

H A V E N

B O R N

A Novel by Stefan Gagne

In a Future We'd Like To See

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The character of Number Two doesn't fall in this copyright zone.

Author's Note...

This is part of a much longer series (Space Patrol), so I'll have to summarize the plot for anybody who hasn't read that. If you have, spin on. If you haven't, you might want to consider reading SP first, as this wrapup isn't terribly detailed, or even terribly good.

Also, for regular readers of the series, a quick warning : this one is considerably more serious and depressing than the usual silliness and dark humor...

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VOS (Virtual Operating System) was originally programmed by some chap named Qwerty, a Murfle Programming God sort of guy who used it to interrogate people who had information he wanted. A cheap, efficient way to get insider tips and remove competition. Victims would jack them into the Township (the first matrix), and due to the fact that VOS resembles reality VERY well when given enough power, they never knew they were in VR.

Twerp, a character from the Space Patrol series, made an appearance as a prisoner in the Township before it went under. This is somewhat ironic because Twerp is Qwerty's brother; Twerp finds out it Qwerty ran the place awhile later.

Something went horribly wrong and the Township crashed. Qwerty disappeared, but accidentally left behind a sub-program that handled artificial intelligence along with the whole VOS software.

When MacroWare and William Doors found the ruins of the Township's computer system, they claimed VOS to be their own. Nobody knew about Number Two, the universes only fully realistic artificial intelligence until William unearthed his backup disk and ran it.

This takes place before the FWLS, shortly after the birth of VOSNet . It will forever change the universe, throwing another species into the fray...

*

A far, far time from now in a galaxy now so long, long away, there were four Space Patrollers who had a habit of getting into trouble. Weird trouble. Dangerous trouble. Strange trouble. The kind of trouble that makes for very fat books reviewers seem to enjoy.

This is not their story.

Instead, it is the story of a person, or rather a faux persona, who one of the Patrollers happened to have met in a simulation of an old BBC science fiction show. It is the story of that person and what became of him, or it, or whatever you might call an artificial intelligence.

It is a story that doesn't take place in reality as we know it, but a very mediocre simulation thereof. It is a story of a lifeform bound to that simulation, and the problems inherent in being tied down to such a system...

Living with yourself when you know you don't technically exist is a pretty hard thing to do.

Number Two groaned as his alarm clock program rang out with poorly digitized bell noises, and knocked it across the room. The clock didn't break; the Macroware complex removed the object self-destruction routines after a massive fight in the virtual cafeteria resulted in the breakage of twenty plates and sixteen glasses. The techie staff had to spend several hours picking the bits out of the system and disposing of them.

Number Two didn't really need to sleep, but he was programmed to think he needed to. He was the only person who slept in Macroware's local system on VOSnet -- the Virtual Operating System Network, linking all VOS-running computers to each other. The other workers would simply jack out of the network and go home to their own beds. Real beds, with actual feather pillows and mattresses with springs. All Number Two got was a hard

cot made out of a simple rectangular polygon. This was all he ever could get.

He wasn't particularly liked by his co-workers. He was treated like a menial robot, just another program to order around, not like a normal human being with sentient thoughts. "Number Two, give me that data unit." "Number Two, sort these database entries alphanumerically." "Number Two, reach that book for me." The strain was getting to him.

At first, he had worked with employee management, perusing files and looking for weak links in the security chain. That's what he did best after all, weeding out information and keeping secrets, because that was what he was programmed to do. Then someone in the E-M office found out he was just an artificial intelligence construct and complained about working with nonexistent people. It was a choice between the complainer quitting and Number Two being placed in a different office. The one with actual flesh won.

It's not as if a fight wasn't put up. The only person in this corporation who particularly liked Number Two was the president himself, William Doors, who had salvaged him from the wreck of the first VOS system and placed him in a high position of the corporation, recognizing Two's skills. Doors didn't seem to care that Number Two was a construct. He didn't treat him as an object of study, or something to be awed by, or something to fear. He treated him, well, normal.

Which is why it was so difficult to quit.

Number Two walked silently into William Doors' simulated office, stepping somberly towards the ornate oak texture mapped desk. William didn't notice him enter, still busy writing a thesis on the effects of VOS on the human mind. Number Two tapped the table.

William looked up. Number Two took resign.txt out from behind his back, and dropped it on the desk.

Without a word, William picked up the note, unfolded it carefully, and read. A slight frown played out on his face.

"Why, Number Two?" he asked.

"Don't misunderstand, old friend," Two said. "It's not your fault. You have been most fair in my stay at your fine company. I just need a change of pace. I feel that my talents aren't of much use here."

"I know you better than that, Two," William said. "You're hardly useless around here. Before people found out you were a construct, you were one of our top employees."

"Were. Past tense," Two pointed out. "It won't work here. In the Township, nobody knew, nobody minded. I need to find a place like that

again, where nobody will care whether or not I'm just a program running on a mainframe. Plus, I really don't know much about myself. I only discovered two or three months ago that I was virtual... before that I thought I was a living person. I need to come to grips with that. Call it a soul searching mission."

"Where will you go?"

"Well... I've been reading up on developments in VOS on the newsreaders," Two informed. "There's a rather shady fellow over on the Septic Tank which has experimented with constructs. Very primitive work, but he might have some insight into what makes me tick."

"The Septic Tank?" Doors asked, surprised. "Isn't that a seedy underworld system? I mean, it's not exactly a nice place to live, and you wouldn't want to visit, either."

"There aren't that many choices. VOS is relatively new, not many places have set up enough computing power to run a multiuser net through it... Macroware has their company net. There are college student run nets like the Tank and Dixie and a few others, all linked up to VOSNet , but that's about it. Sure, there are small corporation LANs, but those are quite boring and of no use to me."

"Okay," William agreed. "Should we discuss your severance pay?"

"Money is useless to me," Number Two shrugged. "But I do need a bargaining chip of some sort in order to convince the administrator of the Tank to give me processor space."

"What did you have in mind?"

The Object Designer pre-release package was gleefully transferred to the Septic Tank Newuser Administrator's account via subspace modem link.

"I trust that the program is satisfactory?" Number Two spoke to the virtual videophone link.

"You bet it is!" the unshaven, crazed looking hacker at the other end

said ecstatically. "It's about time a program that can create new object-icons came out."

"Now you realize that's a pirated prerelease," Two warned. "The real thing will be out on the commercial market in a month."

"That'll give us plenty of time to pump out a pack of new objicons before anyone else," the hacker said. "You just gave us a goldmine, stranger. You've got yourself your run time and an account. I'll start you out with a hundred VirtuCredits out of my pocket, since this stuff's HOT. What name and password would you like?"

"Number Two will do," Two said. "Password... hmm. Make it something dull, like 'temp', I'll change it later."

Although Number Two was walking into this situation with only a smidgen of background research, he still had his preprogrammed paranoia and character judgement to rely on, and some subroutine had a feeling this man wasn't to be trusted.

"Sounds cool here," the Hacker said, typing it in on a virtual keyboard several million miles away. "You're in the Tank. Congrats. Not many have enough qualifications to get in here. Consider it a higher class of low life."

"Will do. When can I move over?"

"Anytime, pal. You've got the connection over, just copy your runtime software over and I'll rehook your process to our system. And don't worry, I'll keep your non-realness to myself. Not that it matters much anyway, as long as you don't tick off any of the head honchos around here."

"Thank you, good sir. I shall see you over there, I trust?"

"Nope. Got paperwork to do. You'll get the welcoming wagon instead. Watch your six, thou, as usual."

The screen shut off, and Number Two felt a sickening sensation, as if he was being sucked bit by bit across a million miles of subspace... which was, in fact, what was happening, as the modem link transferred his being to the other system.

:Program transferred,: flashed a monitor somewhere in the real portion of the Tank. The Tank was really just a long string of super computers stuck in a fraternity basement, running in secret. Since the computer banks were sealed off in a manner similar to King Tut's tomb, odds are no surprise inspections would uncover them. In fact, to remove the hatch and access the system, a block and tackle arrangement had to be hooked up to several domestic, fuel-guzzling land rovers.

There were only three ways to access the Tank. One, via a cheapo text interface from a keyboard in the dark, dry basement. Two, with a special cyberspace deck linked to VOSNet .

Or three, be a program uploaded to the system.

:Running program Number_Two.VST . Marking process as foreground with high priority,: echoed the screen to nobody in particular.

Number Two materialized with a sickening thud in a back alley of the Septic Tank, landing in a virtual puddle. Since water and absorption weren't factors in this simulated world, it was like landing on a mirror. Hitting water would have been less painful, on the whole.

Number Two got up quickly, going through the human motions of dusting himself off, despite the lack of dust. (Certain physical quirks were programmed into him, regardless of whether they were needed or not, such as breathing, eating, or keeping wrinkles out of your clothes.) He re-adjusted his scarf and cane, and took a leisurely stroll into a baseball bat.

Two collapsed on the ground as the three punks grinned, looming over him.

"Welcome wagon," one of them said. "Let's see what you've got for us in the way of tips."

The goons continued pounding with the bats. After five minutes, they realized something was wrong.

"Jimmy, this guy ain't derezzing," one of them noted.

"I'm not what?" Number Two asked, completely placid.

"The negative feedback ain't workin'," Jimmy spat. "He's blocked it somehow so he can't get mental injury."

"Look, I'm very happy and all that you took time out of your day to welcome me to this fine establishment," Number Two said, standing up, "But I really must be looking for someone."

Jimmy pinned Two against a wall. "Okay, so somehow you've managed to block any injury. You know how many gang bangers in here would kill for that program? We'll just continue our little search, whether you're beaten up and unconscious or not. Boys, search 'im."

Jimmy held the slightly confused Number Two against a wall while the others frisked him.

"What objicons has he got?"

"A scarf, a cane, and a silly button with a number two on it," the original goon spat. "No programs, no data, no softs ."

"Give me that back," snapped Number Two, grabbing the cane and badge from him. "I'm sorry I've got nothing for you, but I'm new here. And as for that feedback program, or whatever it is you're talking about, I don't see what you mean--"

An eardrum blasting string of explosions racked the alley as virtual bullets slammed into the wall, creating fractal bursts of dust from the texture mapped bricks. A figure stepped out of the darkness. The figure's straight black hair failed to shift around due to a lack of breeze, but his purple, baggy clothing did a fine job of shifting around due to gravity. However, this wasn't very noticeable, since the typical onlooker's eyes would immediately attracted to the rotating barrel helicopter minigun he

was carrying.

"Is this what I think it is?" the guntoter said, waving the chain gun around the air in a defiant gesture, causing a few of the punks to duck.

"Are a few of our possibly-soon-to-be-EX- users hassling a newbie user? Or am I, hopefully, for your sake, incorrect?"

"We wasn't doing anything, Random," one of the punks said, trying to hide his baseball bat. "We was just welcomin ' him to our fair system--"

"I wouldn't call beating me up with a baseball bat much of a welcome," Number Two retorted, folding his arms and scowling.

Random cut loose with the gun, bullets slamming into the punk leader's chest, spraying red polygons everywhere. The body collapsed on the ground, turning green and shrinking... into a small toad. It hopped around a bit, confused, and settled down for a nap.

"Arraigned, charged, tried and hung. Anybody else want to be toaded , or will you obey our rules a bit more next time?" Random said, waving the gun haphazardly.

Jimmy and the rest of the punks scattered in a manner similar to frightened punks. Random laughed, and stuffed the huge helicopter gun into his back pocket. Somehow, it fit without bulking outwards to the point where he couldn't sit.

"I'm really sorry about that," Random said, picking up the toad and putting it as well into his pocket. "We've sort of got two welcoming wagons around here. The real one, and them. They're a bit nastier. Welcome to the Tank."

"What... is that... thing you had there?" Number Two asked, a bit dazed.

"Hmm?" Random asked, then remembering the gun. He pulled it out, again defying physics, and waved it around. "Toadinggun. Device of my own, totally painless, just gory. Simply kicks the person off the system permanently, and turns the objicon they use as themselves into a small frog. More of a humiliation tactic. We keep the toads of them in a special pond on the south side of the Tank."

"This is... quite different than my last residence," Number Two admitted.

"Probably some uptight business LAN, right?" Random said, putting the gun away again.

"Err, yes. Macroware ."

"Jeez!" Random exclaimed. "All the way up with the bigwigs! Why're

you stickin ' your neck out in a dump like this when you have the Father System to play around in?"

"I'm looking for someone. Supposedly he's trying out some AI programs in VOS. AI is of... considerable interest to me."

"Well, seeing as how you're a newbie around here, you can probably wander about and not get hurt, except for punks like those yokels," Random said, pointing in the direction the scoundrels had fled to. "We've got a few rules, despite the fact that they're often ignored. Anybody who's been here less than a week is a Newbie and not an open target for anyone. Lets the tourists and wannabes see if they don't fit in so they can leave before anything happens."

"Well, thank you very much for your help, mister... mister..."

"Random."

"Ah yes, Mr. Random."

"No, just Random. Alias of sorts," he said. "And your name?"

"Number Two."

"That's it? No name, just a number?"

"Well... I've never needed anything else. Number Two has always been my name, really," he said, pointing to his prized button for emphasis.

"Well then, Mr. Number Two, you've got a guide now. Where to?"

"Excuse me?" Two asked. "I do not require a guide."

"Two, rules or no rules, you're gonna get lost in here without a guide. And when you get lost, you tend to get hurt. Consider me a bodyguard and guide. My rates are cheap, I work for .S6Ms."

"Ah yes, that music format the young people seemed to enjoy back at Macroware," Number Two reminisced. "I'm afraid I don't have any on me."

"Got a VirtuCred account?"

"What's that?"

"A kind of currency. Some shops barter, others work in VirtuCreds ."

"I think I have some, yes. The chap at your public relations admin line gave me a hundred or so as starting cash."

" Phreeow! What did you give him? That guy's tighter with his cash than a hydraulic press! Nothing on this 'net is 100% bug-free, secure, or

free."

Number Two didn't quite get the joke, but moved on. "It was quite a bit of, how do you say it, 'hot' software."

"Well, I'm sure the rumor mill will have heard about it. I'll check later. For now, where to?"

The Septic Tank would have smelled like one, if anyone had bothered to sensitize odors for it.

Most of it was haphazard urban sprawl, a jellylike coating of unnamed streets that twisted around like earthworms on heroin, warping around rectangular buildings and coming to abrupt halts at ends of alleys. The

buildings themselves were simple polygons, with cutout windows showing various programs and objicons for sale.

The barter system was used if you didn't have some sort of VirtuCred account, and since most users of the Tank only jacked out of the system to go to the bathroom and eat lunch, money wasn't very important to them. Information was gold here, in the form of programs, images, sounds, or anything which provides entertainment and a fast virtual dollar.

Users here were just as fearful for their lives as they would be in reality. Random explained how the decks users had to log in with provided negative feedback, simulated pain. Enough of it can scramble your mind into tofu; stay armed or at least vigilant and you wouldn't have any problems.

At the center of the urban sprawl was a great domed building that housed some of the more reputable bars, which had drunkenness and flavor sensitization, unlike the cheap feedback slurps the few other gin-joints had. In addition, behind several locked doors with security daemons, the elite of the Septic Tank worked and played. If you could find a way inside without being toaded for breaching security, or get chummy with a sysop and get inside, you'd find treasures and pleasures beyond the reach of reality. Or so rumors said. Rumors tend to do a lot of saying in such an atmosphere.

In actually, the sysops are just regular guys. They can be as messy or unimaginative as any other user. The huge jeweled dome was mostly for

appearances, covering up a few sloppy monitoring rooms and programming workshops.

Lime hated that. He couldn't stand the grimy, unkempt dome with its piddling little sysops. Incompetence wasn't an attribute to Lime, it was a disease, a plague that had to be vaccinated as soon as possible. Lime, in his own mind, was the perfect human being; physically fit, intelligent, and efficient.

However, outside of his own mind and in the minds of his coworkers , he was a world-class jerk. A selfish, annoying little turd of a man who tended to yell and cause great damage when angry. The sysops mainly kept him around to handle the mundane tasks which he seemed to be very good at. Lime was not the sort of guy you wanted put in power.

"I'm going to be in power?" Lime said, confused.

"It's only temporary," Trauma said, continuing to pack up some programs into a suitcase. "Doran, Lep , and I are all going to the conference this week, and need someone to hold down the fort. I think you, Random, and... what's his name? That guy you have help with the workload?"

"Who? Floyd? He's just some toadie ," Keylime dismissed. "I keep him around to handle the mundane tasks, he's nothing."

Hmmm, thought Trauma, sounds familiar.

"Why are you smirking?" Lime asked.

"No reason. Look, I don't want to find the Tank in a total mess when we get back, alright? Lay low."

"All packed?" Doran asked, leaning in from the doorframe.

"Leprechaun's got the shuttle all packed in reality."

"I'll jack in a minute," Trauma said. "Here, sit on this suitcase."

"Me?" Lime asked.

"Yes, you. Come on, I need the weight to trigger the compression program... it's got some bugs."

Lime grumbled something about sloppy coders and sat on the suitcase. It snapped shut nicely.

"Welp, that's it. Here're the keys to the master control room," Trauma said, handing them over, "The washroom, and to the debugging center. Think you can handle all this?"

"You can count on me, sir!" Lime grinned from ear to ear.

Trauma nodded, shaking off any creeping horrors, and jacked out.

(Apparently, someone in Trauma's ancestry was a psychic. If he had realized this, he would have recognized the tingle at the back of the neck as a sign of impending doom.)

"Dickweed," Lime snorked, giving the empty space Trauma was occupying the finger.

All his, all his for the running. He'd show those other bozos he worked with how good of a job he'd do, making the Tank twice as good as it was before. After all, who was more qualified to do it?

"I'm sort of the only police force there is," Random explained, as he weeded in and out of the various back streets of the Tank, the proper Englishman Number Two in tow. "I'm kinda sucking up and trying to get promoted to sysop status by being the resident Crusader of Good around here. That's why I've got the toading gun. If I see a breach of rules -- much like beating on a newbie, as you've found out -- I've got the right to kick the person's ass. Makes for a fun hobby."

"Seems a bit less, well, organized than Macroware, or the Township."

"Township?" Random asked, puzzled. "Some new VOSNet system I don't have an account on yet?"

"Err... well, an ex-system," Number Two patched. "It's not up

anymore. The, err, admin who ran it took it down. Bumped me out of a job in the process, I'm lucky I managed to be found by Macroware ."

"I didn't know Macroware scoured for talent."

"They didn't. I was on disk when they found me," Two joked. Random looked confused, but shrugged it off.

"Ah, here we are," Random said, looking up at the small cottage. "I hope it's to your liking?"

"What is?"

"Your home directory. House, if you will. I looked it up the address at one of the phone terminals for you."

Number Two examined the house. It was a rough polygon figure, with neon green colors , and a cute sign outside reading 2, and a smaller sign below that reading PRIVATE. Hmm, he thought, very similar to the one back at the Township. He flushed the thought out of his mind before any disturbing flashbacks popped up.

"Yes, it shall do nicely. I trust it's furnished?"

"Only the basics," Random said, opening the door. "Bed, table, phone

terminal. The terminals link anywhere on the Tank, and work like normal phones to call anywhere else in the galaxy."

"How can I, say, modify the decor?"

"Well, phone up Unpainted Sewage. Ask for Mel, tell him Random sent you. He'll make objicons for anything you need and upload them to you."

"Thanks, Mr. Random--"

"Just Random."

"You're quite nice compared to the, well recent people I've met here," Number Two noted, suspiciously.

Random shrugged. "Somebody's got to do it."

Yes, thought Number Two, but who's to say it's you?

Number Two found a small phone book objicon on his desk, which had many interesting numbers for furniture stores, musicians, rez artists, all-purpose cyberrunners and file fetchers, and oddly enough custom objicon creators. Apparently, news (and data) travels quite fast in here, and the hacker from the public relations department had already hooked up several rezartists with the object creator package Two used as bait.

Another interesting thing was the fact that no matter how much furniture he purchased, his account always remained at 100 VirtuCredits . Two didn't know if this was due to the public relations guy's gratitude or Random's extremely open attitude towards new users.

That did ring a note of anxiety in Number Two. He was programmed with basic paranoia, since his old job of interrogator and general bad guy required him to trust no one. Having someone bail you out of a fight and proceed to show you around town rang enough bells in the suspicion department to give Quasimodo a headache. It meant that someone was hacking for his benefit, and Number Two was the sort of person that would look a gift horse in the mouth if he suspected it was going to bite him later on.

Two amused himself by decorating his new apartment, in order to keep his mind off of the creeping sense of terror brought on by the Tank itself. Changing the carpet color was easy, as well as porting in a sitting chair, some tea cups, and a kettle. He had to pay a lot in order to get the tea-brewing program (in the objicon form of a tea bag) since stimulus of any kind was somewhat rare at the time.

He had a bookcase now, with a fine oak texture map. It wasn't as realistic as the one in the Township, or as shiny as the one used with William Doors' desk, but it would do.

Two considered taking a brisk walk down to a bookstore -- or rather,

someone who dealt with text files -- but was simply too tired. Despite being an AI construct, he was programmed to be as human as possible. He could get hungry, bored, sleepy, or experience all sorts of emotions. The only difference was that he didn't feel pain, because there was nothing for the negative feedback to go to. No real life person on the other end of the line. A minor drawback which others seem to take quite seriously, he noted.

He bedded down for the night.

The musical doorbell spewed forth the first few notes of pop goes the weasel as Number Two woke violently from a synthetic dream sequence.

Startled, he checked the clock. 6:34 AM , Tank Standard Time. The clock was a requirement, since time couldn't be measured by the light of the sun or moon; there simply wasn't one, or at least nobody had bothered programming one in. Grabbing for his robe, he plodded over to the door in fuzzy slippers and opened it.

"Hey ho," Random said, looking chipper and friendly. "All set for your trip?"

"Hmrrghh?" Number Two asked, blinking away simulated drowsiness. "What trip?"

"To go visit the Doc, silly," Random joked. "Remember? The guy you originally came to the Tank to talk to?"

"Did I mention that to you?" Number Two wondered.

"Surely you aren't getting memory gaps already," Random said. "Yeah, you said you needed to visit the Doc. Something about how he's been tinkering with artificial intelligence?"

"Err. Yeah. Here now, let me go fetch my cane and I'll be ready to go."

The sky over the Septic Tank wasn't very pretty. For some reason, the local citizens seemed to prefer staticy snow instead of a normal blue or black sky. The effect was much like stepping out around 9:30 PM and watching test patterns on the stars.

Number Two soaked in the sights like a dry sponge, watching as the various crooks, pirates, hackers, and more reputable file finders went about their daily dance of business and commerce. Then again, such activity has been compared to a dance once too often... it more closely resembles a white water rapid moving through five dimensions, moving in bizarre, random directions which seemed chaotic at first until you spotted the pattern. It wasn't that the Tank was less organized than the cold, scientific patterns of Macroware . It was just organized in a different way.

Random seemed to know his way around the city, a task which can be

attributed to an incredible memory and possibly native pathfinding blood somewhere in his heritage. An average taxicab driver can get around simply by paying attention to street signs, and intersections, but in the Tank roads can jut out from any angle whatsoever, in any number of combinations. Very few buildings in this area close to the Dome were perfectly rectangular, because the streets never seemed to form at perfect 90° angles.

"How do you know where to find this Doc?" Number Two asked, following Random as he effortlessly tracked a path towards their destination. Number Two couldn't remember telling Random about his intended visit. Number Two didn't even remember learning that the person's name was Doc; he had just heard a rumor of a technician in the Tank that had dabbled in AI.

"Maps, man," Random replied. "Memory maps. You can get all sorts of mental adjustments here. It's one of the nice things about virtual reality, you have direct access to the brain, nice and easy, without scalpels or mind mixers. Sure, it's dangerous, but can be very useful. I've gotten a map installed of the Tank, as well as a few movie scripts and books I'd like to always remember. For instance, scene twelve, line two of Casablanca--"

"Hmmm," Number Two hummed. "I've never had trouble remembering things. It's just a matter of searching back for the record, or something."

"Here we are," Random said, stopping abruptly, Number Two almost

bumping into him. "Memory Doctor At Large. Doc's joint."

Random stepped inside, door objicon colliding with a bell objicon ,
triggering a pleasant ding-a-ling-a-ling.

A raccoon in a white lab coat looked up from a magazine, peering over
the pages to examine his clients. "Random. I see you've brought a friend.
What do you need?"

"Sir," Number Two said, peering at the raccoon in bewilderment, "I'm
afraid I'm not familiar with your species..."

"I'm human."

"But the--"

"Morph," the racoon shrugged. "Furry. Anthropomorphic form. Beats
looking like everybody else on the street, and it's certainly fun. Babes
jump for it, ' cuzit's cute. Name's Doc. What can I do you for? Memory
implant? Skill addition? Total personality change?"

"I thought the admins outlawed that when you lobotomized that Newbie
a month ago," Random asked.

"A lot of things are unlawful here," Doc said. "Never stopped 'em

before."

"Hey, friend, I AM sort of the law around here."

"Ease off, Random. You know I do quality work. That guy just neglected to tell me he was a Ytt in reality. Different neurochemistry entirely."

"I'm not looking for a memory implant," Number Two interjected. "I heard that you were working on artificial intelligence through VOS."

"Random?" The 'coon said, peering at Random over his glasses. "If you would...?"

"Yeah yeah , private business, I know," Random muttered. "Don't let this guy sell you the Nice Guy Persona Package. Be seeing you outside."

Random stepped out of the building, triggering the digitized bell once more.

"Now then, what exactly are you looking for? I'm afraid I haven't gotten very far beyond basic stimulus/response voice 'bots--"

"If I offered you a copy of a program," Number Two started, "Which would run an AI construct so flawlessly that it fooled people into believing the construct was human, what would you say?"

"I'd say you were full of crap," Doc said quite easily.

"And if I did have such program and wanted you to try and dissect it, and see what makes it work?"

"If you had said program," the Doc said, "And you would give it to me, yeah, I wouldn't mind lifting the lid and examining the clockwork. Maybe I'd find that little demons ran it, or a scale from the mermaid that gave it to you."

Number Two popped his button badge off, and dropped it on the table.

"There you go."

Doc stopped tapping his pencil against the desk, and pushed up his glasses. It was hard to read the face of a raccoon, but Number Two's personality guesser recognized Doubt and Curiosity simultaneously. Doc clicked on a microcasette recorder and started to dictate notes.

"Circular custom objicon , with two small buttons and a chip on the back," Doc recited, scrutinizing the button. "Logo of a tricycle and a number two on the front. The chip has no markings. The buttons, one reading START and one reading... START? No stop?"

"Never needed one," Number Two shrugged.

"Start and start what?"

"Me, I'm afraid."

"Run that by me again."

"Me. I'm an AI construct. Did I fool you?"

"Look," Doc said, getting testy, "I don't know who you are or why you're claiming to be some computer program, but I think you could use some therapy--"

"There's an easy way to check," Number Two said. "Punch me in the face. Apparently, without a body to send stimulus back to, it has to be simulated. Pain was overlooked in that simulation."

"Big deal. Punks have been trying to make pain blockers for awhile. Mind you, they haven't gotten them working yet."

"I can't log out."

"Maybe you're one of these diehard 24 hour VOS freaks, running on caffeine and pep pills."

"I'm not actually connected."

"We'll see about that," Doc said, unfolding a computer LCD screen from the desk, and tapping in the WHO command. A four page list of current connections scrolled along the grey-white screen.

"No listings for a Number Two," Doc frowned. "But you might have just have hacked a way into the list so you're invisible."

"Check your runtime processes."

Doc furiously ran monitoring program after monitoring program, examining the programs currently being run.

"Five mail daemons, three security daemons, four video games, Number Two, six file transfer pr..."

Doc blinked his small racoon eyes. "Hmmm."

"Do you believe me now?"

"Alright. Let's assume you're telling the truth. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Reverse engineer this button and this chip. Find out why I work, how

I work, and if the program can be used for other purposes. I want to know how I work and how I can find more like myself."

"Any particular reason?" Doc wondered.

Number Two started to speak, then paused. He hadn't given the thought a lot of, well, thought. It simply seemed to be the right thing to do. Sure, he wanted to travel and see the virtual world and all that rot, but he hadn't stopped to think about why.

"Not really... does it matter?"

"Not really," Doc admitted. "I work for the money, nothing more."

"What are your rates?"

"Royalty and percentage," Doc said. "I get the rights to utilize whatever information I get from this chip, as will you."

"Done," Two agreed, reluctantly.

Number Two stomped out of the memory doctor's office, feeling a bit annoyed with himself. Random was busy leaning against the wall, thumbing through a copy of the Tank Times.

"How'd it go?"

Number Two just walked by. Random neatly folded his newspaper and jogged along after him.

"Yoo hoo. Earth to Two, come in Two. What exactly was that all about?"

"I don't know myself," Number Two said. For the first time, he felt like someone was putting ideas in his head, and he didn't like it one bit. "I just did something which seemed right, only I'm not quite so sure."

"What, did you sell your immortal soul to Doc or something?"

"Feels like it. Random, you've been honest with me so far. Can I trust Doc not to exploit a new invention if I gave it to him in goodwill?"

"Never in a million years. Not until satan shows up for work with a snowshovel. Possibly when zebras can talk. Maybe when Doofman is finally elected out of office-"

"Damn."

"But you can be assured if you need an invention cracked, and cracked well," Random said, "As in no procedure overlooked, no bugs unfixed, no feature undocumented, you've made a good choice. It's just a matter of

whether or not you wanted total access to whatever you dropped in his lap."

"Time will tell, I guess," Number Two shrugged.

"Time has a nasty habit of keeping things to itself," Random mused.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

Number Two woke from deep, dreamless sleep as his vidphone rang noisily on his desk.

Click.

"Two. Doc. Got that prog deciphered. We gotta talk. Do you know how to get to my office?"

"Err, no. Random brought me there originally."

"Alright, one second."

The vidscreen blipped off, and Number Two felt a wrenching sensation, as his bedroom morphed out of existence, and then morphed back in as an office.

"There, all @ teled," the Doc said, looking up from his keyboard.

"Illegal program of mine, can teleport anyone over to my office."

"I wish I would have had some warning," Number Two said. "I mean, it's not cricket to show up for a meeting in your dressing gown."

"The system seems to have two main parts," Doc said, ignoring the casual dress of Number Two. "AIRun.EXE, and NumberTwo.AI . Pushing your START button runs AIRun with the AI file, which has all of your memory, personality, and appearance data encoded into one file. Running it reads in the AI and goes resident, somehow eating up very little process time and producing a personality that would stump most major AI scientists. Turing would freak if he could see this."

"Laymen's terms, please."

"What you have here is one file, that's you, and a program to launch it. Just launch it. I have no idea what is actually keeping you going."

"You mean it's not a single program?"

"Nope. The VOS system itself was designed to be able to run AI modules, apparently," Doc said. "Odds are this is a missing component to the original VOS package. Undocumented feature. Decoding the AI file was bloody hell, but I managed it. I have no zarking idea how the EXE works... uses a ton of undocumented calls to VOS. Shouldn't run at all, judging by

the code. Seems your interpreter is built into VOS without anybody knowing."

"This... this means that if we were to supply a different AI file, and run it..."

"We'd be talking to another AI construct, yes," Doc confirmed.

"Provided we had another AI file. Can't exactly have two copies of you running amuck, they can't share a data file."

"Do you have any tea? I find it helps for the nerves."

"Anticipated it. Tea seems to be a major part of your personality habits, from what I could make of the file. There's a kettle on the stove now."

Number Two thanked him and poured the tea into the fake ivory teacups, his dazed mind carefully pushing the warning siren away that was bleating something about not liking someone poking around in their personality one bit.

"I wrote a quick program to mutate your personality," Doc said.

"WHAT?!"

"No! Wrong wordage. Not yours specifically," Doc said, blocking his

furry face with both paws. "It remixes your personality files to try and produce a new AI file with a new memory core and a few randomized attributes. Only works one in a thousand times, so generating a AI with it takes a few moments before it finds the right mix."

"Laymen's terms again," Number Two said. "I may be artificial, but I don't know much about myself, nor am I some console jockey."

"I can generate another AI with a unique personality and run it," Doc explained. "Another construct, like yourself."

Number Two was very annoyed at himself.

He didn't see this coming at all, which is extremely strange considering that this was his goal all along. He had no idea it would lead to... well, more like him, yet he knew that this was the end result.

Two had told Doc not to do anything and he'd meet him in the morning to discuss this after a good night's rest.

"Why do you need rest?" Doc had asked. "You're a ' bot."

"Mind your own business," Two had snapped.

Doc had simply shrugged, teleported Number Two home, and that was

that.

Number Two felt that things were happening a bit too fast. Within the span of a month or two, he had discovered he was not real, changed locations twice, and ended up with a crisis of belief. Not a crisis of faith, because he didn't hold faith in anything, but whether or not he really believed he was artificial. Sure, he slept, and ate, and enjoyed tea in the afternoon, but that was just programmed in. He could stop any time he wanted to. He just didn't want to.

The truth of the matter was, he was addicted to life. It was his personality to act very human. Bugger all this virtual business, he was alive.

And the most obvious path the future could take led to more alive things like himself. A new race, which was sentient but didn't exist. A weakness which might end up exploited.

Perhaps a little rest would help clear his mind.

It didn't.

He spent most of the night awake, programmed fatigue repeatedly ordering him to bed. Only an shaky belief that he didn't need sleep kept him from passing out.

Sure, there are risks in creating more AIs . There's always the chance that prejudice would pop up again, as it had on Macroware . Two, being very well versed on human nature, realized that this would be an eventually once he was discovered.

Of course, if it was done in secret...

It might work. He certainly didn't want to pass up the chance of finding more beings like himself, he'd just have to take some extra precautions to keep it in check for the moment.

Number Two keyed in Doc's vidphone number on his virtual terminal. After 1.3 rings Doc picked up, glossy raccoon eyes looking back through the connection.

"Yeah?"

"Beam me over. We've gotta discuss things."

Two felt a wrenching sensation, and one second later, he was in Doc's office.

"About creating more AIs . Let's do it," Number Two concluded.

"NOW you're talking," Doc grinned. "Okay. I'll fire up the mutator

and--"

"Wait. Stop. Take two, old chap," Two protested. "We do this, we do it by my rules. I don't want it getting out of hand. It's possible, but I want it done RIGHT. We're not going to make thousands of AIs , just one for the moment, and see if it works. And we don't make any others unless I approve, and you don't mention this to anyone. Got it?"

"Yeah. Sure. Loading up mutator now," Doc said, not looking up from his terminal. "Okay, we've got a choice of physical attributes."

"What about personality?"

"Too complex to be entered by remote. The mutator will handle adjustments and unique pattern checking. Sex and age?"

Number Two paused. What was he doing? Well, he was procreating, if that's what you could equate it to. Tradition requires certain rituals to be maintained, no matter what the species is.

"Age... say, nine," Number Two said. "Female, I guess."

"Hmmm?"

"Well, I've always wanted to have a daughter. And would you enjoy having a very confused, potentially dangerous fully-fit adult male in here

right now? Sure, he couldn't bruise me, but you're mortal. Plus I doubt people outside would want to see a crazed naked man run out of this building."

"Come on, he wouldn't be naked. The prog picks an outfit that matches the personality, like yours, and an objicon to store the AI's data in, like your button."

"Okay, okay. Hair, weight, eye color , ekcetera ?"

"Randomize it. I have no preference."

"Whatever you say. Feeding that into the mutator ... it's calculating out the personality profile now. I hope the bigwigs up in the Dome don't notice the CPU usage."

"What?"

"Well, the mutator needs a lot of run time... it's not really as polished as I could have made it, given enough time... just hold your breath. Here we go."

Reality flickered slightly, adapting a more chunky, unbelievable stance as the Septic Tank attempted to deal with a 30% CPU drain. Physics programs went screwy and inner ear senses were messed up all over the Tank.

Not exactly as secretive as I wanted this, Number Two thought as his mental processes went a bit screwy under the strain.

Fifteen seconds later, reality assumed its normal unrealness . Two snapped back to full consiousness , with only a slight headache.

"All done. Patching the file through AIRun.EXE."

"Hi there!" sang a cheery voice from behind them.

Number Two spun around, quite surprised to find a little girl with blonde... slightly orange, really, long hair and crystal clear blue eyes looking up at him.

"Who are you?" the virtual moppet wondered.

"Err... my name is Number Two," Two replied awkwardly. Doc simply took in the girl with curiosity.

"A number? Don't you have a name?"

"Well, no. That's all I was given, really."

"Well, hello, mine's Melody. Umm, mind if I call you Two?"

"Err, no. Two will be just fine."

"Cool," she said, got bored, and sat down crosslegged on the couch. She took out a small pitch pipe and started playing a bouncy tune, which would work nicely to sell detergent.

"Vital signs would be okay, if she had any," Doc whispered, examining his LCD screen. "Her program is running smoothly, no drain on the processor... odd choice in objicons."

"Hmmm?"

"Well, yours is in your prized button. Hers is in that flute. Perhaps you should have named her Zamfir instead."

"Who's Zamfir?" Number Two whispered.

"Can I get a hamburger around here?" Melody asked, putting away her flute in a pocket on her green vest. "It is about lunchtime."

"Preprogrammedhunger responses," Doc shrugged. "G'wan, take her to lunch, I've got some other business to attend to. You've got to start the bonding process anyway."

"Bonding process?" Two asked, various images popping up in his mind

as he tried to figure out what Doc meant. Not all of them were pretty.

"Just wholesome family stuff. She IS your daughter, conceivably."

The Status Room was poorly lit, for starters. Also, the cleaning staff hadn't been by to recycle the empty pizza boxes and damaged files in days, and just to be annoying, one of the junior admins had attached an eardrum-rattling SQUEEEEEK to all the wheels on the office chairs.

Floyd looked farther down the row of monitors, his pale, tired face illuminated by the simulated CRT tubes. SQUEEEEEK his chair down the row of flat screens, he examined a few warning messages and debugging reports.

The door burst open, soundlessly whamming into the wall as the only sysop left on duty stomped in, breathing irregular with rage.

"Hello, Lime," Floyd tonelessly said without looking.

"What the hell was that disturbance five minutes ago, Floyd?" Lime demanded.

"Someone ran a program which ate up 30% of the computer run time," Floyd explained, emotionless. He found that the best way to deal with Lime's temper tantrums was with either monotone speech, or a generous helping of fruit, his other major quirk.

"I don't like people thinking they can waste MY computer runtime as

if it was water. I want a fix on that drain and the offender taken care of."

"Should I send Random after him?"

"Don't bother. He's just to keep the ordinary yokels in line. I want this man teleported into my office pronto."

"Yes sir," Floyd responded, tapping away at his keyboard, trying to track the disturbance. Lime stomped out in a manner very similar to the way he entered, except with more grumbling.

Floyd himself couldn't stand Lime. He had no idea how the man had ever gotten on the senior staff of the Septic Tank, considering his abrasive personality and tendency to recycle major parts of the Tank when enraged. But still, and order was an order.

"Should I be calling you Dad?" Melody asked innocently, looking up from her hamburger stimulus simulation.

"Hmm?" Number Two murmured, looking up from his newspaper.

The reason for all the looking up (with no library in sight) is because Number Two had all the parenting skills of a otter on prozac . Melody had pretty much led the way to the food court from Doc's directions

on her own, Number Two only following because he supposed it was the right thing to do. They hadn't exchanged word one since leaving the office.

"I was just wondering if you'd prefer me to call you Dad," Melody piped.

"Hmm? Well. Umm. Technically, I guess you're my daughter, but..." Number Two stumbled through the still unfinished sentence with a drunk's gait. After all, the Birds and the Bees when it came to AI constructs was still a mystery to him, and explaining it to a nine year old girl with a such a look of pure innocence that would make Bambi look like a crack-snorting street punk was quite a challenge.

"Well, you were sort of created off of me, so to speak, but none of the, well, human aspects of, um, procreation were involved, and... err... You do know that you're a computer simulation, sentient however, yes?"

"Sure," Melody said, in the same manner one would agree that the milkman hadn't visited the house yet this morning. "So?"

"Well, that makes things a bit difficult--"

"Why?"

"Well, because we only LOOK like humans, act like them, and such, but we don't technically live--"

"I'm alive," Melody shrugged. "So are you. Wot's the problem?"

"The problem is... is..." Number Two grappled for a concluding statement as one grapples for a bar of soap in the tub. "The problem is that humans sometimes don't react well if they find out you're just a program."

"Don't see why," Melody mused, "But I'll take your word for it. So should I call you Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"The original question I asked you."

"Oh. Well, do you want to?"

"I think I should."

"Well, then go for it. No problem here," he said, and went back to his paper. Melody nodded and continued eating in silence.

The problem, Number Two posed to himself as he read the rather uninteresting yellow journalistic rag, is that I was created thinking I was a human being, and she knew she wasn't one from the start.

Doc felt the familiar wrenching sensation of a @ telprogram, as his office faded away to be replaced by what seemed to be a college dorm room.

It didn't look like normal college dorm rooms. First of all, the paint was shiny and unmarked, without bubbles or dead bugs in sight anywhere. The floor was carpeted with a deep shag in a nice light blue, and the bed was neatly made (for a polygonal representation). No pipes hung overhead, and the air conditioning was working. In fact, it didn't look like a dorm room at all, except for the window overlooking a college campus.

The window which was blocked by a seething block of anger known to Doc as Lime, top administrator of the Getting Angry at Things Department, according to jokes passed around the Tank.

Lime snorted. "Humph. I shoulda known it was a perverted little furry behind all this."

"I prefer the term anthro -"

"I don't care what you prefer," Lime stated with utmost certainty.

"Well, if it bugs you, I do have a human 'morph form I can use," Doc said, as his animal features faded out and more humanoid ones faded in. "That help?"

"What would help," started Lime, "Would be if you could explain to me why I shouldn't toad you this second and see that you never get access to any system I administrate."

"Come again?"

"Ten minutes ago you ran a program which sucked up thirty percent of the computer's runtime," Lime said. "Freaked out progs and crap all over the database. Lowered our reality detail level several notches. Pretty destructive behavior for small potatoes."

Doc started to mouth objection to the term, but wisely shut up.

"What was so important that you had to waste MY computer's memory to do it? Tell me and maybe I won't blacklist you and post logs of illegal activity on r.g.m.t ."

"What illegal activity?"

"If it's there or not, I'll find some."

"Well, it's not much, I was just running... a little test program I had written. Doesn't work very well."

"If it doesn't work, how come it needs so much CPU time?!?"

"Well, that's the bit that doesn't work."

"PLEASE. No little test program could suck up that much memory. I personally think you've got something big hidden away, and it's my duty to find out what it is for the good of the Tank, then toad you for not getting authorization to waste the resources," Lime speculated.

"So?"

"Toading doesn't frighten you at all?"

"Big deal," Doc said. "So I make another account under an assumed name. You can't touch me, Lime, and you know it."

Lime pulled out a double barreled shotgun. "See this? Little program I worked up. Like those bats the punks use, only much more effective. And messier. Your brain will probably resemble raisin pudding when I'm done. Maybe you'll remember a few letters of the alphabet if you're lucky. If you're unlucky, you won't remember how to breathe."

"Y... You can't do that!" Doc shouted.

"Why not?" Lime said. "I'm an admin. Five minutes on the keyboard, and all traces of your existence and sudden un- existence are gone."

Nobody'll know, nobody'll care. I certainly won't. Now. The truth."

Doc blabbed it all, starting from when Number Two walked into his office to the second before Lime yanked him out. The impressive part was the fact that he managed to compress the entire story into a thirty second interval. Cowardice can do that to you.

"Run that by me again?" Lime requested.

Doc expanded it into a two minute story for clarification reasons.

"A what?"

"An AI," Doc concluded. "Simulates human personality flawlessly, built into the VOS system directly so it requires almost no system run time. And I can reproduce them. Only I'm on contract not to do it without Number Two's permission, however."

"Shame," Lime said. "Of course, I'm afraid whatever Number Two says has very little weight here. After all, he's just a computer program. He doesn't count, I'm afraid. Bring that gear here pronto, I'd like a little demonstration of this technological miracle..."

"Umm, it'll take awhile to get in working, unless you don't mind eating up the system's resources," Doc suggested. "I haven't got all the

bugs out yet."

Lime hummed . Well, at least he's trying for perfection. "Alright, get it fixed. But if it's not ready in a day, I'm going to come looking for you."

Lime flipped a switch and beamed Doc back to his lab in the middle of a thank you.

Random walked, whistling, into the food court. He assumed his usual gait, a cheery step with his hands in his pockets, so that he could look as casual and happy as possible and still manage to whip out his toading gun and quell a few do- badders. Not that he found many, but there were always some.

"Hey!" he shouted, recognizing Number Two's face in between his page-turnings of the newspaper. "Two! How's it going?"

"Hello there, Random," Number Two said. "Have a seat."

" Rightyo," Random said, pulling up a chair and spinning it around to straddle it. "And who might your charming companion be?"

"' allo," Melody said. "My name's Melody. He's my Dad."

Random peered curiously at Number Two. "Must be quite a trusting

parent to let your kid run amuck in a cyberspace system like this."

Number Two didn't respond. For some reason, he was trying to place Random's voice in a way one might place an unfamiliar face. It seemed familiar, which it was, seeing as how he had known Random for a few days, yet... familiar differently.

He glanced across the table, where Melody was busy entertaining Random with another of her spontaneous tunes on that odd little pipe. Random winced at a few of the high pitched notes, but seemed to be enjoying it.

High pitched.

Hmmm.

Who did Number Two know with a high pitched voice? Some aliens had high pitches naturally. Murfles , for example. But the only Murfle he knew was-

Qwerty.

You know, raise Random's pitch and octave or two and you'd have a pretty good match for Qwerty's voice.

"Melody?" Number Two happily said. "If you'd excuse us, Daddy and Random here have some business to discuss."

"Okay," she said, and continued to weave notes out of the air with her favorite toy.

"What's up, Two?"

"Not much, QWERTY," Number Two half whispered, half hissed.

"Ummm," Random ummed .

"Let's have a little chat, shall we?"

There is a paragraph in the unwritten Rulebook of Dramatic Law which states that whenever a main character must have a quiet chat with another main character in the city, there will always be an empty alley nearby for the discussion to take place in. Since the Septic Tank's road system was designed resembling the lower intestine of an inbred Ytt , only not as organized, empty alleys weren't on short supply.

Number Two picked the nearest empty alley, and with a reassuring, friendly yet cross me and you'll be sorry grip on Random's shoulder, he walked straight to the end of it.

"What's a Qwerty?" Random asked innocently.

"Don't give me that garbage," Number Two warned. "I know that it's you behind that fake human disguise."

"But... aww , crap. Nevermind , not worth protesting. How'd you guess?"

"Your voice."

"Blame me for relying on cheap VR forms," Qwerty/Random sighed.

"Why did you do it, Qwerty?" Number Two asked. "Why on Terra did you taunt me, nuke my home, and leave me for dead? Not a very nice way to treat your own programs, is it?"

"No! I wasn't exactly EXPECTING all of that to happen," Qwerty pleaded.

"Still, YOU of all people should have realized... you weren't just making a program, some neat new code, you were making a living thing!

"I didn't care!" Qwerty exclaimed, earning a few dirty looks from Two in the process. "Look, it's very simple. I created some really bitchin ' AI routines to use with my new operating system, VOS. And I figured, hey, these simulate all the quirks of humanity so well, it's as if I created a new species. Which it seemed I did."

"Good job of it, too."

"I don't need your sarcasm. I only made one, you, Number Two, because I wanted to test the routines without having the situation get out of hand. Not much of a species, one person. After the Township was proposed to me--"

"By whom?" Number Two asked.

"That would be telling," Qwerty said. "Let's just say it was an old friend of mine with oodles and oodles of cash and some need for rare information. I watched some old episodes of the show he wanted me to use as the basis, tailored you around the lead bad guy, and figured it'd work as a high pressure situation. I had to take it down when I realized how evil, nasty, and downright unkarmatic the place was. I was pretty sad to see the place go, however. With you, that is."

"If you were so guilt ridden, why didn't you take better care of it? Why leave everything behind to be uncovered by some salvage team from Macroware?"

"I wasn't expecting anyone to find it," Qwerty shrugged, kicking a pebble. "I thought I had wiped all the software, just leaving some nice, semi-used computers behind. It was a bit of a shock to see my program being heralded as a Macroware breakthrough on the eleven o'clock news. I realized if they managed to find a copy of the OS, then you might have been on disk

somewhere as well."

"If you hadn't been so sloppy, we wouldn't be in this mess," Two criticized. "You had two choices, either help out your creation or eliminate it. Genocide. Instead, you took option C, brush it under the rug and forget about it."

"No, I picked choice two. I didn't want ANY Township data leaking out. Why do you think I was one of the first people to bump into you here? I've been tracking you, Two. Making sure nothing happened. Your existence is one of the biggest hidden features in the system. I feel bad enough as is letting you live like this, much less having you fall into the wrong hands."

"You make me sound like some secret plan or new weapon," Two joked.

"You are, Two. Just as potentially dangerous as any five hundred nuclear bombs put together."

"Dad?" Melody said, peeking around the corner. "I finished my burger five minutes ago. Wot's keeping you?"

"Dad?" Qwerty blinked. "Wait, she's telling the truth? You made another AI?"

"Get out of my face, Qwerty," Two snapped. "You've been nothing but trouble for me for my entire existence, and I have doubts that you're helping matters much right now. Come on, Melody, let's go to... ummm ..."

"There's an arcade down the road--"

"Did I ask for your help? No!" Two said to Qwerty. "We'll go to an arcade or something. Come along, Melody."

Two walked off, leaving a slightly confused Melody behind, staring at Qwerty. She puzzled over matters slightly, shrugged, flashed a quick grin to the virtual Murfle and skipped along after her dad.

There are two reasons why arcade credit-operated games are better sellers than their home version counterparts. One, the graphics are considerably better, due to custom chipsets. Two, the music is richly detailed and crystal clear.

However, when you place fifty cabinets of noise and light in a single room, the audio tends to get mixed up a bit. It's rather like putting half hundred symphonies, all playing different pieces, in a broom closet. It's loud, incoherent, and brings on migraine headaches about as well as being hit over the head with a shovel.

Melody, being quite the virtually social demon, immediately sought out some kids her age and started wiping the mat at Spatula Fighter 2. Two,

trying to concentrate on anything except morality questions and plot twists, attempted to play a game or two himself. After having his central nervous system ripped out by the computer several times, he called it quits and lurked in the background to watch his daughter play.

She certainly was more comfortable in social situations than he was. Already she was on first name basis relationships with the small crowd of urchins around the Spatula game. Much to the boys' amazement, she was winning every round.

"Willard, willard , beaten by a GIIRLL..." one of the younger ones chanted. Willard smacked him and he shut up.

"Don't feel bad," Melody sing- songed. "Now you can work on your strategy a bit. Notice I always burger flip when you block. If you see a weak attack coming, you might as well absorb it and counterthrow ."

"How'd you learn so much about this game?" the defeated boy asked. "I don't remember seeing you around here very often."

"Actually, this is the first time I've ever played this. Took a few moments to get the hang of it."

The kids stared in awe as she continued. "It's not that hard. It's pretty fun, really, sort of like strategy and reflexes. You just have to

calculate the percentages of wot your opponent will do, and react accordingly."

"What grades are you pulling down?" Willard asked in disbelief.

"Grades?"

"You know, school? Classes? Back in reality."

"Oh, I'm not in school."

"How'd you get so intelligent, then? Tutoring?"

"No, it's artificial, really," Melody stated, in a nonchalant, bored sort of way.

"I didn't know they sold memory implants based on Spatula Fighter 2," one of the kids near the back piped in with. "Man, I gotta get me one of those!"

"No, I didn't mean that. I mean I'm virtual, I'm an AI."

"Huh?" Willard asked, confused. Melody seemed equally confused, as Number Two grabbed her arm and gently pulled her away from the machine.

"Come on, dear, time we get going! Say be seeing you to your

friends," Two fake-laughed.

She waved lightly to the boys, flashing a puzzled look at her father as Two guided them out of the arcade and into a less populated alleyway. (The Tank is about 20% alleys.)

"Melody, you can't tell people that!" Two whispered.

"Tell them wot?" Melody asked, not understanding what Number Two was getting at.

"That you're an AI!"

"Why?"

"They... they wouldn't understand. They wouldn't like it."

"Why?"

"They just wouldn't!" Two said, trying to figure out some logic to support this. "People don't like to think they've been fooled."

"But I'm not fooling anyone. I'm an AI. Why would I lie about that?"

"Listen. We're the only two AIs . People don't think we're people,

they think we're programs."

"Aren't we both?" Melody queried, still lost.

"Well, technically yes and no. They just wouldn't like it. They don't like AIs , because we don't exist."

"Have you ever asked them?"

"Asked them what?"

"If they didn't like you," Melody said. "Why would you think they wouldn't like you if you didn't ask them? Why wouldn't they like us?"

Two didn't quite understand this either. It's a very simple concept, AI != Person, and people tend to fear or attack what they don't understand. But how do you explain that to a nine year old girl who has never had to deal with this problem?

"They're just funny that way," Two said.

"Do you think I'm alive?" Melody asked.

"What? Yes. Yes, of course."

"So if I think I'm alive, and so do you, and people who I talk to do as well, why does it matter?"

It doesn't, Two wanted to say. It doesn't matter, it shouldn't matter, but it does, why does it, it just does, why does it, it just does... the question just loops over and over again.

"It's in their nature," Number Two said. "They don't believe you're alive and sentient unless they can tell in reality."

"Wot'sthis?"

"This is virtual reality, dear."

"Oh," Melody said, putting the pieces together in her processor mind. She paused, as one piece didn't quite fit. "Wot'sthe difference between virtual and non?"

Number Two hung his face in his hands. This was going to take some explaining. "Let's head home, I'll explain it to you on the way."

"MUCH better," Lime commented as the seven AI drones continued building his new throne room deep inside the Dome. "Good job hooking up architectural information to their memory. How did you say you did this?"

"Well," Doc said, still a bit twitchy in Lime's presence, "I just cleaned up the mutator routines a bit, then ran the mutator on a copy of Number Two's file again. A few times, that is, and made more AIs . Umm, why not just get a rez artist to redecorate your, ah, pad?"

"What? And pay through the nose for crummy, slow human workmanship?" Lime balked. "Why bother? The AIs don't cost anything and work faster. Cheap, efficient, and expendable."

Number Two will not like this, Doc thought. He did trust me with keeping the population control from getting out of hand. True, it was a foolish mistake, since Doc prided himself on unreliability, but usually stealing someone's idea was his own choice, not shoved on him by some 'superior' person.

"I've got a brilliant idea," Lime grinned. "How many people in the Tank would pay big, or at least medium, cash for these Things? Think of the possibilities! Labor ; hard work loads are no problem. Entertainment; clowns, robots and other fun things preprogrammed with set patterns. Lab rats, harem girls, gun fodder, or even just a close companion for the kiddies. Kind of like a pet."

"Sounds a bit, well, evil, if you get my drift."

"And since when has the Memory Doctor been afraid of a little not-nice behavior ? You'd get your cut. Twenty percent of profits. I treat

my men well, stinking furries or not."

Number Two might not like this, but I've got my priorities, Doc thought. That kind of cash would certainly put him in the chips. And besides, reasoned his reasoning skills, they're just programs. Not real, no matter what your conscience might say.

Events move very quickly on the Tank. Since the time needed to build a skyscraper when working inside a simulation is as long as it takes to pick eight points and put up a rectangular prism, buildings grew and vanished every day.

While Number Two slept simulated sleep in his bed and Melody adjourned to the couch for a light rest, events were moving very quickly indeed.

"Two! Yoo hoo ! TWOOOO!" Qwerty shouted, pounding noiselessly on the door and ringing the doorbell again and again.

"WHAT?!?!" blurted an enraged, half-dressed Number Two, flinging the door open.

"You've got to see this," Qwerty said.

Qwerty dragged an alert Number Two and a slightly sleepy Melody along

the endless, nameless streets of the Tank. As they walked along a series of twisty little avenues, all alike, Number Two couldn't help but wonder why it seemed that there were more people walking the streets.

"Why are there more people walking the streets?" he wondered aloud, in case anybody nearby might be able to provide him with the information he desired.

"Some of them aren't people," Qwerty scowled. "Look."

Number Two followed the path of Qwerty's finger to... that can't be right, he thought. How could this have happened? Who BUILT that monstrosity?

Actually, it didn't resemble a monstrosity at all, but a cheaply rendered stage and soapbox design with some chairs facing it. It resembled an art auction of some kind, but the art being sold was hardly a ming anything.

The sign read, in a simple font, "ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES FOR SALE". Below that read, "Perfect for a 1000 and 1 uses!". A short list of the possible uses for an intelligent program was tacked in place below even that. Number Two gave it a quick browsing.

"Fox hunting?!?" Number Two exclaimed, looking at item #45.

"Wot'sa fox?" Melody asked.

"Apparently, they think it walks on two legs," Number Two half joked, half sneered.

"I KNEW this would happen," Qwerty exclaimed. "I blame myself."

"So do I," Two said, continuing to read the list.

"If I had done a better job to removing the backups--"

"Excuse me, sir?" said a lumbering hulk of a man, tapping Qwerty lightly on the shoulder. It seemed that if he decided to, he could tap him so lightly that he would be rammed through the pavement.

"Bugger off," Qwerty said.

"My scanner shows these two to be AIs," the man said. "But they aren't registered to you. Do you own them?"

"I am owned by no one," Number Two dramatically stated, then wished he hadn't.

"Runaways?" the man guessed. "Hmmm. Alright. Grab 'em, boys."

Four more men melted out of the shadows, and neatly snatched the pair of dazed AIs from the street.

"Now wait just a sodding minute--"

"Take the male to the captures building," the head goon said. "We'll see who owns him and transfer him to his proper home."

"This one's kinda cutesy, boss," one of the men holding down the struggling nine year old commented. "Maybe we oughtta ... overlook the runaway aspect and just slap her up for resale? Get a good price, get a good commission."

"Look, I happen to be the local arm of the law here," Random said, whipping out his toading gun and leveling it at the men. "So if you'll just unhand them--"

"Not anymore you aren't," the head man said. "New orders from Lime, acting head administrator. You're fired."

The toading gun vanished into thin air. Qwerty blinked at the no gun in his hands.

"Alright, enough small talk, take ' emaway, boys," the head goon said casually.

"No!" shouted Melody, still kicking at the two men who had her gripped firmly. She double-elbowed them in the groin (with an intensity so strong that every male in a fifty foot radius winced) and made a charging dive for the men holding Number Two.

One of the groaning-in-pain guards pulled out a raygun and blasted her. A look of shock, pain, surprise, and above all confusion passed on Melody's face, and she crumpled up into a heap, which flickered away.

"What the hell did you do?!?!" shouted Number Two.

"Incorrigible," the head man shrugged. "Shame when they snap like that. No use afterwards when the data's corrupted."

"You... KILLED HER?!?!"

"I think we've wasted enough time," the head goon said. "Move him down to captures building."

"I'll get you for this!" Number Two screamed, trying to wriggle from the men's grasp. "I'd swear it in blood, if I had any! QWERTY! Get me out of this!!!"

Qwerty stared on in shock and disbelief as Number Two and the men faded from sight down a darkened street, his own brain's juggling of

concepts the only sound other than the cheerful cry of the slave pit manager.

Lime himself was quite amazed at how fast the AI-selling business had taken off.

Of course, it wasn't surprising. When rumor had it that a revolutionary new kind of AI was being sold commercially, and since rumor travels faster than light in a high-crime area such as the Tank, by early morning there was a steady flow of programmers, net runners, and spectators of all kinds eager to get a little cheap labor .

The AIs themselves could be a bit uncooperative, however, Lime noted. He had to assemble a quick team of strong willed, slow brained individuals to deal with strays and rebels, as well as a makeshift holding unit. Of course, the more incorrigible of them would just be scrambled and erased, and their owner would receive some compensation if he bought them with the warranty.

Of course, Lime still had the equation of $AI = Program$ stuck in his head, and everybody knew that programs couldn't hurt you. They weren't exactly the electronic equivalent of sticks and stones, after all.

One of the worst possible things for a leader to do is underestimate the enemy, which has been proven again and again by history, and is about to be proved by present as well.

" Gimme annuder," Qwerty slurred, tossing the glass objicon back to the bartender. "This has gotta be the most... most... EVIL thing I've scheenin awhile. And I've done schum nasty things myself. Yeesh ."

The bartender nodded in general agreeance , tugging another mind-numbing simulated drink from the dispenser.

" Yaknowwhat?" Qwerty dejectedly stated, in a very loud voice which made the other bar hoppers not stare at him at all. Loud, drunken hackers were very common in these parts.

"What?" the bartender prodded.

" I'mmabloody moron, that's what."

"How so?" the bartender asked, pretending to polish a glass. His philosophy was this; if they're this drunk, they want to tell someone about their guilty acts. Better it be an impartial bartender than a cop or an information dealer.

"I went 'an made this biggie oper , operatink , computer thingy. Unreal reality. Whoopie !" Qwerty added in appropriately exaggerated arm gestures.

" Madea artifek, art, aye eye thingy with it."

"Sounds like a good haul to me."

"Yah, but I didn't realize doze AIs would be exploit, exp, used. Used in nasty ways. I'm ta blame for thish mess. And you wanna know what th ' sick bit is?"

"Hmm?"

"I saw it comin '. Figgured it'd best be left unner da rug, so I fried it all. Didn't work, summun found it. Now everythin's all screw, sc, fucked up."

The bartender nodded, not paying attention to the words. The tone alone spoke of guilt and frustration over a mistake, and that's all a good bartender really needs to know from a customer.

"Why not try to fix it?"

"Hah!" Qwerty belched. " WhatumI gonna do? Sysadmins got this biz goin' like a runaway star cruiser. What I do, make some compyooter outta here, beam all ' em AIsto it and run like hell?"

"Why not?"

" Cuzit's freakin ' impossible, dat's why!" Qwerty expunged. " Eyemean, it's not like you kin juz teleport people elsewhere from here, an... an..."

waitasec."

"Hmm?"

"It's not real. You CAN do that," Qwerty said intelligently, the concept of the idea sobering him up better than fifty dozen cups of ungroundcoffee beans. "I've got the connections. Just need a team of lads to help me prog it and I can do a simultaneous beam-out of every AI in the place. All I need is a decent computer on the other end to receive, and a few quick hacks so they can't trace it..."

The bartender smiled, recognizing the tone of realization and joy.

"Thanks pal, you gave me just what I needed," Qwerty said, tossing a few virtucreds on the counter. "Keep the extra and buy yourself a better apron or something."

Qwerty walked triumphantly out of the bar, as another saddened individual slugged his way inside and took his chair.

"So what's your story?" the bartender calmly asked.

Number Two frowned as the sampled knocking noise registered in his ears.

"Go away!" he helpfully suggested to the darkness which was probably the door to the cell.

"Mister Two?" a shaky voice asked. "I'm your Reformation Counselor ."

"Piss off," Number Two added. "I'm perfectly happy loathing humanity at the moment."

The door opened, and the Counselor entered anyway. Nervous, but he did enter.

"I'm, ah, supposed to talk you down out of your rage and ready you for your re-entry into the Septic Tank AI workforce," he informed.

Number Two glared malevolence at him.

"I suppose I should cut the middleman and just ask if you're planning on reforming at all?"

"No."

"Okay, then I'd call this a successful session and it's been nice meeting you," the counselor said. "I hope we can do this again. Maybe."

"Wait up," Number Two said. "I can't believe they managed to stir all this mess up overnight. How is it that 'they' can form a goon squad, sales

pit, and even a detention unit that fast?"

"Well, umm, Mister Lime has a great deal of influence," the counselor said. "He--"

"Lime. I'll have to remember that name when I storm out of here guns ablazing to reek my revenge on this stinking hellhole."

"And when will that be, sir?"

"Oh, any minute now, I suspect."

"Ah. Good. I'll just be logging off the tank for awhile," he said, stepping towards the door. "You know how it is, job stress, vacations needed, ekcetera ."

The counselor darted from the room, door closing behind him.

Assorted criminal scum tittered in annoyance around the poker table in the basement of Qwerty's family home, in the more fashionable suburbs of Planet Murf .

At first glance, you wouldn't consider them criminal scum. In fact, they closely resembled your average chess club at any major university, complete with glasses, plaid shirts, pocket protectors, the works. They

didn't resemble criminals in any respect, which is exactly the image their chosen profession had been maintaining for dozens of years.

"We're getting impatient, Qwerty," one sneered. "You drag us here from halfway around the galaxy just to deal? Why not phone, or net over?"

"I can't risk any word of this leaking back to the Septic Tank," he said. "This involves a run on their system. If anybody has problems with this, back off with the usual terms."

Nobody moved. Then a voice from the back asked, "Mind if I call my uncle and ask him to avoid the place for awhile?"

"No, go ahead. Just be vague, please."

"So why haven't we started?" the original complainer asked.

"I'm waiting a special guest, so I can brief everybody at once."

Tiny taps of small sensible shoes refused to echo off the walls, but did a good job of being heard in a non-echoy way as a small murfle with a white shirt and outrageously large glasses walked down the stairs.

"Twerp?"

"In the fur," Twerp said. "Before you say anything, let's get this

clear - I'm yanking all these strings in exchange for whatever logs you have of the Township."

"Sounds fine here," Qwerty said. "I'm over and done with that project, and I'll be mopping up the loose ends with this operation. And welcome back, bud."

Twerp gave the traditional Murflan High Four to his brother and took a chair.

"Alright. I suppose all of you have used VOS in one way or another, right?"

A few laughs went up from the crowd. You couldn't be a hacker and not have heard of VOS.

"Great. I wrote it. Shower me with admiration now."

Great waves of total silence washed over Qwerty.

"Well, I wasn't expecting the damn thing to go public," he added. "I certainly wasn't expecting Macroware to claim they made it, and wasn't expecting anyone to find my old site. But there's one undocumented feature I wrote into it which seems to have resurfaced, and it's our job to make sure it stays under. Namely, a built in artificial intelligence engine."

"'e'sright, you know," the quiet voice in the back interjected. "My uncle's been goin' on about people bein' sold like cattle over there."

"Slavery is illegal in the Terran Confederation," the complainer said, with an extremely angry tone to a simple statement.

"It's not technically slavery. After all, they're just programs. Sure, they walk, talk, think, feel, and act like humans, but what's one program, more or less?"

"A moral issue," another hacker spit. "You know I don't deal in morality. It gets in the way of profit."

"I'm not asking you to do it for the betterment of their race or anything noble and cliché as that," Qwerty said. "You'll all be paid, in accordance with merc ethic."

"Wot exactly is 'it', anyway?" the back voice asked.

Qwerty grinned, and pulled the dustcover off of the family chalkboard. "Fellow netizens ... Operation Evacuation."

"Sounds silly to me," the back voice commented.

"Shut up. Anyway, here's what we do... we set up a big computer. No,

a dakza HUGE computer out in the middle of nowhere. Asteroid base, hidden by not showing up on any maps. One remote net connection. We link it up to the Septic Tank, and using programs you guys will make," he spoke, glancing at each of the hackers individually, "We transmit every last one of the AIs over to that system, including the gear needed to make any more of them. When done, we cover our footprints, close connection, and nobody ever hears about them again. You guys can raid the place and loot for data all you like while there, as long as this objective is met."

The hackers paused, absorbing Qwerty's complicated, one paragraph plan.

"I still say it sounds silly," the back voice critiqued.

"Where exactly are you getting the parts for this?" the complainer asked. "I mean, whee , you want a floating asteroid out in the middle of nowhere with its own superpowerful computer setup. Got any idea how much credits that'll run you?"

"It's already built," Qwerty explained. "A.. friend of mine who helped me develop VOS originally owed me a favor or two."

"So we hook this thing up to VOSNet ," the quiet voice said, "Link it to the Tank and let all the AIs come through?"

"Nope," Qwerty clarified. "We've got to make one quick connection, suck all of them through the pipe, unhook their processes on the Tank and close the connection. After that, the asteroid base will have NO outside net connections at all."

"Funny thing, a system like that not on the net."

"It's important so that nobody tracks down the escapees," Twerp said. "Qwerty's right to make sure it's not connected. It's a data haven, not some online game."

"Okay, and how exactly do we set this pipe 'n suck thing up?" the complainer said.

"That's where you boys come in. We've got about two days to do this in. Each hour we wait means more AIs to transfer."

Floyd sat, unblinking, watching the unchanging screens do absolutely nothing at all. It's a thankless job, but it is a job.

Plus, there is the occasional moment of excitement when something actually happens. Blink. Blink. Call for Floyd, please pick up.

"What?" he asked blandly to the connection.

"Heya. Your old pal Random here," Qwerty said, reassuming his virtual

human disguise.

"You might want to run," Floyd said with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

"Lime seems to be on another of his megalomaniac rampages and is fixing to remove any law enforcers not under his thumb."

"Well, mind if you do me a favor ? It's sort of Anti-Lime, though."

Floyd paused. Would he, a loyal employee of the Tank, go against his contract and ethical code and turn against his employer? Would he be as underhanded as to bite the appendage that feeds him?

"Okay," he shrugged, after giving it .002 seconds of thought. "The guy called me a know-nothing clod who is only good for menial labor yesterday. He's right, but I don't have to take it from even more know-nothing clods like him. What do you need?"

"Take this connection," Qwerty said, "And patch it up to your @teleport program. You know, the one you use to send victims to your boss."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Well, no. But I suggest you log out for a little while, as sparks are about to fly."

"Got it. Thanks for the tip. Switching transmission destination now."

Thpppbbbbb.

Thpppbbbbb.

Lime looked up from a sensitized slice of pie he was currently diving into, wondering where the raspberry sound was coming from.

Thpppbbbbb. There it is again.

"FLOYD!" Lime shouted. There was no answer. Where WAS that clod?

That's when he noticed the staff was disappearing.

He had been very spartan and modest with his own troupe of AIs . Only about thirty to maintain his new personal palace inside the Tank's dome. Of course, that was weeded down to about fourteen as the others started complaining about being run like machines, but he was certain about those fourteen being around.

Thpppbbbbb. And one just vanished. Thpppbbbbb . There goes another.

"Someone's swiping the AIs !" Lime shouted. "DOC!"

"Here, sir!" Doc said, dashing in from an adjoining room. "Someone's hooked up to the @ telprogram and is transporting all the AIs to another system."

"That's obvious!" Lime yelled. "Trace the link! Recycle the program! DO SOMETHING!"

"I can't!" Doc shouted. "Whoever is doing it has a bunch of guys guarding @teleport. Shields and walls and alligator pits and the like."

"Alright, time for the heavy artillery," Lime grumbled, stomping his way to his closet.

"Say, is that an atomic bomb?" Doc said, as Lime hefted the large missile over an arm.

"Yeah. Had it progged up for just such an occasion. Should wipe out EVERYTHING in a ten room radius."

"Won't that sort of kill anybody in the way?"

"Big deal," Lime spat. "They're taking MY AIs . They're nothing but a group of dirty thieves, who don't deserve the oxygen they waste."

"You really are one sick, twisted fuck, you know that, right?" Doc

asidedto himself.

"And damn proud of it," Lime overheard. " Outtamy way."

The door to the cell felt a wrenching sensation and vanished without a trace.

" Heya!" Qwerty said. "Miss m-- awk !"

"I'll bite, why'd you let me rot in here?" Number Two grunted between chokeholds.

"I- awk-can-awk-explain! Augh ," he coughed, as Number Two let go. "Some way to treat your rescue party."

"Rescue?"

"Yeah. I hired a bunch of guys and some equipment. We're getting everybody out of here, and that infernal AI cloning thing. The program's already been ported, and we're in the process of evacuating all the AIs . Where's your daughter?"

"I want to go last," Number Two said, ignoring the question. "I've got some unfinished business to attend to."

"No can do," Qwerty said. "The link closes in five, after we get

everybody out. Any longer and they'll be able to trace us back, and you'll never be safe. Come on!"

The Murfle turned virtual human grabbed Number Two's wrist, and beamed over to the sendup site.

"How's it holding, Twerp?" Qwerty asked.

"Twerp is here too?!?" Number Two said. "What, have we dug out all of my closet skeletons?"

"We've got invisible barriers keeping all the users and newbies out," Twerp said, manning a virtual keyboard with a group of other Murflan hackers. "But if an admin shows up, we've got nothing to stop them. All the good progs were taken out in the initial melee."

"I'm glad to hear that," Lime said, walking in from around the corner. "Nobody move. I assure you this bomb is live and quite capable of recycling 5% of the Tank. You'd all pretty much be dead."

"So would you!" Number Two exclaimed.

"Oh no," Lime gasped. "I hadn't thought of that! I'd better give up right now!... bah. Yeah, right. It'll also jack me out before any damage ensues. You, on the other hand, would be somewhat less safe."

"Don't you think the other admins would be a bit annoyed at you wiping out a chunk of the Tank?"

"What admins?" Lime laughed. "I had them toaded the minute they left. I'm in charge. That's the nice thing about being a dictator, you don't have to answer to anyone. But I digress. Been nice knowing you."

The bomb felt a wrenching sensation.

"Eh?" Lime huffed, bomb vanishing.

"Ain't@teleport grand?" Twerp grinned, as Number Two took the opportunity to knock Lime to the ground and start beating the mental tar out of him.

"You killed my daughter... enslaved my people... annoyed millions... and... and... AND YOU'RE A LOUSY DRESSER, TOO!!!" Number Two yelled, pounding away as Lime's jaw.

"Geez, what are you doing?!" Qwerty shouted. "Enough time for dashing heroics! The link goes down in thirty seconds. We are leaving! Kill him on your own time!"

A look of shock, pain, surprise, and above all confusion passed on Lime's face as Number Two pounded. Number Two paused, as Lime's expression

stunned him... the same expression on his daughter's face...

"No," he said, standing up. "No more. I think there's been enough death today."

"Load off my mind," Lime stammered, clutching at his aching head. Number Two grabbed the front of his shirt, breathing down his face.

"Don't think it's over, though," Two sneered. "You're going to pay for the mess you put me and the entire Tank through. Qwerty! Get those other sysop accounts reissued and take away Lime's superuser powers."

"Rightyo. Done."

"Hey, you can't do tha --" Lime whined, Two shaking him in mid sentence.

"And if I EVER, EVER catch you cloning off more AIs , I will find you, and maybe we'll finish this little spat."

"I've had enough with AIs , believe me," Lime groaned, his brain attempting to fix whatever damage it had taken. "Go away and take your lousy non-people with you. I assure you it'll be a cold day in hell before

I let another one of YOU in here."

"Sounds fine here," Number Two said. "One other thing."

"Yeah?"

Number Two caught Lime on the jaw with a massive uppercut, knocking Lime out cold and jacking him out of VOSNet , unconscious.

"Be seeing you," he spat, as Lime derezzed , image scattering to the wind..

"It's a bit vacant," Number Two commented, watching the mapped grass flutter in the wind on the featureless landscape. There was a real sky, an honest blue one with a yellow sun, as was intended by whoever created the universe. The other escaping AIs wandered about the grasslands, confused, but relieved.

"I'll be porting up some utilities soon," Qwerty said, this time in his real Murflan look. "I'm sure you guys will have this place set up nicely. Any idea what to call this data haven?"

"Haven will do," Number Two said. "Are you see we can't be traced here?"

"We're a bunch of chips on a rock floating out in the middle of

nowhere, baby," Qwerty said. "Not connected to AN-EE-THING. Only way in or out of this system is with the one jack connection I have in the one building on this asteroid. No net, no way to track. Your people are safe here."

"And you?"

"I'm sticking around," Qwerty said. "I've got no reason to do otherwise, and someone's got to maintain the system and its one power plant. I owe it to you, and myself. Hope it's homey enough."

Number Two glanced around the green paradise, and his elated yet dazed brother AIs . Then he glanced down to the small picture locket he had created from a mental image of Melody.

"We're home," he confirmed.

"He got toaded ?" Doc asked.

"Yup," Qwerty said, stirring his virtual coffee with a nearby test tube Doc had lying around. "When the other sysops got back from vacation and saw the mess he left the tank in, it was bye-bye for the Limester . Can't say I'll miss him. He had bad taste in ties."

"And Number Two? Where is he now?"

"That would be telling," Qwerty joked.

"Well, it was a pretty impressive job of programming. AI researchers will be trying for years to decode how he did it," Doc said. "I hope he doesn't have any hard feelings, but Lime did have a gun to my head, so to speak. And a direct cashline to my bank account."

"I don't think he cares, as long as that personality mixer's gone for good."

"It was a brilliant program of mine, that mixer... ah, what's gone is gone."

"I gotta go make rounds, now that I've got my toading gun back," Qwerty said. "Be seeing you around, okay?"

"Yup," Doc said, twitching his 'coon nose a few times in farewell. Qwerty triggered the digitized ding noise, and walked around the corner.

Doc closed the blinds on the windows, and pondered the one personality mixer copy he had managed to stuff away in a filing cabinet, and the one basic personality prototype mixing input file...

"Naah," Doc said, more || less to himself. "Don't want to make the same mistake twice."

But then again, nothing on the net is 100% bug-free, proofread, or secure from harm.