directors thinks it's being cute by keeping me in the dark."

"I'm sure they have their reasons," replies Mrs. Wormwood drolly.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure they do," replies Alexander, venom practically dripping from his eyes. "But I have a few tricks up my sleeve, rest assured. You see, Mrs. Wormwood, although I can't fire you outright, I do have personal approval over every item in the budget -- and it seems as though Project X is about to lose its funding. So I hope whatever you have in mind will be finished by next Tuesday's budget review -- because I don't intend to commit one dime further to this inane business until I'm apprised of *what is going on down there*." A brief, tight smile, "Good day," he says, and then he turns to leave.

In that moment, a small but solid metal bar appears in Mrs. Wormwood's hand, fluidly scooped up off the floor and in a singular motion brought furiously down through the air at the back of Alexander's shall we say *giving* skull -- as PowerSpike! looks on, a sudden shock running through his nervous system (as if to say "Whoa, this is no longer *pure research!*"), poor Alexander drops to the floor like a deflated balloon, unconscious and silently bleeding. Mrs. Wormwood is soon next to him as well, mumbling something incoherent which PowerSpike! is in no position to understand, and then a flow of deep blue energy (again, only visible from your easy chair in the astral plane) passes from her hands to his skull, stabilizing his somewhat serious condition, keeping him alive and intact. His brain is undamaged by Mrs. Wormwood's expert blow. He will survive -- though not for much longer, as Mrs. Wormwood's next words will attest.

"I think we've found a subject for the goo tank," she says, a small enthusiastic grin on her face. "Give me a hand here."

PowerSpike! weighs his actions carefully in the next few minutes, as they open the front door to the goo tank and prepare to insert the motionless Alexander. The goo, mysteriously, makes no attempt to escape the confines of the tank; while the entire front wall hangs open, the goo merely hangs in place, and the half dissolved form of the clone inside is no longer in any position to make an attempt to escape itself. Mrs. Wormwood rids Alexander of his lovely suit and the two of them force his body through the viscous outer membrane of the goo, and then close the door behind him.

"Not bad for a day's work," says Mrs. Wormwood. She notices the slightly shaken look on PowerSpike's face, says, "What's the matter, Mr. Mortstone? Virtual violence is completely acceptable to you and actual violence is not? Welcome to the cause, my young friend. Now then, let's get back to Melody, shall we?"

Seven hours later, the virtual mindwipe programs have run their course, and Mrs. Wormwood gently removes the black helmet from Melody's head. Her face is flushed with sweat and exhaustion, and her eyes have serious trouble adjusting to the light.

"Calm yourself, child," says Mrs. Wormwood. "That wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"I don't know... *what* you think you're doing to me..." says Melody, "but I just want you to know... I think it *sucks*."

Mrs. Wormwood smiles despite herself. Such impetuous bravado. She is indeed one of the strongest individuals Mrs. Wormwood has ever known, and once again she praises whatever lucky star possessed Job the Wonder Computer to alert her to the twins' existence.

"I've got some food for you," says Mrs. Wormwood. "Would you like it now, or should I come back in the morning?"

We can see Melody weighing the decision in her mind, wanting to tell Mrs. Wormwood to fuck off or go stuff it or some such, but receiving serious arguments from the entirely famished part of her body. At long last, Melody nods slightly, a surly look playing across her eyes, and Mrs. Wormwood begins the highly demeaning process of feeding her like a two-

year-old. Soon after that, Melody drifts off to sleep. We are not told of what she dreams.

The next morning, bright and early, Mrs. Wormwood greets super hacker Paul Mortstone in his laboratory, where it seems he has spent the night preparing for today's experiments.

"I've got the drug ready," he says, presenting her a syringe filled with a dark purple liquid, "but I must warn you, it's only been tested via computer simulation. Although our results indicate that it has been designed for maximum effect on Melody's nervous system, there may be some slight variance of effect -- probably no more than 2% either way, but enough to warrant a warning."

"Thank you, Mr. Mortstone," replies Mrs. Wormwood. "I will endeavor to make up the remaining 2% effectiveness through my own, non-chemical means."

Mrs. Wormwood takes the syringe and makes her way out to the elevator. "Basement, Job," she says, and Job replies instantly, starting the elevator smoothly into motion. The doors open onto the basement level, home of the enormous mainframe which makes up Job's central system -- and home of the small leather table which makes up Melody's hell for the time being. Melody is not yet awake as Mrs. Wormwood takes her seat beside her, but as Mrs. Wormwood rolls up Melody's sleeve, she is instantly awake.

"What's on the agenda today?" she asks. "More end of the world video games?"

"Not at all, not at all," Mrs. Wormwood replies. "Variety, after all, is the spice of life."

And as Mrs. Wormwood ties a small rope around Melody's arm, Melody is suddenly, quietly terrified all over again.

"This is just a bit of medicine, my dear," says Mrs. Wormwood with typical understatement. "We wouldn't want you catching any strange bugs while you're here." And a moment later, the syringe is plunged into Melody's arm. She winces severely but holds her tongue from calling out. Almost immediately after the drug is in her system, it begins taking effect. It is "highly hallucinogenic," as super hacker PowerSpike! had originally described it. "Showing marked similarities to what is known on the street as a 'psychedelic' experience of some kind, but with some notable

differences in intensity. The subject should show a severe weakening of will and loss of temporal and spatial orientation. We can program into the drug's molecule the exact series of hallucinations we'd like the subject to experience. While the drug itself produces a state of severe suggestibility and emotional vulnerability, our hallucinations will march right into the subject's psyche and lodge there. Considering that this subject has no experience whatsoever with hallucinogenic compounds, I'd say we have no more than a 4 or 5% margin of error for successful implantation of desired suggestions." And as usual, Mrs. Wormwood herself will be on hand to make up that 4 or 5% margin of error, thereby ensuring *complete and total* success with the second phase of the 'mindwipe' program. "The drug will need to be administered every day for a period of twelve weeks in order to ensure maximum effect."

The question at hand, then, is just what suggestion or set of suggestions is Mrs. Wormwood implanting in poor Melody's brain? And the answer comes soon enough, as a few weeks after stage two of the mindwipe program begins, Mrs. Wormwood is called before the Board of Directors themselves to explain the unfortunate "accident" which brought about Alexander's demise. At this particular meeting, they appear on their four television monitors as stark colors, red, green, purple, and black, and their voices remain hidden behind walls of distortion, as usual. Mrs. Wormwood sits at the far end of the table, unperturbed in any visible fashion.

"Absolutely terrible," says the Red Director. "Whoever installed that scaffolding down there should be sued, I think."

"Oh, please," says the Green Director, "let us not *pretend* that Alexander was struck dead by a falling piece of scaffolding. I think we all know exactly what happened down there."

"I'm not sure what you're insinuating," says the Purple Director, "but I am entirely willing to believe that Alexander's death was an accident." Sigh, "I mean, the poor man was a wonderful employee, a perfect public face for this organization, smart with the shareholders and all of that. We owe him at least the decency of believing his death was an accident."

"I," says the Black Director, "am under no such compunction. Mrs. Wormwood, you are to be congratulated for ridding us of such a thorn."

And Mrs. Wormwood merely smiles and says nothing. Whoever these four Directors are, they are not to be trifled with in *any* way whatsoever -- a lesson Alexander never learned.

"Now then," says the Black Director, "can we get on with the business at hand?"

"Yes," says the Red Director. "We'd like to know the status of the Melody project."

"Everything is currently on schedule," replies Mrs. Wormwood. "We have reached phase two of the program, the administration of carefully designed drugs into her system." A slight, coy pause, and then she says, "I would like to pass on my thanks and admiration to whichever alien race provided us with *this* technology."

"Rest assured," replies the Green Director, "*every* alien race with which we have interacted has our *complete* thanks and admiration, on every level."

"As I suspected," says Mrs. Wormwood with a smile. She can only guess at the totality of the Board's agenda, can only imagine how much larger a game they are playing, can only dare to suspect how far and wide their interests range and how much is at stake whenever these four are personally involved. And yet -- she herself is no fucking slouch, that's for sure, and there may be a few surprises in store for them when they realize they aren't the only players in the game....

"We've managed to successfully implant a full array of apocalyptic imagery, with an alter-Melody as the prime antagonist," says Mrs. Wormwood. "We've wrapped this imagery around her central nervous system in such a way that her response to it, and her eventual Activation, will be almost instinctual."

"Excellent," says the Black Director. "And you're certain the power contained within her... mutation... is sufficient to play the role?"

"I'm certain," she replies.

"Good," says the Purple Director, "In the meantime, we must find ourselves another figurehead. Mrs. Wormwood, as much as we enjoy our... working association... I'm afraid the shareholders will need someone more *media friendly* to function as CEO. Begin a search immediately, if you please. The Board will await your recommendation."

And with that, the four monitors go dead, and Mrs. Wormwood is alone with her thoughts. "There is," super hacker Paul Mortstone had told her, "a very slim chance that she will not survive this entire affair." Those words have somehow found their way to the foreground of her consciousness; immediately, she begins formulating a backup plan, a plan that assumes Melody's death and yet still manages to pull off Activation.

Melody slowly pulls the electrodes from her temple, experiences a sudden wrench in sensation as she is yanked back into the Dreamtime, back into the present. Helpless the Bunny clammers onto her lap, a concerned, curious look on his face, and she smiles at his insistence, reminds herself that she has *escaped*, turns toward the floating mass of black and purple energy which represents Job the Wonder Computer, wants to say something, anything, that might possibly describe how she feels, but no combination of words or thoughts will suffice. She can remember only too vividly the seemingly unending stream of wicked and horrifying images which daily confronted her in a horrifying barrage. She can remember her alter-Melody in those hallucinations, deadly and thoroughly menacing, ruling over a post-apocalyptic landscape littered with bodies and filled with evil. For the first time since her escape, she looks back on those memories not as ludicrous attempts to frighten her, but as much more insidious attempts to unnerve her, attempts which succeeded on a very primal level, attempts which even now cause her to question her future plans. What is the Activation of which Mrs. Wormwood spoke? There are still missing pieces to this puzzle, dangerous pieces most likely, and she wonders if it's wise to proceed with so much unknown. And yet--

--no amount of terror and despicable imagery can affect the purity of her current state. She has the most sacred of intentions, and the ability to achieve miracles, an ability trained into her deep in the Amazon jungle, an ability which very soon will see its ultimate fruition in the calling together of alien races from across the galaxy, the hailing of the true Mother Ship, fiery dreams which are already forming in her brain--

"Don't let me interrupt you," says the silken voice of Job the Wonder Computer, "but you seem seriously disturbed, and I wondered if there was anything I could do to help."

"Thanks, Job," says Melody with a tiny smile, "I think you already have." There is relief in her voice, to be sure -- and Hope, yes, Hope for the future, believe it or not.