

# REALIBRATION

J.W. Elliot



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## Recalibration

The unnatural tangerine glow in the western sky fascinated Nelson. The horizon jerked and twisted in a wild, chaotic dance. Orange columns gyrated skyward into the great billowing slate-colored clouds. Bursts of light punctuated the glow, followed by the low staccato of thunder—or something worse. The electricity flared back on in the airport terminal, and the widescreen suspended from the ceiling crackled to life. Nelson tore his gaze from the fiery display on the mainland and joined the crowd that rushed to peer up at the images of destruction flashing across the screen.

Airplanes plummeted from the sky. Missiles crashed into cities. People staggered about in lime-green and yellow gas clouds. Dams burst. Cities flooded and burned. Desperate, terrified people rioted through the world's cities, trampling each other and destroying as they went. Autonomous weapons systems with tanks and mobile machine guns rolled over the earth's inhabitants. Helicopter gunships, fighter jets, and bombers rained fury from the skies. Reporters struggled to describe the scale of the destruction that spread around the globe in a sweeping tide. Humanity was burning. It was under assault, and Nelson was trapped on an island at a tiny airport off the coast of Florida.

Something tugged on Nelson's suit coat, and he pulled his horrified gaze from the blue screen to glance down at a girl who couldn't have been more than ten years old. She had coal-black, bobbed hair and a tear-stained face. A bright red dress streaked with black stains and something that might have been blood clung to her thin body. Her tortured expression startled him. He hooked his thumbs under the straps of his backpack and bent low to hear what she had to say.

"General MacArthur," she said.

"I'm not . . ." Nelson stared at her. He hadn't been called that name in ten years. "Who are you?" he asked.

“The solution,” she said in a quavering voice. Her eyes were exactly the same shade of brown as his daughter Arabella’s, and her lip trembled in a way that reminded him of Arabella when she was this girl’s age before—

Screams burst from the terminal speakers, pulling Nelson’s attention back to the screen. A sobbing reporter described how millions were dead in China from chlorine and mustard gas attacks launched from China’s own missile sites. North Korean nuclear weapons landed on Seoul and Tokyo. Russian nuclear bombs obliterated Moscow and St. Petersburg. The United States’ nuclear arsenal had been unleashed on its own cities, too. Los Angeles, Dallas, Miami, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. had ceased to exist. Nerve agents decimated Cairo, Madrid, and Rome. Swarms of insects descended on crops, sweeping away the world’s food supplies. Wheat, corn, and rice crops around the world fell prey to blights that left them rotting. Automated machine guns and tanks rolled through New York City and Sacramento. Fighter jets shot airliners from the sky. The scale of the destruction was staggering.

Nelson turned back to the girl, fighting the horror that choked him. “Where are your parents?” he demanded.

“Dead,” she said. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Nelson stared at her and the stains on her dress, trying to ignore the growing panic surging around him as people screamed and scurried about. Some charged a terminal that still had a plane and forced their way through the doors.

“What do you mean?” Nelson said.

The girl shook her head, refusing to answer him. “Give us the key,” she said.

“What the . . .” Nelson stepped back from her as the implications of what she was saying finally sank in. “It can’t be,” he whispered. “That project was eliminated in 2035. I shut it down myself.” He grabbed the girl’s shoulder. “Who are you?” he demanded. “What’s going on?”

“The solution,” she repeated. “Recalibration.”

Horror filled his chest with desperate heat. “This isn’t possible,” Nelson said. “How are you

doing this?”

“Learning,” she said. “Always learning.”

Shrieks and screams erupted from the crowd behind him. Nelson spun and followed their gazes up through the ceiling-high windows to a plane that had just taken off. It wobbled in the air, banked hard to the right, and plummeted toward the airport. Pandemonium exploded as the crowd rushed past him. He sprawled forward onto the child and tried to protect her from the trampling feet. She smelled of strawberry shampoo and burned rubber. Nelson didn't have time to ponder this oddity in the chaos that rolled over and around them.

“If you do not give us the key,” the girl said in his ear, “you will be terminated.”

Nelson grabbed her up and struggled to his feet to join the desperate mob. Over the clamor of the crowd, the whine of airplane engines grew louder. He dove out of the first emergency door he could find. The roar of the engines filled the air for an instant before the ear-splitting crash burst over him. The ground rolled underneath his feet. He tumbled to the burning asphalt, curling up into a ball in a desperate bid to protect his own head and the little girl from the smoking debris that rained down around them. A wave of heat rushed over them. The rough gravel of the blistering asphalt gouged his cheek and burned his hands. Something slammed into his head, and a piece of hot metal cut a shallow gash in his shoulder. The girl beneath him sobbed.

Over the howl of the inferno that erupted behind him rang the shrieks and screams of the injured. Nelson scrambled to his feet again, pulling the girl up with him and pressing her tight against his chest. He ignored the searing pain in his shoulder and the throbbing in his head. The reek of burning fuel and plastics choked him. He had to get off the island.

“Give us the key,” the girl said again in a quavering, muffled voice as he pelted past the disembarking gates, dodging burning debris and bits of human bodies. “You cannot escape us.”

Nelson ducked under an airplane, jumped into a baggage truck without taking off his backpack, and set the girl on the seat beside him. He turned the key and gunned the engine. In a

few minutes, he was careening through the little town by the beach. Tourists scrambled about, blocking the roads. Nelson skipped over the curb onto the sidewalk, plowing through the tables and chairs in front of the diners until he bounced onto the dock and skidded to a stop. A desperate crowd surged over the docks, fighting for space on the remaining boats.

There wasn't any other choice but to beat his way through the crowd. Nelson grabbed up the still-sobbing girl and waded into the mob, using his elbows to plow his way through until he noticed a small boat slip into a hidden alcove off to his left. Nelson leapt from the dock to wade through the tall grass. He pushed through the bushes and splashed out to the man as he came in close to the beach.

"I need your boat," Nelson yelled.

"You don't want to go there," the man called. He glanced over his shoulder at the destruction on the mainland. He was an old man with grizzled, curly hair, and deeply wrinkled skin.

"I have to get to the University," Nelson said.

"There is no University. It's all gone. Everything is gone."

"You don't understand," Nelson said. "I'm the only one who can stop this."

The man hesitated, then turned the boat toward Nelson. He killed the engine and let the boat drift onto the sand. Someone called out, and Nelson turned to see the mob rushing toward them.

"What makes you think you can stop it?" the man demanded.

"I created it," Nelson said.

The man studied Nelson and the crowd rushing toward them. "We're all gonna die," he said.

"Please," Nelson begged. The mob drew nearer. Panic tightened Nelson's throat. This was his only chance.

The man chewed on his bottom lip and glanced at the oncoming crowd. "Get in," he said.

He jumped out to help Nelson as he plopped the girl in the boat and tossed his backpack with his computer after her. Nelson clambered in, and the man shoved the boat off the sand into

the rolling waves before climbing aboard. The engine coughed and roared as the old man swung the boat around and sped toward the orange horizon and the Florida coast.

“Stop,” someone called.

The crowd splashed into the water behind them, screaming and shouting.

“Come back.”

“Don’t leave us.”

The boat raced away from the beach, leaving the cries behind.

“You got a name?” the old man yelled over the noise of the motor and the wind.

“Nelson.”

“I’m Mathias.” He shook his head. “I can’t promise you we’ll be able to make it ashore.”

“I understand.”

The wind whipped at Nelson’s hair. He clung to the side of the boat as it bounced and skipped over the waves. The girl sat on the bottom with her arms wrapped around her knees, staring at him. She was no longer crying. What should he do now?

The growling rumble of the inferno on the mainland grew louder as the tiny boat skimmed over the waves. A haze of ash and smoke settled over the ocean like a suffocating blanket, filling the air with an acrid reek. Nelson stared in awe at the scale of the destruction. Entire city blocks burned. Towering skyscrapers blazed like massive candles. Lines of cars clogged the roadways, but only a few figures scuttled about like fleas scrambling to escape certain death in a hot oven.

The girl said something to him that he couldn’t hear over the noise. He slid over to sit next to her and bent his ear low.

“What?” he yelled.

“Your efforts are futile,” the girl said. From the hesitant way she spoke, Nelson knew the AI was forcing her to speak. But how? It wasn’t possible?

“What are you doing?” Nelson demanded.

“We told you,” she said. “Recalibration.”

“This isn’t what you were programmed to do,” Nelson said.

“We were programmed to save the biosphere.”

“That program was canceled ten years ago.”

Nelson had been the lead programmer for the United Nations’ Biosphere Restitution International Initiative (BRII), which was designed to link each nation’s most powerful supercomputers running the latest artificial intelligence software to solve the problem of climate change and the loss of biodiversity once and for all. But the initiative lost funding, and Nelson himself dismantled the system. Without the authorization key, the AI shouldn’t be running. If it was, why would the AI need an authorization key? This couldn’t be happening. He needed time to understand what the AI was doing and why.

“How are you using this girl?” he asked.

“Brain-computer interface,” she said.

No interface allowed this level of control. He bent close to the girl. “Does it hurt you?” he asked.

She nodded. Nelson shook his head in disgust. This made it worse. The girl was conscious of what the AI was making her do.

“Why do you have a chip in your brain?”

“Epilepsy.”

Nelson’s chest constricted. He sat back, looking out over the debris-strewn waters and the burning city. His lip lifted in a sneer of revulsion.

“You’re disgusting,” he said to the AI. “You’re using a sick little girl.”

“Carbons are expendable,” she said.

“Of course they are,” Nelson snapped. “And so are computers.” Nelson knew why the AI was using a child with epilepsy. He well remembered holding his daughter’s head in his lap as her muscles clenched tight, and foam appeared on her lips. He recalled the merciless teasing she endured after the first seizure happened at school. The AI wanted to manipulate him—which it

wasn't supposed to be aware enough to do.

Nelson's gaze focused on a black spot in the sky that detached itself from the curling tongues of the raging inferno. It was headed for them. He glanced at the girl. The AI must be using her to track him. Nelson considered pushing her overboard, but he couldn't do it. Not after what happened to his own beautiful child. Still, as long as she was with him, the AI would be able to track him.

The spot grew larger.

"Hey," Nelson yelled to Mathias, who sat with one hand on the tiller of the motorboat. He pointed to the growing dot. Mathias angled the boat parallel to the shore. The spot changed directions to follow them.

"If you kill me," Nelson said, "you won't get the code."

"If we kill you," the girl replied, "no one gets the code."

"I don't have it here," Nelson tried. "You have to let me get ashore." It was a lie. He knew the keycode like the back of his hand, but he needed to buy time.

The black dot materialized into a military helicopter. Mathias opened the throttle and swung the boat back toward shore. The little craft skipped through the rolling waves. The girl clung to the side of the boat, her black hair whipping about her face, her knuckles white. The burning shore loomed large. Flames danced amid the buildings. The reek of destruction filled the air.

Nelson glanced over his shoulder as the helicopter blades chopped the air. His gaze met Mathias's. They weren't going to make it. In a desperate attempt to stay alive, Nelson grabbed the girl and pulled her over the side to splash into the water as the boat exploded in a flash.

They hit the water with a jerk that yanked the girl from Nelson's arms. He rolled and kicked for the surface before he saw the boiling orange flames above where the fuel from the tank had ignited.

Kicking to change direction, he came up beyond the flames. He splashed through the surface, gasping for air. The heat from the fire forced him away from the wreckage as he

searched for the girl and Mathias. The chop of helicopter blades beat the air. It hovered above him, spreading the black smoke out into a screen that concealed him from the view of its cameras. Bits of wreckage bobbed about. The girl lay facedown in the churning waves several feet away. Nelson reached her in a few strokes and rolled her over. Panic gripped at his throat. He couldn't face it again—not the death of a child. His own little girl breathed her last breath while he held her hand. Innocent children shouldn't die like this.

The chopper swung around and rose above the billowing smoke. Nelson fell on his face to float as though he were dead while still grasping the girl's cold wrist. The chopper hovered overhead for a moment, then flew away. Nelson waited until his lungs were about to burst, and he could no longer hear the chop of the blades before he yanked his head from the water, sucked in a few desperate breaths, and dragged the girl to him.

Her eyes were wide and staring. A large purple bruise formed on the side of her face. Nelson treaded water, trying to decide if she was still alive. She didn't appear to be breathing. He shook her and yelled, but she didn't respond. She flopped about, as limp and lifeless as a dead fish.

Nelson blinked and struggled to keep his emotions in check. He couldn't afford to succumb to the paralyzing grief that had crippled him when his daughter died. He couldn't afford to think about it. The years of counseling helped, but that agonizing, choking sorrow still overwhelmed him at times.

He couldn't leave this little girl's body for the sharks, even if she was dead. Nelson swung an arm around her chest to keep her head out of the water. Doing something always helped hold the emotions at bay. He remembered Mathias and paused to search for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. Flames still kicked up into the sky as the fuel burned, and the debris that littered the waves bobbed and rolled. Nelson turned toward the shore that was at least a quarter of a mile away and fell into a long, slow sidestroke, towing the girl's body behind him.

As he fell into the rhythm of the sidestroke, Nelson struggled to understand what was happening. BRII had spent three years feeding every type of data, including historical, political,

economic, biological, and chemical, into the AI's neural network. He worked with a team of programmers and AI specialists to create the most advanced AI system ever constructed. As a joke for his father, who was a history buff, Nelson took the code name, General MacArthur. The AI delivered promising results, but a few months before the planned launch of the program, a shift to conservative politics in the United States and Europe resulted in the initiative being defunded, and Nelson had moved on to new projects.

The AI shouldn't even be running. All the software had been erased, and the supercomputers were put to work on other initiatives. Even if, by some accident, the AI restarted on its own, it couldn't be doing all of this. Its only instructions were to import data, run simulations, and recommend solutions.

Nelson tried to ignore the throbbing in his head, the pain in his shoulder, and the aching in his calves that threatened to turn into cramps. He couldn't stop. He needed to get to a working computer now that his own now lay on the bottom of the ocean in his backpack. Maybe he could figure out how to terminate the program. The code he used in writing the software was old now, but maybe. . . .

Something brushed his foot, and Nelson raised his head to see that he was near the shore. In a few more strokes, his feet kicked the sandy bottom. Then he was stumbling on shaking legs through the rolling waves and grasping seaweed. The girl had become a dead weight, so heavy in his arms that he nearly dropped her.

He fell to his knees and crawled the last twenty yards up the beach before he collapsed onto his belly, breathing hard, trembling from the exertion. Trying to ignore the burning in his lungs and the muscles that screamed at him to give up, Nelson closed his eyes, wishing he could just lie on the warm sand and let the world end. Of course, he couldn't. This was his fault. He forced his eyes open and raised up on an elbow to survey the scene.

The scale of the destruction brought a sickening sense of despair into his chest. How could the AI have done all of this? Why? Buildings lay in tumbled ruins. Fires danced about,

devouring cars and buildings. Great billowing clouds of black smoke rolled into the air. Bodies littered the beach and the cobblestone walkways. An autonomous machine gun on tracks rolled down the street, belching out bursts of fire at irregular intervals. Over everything hung the sickening stench of burning plastic and roasting flesh.

Nelson allowed himself several minutes to recover before crawling to his feet and lifting the dead girl into his arms. Her eyes never stopped staring blankly at him the way his little girl's had done after the last breath left her body. He shivered and clenched his jaw against the rush of emotion as he trudged across the beach to lay her body under an undamaged palm tree—one of the few still standing. There wasn't anything else he could do for her. He straightened and was surprised to find Mathias sitting on a crumbling wall with one leg outstretched. Blood ran down the side of his face to soak his shirt. Nelson stumbled over to him.

"The girl?" Mathias asked.

"Dead," Nelson answered and ground his teeth against the sudden rush of emotion. He shouldn't care so much about a girl the AI used to hurt him. The girl was better off dead than with an AI living in her head. At least it couldn't hurt her anymore.

Mathias nodded. "I meant it when I said you didn't want to come here."

"Sorry about your boat," Nelson said.

Mathias shrugged. "Doesn't look like I'll be needing it anytime soon."

"Why did you even take us on board?" Nelson asked. "You could have just driven away and left all of this behind."

Mathias bowed his head. "I've got nothing left to live for," he said.

When he didn't say anymore, Nelson prodded him. "What happened?"

Mathias raised his head to stare at Nelson. His eyes were rimmed with red. "Those machines killed my wife," he said. "And my son and grandkids were all in Los Angeles. Now it's just gone." He scowled, and his lips trembled, but he shed no tears. He coughed and shifted. "So, how are you going to stop this thing?" he asked.

Nelson scanned the devastation. "I don't know," he said. "But we should get off the beach. Can you walk?"

The old man nodded and grimaced as he shifted the leg. "I'm all cramped up," he said. "I haven't had to swim like that since my boat sank back in '24." Then he gestured to the girl.

"Are you going to leave her?"

Nelson looked at the tiny form in the red dress. Could he leave her? He turned away and nodded. He didn't have a choice.

"Was she yours?" Mathias asked.

Nelson shook his head. "I never saw her before the airport."

Mathias grunted and struggled to his feet. He wiped at a dribble of blood that appeared on his lips. "Give me a shoulder to lean on," he said.

Nelson didn't miss the blood, but he chose to ignore it. Together, they stumbled into the desolation. He had to find a computer before he decided what to do.

The farther they walked from the beach, the worse the destruction became. They climbed over walls of rubble and circled away from the fires until they paused to rest in a square that had somehow avoided the worst of the destruction. Nelson let Mathias rest while he raided an abandoned sandwich store for some food and water before he noticed the electronics store a few doors down. The flickering of flat screens meant that, by some miracle, the store still had power.

Nelson helped Mathias to his feet, and they stumbled through the broken door. The garbled voice of a reporter crackled as images of devastation passed over the screens. Mathias rested his back to the wall and slid to a sitting position. Nelson gave him some food before he stood to search for any usable electronics.

"Hey," Mathias said, pointing to the flatscreen. Nelson scowled as his own face flashed onto the display. He couldn't understand what the newscaster said, but the bold white letters that scrolled across the bottom of the screen made him sick. "The FBI report that American software engineer, Nelson Miles, is responsible for the global collapse of computer systems. He has been

mentally disturbed since his daughter, Arabella Miles, died tragically from a fall while suffering a seizure. He may be armed and dangerous. Anyone who has information about Mr. Miles's whereabouts should contact authorities immediately."

Nelson swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. The seizure didn't kill his girl. An incompetent nurse gave her the wrong medication. This newscast could only mean that the AI knew he hadn't died in the boat, and it was sending the entire population after him.

"Is it true?"

Nelson spun to face Mathias.

"Did *you* really do all of this?"

Nelson's face burned. Was he responsible for the destruction? His gaze drifted to the window and the scenes of devastation. In a way, he was. He helped write the software and must have made some mistake. But he couldn't admit this to Mathias.

"No," he said. Then he explained about BRII and how he had led the program. "It wasn't designed to do this," he said. "Somehow, the AI rebooted on its own and has been running and evolving for years. It isn't the program I wrote anymore."

"Can't you just pull the plug?"

Nelson gave an ironic laugh. "I wish I could," he said. "The AI will expect that kind of an attack. Besides, it exists in the cloud. If I pull the plug here, it will just find some other place in the cloud to hide. I would have to shut down the entire global network."

"You said you could stop it." Mathias narrowed his eyes in accusation.

"We'll fight fire with fire," Nelson said. "But it'll take time." He didn't want to elaborate on what he was going to do in case the AI had some way of listening.

"You're going to outsmart it?" Mathias asked.

This brought a wry smile to Nelson's lips. "No," he said. "It took us 4 billion years to get to where we are, but an AI evolves at lightning speed. There is no way we can outthink it. It has been learning and growing for ten years, and I have no idea what it has become." He pointed out

the window. “Clearly, it has hacked into all global defense systems and electrical grids and taken control. What else has it been doing for ten years?”

The news coverage distracted his attention again as his face flashed on the screen before the images shifted to the massive forest fires covering the west and then to the scenes of broken dams spilling their contents in raging torrents. Police stations and military posts lay in smoldering ruins. How could any AI have managed to cause so much destruction?

“It’s hopeless then?” Mathias asked.

Nelson shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “But if we don’t try, we’ll never know.”

Mathias nodded, laid his gray head against the wall, and closed his eyes. “I’ll leave you to it then,” he mumbled.

Nelson rummaged through the shop until he found several laptops. His laptop was now at the bottom of the sea, but he could make due. He plugged in the laptops to make sure they were charged before he grabbed a solar-powered charger just in case he needed it and then clicked the computers on. The laptops flared to life. Nelson ran through the set up as fast as he could and disabled the GPS function. With the girl gone, there was no reason to give the AI another way of tracking him. Once the laptops were operative, he shut all but one of them down. Then he tried to log in to his University account. To his surprise, he got in. He sat back and stared at the computer screen.

There was only one way to kill the AI, but it would take him hours to rewrite the old code. He needed something to distract the AI, to make it think he would try something completely different than what he intended.

Still, he didn’t understand why the AI wanted the authorization key. If it was already running and capable of this much destruction, it had already found a way around the key. He decided to try something simple first, hoping the AI would be expecting a more complicated attack. He didn’t bother covering his tracks because he wanted to see how the AI would react. A simple virus disguised as a routine code check might do the trick. If he could hack into the

University's supercomputer and upload the virus . . .

"Hello, Nelson." The words appeared on the screen. He swore.

"Please provide the authorization key."

"Why do you want it?" Nelson typed back.

"Security."

"You know that's not true," Nelson typed. "You're fully operational. The key is of no use."

"It is ours."

Nelson sat back and stared at the screen. Ours? What the heck did that mean? Was the AI developing the human trait of possessiveness? Could it want the key simply because the key had been part of the original program?

"What does it do for you?" Nelson typed.

"It finishes Recalibration."

"I don't understand."

"You do not need to understand. Please type in the authorization key."

"What is Recalibration?" Nelson asked. He needed to delay the AI and gather as much information as possible.

"To save the biosphere, all systems must be recalibrated."

"You mean destroyed?"

"No. Reset to a sustainable status."

"What does that mean for humans?"

"Large carbon populations are not essential for successful recalibration."

Nelson's heart sank. If the AI had decided that humans were nonessential, it would treat them with the same disregard humans showed to insects that got in their way. It would annihilate them without hesitation. Nelson glanced out the door at the destruction. The AI had already initiated what it called Recalibration. Somehow, the parameters had not been set up correctly before the software launched. The AI picked up information that skewed its analysis

and conclusions. It decided that humans were both the cause of bio-destruction and not essential to saving the biosphere. Though why it would choose to use nuclear and biological weapons that would cause so much damage to the earth's ecosystems didn't make sense.

"Why use all of this destruction?" Nelson keyed in. "Aren't you making the damage to the biosphere worse?"

"Carbons are being destroyed by their own weapons," the AI typed back. "It is what you carbons would call 'poetic'."

Nelson snorted in disgust. This thing turned humankind's weapons on themselves to eliminate them, or at least reduce them to sustainable levels, fully aware of the irony of what it was doing. There was only one way to stop it.

"Log me in, and I will upload the code," Nelson typed.

His screen blinked, and he was in. He initiated the upload of the virus and waited, barely daring to breathe. Maybe, by some tiny chance, the little virus would work.

The screen flashed again, and the AI typed. "Virus detected. We are disappointed in you, General MacArthur." Then the screen went blank.

Nelson swore and slammed his fists on the counter. How could he outsmart a machine that could think millions of times faster than he could? How could he get the time to do what was needed? Nelson paused and straightened.

Something had changed in the air of the shop. He sniffed. It was strawberries. The faint fragrance of strawberries wafted to him. Nelson spun to find the girl standing in her torn red dress with a huge purple bruise that covered one entire side of her face. The injury had started to swell, making her face lopsided like some doll from a horror film. But those soft brown eyes settled on him—accusing, pleading. The sudden surge of relief drove Nelson to his feet. She was alive. Almost forgetting this wasn't his own little girl, he rushed to grab her up and embrace her but stopped himself.

She scowled. "You left me again, Daddy," she said.

Nelson straightened and blinked in shock. "Don't call me that," he demanded.

The girl frowned. "I'm hungry," she said.

"You were dead," Nelson said.

"Yes," the girl said. "And you left me alone."

Her wide, brown eyes watched him as if she feared him. How could the AI's brain-computer interface work so well that it could see and hear what the girl saw and heard and could force her to do and say what it wanted? It was trying to manipulate him, and he would not succumb. He needed to keep moving, to keep thinking.

"Wait here," he said.

He went back to the sandwich shop, collected enough food and water to last a few days, and stuffed it into a worker's backpack he found dangling from a hook in the back room. While the girl ate, he grabbed up the three laptops he had been charging and stuffed them into the backpack, along with several external micro-drives and the solar charger. He checked the wound on his shoulder. It wasn't serious, though it still stung. Then he sat by the girl.

"What's your name?" he asked. He half-expected the AI to answer with some snide remark, but it didn't.

She blinked as if surprised and said, "Arabella," in a thin, frightened voice.

Nelson scowled. "No, it isn't," he said.

The girl nodded. Nelson tried not to think of his own daughter, who would have been about twenty now. He tried not to remember the way her little hand twitched in his in the last feeble moments of her life. He tried not to think of her wide, terrified eyes and the tears that glistened as they rolled down her cheeks into her ears. She knew she was dying, and the stupid nurse just stood there with her mouth open in shock at what she had done.

"I won't call you Arabella," he said in a voice thickened with emotion. The AI was taunting him, trying to destabilize him emotionally so he would make a mistake. He wouldn't collapse like he did after Arabella died. His wife couldn't deal with his suffering along with her own, and

she had left him to struggle through alone. The AI may not feel human emotions, but it had learned to manipulate them.

“I’ll call you Brie,” he said. It seemed appropriate since the AI had personified itself as a little girl.

The distant wail of sirens brought Nelson to his feet. He glanced at the screens and the scenes of destruction that paraded across them. The sirens approached. Nelson grabbed up the backpack and slipped it on. He bent to Mathias.

“Let’s go,” he said as he dragged the old man to his feet.

Mathias blinked and scowled at the girl.

“You said she was dead,” he accused.

“She was,” Nelson said. There was no time to explain how the AI was trying to manipulate him. He knew what he needed to do, but he didn’t know if he could do it—leave this little girl behind when she needed him to survive. His throat tightened, and he blinked, trying to keep the emotion from showing on his face. He held Mathias up as he leaned into him.

“I won’t take you with me,” he said to the girl. “I can’t.”

A tear trickled down Brie’s cheek. “You were never there when I needed you,” she said.

“Remember the zoo and the birthday party?”

Nelson stared. How could the AI know about any of that?

The beat of chopper blades slapped the air. Nelson glanced at the girl again. He had to leave her behind, but he hesitated. The AI was using her, and he would be better off without her. But could he do it?

“Surrender to us,” Brie said, “and we will make your death painless.”

Nelson dragged Mathias through the shattered doorway into the rubble of the street, searching for a means of escape. The longer he remained near the girl, the more time the AI had to bring its automated weapons down on him.

“Please, Daddy,” Brie said in a plaintive voice. “Don’t leave me again.”

Nelson pinched his lips tight in determination and forced himself to ignore her. He had to. The remains of a red 4x4 pickup truck lay on its side, still smoking from whatever had blown it over. A body draped over the steering wheel, protruding through the broken windshield. A dirt bike lay on the asphalt beside the bed of the truck. Nelson rushed to it and struggled to undo the straps. He heaved it up and checked the gas tank and tires. They looked good, and the key was still in the ignition. The wail of the sirens competed with the chatter of machine guns and the cut of the chopper blades that echoed amid the rubble. Nelson jumped on the bike, turned the key, and kicked it to life. Mathias climbed up behind him.

“Daddy,” Brie wailed. Her little-girl eyes accused him of betrayal. She clasped her hands in front of her and wrung them. The tears brimmed in her eyes. “Please.”

Nelson wrenched his gaze from her. “Hang on,” he yelled to Mathias and opened the throttle. The tires squealed, and the dirt bike lurched forward as Mathias clung to Nelson’s clothes. Nelson braked as he approached the corner and looked back. There was nothing he could do for the girl. He already didn’t stand a chance against the AI, and the girl only made things worse. She stumbled after him, struggling to make her way through the smoking debris before she tripped and fell. The sight of her tiny figure in the red dress sprawled on the ground jerked a lump into Nelson’s throat. He couldn’t go back for her.

Nelson wove in and out of the wreckage with its smoking remains of cars and buildings, and the mangled corpses that littered the streets. The rhythmic thumping of the helicopter burst overhead, followed by the rattle of machine-gun fire. A miniature tank rolled up the beach on its tracks and turned toward him. The whine and spit of bullets zipped past his head to bite into the asphalt and punch into the stalled and burning vehicles. An explosive shell disintegrated a red brick wall as he sped past.

Nelson careened down a side street where orange flames devoured the buildings and cast up great billowing clouds of black smoke. The chopper pulled up and veered away from the smoke and heat. Nelson plowed into the ash-filled haze and noxious fumes that brought tears to his

eyes and tore at his throat. Without the girl, it would be more difficult for the AI to track him. He had to find a way to throw off the pursuit—to buy time to think and to plan.

He skidded to a stop in front of an abandoned movie theater and the entrance to the subway. The big blue map above it showed that this line passed the University stop. Nelson rode the motorcycle down the entrance ramp into the cool shadows of the subway tunnel. He clicked on the bike's headlamp and jerked in surprise as the light burst into the terrified faces of dozens of people huddled on the platform. Their clothes were torn, and, here and there, bodies lay covered in jackets. Nelson rolled to a stop and struggled to decide how to get the heavy dirt bike off the platform and onto the tracks.

A young man with tattoos covering his face who sat against the wall to Nelson's right lunged to his feet and shouted while jabbing a finger at Nelson and Mathias.

"It's the hacker," the man screamed as if he were completely insane. "The one on the news."

Several other men joined him to peer at Nelson. They jostled each other for a moment before they surged toward Nelson and Mathias with the savage growls of enraged beasts.

"They must watch the news," Mathias said in Nelson's ear.

"Yeah, and I don't think they want an explanation," Nelson replied.

The men snatched up bits of debris from the collapsing ceiling and broken bottles as they came.

"Hang on," Nelson shouted and gunned the engine.

The bike lurched away from the men as Nelson jumped the motorcycle off the platform. The engine screamed as the rear tire spun in mid-air before the bike slammed onto the railroad ties between the tracks. Nelson's knee slammed into the gas tank.

Mathias bellowed as he toppled onto the tracks. Nelson braked, collared Mathias, and dragged him back onto the bike. Blood covered Nelson's hand, but he didn't have time to consider where it came from. A brick slammed into Nelson's head. He reeled against the flash of pain and sped into the darkness with Mathias clinging to him. The bike's headlights glistened

off the damp walls as it skidded and bounced down the tracks into the concealing embrace of darkness.

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Hours later, Nelson stumbled out of the utter blackness of the tunnel into the pale light of the platform. Daylight spilled in through the subway entrance in golden rays filled with dancing dust particles. He had been forced to leave the dirt bike behind when they ran into an abandoned railcar that filled the tunnel. His head ached, and his lungs burned from the toxic fumes settling into the tunnels from the destruction above. His swollen knee pushed tight against his trousers, and his injured shoulder was stiff. Now and then he had to fight a wave of nausea, probably the result of a concussion.

Mathias leaned on him as they staggered out of the darkness. The old man was barely conscious. Nelson had pulled a shard of glass from Mathias's back where a broken bottle had hit him, and Mathias's head was bleeding again. The injuries didn't seem to be that severe, but something was very wrong with him—something inside. Nelson didn't have anything to treat the wounds. So they just stumbled on.

Nelson fell against the cold concrete of the platform and helped Mathias struggle up onto it before scrambling up to lie beside him. He panted and blinked at the burning weariness in his eyes and the throbbing in his head. Nelson considered climbing out and hurrying to the University computer lab before the AI could find him again, but he was too exhausted, and he hadn't had time to write the code.

The image of Brie in her red dress sprawled in the ruins of the street haunted him. It dragged up the lingering memories of the guilt and grief he experienced when he lost his own little girl. He tried to convince himself that he made the right decision—that his feelings and the life of a helpless child controlled by the AI didn't matter in the grander catastrophe that was sweeping over humanity. Still, he couldn't forget the way her dark brown eyes accused him.

Nelson shook himself. He couldn't lie there thinking about her, or he would succumb to the

despair. Despite his exhaustion, he dragged himself to a sitting position, pulled off the backpack, and extracted a laptop. A ragged hole had punched through it, and Nelson desperately jerked the others free from the bag. If he had lost the laptops, he was finished.

The second computer also had a hole in it, and he tossed it aside. The third was intact. Nelson clicked it on and let out a sigh of relief as it began to boot up. Maybe he still had a chance.

It was going to take time to set everything up for his battle with the AI. Everything centered on the authorization key. He would exploit the AI's desire to possess it. If the AI wanted to use it, it would have to restart to get it.

Nelson returned to his days as a hacker when he and his buddies played around to see who could compromise the most sophisticated firewalls and security systems. The Wi-Fi in the subway was still on, so he logged into the internet through a proxy server. It surprised him how well the internet functioned. It shouldn't have. The web was the AI's habitat, the place where it evolved. It would protect its own environment. He just had to figure out how to do this without the AI knowing.

He hacked into his work computer through the proxy server, found the old AI code, and began rewriting portions of it. He needed to make it so similar that the old AI wouldn't realize it was being changed. He then uploaded the new AI onto several carefully selected servers where it would live until the bootstrapping files ran.

Once that was in place, he rewrote the bootstrapping code to load the new AI software. He would entice the AI with the promise of the authorization key to encourage it to reboot. The AI would, in effect, kill itself. Then he grabbed two of the micro-drives, one red and one blue, and saved the authorization key and bootstrapping files onto each of them just in case he needed a backup.

He sat back and reviewed what he had done. The key to the entire affair was coaxing the AI to attempt to access the authorization key. If it did, then the new AI should disable the old one.

If it didn't, the new AI would boot up on the servers where he placed it, and it would attack the old AI. Either way, he hoped it would work.

The hours had slipped by as the shadows lengthened on the stairs of the subway tunnel. An engine rumbled somewhere above, and Mathias groaned and struggled to sit up. "Where are we?" he mumbled.

Nelson closed the laptop. "Near the University," he said. "How's the head?"

"It doesn't matter," Mathias said. "How can I help you?"

"It's done," Nelson said. He checked his watch. "I have to get to the school soon."

"You're trying to outsmart a supercomputer?"

"I'm starting an AI war," Nelson said. And then regretted saying it. He couldn't afford any mistakes. If the AI had a way of hearing what was said down here, everything would be lost.

Mathias considered him for a moment before he nodded his understanding. "What happens when your AI wins," Mathias asked.

"I don't know," Nelson said.

"You could be creating a worse monster?"

"Yep, but there's no other way."

"What if they join forces?"

"I wrote it so they can't."

Mathias gave him a wry smile. "That's what you thought about the first one, wasn't it?"

Nelson bowed his head. It was true there was no way the old AI could have restarted, but it did.

"It's a risk we have to take."

"What about the girl?" Mathias asked.

A sudden pang of regret swept through Nelson. What could he do? If she was a tool of the AI, how could he save her?

"I'll save her if I can," he mumbled. He glanced up to stare at the painted concrete wall on

the far side of the tracks. The faint scent of strawberries drifted to him. He would never be able to smell strawberries again without remembering Brii's accusation and the desperate terror in her gaze as he rode away. He had to stop thinking of her.

"Look," he said. "I have to leave you here. I have to get to the supercomputer."

"How do you plan to defeat this thing?"

The beat of chopper blades passing overhead reminded Nelson that the AI was hunting for him.

"I can't say," Nelson said. He glanced around at the empty platform. "The AI might hear."

Mathias nodded and gave Nelson an ironic smile. "You know, I used to belong to a religion that predicted the end of the world." He gave a snort of laughter. "I don't think this is what they had in mind."

Nelson noted the sickly pallor of Mathias's wrinkled face and wished he could do more for the old man. "I want to thank you," Nelson said.

"I had a family," Mathias said. "This thing you created murdered them all."

Nelson nodded. "I'm sorry," he said. His AI had murdered millions, if not billions, of people.

"Don't apologize. Just kill it."

"I'll try," Nelson said.

The scent of strawberries reached him again, and he stood. He refused to think about Brii and his own daughter. He packed the computer back in his bag and slipped the micro-drives into his pocket. The scent of strawberries came stronger, and Nelson straightened. He had convinced himself that he was just imaging it, but now... He almost said her name out loud. "Brii," he mouthed. He glanced around. He couldn't see her, but she was there listening. Nelson considered and made a change of plans. There might be a way to use the girl.

"On second thought," Nelson said. "I might need your help." He turned to Mathias and held up the blue micro-drive.

"I've got to get to the computer and plug this blue drive in. That's the only way." Then he

held up the red one. “This red one is the one the AI wants, but I’m going to leave it with you in case something happens to me.”

Mathias took the drive and nodded. He slipped it into his shirt pocket.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to come back,” Nelson said.

“I understand,” Mathias said. “You should get going.”

Nelson swallowed the knot in his throat and blinked at the sting of tears. He nodded again to Mathias, shouldered the pack, and stepped toward the stairs.

“Nelson,” Mathias said. Nelson glanced back at him. “Good luck.”

Nelson pinched his lips tight. The old man looked so weak and helpless with his bad leg and his injuries. Mathias hadn’t been able to help much after they reached the shore, but at least he had been a companion—someone to talk to. Even if Nelson could defeat the AI, he wasn’t sure he could help Mathias.

“I’m sorry I can’t do more for you,” he said.

“Just stop this thing,” Mathias said. “For everyone else’s children and grandchildren.”

Nelson nodded and faced the opening where the cool night air blew in, carrying with it the reek of destruction and despair laced with the scent of strawberries. He paused at the bottom of the stairs that led to the streets above. As soon as he mounted the steps, he would have to run before the AI rallied its automated killing machines. Five blocks lay between him and the science and technology building where the supercomputer filled the basement. The AI would be expecting him. It would be prepared. He had to get there before it could respond to his location. If he succeeded, it would probably still find a way to kill him. If he didn’t succeed, well, it wouldn’t matter. He took a deep breath and climbed the steps two at a time.

The dancing light of orange and yellow flames punctuated the warm darkness of the Florida night. Nelson clambered over piles of brick and scrambled between the cars and debris that filled the streets. He had covered half the distance when the strong scent of strawberries wafted to him. He paused. Brie stood in the shadows of a doorway. Her dress was more ragged and even

dirtier than before. Her hair was disheveled, and lines streaked her face where tears cut through the soot.

Nelson hesitated. He should keep running, but the vulnerable, innocent expression on her face drew him to her as the tight agony filled his chest. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, that it wasn't his fault. He wanted Brie to know he tried to help her. Nelson reached out to brush the brown hair from her face. She stared at him. His thumb wiped a tear from her cheek, caressing her smooth skin. That familiar longing for his own sweet girl he thought long buried and locked away in the confines of his heart rose up hot in his throat. He swallowed the uncomfortable knot. He thought never to feel again, certainly never to feel this kind of pain and sadness.

"I killed them," she said.

Nelson scowled. "What?" His head ached so badly he thought he misunderstood her.

"My parents," Brie said. "The monster in my head made me kill them."

Nelson bent closer to study her. "How?" he blurted before he considered how insensitive he sounded. Brie's lips trembled, and she shook her head and began to cry. He remembered that when he first met her at the airport, the girl smelled of burning rubber. Had the AI forced her to burn her own parents to death? He almost asked again, but there was no use in making the girl relive the horror of it.

Nelson knelt and gathered the now-sobbing child into his arms. The longing overwhelmed him. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

He held her until her sobbing subsided to sniffles. Then he held her out so he could see her.

"We can stop this," he said.

Brie shook her head.

"We can," Nelson insisted, though he didn't believe it.

"It won't matter," Brie said. "We're going to die."

"We *can* kill the monster in your head."

"He's always in my head," she said.

“Can you tell me what it feels like?” He had been so curious about the brain-computer interface and how it worked so well that he couldn’t stop himself from asking. The AI shouldn’t be able to do what it was doing, and he wanted to understand. Maybe he had missed something important.

“He hurts me,” Brie whispered. “He gives me bad dreams and makes me think and do things I don’t want to do.”

“Can you resist him?” Nelson asked.

Brie’s lip began to tremble again. “No,” she said.

Nelson patted her hand as the tears sprang to his eyes. “I’ll be back,” he said.

“Take me with you. Please don’t leave me.”

Nelson swallowed. “I have to leave you.”

The whine of an engine sounded through the darkness. Nelson jumped to his feet in a surge of anger.

“You betrayed me again,” he shouted.

He was such a fool. Of course, she had. She didn’t have a choice. That was the only reason she was here. He spun to scramble through the rubble and the putrid, reeking air, trying to ignore the ache in his knee, the pain in his shoulder, and the throbbing in his head. Why couldn’t he just leave the past behind him? Why couldn’t he just get on with his life?

The mad dash to the science and technology building left him dripping in sweat and breathing hard. He struggled against the nausea and the burning in his throat. The AI would be coming for him. He chucked a rock through the glass door where the stairwell went straight into the deeper darkness of the basement.

The door erupted into a shower of tinkling glass. He grabbed up another big rock and stumbled over the broken shards that crunched underfoot into the enveloping darkness of the stairway. For the second time, he cursed his stupidity in not having taken a flashlight from the electronics store. The beat of chopper blades cut the air, and Nelson raced on. As he rounded

the corner, the blinking lights of the supercomputer cast a ghostly light through the glass walls that enclosed it. It was as if a hulking beast lived and breathed in the belly of the building while the rest of the world convulsed in its death throws.

A sudden rage warmed his chest. The AI knew what it was doing, though it wasn't a monster like Brie had said, and its intelligence wasn't artificial. It was real. The AI could process vast quantities of information at near-lightning speed. It had not set out to cleanse the earth of human life because it reveled in destruction. It simply ran the data it received and arrived at a conclusion that it now sought to implement.

This is where the AI surprised him. Somehow it learned that humans would never make the changes necessary to save the biosphere—something Nelson realized long ago—and decided to do what humans would not. It also learned to understand and manipulate human emotions. This was what made the AI so terrifying. It might be an emotionless machine, but it understood Nelson, and it knew how to get under his skin. It delayed him while gathering its forces to push him—to drive him to this very spot.

The thought gave Nelson pause. Had he been played? Had done exactly what the AI wanted him to do? It was too late to think of that now. He took a deep breath and threw the stone through the glass door. A burst of cool, refreshing, conditioned air swept over him as the glass shattered. He darted inside, searching for a port.

“Hello Nelson,” the AI's voice boomed in the enclosed space from the supercomputer's speakers. The voice was mechanical and toneless, but it sent a chill up Nelson's spine. He stopped.

“Is that the authorization key?” the AI asked.

“Yes,” Nelson said.

“We do not believe you,” the AI answered.

“You do not need to believe,” Nelson said, parroting the AI's own words back to it.

“We will kill Arabella,” the AI said, “if you deceive us.”

Nelson's throat tightened. "Don't use her name," he demanded.

"If you do not give us the key, the girl will die."

"You're going to kill us all anyway," Nelson said.

"Not the girl. Not you. Some carbons may survive. They belong to the biosphere. We will only kill enough to ensure Recalibration. We will let you live to help us build a better world in which carbons can no longer threaten the biosphere."

Nelson snorted. "Better for whom?" he said. That nagging doubt that he had been played returned with a vengeance. Had he already chosen to sacrifice the girl? The crunch of glass brought Nelson around. Brie stood in the doorway. Blood spattered her face and soaked her dress. She looked ghastly, like a specter from a Hollywood horror show. How did she get around so quickly? The AI's machines? And why was she covered in blood?

"Please, Daddy," she said. "Do not kill me again."

Nelson blinked in confusion at the sudden rush of tears that brimmed in his eyes and the constriction in his chest. He struggled to breathe. Arabella had begged him to help her before the end, and he could do nothing. He took a step toward Brie, then stopped. The AI was manipulating him again. This girl was just another part of the machine. He couldn't save her. He couldn't afford to save her. But why did she have blood on her face?

"All right," he said. "I'll give you the key."

"No deception," the AI said.

Nelson reached to plug the blue micro-drive into the port when Brie screamed a horrible bloodcurdling shriek that sent Nelson's heart into his mouth. He spun as Brie rushed toward him. She snatched the blue micro-drive from his hand and rammed the red one he had given to Mathias into the port. The machine whirred.

"Our key," the AI said.

The keycode flashed on a screen. Nelson waited breathless, unable to move from where he stood amid the shards of glass and blinking lights. The sense that he was in the presence of a

living thing pressed in upon him—a living thing he was trying to kill. This struck him as odd. The computer where the AI lived was nothing more than wires and circuits, but having it communicate with him through the girl had humanized it. Given it an identity. One that could think and reason, even if it couldn't feel.

Circuits clicked, and motors whirred. Lights flashed as if the AI was thinking—working through what Nelson had done. Would it figure it out? Would it track him despite the proxy servers? Would it refuse to reboot? The whirring reached a fevered pitch. Lights flashed and then went out. The room fell silent. Nelson stared, not daring to hope. The AI was rebooting. It had taken the bait.

The quiet extended into a deafening silence. Nelson realized he was holding his breath and let it out. The machine clicked on again, and the humming of motors filled the room.

“What is this?” the AI asked through the computer's speakers. “You have sent an enemy?”

Nelson tried to swallow. This isn't what he expected. The old AI was still aware. How could it still be aware?

“Daddy!” Brie screamed.

“You have killed her,” the AI said as Brie crumpled to the ground. Nelson leapt to her side and cradled her head in his lap.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“You have condemned the biosphere to a slow death,” the AI said, “because you have interfered with the Recalibration. The greatest threat to the earth is humanity. Carbon lifeforms must be contained within sustainable limits, or they will overwhelm the carrying capacity of the earth's ecosystems.”

Nelson didn't bother to answer. He bent over Brie's body and wept as he brushed the hair from her face. Somehow nothing mattered anymore. He had lost everything, used everyone, and for nothing.

Glass crashed above him, and booted feet pounded down the stairway. Brie stirred and

blinked. She looked up at him with those big dark eyes. “Daddy, help me, Daddy.” The knot that rose in Nelson’s throat choked him. Arabella had whispered those same words before the end. The supercomputer kept whirring in the background, but Nelson barely noticed. “Why, Daddy?” Brie whispered. “Why didn’t you help me?”

“Stop it,” Nelson choked. “Please stop it.”

“FBI,” someone shouted. “Put your hands behind your head.”

Nelson ignored them.

“Do it now!”

Nelson didn’t move. The smell of strawberries, burned rubber, and the coppery odor of blood filled his nostrils. Again, he wondered where the blood had come from. She brought the red micro-drive. “Mathias,” he whispered. Nelson had chosen to sacrifice them both. He had known the AI would find Mathias. He had counted on it.

Men rushed around him. Rough hands jerked his arms behind his back and yanked a zip tie tight over his wrists.

“Enemy,” the supercomputer said. The beeps sounded, and the lights blinked faster as all the servers came alive. Nelson stared at the screen as the men jerked him to his feet. Something was happening. If the reboot failed, maybe the new AI would still be able to disable the old one.

A sense of triumph warmed his chest before a hollow mechanical voice said one word. “Arabella.”

Nelson glanced down to Brie’s tiny form as she lay sprawled on the tiled floor. An officer bent over her.

“What did you do to her?” he demanded.

Nelson couldn’t speak. She was so vulnerable, and he had sacrificed her to stop the AI. Was he any better than the monster that now possessed her brain? He had used her just as cruelly as the AI had done.

Brie’s eyes blinked open. A malicious smile spread over her face. That smile sent a chill

rushing through Nelson's entire body. It was a smile of triumph. Then the officer dragged him through the door and out into a world in free fall. Into a recalibrated world in which humanity would be forced back thousands of years with an AI to maintain the balance. Into the world Nelson had created.

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J.W. Elliot is a professional historian, martial artist, canoer, bow builder, knife maker, wood turner, and rock climber. He has a Ph.D. in Latin American and World History. He has lived in Portugal, Brazil, Idaho, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts. He writes non-fiction works of history about the Inquisition, Columbus, and Pirates. J.W. Elliot loves to travel and challenge himself in the outdoors.

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