

Datascape

The guard finally opened the gate for me. It had taken over five minutes of security checks just to get this far. How long, I wondered, would it take to get into the main building that I could just see hiding behind a line of trees.

"Follow the signs to the visitors car park. They'll be someone there to meet you". The guard said gruffly. I followed the road heading for the visitors car park.

As I rounded a bend I got my first good look at the Information Industries International building. The whole building was glazed with silvered glass, making it a huge mirror that shone brightly in the early afternoon sun. The whole building was held up, or so it seemed, by six yellow frame work columns that rose out of the ground at the corners of this hexagonal building.

It was the sort of building that Prince Charles wrote speeches about.

I pulled up in the visitors car park, it was large with spaces for thirty or forty cars. Standing in the middle of it was an other guard.

"You must be Dr. Marshal's visitor", the guard accosted me as I locked the car. I looked around the empty car park "Ah yes I must be mustn't I".

The guard smiled, she had a pleasant smile and an attractive face. My opinion of the security arrangements shot up. "You've got some real security here what have you got in there, the crown jewels?"

"Knowledge is power they say. And we have lots of knowledge in there, or so I'm told". As the guard approached the door to the building she produced a card and ran it though a reader by the door. The thick glass door slid open.

Once inside I was searched, first by metal detector and then by hand, then I signed in and was given a security pass and a quick lecture on were I was aloud and were I was not.

I had been to military installations with less security than this. It took a grand total of ten minutes from entering the building before I was cleared to continue.

The main entry foyer was huge but very light and airy. And it was filled with plants of all sorts, it was like a large green house. I said good bye to my escort, having totally failed in my attempts to get her phone number.

Standing by a large water fall in the centre of the room was a man smartly dressed in a shirt and tie. I looked at him, he looked vaguely familiar to me and he seemed to know me.

Good god it was Dr. Alan Marshal my old college friend and host for today's visit. "Alan good to see you again". We shook hands warmly. "Yes it's been a long time. 10 years I think. But to look at you, I'd think it was only ten days, you never seem to age". I laughed.

"Flattery will get you every where. You've changed a lot. I didn't recognize you out of jeans and those awful paisley shirts you use to were. You're looking almost respectable".

This was the first time I had ever seen him wearing a tie.

"Its quite a place you have here".

"Yes were doing quite well for our selves". He led me off down a corridor in to the building "And the security you have here is pretty intense".

"Yes well unfortunately our clients demand such security measures".

"The military you mean".

"I can't say".

"Then it must be military". We passed through another security check point before reaching the lab. Alan fished around in his pocket and pulled out a card, he went to insert it in to the reader on the door and then stopped.

"Before we go in it is important I explain some thing to you. The reason you are being aloud to see this is that our clients are shortly going to allow us to market some of the systems we have developed".

"You mean they've been declassified ?"

"Something like that. Anyway our new formed marketing department think it is a good idea to rase the profile of virtual reality systems just before the launch. So you and a few other journalists are being aloud to see a basic system so you can write some articles about them. But it is important that no names are mentioned or specific details are given. You can quote informed industry sources and say you've seen an experimental mock up. You know the sort of thing".

"You mean I'm going to become an official leak ?"

"Yes that's the idea".

The door open and we entered the lab. It was a large room filled with some of the very latest and fastest computing equipment available. A Cray 3 sat in one corner right next to a connections machine CM-4. There were a few other unidentified machines around the edge of the room and in the middle of all this, and linked to it, was a small grey cubical. "Wow!"

I exclaimed. "Doing well for you selves is an under statement".

"Oh this old thing".

Alan said in an off hand way. "This is nothing compared with our current state of the art system. But unfortunately this is all your aloud to see". Alan led me over to a control desk just in front of the grey cubical.

"This is the Datascape system". He announced "In that cubical we can create some of the most sophisticated virtual realities in the world".

I looked inside the cubical, there was some kind of harness hanging from the ceiling. And hanging from it was the familiar gloves and helmet that would let me interact with the virtual world in the computer.

"What's the harness for?" I asked.

"Well we have found to make a truly realistic virtual reality you must be able to walk around it. See the floor, its Teflon coated. Very slippery stuff that. The harness is adjusted to just support your weight so it stops you from falling over. You walk, or try to anyway, on the Teflon. Sensors underneath detect speed and direction and a viola you can walk in your virtual world".

"Very impressive". I said in a nonchalant way. "There is just one thing I have to ask".

"What's that?"

"When do I get to play with it !"

It took about twenty minutes of preparation to get me ready for entry to the Datascape system. First I had to change in to a jump suit, while this was being done I had various sensors attached to my body. Then I was weighed very accurately and finally attached to the harness in the cubical.

I put the gloves and helmet on.

I was now totally isolated from the outside world. It was a slightly unsettling experience hanging there, with my feet just touching the floor in total darkness. The only sound I could hear was my own breathing.

"Com's check". Doctor marshals disembodied voice said, off to my left and just behind me. I jumped at the sudden sound in my empty, silent world.

Instinctively I turned to face him, but of course I couldn't see anything. "Receiving me OK?" "Fine".

"Good. I'm just starting the program now". As he said this a vertical board faded in to view directly in front of me.

"Welcome to the I cubed Datascape TM system" it proclaimed. Beneath this message was a button marked "log on".

"Go on" Alan urged. "Press the button".

"OK". I went to press the button and then stopped, looking at my arm. It was a uniform dull grey colour and thick and muscular. I looked down at the rest of my body, it was similarly coloured and built.

The computer generated image of my arm moved in perfect sync with my movements and the movements were incredibly smooth.

"Very impressive isn't it?"

"Yes". I reached forward and pressed the button.

The board faded in to blackness, then from the blackness a landscape faded in to view. I was standing on a flat plane. On my left side there were some low hills and on my right the plane dropped slowly but to some kind of sea.

Directly in front of me, about one hundred meters distant was a what looked like a Greek temple.

"Wow". I said to my self.

"Try walking". Alan suggested. I did. It was a very strange sensation at first. I felt my feet slip on the low friction surface and instinctively reached forward to stop my self from slipping over, but my eyes told me that I was moving forward.

"It's a weird feeling".

"Yes but you'll soon get use to it". I continued walking slowly forward, I noticed that the 'ground' that I was walking on was covered with a regular, tessellating pattern, the I cubed logo.

With each step I found myself feeling more and more confident. I was walking faster too.

I could make out more detail of the structure ahead of me now. It was open at the back and front with fluted columns supporting the roof on both sides. In the middle was a sphere on a dais. The sphere had the I cubed logo on it.

"What's this then the company shrine?"

"Not quite this landscape was designed by one of the younger members of the team. He's in to these fantasy things".

"So what do you use this system for if it's not you're current state of the art?"

"This is used to test the basic world interface systems....".

"The what?" I interrupted. "Oh sorry, the routines that turn the raw data in to what you see, hear and feel. It's a relatively simple system and we've got all the bugs fixed so any bugs in the programs show up nicely".

I walked around the building looking at the details, the way the shadows deepened as I moved in the structure, the fine surface patterns on the marble, it was almost perfect. "How much computer power does it take to make this lot?" I asked.

"An awful lot."

Dr. Marshals disembodied voice still came from right behind me. "Running at the moment we have a Cray 3 handling the virtual object database. That's all the details of were you are in the virtual world, what you interacting with, what you can see etc. Then we have a very fast custom video processor array to generate all these amazing pictures, an other custom processor array for the sound. And a Vax 780/II controlling it all. About a hundred million pounds worth of computers".

While he was telling me this I was running my hand over one of the columns. I could feel the ridges on it.

"Peitzo transducers and air bags". Dr. Marshal answered my question before I could ask it.

"What can I say but very impressive. How..." I was about to ask how they planed to sell the system when I heard something. It was very quite and off to my left. I turned to face it, but could see nothing. "What's that sound ?" I asked.

"Oh no!" I heard Alan whisper.

"What is it ?"

"Er...look Harry I think it would be a good idea to log off now...". Alan's tone had changed completely, he now sounded tired and more than a little worried.

"Is there a problem Alan ?"

"Erm...no".

He hesitated. "To log off you lift your left arm and make the thumbs up sign and then select log off from the menu".

I wasn't really listening to him any more I was listening for the sound. It was still quite but it was getting louder. On the horizon I could see something moving, a dark silhouette against the azure sky. The sound was unlike any thing else I'd ever heard, it was like thousands of tiny snatches of sorts of different sounds being played at once.

It was getting louder all the time, the thing on the horizon was getting closer as well. The sound was coming from it. I stood there transfixed by the movement.

I could see what is was now. It was like some one had put a flawed lens over part of the landscape. Through it the image was twisted and distorted.

"...Log off now Harry". I heard Alan shouting at me thought the cacophony. How did I do that, I couldn't remember.

"How?" I shouted back. The thing was now a few meters away and it was still closing.

It was some kind of vortex.

Close up I could see unearthly shapes and forms within the twisting maelstrom.

"To log off..."

Suddenly a clear calm female voice cut through the wall of sound roaring in my ears. "Raise your left arm make the thumbs up sign and select log off from the menu...To log off". The voice continued.

I lifted my arm but my virtual arm was moving so slowly and jerkily. It stopped and dropped to my side. "You're out of sync. Try again but more slowly this time". The female voice said.

The din in my ears was now deafening. I lifted my left arm again this time my virtual arm moved too. Just before the menu came up I saw what looked like a face.

I only caught a quick glimpse of it before the menu came up in front of me. But it looked like it was leering at me from the centre of the vortex.

I stabbed at the log off button. But again I moved too quickly and my virtual arm dropped to its default position, by my side.

The menu began to twist as if it was being pulled in to the vortex.

It took all of my self control not to lash out at the log off button again. Ever so slowly I moved toward the button.

There was a blinding flash of light so bright that for a moment I was blinded.

Then I felt my finger hit the log off button and the noise faded.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded as I was helped out of the cabinet. Still dazzled by the flash of light I could only just see and my legs were shaking so much I couldn't stand.

I fell but I fell in to some one's firm grasp.

"I'm so sorry about this David. I was sure I had that bug nailed down this time". I was led away from the cabinet.

My eye sight slowly returning I could see Alan's concerned face.

"That's a bug!" I exclaimed. "But it attacked me". I was sat down by the console and given a strong cup of tea.

"Attacked? No no". Alan said calmly. "Yes attacked. That thing came straight for me. It wasn't random or erratic it came straight for me". I almost shouted back.

"It's a bug in the program, it has no intelligence. It's some problem with the interface software, caused by your interacting with the environment. Just relax for a moment".

I tried to but was still shaking. "But it came straight for me".

Alan sat down by me on the desk. "As I said it's a problem with interfacing two of the systems, the one that renders the image you see of the world and the one that actually creates the world. The problem is caused by you being in the system. So of course it's centered on you".

The lab door opened and three men in sombre grey suits walked through it.

"This is obviously a problem you've come across before". Dr. Marshal nodded. "Unfortunately yes several times before and because this system is so convincing it has caused some real problems".

"What sort of problems?" I asked.

"That information is secret". One of the men in suits cut Dr. Marshal off before he could answer. Alan turned around to face the man.

"May I have a word in private". The man asked him and they walked off to the corner of the lab.

"Who's he ?"

I asked the operator who was sitting next to me. "That's Mr Bradford. He is head of security for our clients". I recognized her voice, she was the one that I had heard over the noise while in the system.

Alan and Mr Bradford were having an animated conversation, with lots of pointing at me. "He's not very popular then".

"About as popular as a Rabbi at a PLO meeting". Alan having finished talking to Mr Bradford left the lab. Mr Bradford walked over to where I sat.

"Dr. Marshal apologizes but he has some urgent work to attend to, so this session must come to an end". He said in a hard cool voice. "Yes very well but there are still a few questions I'd like to ask him if I may".

"No you may not. Dr. Marshal has lots of problems to sort out and wants to get on to it right away." From his tone I could tell that was goodbye and good riddance.

Mr Bradford and the two others looked on while the operator helped me out of the gear. The operator said very little while during this. She didn't seem to be pleased about what was going on.

I was led out of the lab by Mr Bradford with his two men in escort.

"I think it would be better if you don't write any thing about our system till you have the whole story". Mr Bradford said to me on the way out.

"After all there are many other journalists who would kill to have a go on this system".

"I get the picture". After that he didn't say another word to me.

Once out of the main gate I let my anger out and swore at the whole damn world for letting this happen. I went for my car's accelerator, but then I stopped.

Some one was watching me, I caught a glimpse of him in my rear view mirror, but by the time I had stopped and turned around he had gone. In the quick look I'd had of him (and I was sure it was a him) I didn't have time to take in any detail but the one thing I could remember were his eyes, I felt them boring right through to my very soul.

I was in the Datascape system again. The I cubed triangle, tessellated on the ground, stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions. This time I had headed for the sea. It was rather further away than I had first thought, I had been 'walking' for about ten minutes, and I was still some distance away.

I made a mental note to suggest to Alan that he adjust the scale of this program a little. I could now see the shore where the I cubed logos gave way to the shiny silver sea. It stretched right out to the horizon, a huge, gently undulating sea of mercury.

The shore line was featureless and barren, just a few fractally generated rocks. The sound of the sea lapping on the shore was very calming, I felt that all was well in this world.

I sat down at the sea's edge. Then I heard something, "Oh no not again" I whispered to myself. Was I hearing things or was there something out there? Suddenly the sound of the sea was not so calming any more, it was irritating, blanking out any sound that might warn me of approaching danger.

There it was again, I wasn't hearing things. I looked around, I could see nothing different. Where was the sound coming from ?

"Go on". It was Alan "Press the button".

"Alan". I called. "Where are you?"

"...Virtual object database..." It was Dr. Marshal telling me about the Datascape system. "Datascape Datascape Datascape Datascape Data..."

His voice droned on like a record with its needle stuck.

The sound was coming from all around me. "Datascape Datascape Datascape".

"Stop it !" I screamed. "Datascape Datascape..."

It stopped. The silence was worse than the voice. It was coming to get me, the thing I saw before, it was coming to get me and this time there was nothing to stop it. I ran. Like a mad man I ran. I didn't know where it was but I knew it was coming for me.

Suddenly up ahead the ground bubbled up as a transparent amorphous blob oozed out of it. I stopped and watched in horrified interest as its outline changed in a vaguely human form. Its outline was basically human, but had bits sticking out where there shouldn't be. As it formed its skin became coloured an awful mottled gray, green.

"Stop it". It screamed at me in my voice. I turned back to the sea, but it was gone, replaced by a plane of tessellating logos.

I ran anyway. My feet were growing heavy. I looked down, I was running through the sea, it was up to my ankles.

I looked all around. The plane was flooded now none of the planes was visible at all. The thing was still closing on me laughing at me with my own voice. It was closing on me without moving at all, its hideous outline static.

The water was now up to my waist. I tried to run but could not, my legs would not move. The thing just watched doing nothing but laughing at me.

Its outline seemed even more mutated this time with more spikes and fins sticking out from it. I could hear its deep breaths as it stood there a meter away. The water was now by my neck. It stood there floating above the water looking down on me.

It offered me a hand and said. "To log off raise your left arm...". It was the voice of the operator I had spoken to. I grabbed for its hand but it was gone.

The water suddenly rushed over my head.

I screamed out and then opened my eyes. Before me I could see my alarm clock. It was 2:30 in the morning.

"Dam it! Twice in one week now". I got out of bed, I was soaked with perspiration. "Dam, dam, dam".

I looked in the bathroom at myself, what I saw was not good. My eyes looked sunken and were surrounded by dark rings, my face looked gray and gaunt. The light in the bathroom was not helping things either.

It had been five days since my visit to Information Industries International, and five days since I had a good night's sleep. I had a quick shower and went down to the kitchen, where I made myself a hot chocolate.

"Oh well I'm up now I might as well do some work". I said to myself. I sat down at my desk and switched my computer on, I had a review of a new word processor to finish.

As the machine booted, my personal assistant program ran and informed me of the date, time and today's list of things to do.

Lunch with Alan Marshal, appeared on the screen. Of course I remembered now he called me yesterday saying he urgently needed to talk to me. I needed to talk to him urgently also, but he didn't seem to want to talk much on the phone. I sat staring at my computer screen though a haze of cigarette smoke, I was not going to get much done this morning.

Alan had arranged to meet me in the globe, a pub near Bath, strange I thought since it was nowhere near where either I live or he worked. But he had been so quick on the phone that I didn't get chance to question it.

I walked in to the pub and looked around for Alan. My eyes suddenly fell on a tall black haired man. For brief second his gaze met mine, and in that second I knew it had been him that I saw out side I-Cubed. He looked away, but I stood there staring at him. Some one pushed their way past me and when I looked back at where he had been he was gone.

Shaken by this I made my way to the bar and bought my self a drink.

It was then that I spotted Alan. I almost missed him because I didn't recognise him. His eyes were dull and slightly blood shot and his face looked gray and some how he looked older. He looked worse than me.

"You look awful"

I said as I sat down. "Thanks, but you don't look much better".

"Yes your wonderful Datascape has cost me a lot of sleep".

Alan's face suddenly had a an almost frightened look on it.

"You've not been having nightmares have you?" I nodded. He shook his head and let out a deep sigh. "This is all very worrying. Two members of my team have suffered from similar effects".

"We're they 'attacked'".

"No. No. It was assumed that they were suffering from over work and exhaustion, but now...well I don't know".

"Do you have any idea what happened to me in there ?"

Alan thought on this for a long time and then said. "No not really. But I have two very nasty suspicion's. The first one is slightly more probable but nonetheless disturbing".

Alan said nothing for a few seconds, he was stringing this out as long as possible. He'd been known at university for making a drama out of almost anything. But in my current state I was in no mood for such games.

"Yes". I prompted impatiently.

"Well first of all let me give you some back ground to our work on Datascape. What ever it is, it came from the virtual object database. And I lied to you about that being run on the Cray. It was at first but it's now run on a custom machine. The Cray was just not fast enough".

He paused again, probably for effect.

"Not fast enough!"

"Yes. Anyway this custom machine is a massively parallel computer, but not quite in the same way as something like the Connections Machine. The processors are linked by software controlled links, so that the program running on it can reconfigure the system while it runs. This makes the virtual object nexus, the machine the database is held on about the largest and most complex neural network ever".

For a few seconds I didn't see what Alan was getting at. Then it hit me. My stomach turned.

"Are you saying that what ever attacked me was some sort of intelligent thing living in the computer"

"Yes. You your self said that it wasn't random and that it came straight for you".

I nodded slowly, it was a predator and, I the user, was it's prey.

"We're talking about Artificial Life here aren't we". I read about this in Scientific American, some American working in new Mexico thinks that one day we will be able to create an artificial life form in a computer".

"Yes I read that to. That's what I think happened here. Some thing either a bug or a deliberate program set a chain of events in motion in the network. Only this network can be modified by what's happening in it. Some how the program found how to modify the network. It shaped the environment which in turn shaped it and so on". I shook my head this was getting beyond me.

"This is heavy stuff".

"Yes it is. What happened in that network I can only call super-evolution"

"Evolution ?"

"Yes, and still is evolving". Alan paused to take a sip of his beer, I couldn't face mine now.

"At first it was confined to the virtual object nexus because it needs the special hardware to run. But now it's evolved to the point where it's children can run on other systems..."

"Children !"

"Yes, well smaller copies of it's self. I've found several apparently corrupted programs on various systems that all have the same basic pattern that I've found in the nexus".

I sat and let all this run through my mind, it was all too incredible, I was not sure that I could believe it. "This is like some science fiction story". Alan nodded. We sat in silence for a few seconds.

"You said there were two possible explanations for all this".

"Yes". Alan sighed. "The first one is more likely I think but it's implications are much more serious. I'd like to believe the second but I have problems with that". He paused for a moment.

"The first possibility is that all of this has happen is part of a secret research project. And I know there is on going on at I-cubed..."

"How do you know ?"

"System logs. All time on the system is logged and I've had a look at the logs, secretly of course, and there is another team working on my system".

He emphasized 'my system'. "Now I don't know what there doing but after the first two incidence's there was a surge of activity by this group. Now I haven't been able to see the logs after that so I don't know for sure if that's what they were working on. But it does seem most likely".

"But who are they and why are they making it, what ever it is, do these things ?"

"Well if I answer your first question then the second will seem to answer itself. You were right when you surmised that we were doing some work for the military, I think they are our mystery party".

"So it's some sort of weapon". I said with horror.

"No not in it's self, it could be used as a controller for a weapon delivery system or it could be used as a carrier for some sort of computer virus. But as I said the second question only seems to answer it's self. In fact 'they' aren't making it do anything, it's acting on it's own accord".

"How can you tell ?"

"That's easy, The system logs again. As I said there was a surge of activity after, not before, but after each incident".

I was confused. "So"

"So the surge of activity was a sort of inquiry, to find out just what had happened. They may have had control at the outset but they certainly don't have any control over it now. I think they've succeeded beyond their wildest dreams".

"And if there are secret they don't have to worry about the consequences of there actions".

I said very slowly. It was all just beginning to sink in.

"That's right", Alan said gleefully. "It's dawning on you now isn't it. The fully horror of what's happening". He added in a much more sombre tone.

"Of course the second possibility is that this has all happened by accident. But I don't believe that for a moment".

I shook my head in agreement with Alan. "So what are you going to do ?" I asked.

Alan didn't answer for a moment or two. "I've no idea at the moment. I could just carry on like nothing ever happened, but if 'they' can't control 'it', then I can't see much more work getting done on Datascape. But I don't think I could allow any of my team to be exposed to the danger of an attack, not now that I know what's happening".

I was about to agree with Alan, but then I suddenly had a thought, "Why did it attack me ?"

Alan seemed thrown by the question at first. "I'm not sure you were attacked..."

"Oh yes I was".

"No you only think your were attacked. How do you know that it wasn't trying to communicate with you ?" I didn't have an answer to this question, but I still knew in my heart that it did attack me.

"You don't know do you". I shook my head.

"But I'm sure your probably right and you were attacked, but we don't know for sure".

"So why ?"

"I think it's just trying to survive. And it does that by being on top of the food chain in it's environment. It probably see's users of the system as a threat". Alan said nothing for a few moments, he just sat looking in to his pint.

"I don't know what to do". He suddenly said. "But I have to do some thing".

He added shaking his head.

Alan all of a sudden looked very weary and tired. We sat in silence for a long time both lost in our thoughts.

Alan, having finished his drink, suddenly got up. "Well thanks for lending me an ear. I have to get back to work now".

He started to leave. "Alan".

I called after him. "Let me know if I can help in any way".

"Thanks. I will". He then turned and left.

I sat thinking over what Alan had said, particularly the idea that this all could be some sort of secret military research. The man I'd seen both here and out side I-cubed kept on entering my thoughts. I was sure it was the same man, but why would he be following me. I looked around the, by now half empty, pub. I could see no sign of the man.

This didn't reassure me at all and all the way home I kept my eyes open for any one following, but saw no one.

I'd felt uneasy all day, as if some one where watching my every move. I was constantly checking behind me and looking around corners. I saw some thing suspicious in almost every thing, people talking behind my back, new people that I'd never seen before at the office, cars following me every where.

It was silly I kept on telling myself, I was seeing these things because I was looking for them. But this didn't stop me from doing it. So by the time I left work that night I was a nervous wreck.

Alan's ideas about what had happened to me in Datascape must have really shaken me up.

As I drove down my road I noticed a blue van parked near my house. My heart pounded, I wasn't imagining it, some thing was going on. No, no I told myself, it's just a blue van, nothing suspicious about it at all.

So why did I park a little down the road from my house and walk to the drive?

The house looked normal. It was in darkness, there was no sign of any break in. But I still headed down the side my house to the back door. The security light didn't come on, it had been tampered with. Or it could need a new bulb, I told myself.

I reached the back door and peered in through the kitchen window. My nerves calmed a little. I could see nothing in the darkened room out of place.

But I still held my breath as I slowly turned the key in the lock. What if some one where lurking inside for me. I paused for a moment while I tried to calm my rising nerves.

"This is so silly". I whispered to my self. And in one quick movement I unlocked the door, opened it, stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

I stood there for a moment while I caught my breath, I was in and safe. I reached for the light switch, but stopped.

My heart started pounding harder than ever, there was someone in my house.

I could hear them moving about. For a moment I could do nothing, I stood paralyzed with fear.

But then suddenly feeling angry that someone had entered my house I charged off towards my front room office.

I didn't have any idea what I'd do when I came face to face with the intruder but in my anger that didn't matter.

I threw the front room door open and ran in. As I did a man that had been bent over my desk, searching it, straightened up and turned to face me.

In the eerie orange half light on the street lamps I could see his face. His clear, light blue eyes seemed to look right in to me. It was the man that had been following me.

I started to shout at him, when he suddenly twisted. His body was distorting and deforming before my eyes. But he didn't make a sound, his horribly distorted face kept on staring at me.

As his body deformed it became transparent. He was turning in to a vortex. I realized with horror that I'd seen this before in the Datascape system.

Once again I could not move. Some thing was reaching out of this clear, colourless whirlpool. Transparent tendrils, wriggled and writhed towards me.

One had already wrapped it self around my arm. Another had my leg trapped.

I struggled to break free of there cold, clammy grasp, but more and more of them were fixing them selves to me.

I could feel them on my face, slipping between my lips and in to my mouth. I screamed.

The phone rang.

The phone rang.

I shook my head. I was sitting at my desk, the desk lamp and my computer were on.

Disorientated by the sudden change, I sat and stared at the room around me, no sign of the intruder or the vortex. An other bad dream.

"Dam it". The phone continued ringing.

I took a few moments to calm my racing heart beat.

"Hello".

"Ah there you are Harry". It was Alan. "I was beginning in to think you where out".

"No I was just deep in some work".

"Ah. Is it any thing that you can drop for a night ?"

"Yes nothing terribly important".

"Good because I've found out some things that I'd like to talk over with you and I'd rather not discuss them over the phone. If you understand my meaning".

"Yes I see. So where and when?"

"Can you make it to my place tonight?" I looked at the clock on my screen, 8.44 it read. It was an hour and a half's drive to Alan's. "Just about. But is this that important ?"

"Yes it's very important". Alan's voice sounded very grave indeed.

"Okay then I'll see you about quarter past ten then".

"Right. Bye".

"Bye".

I put the phone down. What could be so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow? It had been three days since I'd seem him last. What could have happened?

This question kept popping up in my mind all the way during my long tiering drive to Alan's house. All sorts of possible scenarios came to mind. I didn't believe any of them for a moment but that didn't stop me from worrying about them.

And all the time I was keeping my eyes on the rear view mirror, looking for signs of a tail. Once or twice I saw a car that I thought I recognized, but I told my self I was being paranoid.

Finally after what seemed like the longest hour and a half of my life I arrived at Alan's place. I waited nervously at the front door. I'd still not been able to lose the feeling that I'd been followed here. I looked around at the quite suburban street, there was no one in sight.

Alan opened the door and welcomed me in.

"Take a seat in the study", He said as he set about making a cup of coffee.

Alan's study was like the rest of the house, clean and tidy. I could remember clearly Alan's lodgings while at university, you were lucky if you could see one square foot of floor though all the books, print out's, disassembled computers and of course take away boxes.

I settled in to a big chair, after the trying day I'd just had and long drive I was exhausted. I closed my eyes.

"You're not looking to good at all". Alan said as he brought the coffees in. He looked a little better than he'd looked at the pub. "Dreams still troubling you?" I nodded.

"So then, what's so important that you can't talk about it on the phone?"

Alan said nothing for a few seconds, instead he turned on the radio, it was turned to a classical station playing Bethovens 9th. He turned up the volume a little. He sat down. "The reason I asked you to come here was to tell you that 'they' know".

"They know what?"

"They know or at lest suspect that some one on the Datascape project knows some thing about what their doing".

I was really worried now. "Do they know it's you?"

"I'm not sure. I'd done a little more probing of the system and found out a few more things and then this morning, I over heard an argument between my boss, Mike Patterson and one of the other team, I don't know his name. But they want to close down the Datascape project. Mike was argument because we so close but..." He sighed. "The other man said he could force him to close it down"

"Pressure from above?"

"Yes. I don't think they know who it is that's been hacking, because if they did then that person would have been fired on the spot".

"Or worse". I added darkly. "Hum. So not knowing they have to keep every one in the project away from the system".

"It could be that they have some thing 'big' planned and they couldn't hide it from you so that's why they closed the project down". I suggested. "Yes I'd thought of that as well. But I think it would serve us to plan for the worse".

"So what do you plan to do next?"

I took a sip of coffee.

"You'll be wanting to know what it is that I've found out"

I nodded. "Well I was right, they don't know how to control what they've created. I managed to intercept one of there E-mail's. They don't even really know what it is they're dealing with. In fact we probably know more than they do". Alan said proudly. "They were in fact working on an AI guidance system for some thing called Northstar, what ever that is. The work that they'd done was quite incredible". Alan's voice started to become quite excited. "They had constructed an entire virtual battle field in there and letting the AI interact directly with the

data. No need for any cumbersome hardware, it was all handled directly by the software. It was talking to the virtual world interface systems, in the same way the hardware would. The AI would have no idea that it was running in a virtual environment, you see..."

I had to interrupt Alan, if I hadn't he would have continued like this all night. "Until it got control of the environment".

"Yes that's right". He said in almost dejected tones.

"Sorry Dave, I can get carried away a bit some times". I shrugged and he continued. "Well any way it got control of the environment and now uses the environment it's self as part of it's program, it's mind if you like".

"Which would explain it's hostility".

"Yes. It's original program was to ignore friendly forces and target hostile ones".

"We're obviously hostile to it". Alan nodded. "So what are you going to do ?" I asked again. Alan having dodged my earlier question.

"I don't know yet, but after tonight I will". Alan didn't add any thing else to this statement,

"Yes, so what's happening tonight". I prompted sharply. Alan could be so infuriating at times.

"Well we're going to take a close look at this program, and..."

"How?"

"I'll have to sneak you in tonight. You..."

"What!". I exclaimed. "Through all that security ?"

"Yes. Tricky"

"Tricky! Dam near impossible I'd say". Alan had quite clearly been working to hard on this and was losing sight of reality.

"And why do you need any one else?"

"I need some ones help who I can trust. And wouldn't you like to find out what's going on". It was true I did want to know what had happened to me that day in the system. "Yes I do but not that badly".

"Besides you can get to see our state of the art system this way"

"There must be another way".

"There isn't. I don't know how long Mike could take the pressure from above. We have to act tonight".

For a moment I floundered, I did badly want to know what was going on, but it was an awfully big risk for both Alan and me. "Look you can get in okay but how will I make it in".

Alan smiled. "With this". He held up a card. I looked at it. "Beth Townsend. Who is she".

"You met her when you where at the lab. And yes she knows I have this"

"Does she know what your going to do with it?"

"Yes"

"Look this isn't going to work, anyone can see I'm not Beth".

"On a security monitor you'll look smaller, she is a well built lady..."

"But what about the guards?"

Alan shook his head. "Look don't worry, there probably won't be any..."

"But if there is".

"I have it all planned out". Alan flashed one of his most winning smiles. I some how doubted he did have it planned.

"Will you help?"

To my own surprise I said "Yes, okay"

Alan's face broke in to a broad grin.

My heart pounded as we approached the glass doors of the I-Cubed building. What if there was a guard ? Well if there was that would be it, there would be nothing Alan could do about that. I almost wished there was, that way this silly escapade would be over.

But to my disappointment there was no one sitting at reception. Alan seemed a little surprised at the absence of a guard.

"You had no idea how to get me past the guard did you".

I hissed in his ear. He shook his head with a little grin.

"It's odd that there isn't though. He may of gone to the loo or to get some tea, so lets get in quickly".

Alan signed him self in an quickly forged Beth's signature.

And we then hurried off down a corridor.

We crept into the darkened lab. The darkness made the Datascape cubical in the centre of the room look even more menacing.

The lights came on.

I jumped out of my skin, expecting at any moment to be captured. I turned around to see Alan by the light switches. "Sorry, but I wouldn't normally work in the dark". He said apologetically.

"Bloody hell. You took years off my life. "Tell me if you're going to do anything like that again".

We were in a deferent lab from the one I saw before. Most of the computer equipment in here was unmarked, custom built and probably top secret. It was all still linked to a little cubical in the middle of the room.

Alan headed over to a cupboard, took out a blue jumpsuit and laid it carefully out on a table.

"While I get the system running you can put this on".

He said casually. I started to walk over to the table and then stopped.

"Why ?". Alan continued pretending not to hear. "Why?".

I asked again. "Look". He stopped what he was doing and turned to face me. "You know why you need to wear it".

"Not if I'm not going in to the system". I said defiantly. "Look, I have to work at this terminal and I can't do that from in there".

"Why do you need anyone in the system at all ?"

"How else an I going to lure it out so I can look at it. You'll...."

"Lure". I shouted. "So I'm just bait now am I?"

"Once I have it out in the open I can try a confine it to one area of memory. Trap it". Dr. Marshal continued ignoring my question. "That doesn't change the fact that you've used me. You knew..."

"How can I ask anyone else to do all this?"

"You haven't asked me !" I shouted. And instead of doing nothing, as I had planned, I said. "And apparently I have no choice now". Alan's face lit up and he resumed powering up the system.

My heart was racing. I was shaking as I put the suit on. What was I doing here, sneaking in to a high security building to face the cause of my nightmares.

I was doing it to help a friend, I answered my own question.

I was sweating profusely by the time I had the suit on. The helmet was a different type to the one I used before, it was much bulkier and heavier.

"Ready when you are". Alan called from the main terminal. "Ready as I'll ever be". I whispered to my self.

With only Alan to help me in to the cubical, it took much longer than the few minutes it had taken last time. I almost wished that we had some one to help, then I could get this over and done with quickly.

I noticed Alan was just as shaky as I was. What was he worried for, I was the one going in to the system, I thought.

But then I realized, he was worried for me.

The door was closed and once again I was shut off from the outside world.

The panic rose up inside me. I tried some deep breathing to calm myself, it didn't work. "Shit" I swore to myself as I felt my legs gave way, if it were not for the harness was wearing I would be on the floor.

"What was that". Dr. Marshals voice came over the intercom. "Can we just get this thing running quickly". I said irritably.

"Okay Just a few more moments and we'll be up and running".

The 'few moments' seemed to go on for hours. I was desperately hoping that there would be some unsolvable problem that would put an end to this crazy plan. But my hopes were dashed when Alan's voice came from behind me.

"This time you'll be in the programs native environment, the battle field, so be ready for that. There's nothing in the environment that should react to you apart from the program it's self". I didn't like the way Alan emphasized should. "All you have to do is to interact with the environment a bit, you know walk around etc. etc."

At the moment I just wished that Alan would shut up and get on with it.

"Here we go". And the log on menu appeared in front of me. My arm quickly lashed out and hit the log on button.

The landscape that faded in to existence around me was very different this time. Instead of the flat plane patterned with the I-cubed logo with some distant mountains, there was a gently undulating dull gray surface. A few bear trees and some boulders were scattered about. The sky was a dark and sullen red.

The whole scene looked much more solid and realistic than before. I made a quick survey of my surroundings, no sign of what ever it was.

"Good isn't it". Alan commented. I said nothing. "This system uses tiny lasers to paint the image directly on your retina, so the..."

"Alan !". I shouted. "Sorry". He apologized.

I thought I was nervous before I had got in to the system. I was now shaking like a leaf. We didn't say any thing for a few moments.

"So what do you plan to do when you have this thing confined?" I asked just to break the oppressive silence.

"Communicate with it. I can use the virtual world interface to send messages directly to it, and hopefully if I use standard system protocols I can use a language it can understand".

I wasn't really listening to what Alan was saying, I kept my eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of the 'thing'.

"When I've established communication I can open a virtual work station and close down your actual work station. Then you can get out". Alan's last sentence got my attention. "Good. I wish it would hurry up then". I regretted saying that as soon as the words left my mouth.

A sound behind me made me spin around, but there was nothing there. "What was that?" I demanded of Alan.

"Nothing for you to worry about. I think it must have been the guard returning to his station". Nothing for me to worry about! I thought, he's not the one you is here illegally. I took a few faltering steps forward. Come on, come and get me, I taunted it silently.

"So what are you going to do when you talk to it?" I asked just to keep me occupied.

"I'll try and run some turning tests on it to see if it really is sentient".

"And if it is what then. Would you wipe it".

There was a long silence. Clearly Alan had the same worries as me. Even considering what it had done to me, if it was a form of life could he destroy it? If I were in his place could I do the same thing. "I don't know".

"Its coming". Alan said in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Where?" I finally managed to say.

I span around, desperately trying to spot the 'entity', nothing appeared to have changed. Then I heard it again, the sound. It was quite but getting louder.

"Where is it Alan?!" I shouted. I looked around again, but still nothing had changed. The sound was coming from all around me. "Alan, where is it?!" I shouted again.

"It has no physical location". Alan replied tersely.

It was then that I saw it. The ground some way ahead of me to my left, was rising up, twisting and distorting as it did. I stood, transfixed, staring at it for a few seconds.

But then a movement to my right caught my attention. The ground there was changing too. It was as if transparent tentacles where oozing out the ground.

I looked all around me. I was surrounded by it.

"...different patterns. May be they've done some thing to it. I don't know". I realized Alan was talking to me.

"It's all around me". I shouted over the horrible noise.

"I don't know..." Alan's voice was now lost in the sound that filled my ears. "I can't hear you". I shouted back.

"...not work. Get ready to..." Again Alan's voice was drowned out.

"...Log off if...one more minute"

The wall of Writhing, semi-transparent tentacles, that surrounded me now slowly started to close in. I was trapped.

There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

As the tentacles moved closer the ground around them started to change colour to a mottled gray green. The colour change spread ahead of the tentacles quickly. And was at my feet in seconds.

There was nothing I could do. The colour touched my silver foot and the change started traveling up my legs.

Log off, Alan Had said log off. I quickly made the thumbs up sign and the menu faded in to view ahead of me. I reached out for the log off button.

But before I hit it, the awful, gray green colour reached it. In less than a second the menu was covered with the colour. Then from its edges the menu started to break down into tiny pixels, which dispersed rapidly.

I hit the log off button just as it broke down.

Nothing happened.

I looked at my hand, it was coloured gray, green.

I looked down at my body. Every part of it was coloured gray, green.

Panic hit me with full force.

I ran. I did not know where I was going to run to, but I ran.

The tactile transducers in my suit were crazy as I ran through the wall of tentacles. It felt like a thousand ants were running over my hands and arms. Distracted by this I stumbled but the harness stopped me from falling.

I desperately tried to get to my feet again, but the teflon surface was too slippery.

Then it appeared in front of me. Just as it had in my nightmares. Its shape barely human, its colour the same awful grey, green that now covered the landscape.

Its monstrous claw reached out for me...

Everything suddenly went black. No sound, no light.

Stunned by this sudden change, I just hung there in the darkness, listening to my own panting breaths.

I don't know how long it was before a crack of light appeared before my eyes.

"Mike! Mike!" Alan called to me as he lifted the bulky helmet off my head. "Are you okay?" He asked, but he seemed somehow distant and removed from me. Like I was watching events unfold on a TV set.

It all seemed so distant and unimportant to me.

"Mike!" He shouted again, and as he did I felt something. My face hurt.

"Come on Mike". This time Alan's voice seemed to be nearer. "It's me Alan, come on respond!"

I tried to speak to him but my words came out as a mumble.

"That's it Mike speak to me, come on say something".

I tried again, but this time I made no sound at all. I closed my eyes.

Suddenly something hit me. My eyes opened wide.

"Sorry about that, but I was losing you for a moment". Alan had hit me. Anger built up inside me.

"Why?" I managed to say. Alan's face lit up. "Back with me?" He asked. I nodded weakly.

"Good. Can you stand?" I stood up, my legs were shaky but yes I could stand. "Good lets get you out of this so we can leave".

Alan busied him self unhooking me from the harness in the cubical. I did nothing to help him, instead I stood staring at the room around me. It still seemed to have a slightly dreamlike quality to it.

"There you go, disconnected". Alan announced.

I shook my head to try and clear it. "Where you able to do any thing ?" I asked. Alan shook his head and pointed to where a thick cable connected to the cubical. The cable lay severed on the floor with a fire axe by it.

"Not very sophisticated". I said with a grin. "No but I had to do some thing, the readings I was getting from sensors in the helmet were really strange. I don't know what it was doing to you in there, but I don't think it was doing you any good. And it had control of most of the systems so I cut it off, literally. But it's still in there"

"What n..."

A siren cut me off. "What the hell is that ?". I shouted over the din, but before Alan could answer it was replaced by a calm female voice. "Emergency. Emergency. Fire detected. Evacuate room. Halon gas fire suppression system will activate in ten seconds".

Alan grabbed my arm and ran for the door. My legs still shaky collapsed under me.

"Eight...Seven...Six". The voice continued counting down.

Alan dragged me along the floor as he ran.

"Three...Two". The voice droned on. Then just as we, literally, hit the door the countdown reached one and the room suddenly became white. A cloud of thick white gas drifted out of the rapidly closing door. I choked on it and everything started to go gray.

Suddenly my arm was grabbed and I felt myself being dragged along the floor again. The colour started to return to my vision. Alan stopped running.

"What happened". I finally managed to splutter out.

"Fire suppression gas". He said between deep breaths. "Very dangerous stuff that".

We did nothing for a few seconds, catching our breaths.

Then Alan opened a door in the corridor and went in.

I waited for a few seconds and then slowly got to my feet and unsteadily walked over to the same door. Alan was bent over a terminal, his fingers flying over the keys.

"Dam it".

"What's up ?" I asked. "It's got control of the security systems". He said in a dull haggard voice.

"It triggered the fire alarm system and...". All the colour drained out of Alan's face "It tried to kill us". I finished Alan's sentence for him.

Alan said nothing, he just returned to his work at the terminal. "Well come on then!" I shouted at him. "We've got to go, half the counties police will be descending on us".

"We can't leave". Alan said calmly, not looking away from the screen. "It has control of the access control systems all the doors will be locked". Infuriated by Alan's calm I stormed off down the corridor to prove him wrong. The first door I came too I kicked at.

"Ha!" I Cried out as it swung open.

I ran back to the office.

"Alan we are leaving". He looked up from the terminal with a blank look on his face. "I've found a way out". I announced proudly. He shook his head "Not yet I haven't finished".

"But we have to". I pleaded. "Leave then". He said coldly as he returned his gaze to the terminal.

I was about to turn and leave, but I couldn't leave him here. I walked over to the terminal. Alan looked up at me with a grin.

"Still here?"

"What are you doing?" I asked, sitting down on the desk.

"Trying to overwrite it with other objects. But I don't know if I've got time. There's a lot of space for it to use and it's deleting all the users". He said without removing his gaze from the screen.

"How did it know about my nightmares?"

"I think it programmed them in to you".

"What!"

"Yes it's basically a neural net and it somehow found a way not only to reprogram its self but other neural nets to".

He let the idea sink in. "Your mind is a neural net". He stated with a chilling tone in his voice. My mind span. I looked over to the computers in the lab, something in there violated my mind, invaded it and poisoned it.

Anger suddenly boiled up in me.

I stormed in to the lab with but one thought on my mind, to destroy the monster in that machine.

I ran for the computer room and kicked open the door.

As the door swung open the lights in the room suddenly went out and a dark shape lunged out of the room toward me.

I saw it too late, to dodge it. It hit me full in the stomach and knocked back against the opposite wall, hard.

Stunned by the twin impacts I lay there. The dark shape got off me quickly and suddenly I was dazzled by an intense light in my face. "Freeze!" The shape shouted at me.

"Mike! I've..." Alan emerged from the office. The flash light was directed at Alan, and I slowly realized that it was not just a flashlight the man had in his hands, there was a gun too.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, I was still dazed, the man seemed unsure what to do and Alan just stood there frozen.

Another dark shape emerged from the room.

"Leave them". It hissed to the other. He lowered the gun and started to turn away.

I kicked at his ankle and with a startled cry he collapsed to the floor. But before I could even start to move the second man was on to me.

He grabbed my coat and hauled me up then thrust me against the wall. The man on the floor rolled and fired at shot down the corridor.

I struggled against the man's grip but he held me firm as he repeatedly hit me against the wall. The man was now up off the floor and aiming his gun in Alan's direction.

I grabbed at his head, trying to scratch at his eye's, but he wore a balaclava, so I pulled at this. It came off and I found myself staring in the same eye's that I'd seem, both out side this building and in the pub.

For a brief second he did nothing save stare in to my eye's, he then let go of me, turned and ran down the corridor.

His college followed suit but kept his gun trained on us.

My anger still un-channeled I shakily stood up and charged in to the room.

The uniform gray boxes of the computers served only to heighten my anger. I found an inspection hatch on one of them and tore it open. Inside banks of circuits confronted me.

I yanked some out. This filled me with a strange kind of savage joy. For a few moments I was loss in a sort of bezerker fury as I smashed the source of my fears. Each impact seemed to fill me with almost orgasmic pleasure.

"Mike!" Alan's voice cut through the haze of madness that clouded my mind. For a brief second I considered him as the next target, the root cause of all my problems. "Stop it".

I turned to face him the anger still bubbling in me. I shot him a look of pure hate. "Look around you Harry, look".

Slowly I did. Many of the panels had already been removed, wires trailed from them to a small box on the side of a can. The can was marked inflammable.

"Come on Harry we have to leave now", Alan said urgently.

I stood frozen for a few seconds. "They are ending the project, it must have gotten out of their control. They are destroying the evidence. And us to if we don't leave now !"

Suddenly it all became clear to me.

I ran.

Through darkened corridors and rooms we tore. I didn't know where we were going, I just ran following Alan.

Just as we hit a fire exit, there was a gentle but deep thud. It was all over.

Some two weeks have now passed since our 'raid' on the DataScape system. In those weeks the investigation in to the fire at I-Cubed has been completed and the cause put down to an 'electrical fault'.

The whole project has of course been ended, as Alan said 'it' must have got out of there control, 'they' couldn't risk the real purpose of the work being found out, so 'they' destroyed it.

What would the result be if they continued the work ?

Certainly if they could develop the AI in the system it would have a huge military value. Would they ignore the risks and continue the work ? Probably.

It was thoughts like this that occupied me after I awoke from my nightmares.

I still suffer from them but they seem to be getting less and less. But still the fact that some thing inside one of those machines could program my mind is a truly chilling thought.

An other chilling thought is that even if I-Cubed do not continue the work, someone, some time will come up with the same idea and develop it. And if they do, the same thing could happen again. Maybe next time it will be able to spread beyond it's own system and...

But then, Maybe I'm just being pessimistic. Any great step forward always entails some risk. Are the rewards that AI's could bring us worth the risk that we might create some malevolent entity in our network which could ultimately cause our down fall?
That I don't know, I guess history will answer that one for us.