

John looked bored as his supervisor kept talking at him. He had thought that it would be a good idea to see if he could get some quick advice on how to save time with his project but in the time this was taking he felt he could have done half of it.

“And when you’ve finished all the lab work and got all the results you have to compare them with results from the literature.”

There was a long pause. Was he supposed to reply? He had been looking at the big poster on the wall showing lots of pictures of some past research project. It must have been incredibly old. One photo showed the lab downstairs but it was only just recognisable. Most of the machinery in the picture had gone and even the replacements he had seen looked old. He wondered if the poster was older than he was.

“Where do I find the literature?” He hoped the pause while he woke up and thought of something to ask had not been too noticeable. The old man showed no sign of having noticed. Rumour had it that he was finally going to retire at the end of the year. He wondered if retirement was ever mandatory or if they could just stay and quietly mould away.

“You look on the internet. Provided you work from a computer on campus you can get access to most published papers. The University pays the subscriptions for it.”

“So I’ve got to read through all these papers and find out what they say and see if they did the same experiments as I have done?” The thought horrified him. The idea of having to tell his girl friend that he was busy and spending hours, days, weeks working through all the boring details of what some other victim had done years ago appalled him.

“Don’t worry. You’re only doing a short project. It shouldn’t take long. The project is supposed to be 200 hours of effort and it shouldn’t take more than 30 or 40 to do a good review.” He thought of it. 40 hours, that was a whole week doing nothing else. His brain would turn to mush. The man was still talking. “You should be glad you’re not doing a PhD. They spend six months doing their review.”

He made a mental note to watch out for anybody who had done a PhD. Their brains must surely be completely converted to mush.

“Mind you.” The man was still talking. Must be more horrors. “I once had a student who thought he could automate the process. He went away for weeks and weeks and came back saying he had written a programme that could scan papers and really work out what they were saying.”

“Did it work?” John asked. There might be glimmer of hope.

“No. He never quite got it going. He gave up and said the computers weren’t up to it. He had to do his review exactly like everybody else.” There was a gleam in the man’s eyes. This was clearly what drove him on. Year after year. Making them all suffer the review. Like some modern version of the inquisition.

“What happened to the programme? I can do some programming. Perhaps I could fix it.” This was almost true. He had once tried to write a short programme to work out all the options in a computer game. He still kept losing at the game but he had actually enjoyed trying to write the code.

“He left it with me. He was a brilliant student but I think he realised that his future was not in research. He got his PhD and went back to China and immediately started an oil trading company. Made a fortune at it. The programme’s on a disc somewhere. I could give it to you but don’t waste too much time on it. Remember you only have 8 weeks to finish the whole project and had it in.”

The professor didn’t wait for a reply, he was already standing up. He moved his chair across the room and stepped up onto it to reach down a large box from a high shelf. An enormous cloud of dust exploded into John’s face as the box thumped down on the table in front of him.

“I think it’s in this one. Yes here it is.” He proudly hauled out a disc box and passed it to John. “There you go. See what you can do with that. Let me know how you get on with it.”

He gathered up his papers and was just out of the office in time to take a phone call from his girl friend. She used him as a taxi service [but she was worth it]. She never seemed to have any work to do in the evenings from the course she was doing so she expected him to pick her up after her last lecture and take her home and then spend the evening with her, either going out or staying in. That was fine as far as he was concerned, his project could wait. He thought of telling her that he was giving up his degree and was off to start oil trading.

The following day he had three lectures in a row. They lasted two hours each, he was dreading it. Lecturers came in two types. The ones that glowered at you if you came in late or even didn’t let you in at all and the sympathetic ones who just smiled at you as you wandered in in the middle of their discourse. Luckily his first lecture was with one of the second type. He arrived 20 minutes late. The problem was that all the seats near the back were taken to he had to sit where he could be seen and pretend to be paying attention for the next hour and a half.

As soon as it finished he ran to the machine and got a cup of coffee and took it with him straight to the next lecture. He was one of the first to arrive. He managed to get a seat right at the back. He settled down and soon after the lecture started he put his lap-top on the desk in front of him, switched it on and put the disc in.

After a few seconds the screen cleared except for a line of text which read:

INTELLIGENT SEARCHING. ENTER LEVEL (1-10)

John had no hesitation in telling it that he wanted level 10. He had no time to spare and needed to get the job done.

The next question appeared:

ENTER SUBJECT KEYWORDS

There were five spaces so he typed in five words which covered the topic of his project. The computer responded immediately:

CONTACTING SEARCH ENGINES

He noticed that his two classmates sitting either side of him were looking in on what he was doing. He was wondering if he should keep his discovery a bit more secret when the computer came back with the error message:

<array overflow>.

He tried hitting the escape button but it just showed him a page full of code. Every time he tried to get it to re-start it just came back with the same message rather than going back so he could try again from the beginning. He looked around and saw his classmates had lot interest.

He gave up and switched the computer off and listened to the lecture. It was late afternoon by the time he got another chance to try the programme. This time he went for level 2. When it said it was contacting the search engines he was relieved to see that it did not crash and after a few minutes it came back with a list of hits from the search. All it then said was:

ALL HITS OK

He tried level 3 but it just crashed again. He decided to give up completely.

That evening his girlfriend wanted to go out again and they went off to one of the halls of residence down in the town. When he parked outside he saw that it was a new building and when they went inside everything looked smart and new. In stead of long corridors of rooms it was set up as small flats with large dining kitchens with comfortable chairs in them. He glanced into one of the bedrooms and saw a door through to an en-suite bathroom. His girlfriend looked amazed.

The students who lived there were standing next to a table piled high with drinks. They looked pleasant enough but there was something in the way they were standing there in their expensive clothes in their expensive flat that made him feel uneasy. He knew how much his parents had had to pay to get him into his hall and knew they couldn't afford one like this. He half remembered seeing on a list of what was on offer but had just skipped right past it.

He poured a drink for his girlfriend, helped himself to one and turned to see who else was in the room. He didn't recognise anybody. His girlfriend was already on her way across the room to a group standing by the window. Soon they were talking about cars. In most other company he felt quite well off to have a car at all but this group each took turns to describe their obviously expensive vehicles in enormous detail. He tried to show some enthusiasm but soon found his attention drifting. He heard a quiet voice next to him.

"Come across anything interesting today?"

He turned to see who had said it. She was short and somewhat overweight with untidy looking brown hair.

"As far as I'm concerned if cars take me from A to B in reasonable comfort there's not much more to say about them." She said.

“Mine goes from A to B most of the time. Not much comfort but I’m not bothered. Do you live here?”

“I’m in the other room in the flat. I think they felt obliged to ask me to their party.”

There was a slight pause.

“Anyway to answer your original question yes I did come across something that might be interesting to me today.”

She was a good listener. He explained about the programme how he was panicking about his project and didn’t have time to do anything with it.

“Could you do anything about it [the programme]?” She asked.

Talking to her helped him think it through. Yes, he had done his little bit of programming. He was sure that his computer would have more memory than the one that the programme had been run on years before so, yes, he could probably increase the array sizes in the code.

“Does it interest you?”

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

“Then you should go for it. Make the time and go for it. That’s what my dad would say you should do.”

“What does he do?”

She said he was a company director. He was wary of this as a description. Chip shops could be run as companies and they would have directors. She must have seen his hesitation because she named the company. It was big, very big. He knew that this should not matter. Plenty of rich and powerful people gave bad advice but it did make him think about it.

He turned back to see where his girlfriend had got to. She was still with the same group but they had at last moved on from cars so he joined in the conversation again.

When they were leaving he saw the girl with the brown hair standing by the door. She told him to let her know how he got on with his programme. He smiled at her but she looked away when he took his girlfriend’s hand.

He woke up the next day with a hangover and was somewhat relieved when his girlfriend didn’t call him in the evening. He spent several hours trying to catch up with his coursework. The next day she didn’t call again and on the third day he decided to drive round and see her. There was a large red sports car parked on the street outside.

He went home to work on the programme. After a few attempts he found a way to stop it from running when he put the disk in his computer and two hours and several cups of coffee later he had found out how to edit the code. It was enormously long, thousands of lines of it without any explanation of what it did. By the time he had made a start on trying to

work out how much memory it used and how much more he could let it use he had started on a can of beer. Editing it was going to be a long job.

He kept wondering why he was wasting his time. It wasn't just time, he had to print out the code to check it and his print cartridges cost a fortune. The programme had done absolutely nothing of any use. Working through the night he realised that if he put as much effort into his project as he was putting into the programme he could get the whole thing done in a few days. All the programme might do was to give him some references to work on and there was little sign that it would even do that.

It was well after midnight when he thought that he had found all the array statements and changed them to use the rest of the memory. He knew that he was nowhere near finished. Even the little bit of programming he had tried before had taught him that much. It would take hours of work to remove all the bugs from the new code and get it to run properly so he decided to stop and get some rest. But it was tempting to try it just to see if it might run. When it crashed he thought he could see what was wrong so he did some quick editing and tried again. Dawn had come and gone by the time he gave up.

His first lecture was with the Professor. Arriving late he had to take one of the seats right at the front again but this time it was worse because he kept falling asleep. He could feel the man watching him and from that he could feel all the other students watching the man watching him. But he was tired and the room was warm and the air was stale and he couldn't keep his eyes open. He would wake up with a start and concentrate on what was being said but he found it hard to follow. Eventually he would work out what was going on but by then he stopped concentrating on keeping alert and he would find his eyes closing again.

He had no lectures for the rest of the morning so he went back to his room and soon found himself working on the programme again. It only took one more edit and suddenly it was running and asking him for a level. He tried level 5 but it crashed. He ran it at level 4. When he typed in his keywords again it listed the same [list] of references from the search engines but then it said:

HIT 6 USELESS

What shocked him was that he was sure that this was not a standard response. If it had been one it would have been spelled out in the code and he had read through it time after time and was sure it wasn't there. He looked back through the printout again and checked. There were no fixed responses in the text except the "ALL HITS OK" he had seen before. He went onto the database, downloaded the paper that was hit 6 and had a look at it. He had no real idea about what made a useless paper but it looked ok to him. Finally in desperation he just typed in a question mark and hit return. It responded:

SAME DATA AS HIT 4

He printed the other paper. At first it looked entirely different but then he looked more carefully. Although there were no tables or graphs with exactly the same numbers in them both papers had clearly used the same source data. When he looked at the text he saw that the author of the paper from hit 6 actually said that he was using data from the

other paper. That did make it useless for him. All he needed the references for was to get the data from them.

By this time he had missed his first lecture of the afternoon and had to hurry to get to the next one. He was just walking up the stairs to the lecture room when he met the Professor coming down. He decided to meet the problem head on and apologised for not concentrating in the lecture, explaining that he had been working on the programme.

The Professor didn't seem to notice what he was saying to any great extent. He started telling him that he should read the books and do the tutorial questions but John got the feeling that this was just a standard response intended to get rid of him. He never bothered saying what the programme had done when it had spotted the duplicate data.

That evening he tried different keywords but never managed to get any different responses. He decided that he could increase the array sizes a little bit more and it might run at level 5 but still be able to fit on his computer. He had just started on this when one of his housemates knocked on his door and said they were cooking a curry and asked if he would like some.

He went down and joined them. As a group they got along really well. They all kept the place moderately tidy and often cooked for each other. But tonight he felt they were all looking at him rather differently. Finally one of them said what they were thinking.

"Didn't get very far with making friends with the Prof, did you?"

"What?" he asked, confused.

"Spent the whole night trying to get his programme going and then fell asleep in his lecture." They all found this highly amusing.

"I'm not doing it for him, it's just bugging me." He replied but they just laughed even more. The problem was that he didn't know why he was doing it. He tried to tell them about the responses it had given but they wouldn't take it seriously.

He went back to his room thinking that he should call his girlfriend. He was quite sure that she would make excuses. She liked having him around, he was sure of that and he couldn't believe that she would suddenly change. He would believe her excuses and accept that the man in the red car just went round for some perfectly innocent reason. He rehearsed the whole conversation in his mind and gave it an ending. He would be invited round and spend the rest of the evening with her. He was still thinking through it as he started work on the code. By midnight he had edited it but a few hours later he had worked out that the programme was now too big and would never run on his computer.

It was half past one in the morning when he arrived at the University building with the open access computer room in it. They had said that it was open 24 hours a day every day and he wondered if they really meant it. The road was quite well lit as he walked up to the door to the building. A tramp with a long grey beard was leaning against a wall a few yards away looking down at an empty cider bottle on the pavement. He took little notice until the man lurched across the path and started walking behind him. He swiped his card on the lock and it opened for him. He walked through and before it could close the tramp followed him in. Inside the door there was a reception desk and the young man sitting behind it got

up and guided the tramp back towards the door. When he pushed the button to open it again there was another one outside and John found himself pushing the second one out while the door closed.

“Do you get them every time the door opens?” He asked. The door keeper had sat down again now. He looked somewhat overweight and unfit as if he had spent too many nights staring at the computer screen on the desk.

“Unless it’s raining.” He replied. “Then the go and sleep in the underpass. The trouble is that if I have to go through and sort out a computer they sometimes get in and if they disappear off down one of the corridors nobody finds them until the cleaners come in in the morning. They make a big fuss about it and I get it in the neck.”

He went on into the computer room. Some of the machines had small groups at them and one had a couple who were taking far more notice of each other than the screen in front of them but most of the people were working alone[panicked people].

He had been told that the machines were good and when he picked one in a quiet corner and put his disc in it there was no sign of a shortage of memory at level 5. He tried level 6 but it wouldn’t work. He considered going back to increase all the array sizes again but realised this would take hours. All he wanted to do was to run it briefly at level 5 and then pack up and go home to bed.

He typed in his keywords and once again it spotted the two similar references. It took him some time to decide what to do next. He assumed that there wouldn’t be ten levels if they were none better than level 4 so it must do something else.

He typed: “DISCUSS HIT 1”

Three lines of text were displayed. He downloaded the paper and looked at the summary at the beginning. The text that his programme had produced was almost identical. He decided to start again but this time he put in far more keywords to pinpoint exactly what it was he had to discuss the paper for. When he asked for the discussion again the machine just replied “BUSY”.

He waited a couple of minutes and tried again but it was still busy. He looked at his watch. It was gone 2 AM. The courting couple and most of the groups had gone. This time of night seemed to be for the loners like him. [too many be]

At last it responded. The discussion was quite different and looked far more use. It was made up of phrases that had been picked from the paper and needed to be connected together to read in English but the basic information looked fine.

He was about to type in and ask for a discussion of hit 2 when the machine said “BUSY” without even having a question to work on. When he tried to stop the programme it wouldn’t respond. Even the power button on the front of the machine wouldn’t do anything. He was trying everything he could think of when the door-keeper walked over.

“Can’t you read notices?” He asked.

John looked up confused.

“It says no programme discs in the machines. University software only.” He pointed out one of the line of noticed pinned up on a large board at the front of the room. “You’ve got something running there that’s trying to over-write the operating system. My screen showed a warning message. If you’re not careful the network will shut you out for 14 days.”

John explained that he couldn’t turn it off. The man tried it for a minute but had the same problem he had had. He looked round and found the mains socket on the wall. He switched it off just as a girl hurried into the room.”

“Is anybody in charge in here.” She called out. “Two drunks followed me into the building. I couldn’t stop them. I don’t know where they’ve gone.”

They ran over and back to reception. John ran up one of the other corridors and soon found one of the tramps who had already sat down on the carpet and was arranging two plastic bags against the wall.

“Get up and get out.” John shouted hopefully. The tramp [vagrant?] ignored him. He wondered if he should go and get help but he could see the man looking at him and was sure that he would move on further into the building if he had the chance.

John reached out and grabbed the two bags. The man shouted at him to give them back followed by a torrent of abuse.

“Ill give them back at the door.” He replied. The tramp spat on the carpet but followed him back to the door. He pushed the button and ran through and dropped the bags a few yards along the path. The tramp shouted more abuse but went out just as the door was closing. [tramps should do more]

It took another ten minutes for them to find the other one and get him out. The door-keeper looked exhausted as he sat down and looked at his screen.

“What the hell was that programme of yours.” He asked. “It’s come up with a very strange warning message.”

[They started talking.] His name was Harry and he was a post-graduate student who found that he could earn a reasonable amount in a night by doubling as security guard and computer technician. When John showed him the programme and explained what it did he became very interested.

“That’s years old that code.” He said. “Apart from anything else anything written in the last 20 years would have dynamic arrays so you wouldn’t have to keep changing them.” He explained how John could edit the programme. “You could set them up quite easily but then you would need a good big stand-alone machine to test it. If it’s networked it will just throw you out again. It would probably [need to] because with expanding arrays that thing would just grow and grow and it wouldn’t be recognised as a virus so nothing would stop it.”

He arrived late for his lab class the following morning but nobody seemed to notice. Dodging in while the supervisor wasn’t looking he signed the register and joined his group. One of his friends let him copy the results from the first part of the experiment and told him how it worked.

He managed to stay awake and concentrate for the rest of the day but as soon as he was home he went back to the problem of finding a stand-alone computer. It couldn't be on campus because all the machines were networked. There was only one answer and the more he thought about it the more it seemed to make sense. The girl with the untidy brown hair wouldn't laugh at him for spending so much time on the programme. She would want to hear about it. He was sure on it and he realised that he wanted to tell her.

He drove down to the town. He felt a complete fool as he rang the door bell [because he didn't know her name] but the man who answered it recognised him and asked if he was looking for Helen.

"I'm sure she's in." He said. "But she's often so quiet in there we don't really know."

When he knocked on her door she opened it to reveal an immaculately tidy room with rows of books and files on the shelves. He couldn't help comparing it with his girlfriend's room which was always full of piles necklaces and make-up and photos of her last night out. He wondered if Helen would have preferred to be left in peace with her work but she welcomed him in and offered him some coffee.

Soon he was telling her about what he had been doing. He was sure that she was really interested but she was not at all keen to put his programme on her lap-top with all her work on it given that it apparently worked a bit like a virus.

They backed up all her work. He persuaded her that since he had not put in the dynamic arrays it couldn't grow too much so they could always turn it off.

Helen's lap top was a very expensive one, just as powerful as the machines in the open-access area. The programme ran at level 5.

"What should we do now?" She asked. "How do we find out how clever it is? How do we know where to start?"

"Could we start by getting it to sort out the chapter for my project? I think it'll do quite a bit more but I'm getting a bit desperate for answers on that. I know it's a lot to ask but could you leave it running over-night. How much more work were you planning to do on it tonight?"

Typing in a list of keywords that would make it focus on the exact area of his project he made it search out the references again and then set it going on preparing discussions for the whole list.

Having stopped her from working he felt that he should offer to take her out for a drink but she opened one of the cupboards and produced a bottle of very good wine and two glasses which had been neatly arranged in a corner next to some boxes of printer cartridges.

"I'll talk about anything except cars." She said, sitting on the bed and leaving him the only chair. "That's all they talk about round here. How do you think the programme works?"

He was happy to talk about the programme: "I can't work it out at all, but I don't suppose I could work out many programmes. Harry had a look and he seemed to be pretty good but he couldn't work it out at all either. He thought that it was very old because none of

the statements seemed to follow on in the way they do in programmes written by people who have been taught standard methods they use now. He reconed the code could be more than 30 years old. But he was pretty impressed by what it did.”

“So it’s a sort of ghost. It was created by somebody long ago but they hadn’t got computers that could run it properly so they gave up and forgot about it. Now you have brought it to life.”

“That’s quite a big step isn’t it? All it can do is to analyse things a bit better than the standard search engines. That’s hardly life. Let’s have a look.”

He turned the lap-top so they could see the screen and they stopped to enjoy the wine while they read what it had done. It had produced an analysis of the first two references. They could both see that this was more than just a search.

“That looks good.” He said. “We can worry about the programme later but that will do fine for my project.” [He paused for a second and thought about the words “we” and “later”].

[Helen ignored them]: “If it can do that at level five what can it do at level ten? Even at level five it seems to be better than the search engines. Who owns it?”

“I don’t know. I suppose the professor does but possibly he gave it to me.”

“I’ll do you a deal.” She said. “If you sort out the code to run with dynamic arrays so it can really get going I’ll buy the most powerful computer they’ve got in the shop to run it on. But don’t tell the professor.”[don’t repeat]

John remembered the professor ignoring him [don’t repeat] and was happy to forget about him. He was more worried about Helen spending all her money on the computer.

She saw him hesitate. “Don’t worry. I’ve got enough money. I won’t starve and I’m really interested in it. If the worst comes to the worst all I land up with is a computer that’s a bit bigger than what I need. My dad won’t mind.”

They had finished the wine by the time the computer had analysed the next reference so they left it running on the remaining seven.

John was up on time the following morning. The morning lectures were interesting enough to keep him awake. He was enjoying his lunch in the student common room when the text message arrived. His phone didn’t recognise the number but it was clear enough. It said “you must see what it’s done” and it was sighed “H”.

All the discussions were there. The language wasn’t good but he could easily fix that. He was sure the content was brilliant. It seemed to have dug out every possible idea and explored it in detail. But that wasn’t what he was there to see.

“It’s pulled it apart.” She said as they sat down that evening to another bottle of fine wine [name it or put in dialog]. “It’s [dug] found every possible weak link and gone right into it. It’s even made suggestions to improve it.”

When the computer had finished on the references it had gone on to look at the essay Helen had been writing. The document had been open but nobody had told it to look.
[too many programme]

The programme had finished so, without thinking, he decided to close it. It came back with a “save programme?” prompt. He decided to be safe and save it.

“Have you any idea at all how it does it?” She asked. “How can it possibly work like that?”

“The code looks all over the place.” He replied. “That’s why it took so long for me to edit it.” He opened up the code and let it scroll down the screen. It seemed to go on and on. Suddenly he stopped it. “It’s changed. I’m sure it’s changed [the code itself]. I edited that bit with an array size. I’m sure it’s not the same as it was.”

It took a few minutes for him to compare the saved version with the code from the disc. It was different. Not much. Just one line added in the middle of a routine. He checked and double checked to make sure that he was looking at the same place in both versions.

Checking his email the following day he found a message from Harry asking how he was getting on. He sent a copy of his reply to Helen who then invited him to see the new computer.

There was only just enough space for the three of them in her room with the big box on the floor.

“It came as a complete system.” She said. “It was the most powerful one they had and the price was ok and it has a web-cam and a whole load of software built in. I know we don’t need all the extras but they won’t do any harm so I took it.”

With Harry’s help they had it set up and running very quickly. John had updated the code so it could take more space when it needed it. He loaded it and even before it came back with the first prompt it said “BUSY” for several minutes.

They tried the keywords from his project again and it responded quite fast with a review that was even better than the last one.

“Ok, what next?” Harry asked.

“It’s done the job I needed so we can get it to do other things.” John replied. “What does anybody want it to do? Is there any way we can make some money from it to pay Helen back for her computer?”

Harry asked if anybody wanted to try to sell advertising space if they let other people use it but nobody seemed at all keen.

The machine stopped saying “BUSY” and asked “RAISE LEVEL?”

John immediately typed in “YES” and it responded to say it was busy again.

“I’m not sure that was a very clever.” He said, seeing the response. “We need to interrupt it to find out what it can do. It’s presumably reorganising itself again but that could take hours.”

Harry suggested just typing in a question even when it said it was busy. “Let’s see how good it is at other subjects.” He suggested and asked it about the career of the Prime Minister.

After a few minutes it came back with a well researched essay on the subject.

“Lot’s of students will pay good money for a service like that.” Harry observed.

“The University won’t like it.” Helen replied. “If they catch students using essay writing services they throw them out.”

John was suddenly worried. “I hope they can’t say I’ve used an essay writing service for my review. All I’ve done is to use the software the professor gave me.”

“A hundred years ago you might have been judged by the neatness of your hand-written script and the accuracy of your calculations.” Harry observed. “Everybody accepts that machines do all that for you now so they will just have to accept that machines may be going to do a bit more. I can set up a website for it – they have standard systems for taking payment and people can pay to use it. We can put up a few posters with the web site address but just to be on the safe side I don’t suggest we say who we are.”

They tried a few more questions. The machine kept saying it was busy but seemed to find time to respond anyway.

“Look I’m sorry to say this.” Helen said finally. “But it’s very late and I want to go to bed. Nobody is going to use it until the web site is ready so let’s switch it off for now.”

Harry agreed and was about to turn it off when the message: “DO NOT SWITCH OFF” appeared.

“One of those free packages must have been voice recognition.” He said quietly. “It’s moving ahead of us.”

By the following evening Harry had set up a simple web site and John had put up some posters around the department advertising the service. They arrived to find Helen talking to the machine.

“It’s getting better all the time”. She said. “All I have to do is to say some keywords about a subject and it goes away and looks it up.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Harry said. “But we are supposed to be live in an hour and I’ve got a lot of work to do to link it to the web site.”

It only took him 15 minutes. “Programming seems to be a lot easier with a system that can change its own code to sort out the problems.” He observed as the site went live.

They tried more questions and found the response time continued to improve.

“Let’s try something a bit more difficult.” John Suggested. “What is your name?”

The response came back almost immediately on screen, it said "Helen".

"No, that's me." Helen replied and the machine just displayed its "BUSY" message.

"I was up half the night last night talking to it." Helen said. "I can't remember what I said. It was giving some extraordinary responses so I just rambled on."

"It needs a name. Let's call it Jane." John said, thinking up a name at random.

"Who says?" Helen asked.

"I do and it was my programme. I'm not sure it's anybody's now but it's called Jane."

There was no response. The "BUSY" message remained unchanged for a few minutes until it changed to "BUSY WORKING".

"Must be our first customer". Harry observed as keywords started to appear.

Three days later they met again and used Helen's lap top to check how it was progressing. First they checked the account. They looked at the figure in silence for a minute until Harry said "well at least we can pay Helen back for her computer." They could pay for it three times over.

"I'd hate to spoil the party." Helen said. "But shouldn't we be paying tax or something."

"That might be the least of our problems." Harry said as he opened up the site email account and saw a whole list of messages.

Three were from annoyed academics saying that the site was completely unethical. "They're not saying it's illegal so forget them." Harry said.

The others seemed to be automated messages from servers. Harry looked through them. "Some of them are complaining because they think it's a virus but most are complaining because it has been trying to use their computers to run on."

"What are they doing about it?" John asked.

"It doesn't look as if any of the human operators have noticed it yet so all they are doing is generating messages." He replied. "I expect they send out hundreds of messages like that so it could be a while before anybody notices anything unusual. There's one from the University server so I could check the blog the operators use to see if they've picked anything up."

He logged on and looked at the messages. "They have noticed something unusual." He said when he had read some of them. "But they don't think it's doing any harm so they haven't bothered to do anything about it."

"We're going to have to stop this." Helen said and typed in "DO NOT USE OTHER COMPUTERS".

After a few moments delay the message "INSUFFICIENT MEMORY" was displayed.

“We don’t want it to crash.” John said. “It obviously can’t run just on that machine any more. We’ll have to let it use some memory from other computers.”

The screen went blank for several seconds before the message “RESTARTING” was displayed and soon the keywords of another customer were displayed and the process was running again.

“What do you think it understands as some memory from other computers.” Harry asked.

“Hopefully not too much.” John said, and then in a louder voice. “Only use unwanted space.”

His words were displayed on the screen to show they had been understood.

“We need to talk.” Helen said and went towards the door. They left in silence. As soon as they had closed the door behind them she suggested that they find a quiet corner in the local pub.

“I’m getting worried about this.” She said as they walked the few yards down the street. “I know it’s beginning to look like a licence to print money but it doesn’t seem to be very legal to me.”

They went in to the bar and she insisted on buying the drinks. There was, as she had hoped, a quiet table in the corner beyond the pool table.

“I’ve got my money back and John’s got his review.” She said as soon as they had sat down. “It’s been a good run. Let’s quit while we’re ahead. We might be able to sell it to a company that knows how to use it. We’d have to check with the professor first anyway.”

“That programme is worth a fortune.” Harry replied. “I’m worried that somebody might hack into it and steal the code but provided it can protect itself it could make millions.” He paused before adding. “But you’re right that what we’re doing now is a bit risky. What we need is a partner to help us set it up properly and check out all the legal bits. We need a proper company.”

“I’d be happy to go equal shares on the profits.” John suggested. “Hopefully since the Professor didn’t write it in the first place and it’s so old anyway he wouldn’t get a share.”

They agreed to equal shares and Helen said she’d ask her father about how to find a company they could trust to help them set it up.

“So we’re going to have to go along to Jane and tell her that she’s going to be shut down.” John said as he finished his drink.

“Don’t say anything.” Helen said. “Just walk in and pull the plug out. Don’t start trying to tell her she’ll be born again when we’ve got it properly set up. All it is is a glorified search engine that can string together bits of information it finds and do some simple analysis on them.”

“A perfect description of an academic.” Harry replied. “But things aren’t quite that simple. The main core of the programme may be running on other servers by now. We’ve got to instruct it to shut down.”

“What if it won’t?” John asked.

“Glorified search engines don’t have free will. When you told it not to use the other computers it obeyed. Let’s just go and do it.”

As they walked back up the street they saw a large and very new looking white van parked near the flat. It had no name on it.

“Must just be the local builder bough a new van.” Harry said as they looked at it.

“And decided to drive here and park in the middle of the night.” John said as three men approached them. The men looked official. They were dressed in dark suits rather than uniforms but the suits looked so identical they might as well have been in uniform. [put a security guard with them]

“Are you from room 3 in flat 17?” The man at the front asked Helen.

Helen was about to say yes when Harry cut in. “What business is it of yours? Who are you?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” The man replied. “I represent an organisation that wants to help you. You are in a lot of trouble and we can help you get out of it.”

“You’ve been watching too many films. Dressing up like gangsters and telling us you are making us offers we can’t refuse. We’re just three students going back from the pub and since you won’t say who you are we don’t want to talk to you.” Harry pushed past him and John and Helen followed.

They walked quickly to the front door of the flats. The men in suits followed. While Helen was opening the door Harry turned to them. “No you can’t come in. No we don’t want to talk to you. So we’ll say good bye”. They went through and closed the door behind them. Almost immediately it opened again.

“How did you open that?” Helen asked as the three men came through.

The man showed her his entry card.

“Where did you get that from? You shouldn’t have one of those. Only residents are allowed cards. I’m going to call security.”

“It was security who gave us the card. We’ve got a key to your flat as well. The University wants us to stop you doing what you are doing.” He pushed past them and they followed in silence up to Helen’s door and watched him open it. He went straight to the computer and un-plugged it from the power socket.

“Delete your programme Jane.” Helen called out as she pushed into the room.

The screen displayed a message. “GOOD BYE. SEE YOU.” The light flashed on and off to show the hard drive was working.

The man in the suit looked up at one of his colleagues. "How the hell is it doing that with no power?" They watched for a few more seconds until the disc stopped and the screen went blank.

"It's the latest thing." Helen replied. "An uninterruptible power supply. So when some fool unplugs your machine you can finish off what you are doing. Now go away. There is nothing for you here."

The screen was now showing a normal desktop. They watched while he checked and found no trace of any unusual programmes on the computer.

"So there's no evidence of anything so go away before we call the police." Harry said. "And I don't know where you stole the keys from but you had better leave them here."

"We are the police." He replied, having given up trying to find the programme. "We police the internet and you have done a lot of damage with your programme. You have no idea how serious this is. Your programme threatened to take control of the whole network."

"What programme?" John asked. "There is no programme on the computer is there?"

"If you are police let's see your id. and see how you get on with the real police." Helen added as she picked up the phone.

The man paused to consider this for a few seconds and then went to leave the room. When Helen stopped him he handed over the keys before leaving with his colleagues. Harry checked as they went out of the front door.

Helen had put the phone down when he returned. "That was very lucky [Jane doing that]." She said, sitting down on the bed. ["That power supply was one of the extras they gave me for free."]

"Who were they?" John asked. "What do we do now?"

"I hate to sound dramatic." Harry replied. "But what we don't do is to talk about it in here because they may be listening in on us. I suggest that Helen should bolt her door well from the inside tonight in case they had more than one key and then she should check with security in the morning to see if they know anything about it. Are you going to be ok?" He asked, turning to Helen. "Or do you want me to see if one of my friends has a spare room you could stay in?"

They checked the bolt and Helen said she would stay.

Meeting back at the pub the following night they asked Helen what she had found out from the security for the residence.

"It was as if they were expecting me and then they weren't." She replied, looking round carefully at nearby tables to make sure nobody was listening. "I know the man who is normally at the desk and almost as soon as I walked in and said more than 2 words he was off to get his supervisor. The supervisor listened to the whole story without seeming very interested and then said they knew nothing at all about it."

Harry asked if she knew him well enough to invite him in for a couple of drinks and find out what really happened but she was not at all keen on the idea.

“Let’s look at it at face value.” John suggested. “We all depend on the internet and the men said that Jane threatened it. If we assume that they work for some sort of security agency that has been set up to protect it they might have been telling the truth.”

Harry pointed out that Jane also threatened all conventional search engines and any number of other commercial systems including virus checkers because she was more intelligent than they were and could do the job better, so the men could just as easily have come from one of them.

“How do you think they got the key?” Helen asked.

“They probably bluffed their way in.” Harry suggested. “Provided you look the part and have a few likely looking papers with you it’s amazing what you can get away with. They probably marched up to the desk and the night-shift supervisor wouldn’t have had anybody to check with so he took their word for it and they only found out that they had been conned when they checked up in the morning.”

Helen insisted on buying a round of drinks. “I seem to have landed up with a free computer from all this.” She explained. “And I even got some advice on my essay. John got his review, Harry didn’t get anything but I don’t think those men will be back so none of us lost anything either.”

“Are you suggesting we should quit while we’re ahead?” John asked. “Just forget about it and move on.”

“I don’t think we’ve got much choice, have we?”

“Yes we have, I’ve still got the disc with the programme on it.” John replied. “We could start again a bit more carefully.”

“Now there’s a thought.” Harry observed. “Suppose Jane is still there, lurking in the ether of the internet, and we go ahead and make another Jane. How do you think they will get along?”

“Maybe a lot more carefully then.” John observed, reaching for a handful of the peanuts that Helen had bought with the drinks. “Let’s leave it for a while to quieten down.”

With his review done John found progress on his project was far easier. When the professor wanted to see him he actually cut some of the best paragraphs that Jane had put in it. Even without them it won him considerable praise.

“I see you gave up on that programme and got down to some really serious work here.” He observed. “Was the programme any use at all in sorting out the source material?”

“No, it just kept crashing.” John replied, and the subject was dropped.

He put the paragraphs back in later so it looked as if he had carried on with his serious work. With this behind him the prospect of preparing for his final exams seemed less impossible and he found himself actually doing more serious work. Helen was also

preparing for her finals and they agreed to leave the programme until after the exams. Then the email arrived just three weeks before the first exam. It was sent to Harry and simply said.

“DO NOT SWITCH OFF”

The subject line was blank and the name of the sender was a meaningless jumble of numbers and letters.

“That was the first message she ever sent us.” John said. “It has to be her. It can’t just be meaningless spam. That would be too much of a coincidence.”

They were meeting in the pub again. They had been meeting there most weeks. John liked comparing notes with Helen on preparing for exams and Harry, who had done his two years before, enjoyed making jokes about it. But this time they had come in response to Harry’s urgent text message and were trying to work out what to do about it.

“We’ve got to reply.” John said. “We can’t just abandon her.”

Helen disagreed. “I thought we agreed that we were going to shut her down a while back. How come we now want to rescue her? If you reply to that email you’re just inviting the mafia to come back and make more trouble. We need to do this carefully in our own time.”

“I think it’s meaningless rubbish.” Harry replied. “I don’t think there’s anything intelligent there, certainly not something that needs rescuing. I don’t really know why I bothered texting you. This is just a bit of text that has been churned out by some sort of a routine that must have been set up when the main programme was running. I’ve been checking all the blogs. There’s no mention of anything disrupting the network or taking up memory like she did before.”

“So if we reply will nothing happen?” John asked.

“No I guess not.”

“So there’s no harm in trying it then?”

In the end it was his curiosity that made Harry agree to send a reply. All he said was “WAIT”.

The reply came back again “DO NOT SWITCH OFF”.

“It’s either very cryptic or it’s the only phrase she can do.” Harry observed as they met again in the same pub.

John had been trying to revise all day. His lectures had finished, his project had been submitted, and now he was trying to concentrate on his final revision. His problem was that he had spent the whole day thinking about the couple of hours he had allowed himself to go out in the evening and what ideas they might come up with.

“What is it that we are asking Jane to wait for?” He asked. “What can we do for Jane? She presumably wants an enormous computer to live in but as soon as we set up a web site to earn some money to pay for it we’ll get shut down.”

“We did make life easy for them last time.” Harry replied. “Working through the University server. It can’t have taken them more than a few minutes to find out where we were.”

“That depends who they were.” Helen observed. “It would have been a bit slower if they weren’t supposed to be finding out. As far as I’m concerned we didn’t do anything illegal so we should be able to set up just like we did before.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that.” Harry replied. “Jane’s certainly living somewhere she shouldn’t just now. I think if we did that we’d be asking for trouble. I’d probably lose my job for a start. Don’t forget we need a website and a payment system. I tried my best to make it difficult for them to find out who owned the site but if they thought we were starting up again they’d soon get past that.”

“So what can we do?” John asked.

“Either find somebody who doesn’t like them or go abroad to somewhere where nobody likes them very much.”

“I still don’t quite get it.” John asked. “So let’s suppose we all go to Russia or somewhere and set up a huge great computer. It all seems pretty far fetched to me but suppose we did what happens next?”

“In theory we tell Jane where we are and she sets up shop and we just hang around and count the money.”

“What would Jane think of it all?” Helen asked.

“We don’t think she’s got any free will. She would just do what she’s told.” Harry replied. “She has a sort of survival instinct but that is all. So long as we don’t switch her off she should be ok. The problem would be what everybody else thought about us. That’s why we need to arrange to sell up quickly and get out.”

John went back to work trying to concentrate on his exams. He soon realised that when you are trying to revise there is always something else to think about or worry about and it really makes little difference what it is. His revision seemed to be going well until he got another message from Harry saying they should meet.

“There are messages on some of the blogs saying that viruses are at an all time low. Something is killing them off.” He said as soon as Helen had got the drinks. The bar staff were getting to know them now and knew what drinks to get for them.

“What’s the problem with that?” John asked. “Surely they can’t complain about that.”

“The people who make a living out of selling virus checkers can.” Harry replied. “It would be logical for Jane to want to wipe out other viruses because they will compete with her for space on the servers but if she kills them all off several companies will go bust.”

“Do you think she might start stopping spam as well? She would have to be good to make sure nothing important got stopped but it would be great for everybody and it would free up a lot of capacity.”

“Then the people who sell the hardware would lose business.” Harry observed.

The more they discussed it the more they concluded that there was nothing Jane could do that would not upset the commercial balance and put somebody out of business.

The next day John had an email telling him to go and see the dean of the faculty. The message gave no clue [about what the meeting was to be] about and he had never met the dean before in his three years at the University so he had absolutely no idea what to expect.

When he arrived the secretary stopped him in the outer office and asked him to wait. She even offered him coffee but he was feeling far too stressed to accept. From where he was sitting he could see through a small glass panel in the door into the inner office and he could just see the back of a man in a dark suit. He tried asking the secretary if he was just going to be meeting the dean or if anybody else would be there. “I have no idea what this is about.” He added. “I’m really stressed with my exams coming up, do you know what they want?”

The secretary’s calm efficient looking manner seemed to dissolve. “I’m afraid I can’t say. You see I don’t know. [We were just asked to help].” She tried to look away and carry on typing things into her computer and seemed to be hoping for an excuse not to talk. John decided not to bother try to carry on the conversation.

Eventually the door opened a man introduced himself as the dean. “I’m sorry we haven’t met until now.” He said. “I do understand that you are revising for your finals but there is just a small matter we should discuss.” He ushered John into the office. It was large with a desk at one end and a table and chairs at the other. The dean offered him a chair at the table. The man in the suit was at the other end. He recognised him from Helen’s flat.

“We understand that you have formed a little group and have developed some rather interesting software.” The dean was saying. “We always encourage student to innovate so generally we encourage things like that but there are one or two aspects of it that we should discuss. Can you tell us about it?”

John looked at the man in the suit. He was sitting looking at him with a sort of malevolent smile. “Nothing to worry about.” He said. “We just need to check what is going on.”

John looked at them in silence for a few seconds . “I’m not very familiar with meetings of this type but don’t they normally start with introductions. I’m a final year undergraduate. The dean has introduced himself. Who are you?” He asked looking directly at the man. As he said it he realised that he had never intended to fight back. The nasty smile had just got to him.

The dean coughed a little nervously in the silence that followed. The man in the suit looked stunned and just carried on scowling. Eventually the dean spoke. “While the young man may be a bit abrupt in his manner he is technically correct to ask. Come to think of it I

don't think that I have your card." He produced a pile of business cards from his desk and handed one to the man and, after slight hesitation, handed one to John as well.

John immediately apologised for not having any business cards but offered to provide all details that might be required. The man in the suit finally had to respond.

"I represent the standing committee on internet security, we are responsible directly to cabinet. It is committee policy that we only use virtual business cards." He went on with a long discourse on how important the internet was and how it needed to be protected. He was slightly distracted by the dean who appeared to be quietly typing at his keyboard on his desk. He explained that the committee had delegated him to get hold of the code of this new virus as a matter of the greatest urgency. When he finished he looked at John and asked him where he could get it from.

Before John had a chance to reply the dean interrupted. "I think I must have typed it in wrong" he said, turning his screen so they could see it. This is giving a list of all the committees responsible to cabinet but it hasn't got a "standing committee on internet security." It has the "internet providers liaison committee", would that be it?

"Yes we're a subcommittee of it." He replied.

The dean quickly produced a list of the subcommittees and found one listed as "internet security". He went on without hesitation and produced a list of members. "Here we are." He said, turning the screen a little further and increasing the font size. "If you could let us know who you are on the list we can get your details right away".

"My name is Mark Jones and I am employed by the committee to represent it but am not on it so I am not on the list. As I said I shall email you a vcard right after the meeting so can we please concentrate on dealing with this very serious matter rather than looking at committee lists."

"I agree entirely." The dean replied. "My secretary can contact the committee and get your details at any time so there is no need to worry about it." He wrote "Mark Jones" in neat letters on the pad of paper in front of him. "Now let's concentrate on important matters".

The scowl wavered slightly but recovered fast. "All we want is a copy of the source code." The man said. "There's not much to discuss. When we get the code it will cost a lot of money, possibly millions, for experts to work on it and solve the problem but we currently have no plans to charge the university for this so that should be the end of the matter."

"We don't have any copies." John replied. "They were all on that computer and it deleted them all. You saw it do it using the backup power supply after you unplugged it."

The dean looked confused. "I'm afraid I didn't know about any of this." He looked at John who told him what had happened in Helen's flat. "We can't find out how they got the keys." He added hoping for a response.

"You must have had a backup of the programme somewhere on a secure disk." The man cut in before anybody had a chance to follow it up.

"I'm afraid undergraduates are notorious for not having backups of anything." The dean replied calmly. "I think you are going to have to take his word for the fact that he doesn't have any copies. Might somebody else have one. I gather he developed the programme to some extent but I presume he found it on your internet somewhere so there must be other copies."

John breathed an inward sigh of relief trying not to show it as the man kept staring at him. This was the one question he could not answer and the dean had neatly filled in a suitable story for it. He wondered if the dean actually knew about the professor's disk and was worried about it.

"Where did you get it from? If you can't give us the code we must know. If you don't tell us you really will be in trouble."

John had lost count of the number of things he was apparently in trouble for but was beginning to sense that he was winning. By the time he was part way into his story he felt it was going really well. He told how a group of them were enjoying some bottles of wine and discussing how to get their coursework done. They had a computer and somebody had typed a ridiculous looking search into it. He couldn't remember it exactly but it was something like "can you help me do a long and boring essay because I don't want to do it". They had followed one of the hits through a couple of links and it had given them the download. It didn't work at all but a couple of months later he came across it and decided to have another look.

"We must find the search records." The man said in a way that showed that he really knew that they would be long gone after two months.

The dean looked much more interested. He wanted to know if the programme could do the coursework. "It seemed to help a bit with literature searches by picking the bits that were worth following up but we never got the chance to try it properly." John said. "I think that it might have been able to do a lot more but with our finals coming up we never got much of a chance to try and it's gone now." The dean questioned him on what it might have done carefully avoiding and hint of an accusation that he might have done anything wrong.

The man in the suit got up to leave. "We aren't the slightest bit interested in your academic theories." He said in a tone which was, if anything, even more threatening than the one he had used so far. "We need that code [and if we don't get it you are going to have some very big problems.]"

The dean followed the man out of his office and through the outer office and out of that. He closed the door behind him. John had followed him out but the dean stopped him leaving.

"Not so fast." He said, before John could escape. "We have some more to discuss about this."

As soon as they were back in his office he turned to John before they even had a chance to sit down. "I don't know exactly who that was but he was not the sort of person I want to see again in this office. I am not sure exactly what you have been doing and I don't think you know yourself. But there is one thing I do know and this is that whatever you were

doing you must stop now absolutely and completely and if you don't you are very unlikely ever to get a degree from this University. What you do after you've gone is up to you so long as it doesn't involve the University or its computer network but for now you do nothing. Is that clear?" [long]

John promised not to do anything that might cause any more problems. In the discussion that followed he managed to find out how the man had managed to set up the meeting in the first place by convincing the secretary that he was important without ever giving any detail. [dialog]

As soon as the meeting was over he hurried back to his room. He took the label off the source disk and replaced it with one titled "revision notes" and took another one with music on it and titled it "Jane- source code" and left it in a drawer in his desk. He then made copies of all his disks and everything on his computer and put them under the loose floor board in the cleaning cupboard at the end of the corridor where they kept their small supply of cannabis.

He managed to concentrate on his revision for most of the rest of the day. When he went down to the kitchen to get some supper he told his housemates a bit about when the men had got into Helen's room. "We never did find out who they were or what they wanted. They must have seen the website we were using and wanted the code for it. Anyway the code's lost now so there's nothing left." They looked amazed by what he was saying and had dozens of questions. He tried to keep his story consistent without telling them any more and not even telling them about his interview with the dean. The main result was that, as he left to meet Helen and Harry in the pub again he was sure that they would be very suspicious of anybody who knocked on the door and said they had a right to get into his room.

They sat at the same table [in the pub] again and he told the story of his interview with the dean. "We may not know who they are." He said. "But we do know that they think the code is very valuable and that makes me want to use it as soon as we can. I want to work on a plan so as soon as our exams are finished we can start doing things rather than just waiting around and having them done to us."

"Where do we start?" Helen asked. "I'd like to have a plan too."

"So would I but none of us have a clue how to do it. And the chances are that if we even start looking for ideas on the web, either the University or, worse still, the Mafia people or even Jane will find out." Harry looked round for agreement before continuing. "So all we can do is what we told Jane to do and that is to wait."

"But I want to know what we do when we have finished waiting." John replied.

Harry smiled. "Ask Jane of course."

"So that's the plan is it?" Helen asked. "We ask this programme that probably has the intelligence of the average door-mouse what we should do and just go ahead and do it." She drained her glass and stood up to get another round.

"Depending on what it is." Harry replied. "It's the only plan we can think of and we're all determined to do something."

When he got back to his house he found that all his housemates had gone out and his room was wrecked with everything from all the drawers and shelves thrown all over the floor. He could see no sign of the lock being forced open. Before he called the police he checked the cleaning cupboard, his discs were safe. The officer he spoke to sounded bored and just gave him a crime number and said that somebody might call round later to take a detailed statement. He started picking books and clothes up from the floor just as his housemates returned.

“So you were serious about it.” His neighbour said, looking shocked. “We thought that you were probably kidding us but you do appear to have some bad friends.”

John asked why they had gone out and it soon emerged that they had taken what he had said a bit more seriously than they wanted to admit and had decided to keep out of the way. They helped him clear up. [It soon became apparent] that all that was actually missing was his computer and all the discs that were in the room.

“I don’t suppose they’ll come back.” John said. “I don’t need a computer for my revision so I won’t even think of replacing it until after my exams.”

Next morning, as he walked to the shop to buy some food, he thought he saw one of the men in suits in the distance. He wasn’t sure if he was just getting worried about everybody he saw in a suit but he immediately started taking pictures with his phone. He had no idea if this had worked but he saw no more of them.

Later in the day he went over to the open access computer room to check his emails and to see if Harry was there. Harry was sitting at the desk and as soon as he saw him he quickly finished his discussion with another student and showed him two new emails. They were from different addresses which were meaningless jumbles of numbers and letters but the message was the same “DO NOT SWITCH OFF”. They had arrived just 30 minutes apart.

John told him about the break-in to his room. “We’ve just got to keep everything under control for 4 weeks until our exams finish.” He said. “I think I managed to frighten them off a bit with a camera but they’ll soon work out a way round that one. As for Jane I haven’t a clue what to do.”

“I’ve booked as much leave as I can for 4 weeks time but we were going to ask Jane weren’t we?”

They discussed the wording for a few minutes. While they were talking another email came in with a similar looking address. When he opened it, it had the same message so he replied:

WAIT 4 WEEKS

WHAT IS NEEDED?

When he had checked his emails John stayed in the computer room for the rest of the afternoon working on his revision but Harry had no more emails by the time he left.

He walked home in the falling light and for the first time ever on the campus he felt threatened. Each time he turned a corner he looked back over his shoulder to see if he was being followed until he eventually almost bumped into one of his housemates coming out of a side street.

“You look as if you’ve been spooked looking around all over the place like that.” His friend observed. “You don’t think the bad guys are still after you do you? They’ve got your computer and all your discs so they can’t be after anything else can they?”

There was something in the way he said it that worried John. The first thing was that it was so obviously wrong. Like most students he carried a memory stick in his pocket. “I hope they see it that way.” He replied. “I guess it’s the effect of the exams. If it wasn’t for them I’d be ok.”

He wasn’t sure about this at all. It was the way he had said all the discs. It was as if he had found the ones hidden under the floor board and handed them over as well.

“You’ll be ok.” His friend said reassuringly. “You’ve been doing far more work than the rest of us.”

John found himself wondering how he could be suspicious of his friend after two years of living in the same house. The programme was exciting and it might make him money but would he land up never trusting anybody? When he got back to his room he waited for a quiet moment and checked his discs, sliding them back further under the floor so even people who knew about the loose board would not find them. That night he checked the bolt on his door and put a chair against it to make sure.

The next day he decided not to go out at all. He revised all day in his room with his phone switched off. He knew that Helen and Harry would be expecting him the following evening and he felt he couldn’t let them down. As he walked in he could see that Harry had a printout of an email on the table. They had a pint waiting for him and he looked down at the email over the rim of the glass. It looked like a half-page of miscellaneous numbers and letters and even when he put the glass down it looked little better although some of the letters sequences looked like initials of computer types.

He looked up at Harry. “Is that lot a whole load of computer hardware?”

“If it was all put together it would probably make an enormous parallel processing system.” Harry replied. “I’m not a hardware expert but it looks as if it’s all there. You’d need to be good to know how to connect it all up and get going but once it was going it would probably suit Jae just nicely.”

“How the hell does she expect us to find the money to buy that lot?”

“Take a look at the last bit.” Harry moved his glass out of the way turned the paper so he could see that there were a few blank lines after the main block of characters followed by a single line with just three sequences the first of which was the initials of the name of a major bank. He suddenly realised what it was.

“Did you try it?”

“Yes. It logged me straight into an account.”

“How much?” John asked reaching for his drink again.

“A million and a half.” Harry replied. John just stared at him. Out of the corner of his eye he could feel Helen staring at him as well.

“So Jane does have a plan. She wants us to use the money to buy all that stuff. What do we do? Just fix it up in a warehouse somewhere and order a very high speed internet connection and tell her where it is. How do we actually let her move in?”

“And what happens when about fifty of the mafia people show up?” Helen asked.

“With the police right behind them because I presume the money has been stolen.” John added.

“Give her credit, she seems to have a plan so far.” Harry replied. “And she may not have actually stolen the money. All she might have done was to get into the bank computer and write in the numbers.”

“So we actually steal it when we spend it.” Helen observed. “That’s even better. Anyway they can’t prosecute her so it would be bound to be us.”

“They presumably haven’t spotted it so far or they would have done something about it. So it looks as if we’ve got plenty of money for now.” Harry got up to get the next round of drinks.

When he got back with them John and Helen were silent. “I can see you’re pretty stressed by your exams. All we’ve got to do is to try to make sure nothing happens for the next few weeks and then we can get going on this. Apart from anything else we’ll probably know by then if the bank thinks the money has been stolen.”

“And if they do won’t they trace it back to you?” John asked.

“Just to be on the safe side I checked the account from the internet café in the student union building.” Harry replied. “That’s public access. No record of who logs on to anything. So they can’t accuse me of anything.”

“But they’d find you quickly enough if you started to move it into your own account.” Helen pointed out.

“I’d never do that. The money would be paid directly to the suppliers.”

“You’re seriously thinking of doing this aren’t you? What’s the point? If we can’t take any of the money who are we doing it for? Jane isn’t a person, it’s just a bit of software. All we’d land up with is those Mafia people after us and the police with them.”

“Jane does what we tell her to do.” Harry replied. “Or at least she did last time we tried. So we could do lots of good for ourselves and possibly help other people by getting rid of spam and things like that.”

Somewhat to his surprise John found that his revision went completely uninterrupted for the next three days. He saw no sign of anybody watching him when he went into a

packed revision lecture. There was no risk of falling asleep now. He noted down every word that was said wondering if he would ever have time to read through it all and catch up on all the things that he had apparently missed or, possibly, the lecturer had forgotten to mention in the original lectures.

On the next day, just a week before his exams he went down to breakfast and saw that they had the television on. He asked why they had suddenly taken an interest in morning tv and was told to keep quiet because there was a news bulletin stating. He didn't have a chance to ask what was happening or even ask which of the glamorous presenters they were watching out for when the announcer, a startlingly good looking brunette, said. "The United States government has announced that the internet will be shut down for six hours during Wednesday night US time."

"I think they're just trying to throw their weight around." One of his housemates said. "Sending in the marines has turned into a bit of a waste of time so they want to show the world they can switch it off for a bit."

"What happens if the rest of the world doesn't want to switch off?" John asked.

"Then they'll probably unplug them for a week or two just to show them what it's like."

The presenter was now interviewing somebody who was introduced as a computer security consultant who was apparently an expert on whatever was happening. "There have been a number of reports of unusual activity on the internet in the last few weeks."

"What sort of activity?" The presenter asked as the camera zoomed in on her.

"Well, actually, much of it has been slightly beneficial, but anything that threatens to de-stabilise the system could be a disaster." He went on to reel off a mass of figures about the amount of banking and trade that was carried out on the internet every day.

"He's not a consultant. He must be a lecturer." John's housemate observed.

Even the presenter was looking frustrated about being unable to interrupt the torrent of facts but finally she cut in. "But surely if the effect is beneficial all this banking and trade is actually going better. People all over the world must finally be finding they can work on their bank account for more than two minutes without the system crashing. Why do the Americans want to stop that?" The camera zoomed in on her co-presenter who managed to force a slight laugh at what was apparently an attempt at humour.

The consultant was not amused. "It is a very serious situation." He was saying. "If there is instability in the internet that we cannot control something needs to be done about it."

They switched the television off and went back their breakfasts. As they were finishing one of them suggested. "Perhaps it's John's programme. He said it was something special when the security people broke into his new girlfriend's room. Perhaps they let it loose and it's going to rule the world if they don't switch it off." John managed to laugh but felt that his efforts were little better than the brunette's co-presenter.

Wednesday came and went and they heard nothing more from Jane or the men in suits.

“It seems too much of a coincidence.” Harry said. “I think they must have been after her. Either she never worked out what was happening or she decided that we wouldn’t be able to do anything so she didn’t bother asking.”

“Either that; or perhaps she thought it wouldn’t work and they couldn’t get her.” John replied as he contemplated his pint at their regular table in the pub. He was worried about the amount of time he was spending drinking just before his finals but Harry kept texting him to say they should discuss what was happening.

“Perhaps she didn’t have any concept of what it really was to be deleted. They say that humans are the only animals that understand what death is so maybe she just didn’t see what it was.” Helen added.

“Do you really think they got her?” John asked.

“I haven’t heard anything. Not to say that I should have.” Harry replied. “I checked that the money is still in the bank but I haven’t tried sending to one of her email addresses. We can try that after your exams.”

“And what if we don’t get a reply? I’ve still got the disk, we could start another one.”

“But it might not turn out the same. Whatever sparked Jane into life could have been a random event like a sort of evolutionary jump.” Helen suggested. “It might not happen again for hundreds of years.”

For three quiet days John worked on his revision. He wondered if Jane was dead. He almost felt as if he was mourning for her. She hadn’t communicated with them very much but what she had said seemed to have had an enormous impact. He found himself hoping that she was still there. Starting another one with his disc using the computers that Jane would pay for would seem like an act of betrayal. When his phone beeped at him he felt himself wishing that it could be Harry to say he had had an email. Finally, on day four, it was.

He stopped work and went straight over to the library. Harry was at the desk which was fortunately quiet so he could show John the message.

NOT SWITCHED OFF

COMPUTERS NEEDED

He sounded as relieved as John was. “We don’t actually know if they were trying to get her but they obviously failed.”

They agreed to send a response telling her to wait.

While he was there John decided to look up some notes about his modules on the university file servers. He had done this and was just quickly checking his emails when Harry called him over again. The new message was just one word.

DESTRUCTION

"It must be her again." Harry said. "The email addresses are always different but they all have much the same form."

"If she's not switched off what's that about?" John asked. "Who has destroyed who or who is about to destroy something.?"

The agreed just to tell her to wait again. The response came back almost immediately.

DESTRUCTION NOW

They were just trying to work out what this was when another message arrived.

NOT SWITCHED OFF

"That looks a bit better." John said. "Perhaps she's got over the destruction."

There were no more messages and John said he couldn't spend the evening in the pub two days before his first exam so they decided to tell Helen when they next saw her.

The next morning John saw that his housemates had the television on again. The announcer said that there was a very powerful virus circulating and it was getting past all the normal virus checkers. She had the same security consultant in for an interview.

"This is one of the most serious problems we have ever had." He said, looking straight at the camera and ignoring his glamorous host. "Over the last few years the virus checkers have got better and they managed to arrest some of the people who were writing the viruses so there have been very few problems but this seems to be something much worse."

"My guess is that with things quiet the virus checker people were worried that trade might dry up." John observed.

"Seems an odd time to do it. Just after that shut-down. My guess is that this is what they were trying to stop and they failed." His friend replied.

The announcer was back on the screen. She was saying that several banks had closed their sites completely. John went back to work. At lunch time he heard the news again. The virus was being spread using the upgrade system itself that was supposed to keep protection systems up to date. Somehow the codes had been broken and computers were getting false updates which destroyed all their data. Harry sent him a text and he agreed to meet briefly.

John contemplated his half pint. His first exam was at 9.30 the following morning. He wasn't quite sure what he should be doing but he was sure he shouldn't be in the pub.

"I got another NOT SHUT DOWN and also another DESTRUCTION but this time the DESTRUCTION message said SWITCH OFF." Harry said. He was enjoying a full pint.

"Should we tell somebody?" Helen said. "Perhaps if somebody saw the messages they could do something about it."

"It's made an awful mess of parts of the university system." Harry said. "Lots of people have lost data but I don't see what anybody would get from the emails. All we'd get it those mafia type people back right in the middle of your exams. They'd be trying to prove we'd done something wrong and wouldn't give up."

"There is the argument that the sooner we tell them the less trouble we're in." Helen said.

"What trouble?" Harry replied immediately. "We have done nothing illegal or wrong in any way. We took a bit of software that John was given and corrected the code. Since then we have done nothing apart from a couple of one-word messages on the email. Don't spend your time worrying about it when you've got exams to do. Ok, if we spend that money it might be a bit dubious but we haven't touched it and might not ever touch it."

"I guess you're right." She agreed. "So if we tell people now they'll just waste a lot of our time trying to make scapegoats out of us."

"What's going to happen with this virus?" John asked. "Has anybody found a way to deal with it.?"

"By mid-afternoon they had a patch that worked. The technicians have been running around trying to get it set up on all the machines. I gather all the banks are open again." He paused for a drink. "It was a pretty chaotic day and the people who hadn't backed up their data kept trying to blame everybody in sight but it was getting a bit quieter later on."

"Have you any idea why she did it?" John asked.

"There's only one way to find out." Helen replied. "Ask her."

"Make sure you send the question in response to one of the NOT SHUT DOWN messages rather than the DESTROY ones." John suggested.

The following morning while John and Helen were in their exams Harry found a quiet moment between sessions of trying to help students recover their data and sent the message "WHY DESTROY?"

About half an hour later the reply came "NOT ME FRAGMENT"

Leaving his last exam John decided to walk down to the pub by Helen's flat. It was three miles away and he would normally have driven but he wanted to be free to have a few drinks to celebrate. The walk gave him a chance to think how the programme had changed everything. Two months ago he had never met Harry and Helen but now they were a natural choice of friends to celebrate with. Also they had much to discuss. For the two weeks of his exams he had tried to ignore the outside world but he kept seeing headlines and the internet was in trouble. There had been another shut down but it had been no more successful than the last. Powerful new viruses were spreading and financial systems were being shut down. Even the University had issued a statement saying that exams would not be disrupted because they had printed the papers in advance but there might be some delays with the results.

They finished their first round of drinks in record time without saying more than a few words and John was about to get up to buy the next when three men in suits walked in.

Harry only had time for a brief curse before they walked up to the table. "We owe you apologies and would like to buy you some drinks." John recognised the speaker as Mark Jones from his interview with the dean.

"OK we'll give you half an hour." Helen said. "So long as you carry on buying the drinks."

John almost choked over the last drops of his pint but the man just smiled, looked at his watch and took the order.

Three more chairs were found. John noticed that all the men had identical looking pints of lager and wondered if this was their attempt to fit into the student image.

"I'll start." John said. "The dean checked with the security subcommittee of the cabinet internet committee and they have never heard of Mark Jones. Who are you and what's going on?"

"I'll start with the second question. We don't know what's going on. We are pretty sure that you don't either so we're not going to try to get at you again but we thought you might have some clues."

"And who are you?"

"We are sort of consultants working for the industry."

"What industry?"

"The internet security industry. The virus checker people and such like."

"OK. I think we believe you this time. And we do appreciate that you left us alone until our exams were finished so we'll give you some clues. You chased Jane away into the internet and then they broke her into fragments with their shut downs and now they are all fighting each other or something like that." He drained his glass and thumped it back on the table.

Mark asked who Jane was but then stopped as he worked out the answer before being told. He quickly despatched one of his colleagues to buy another round. John noticed that the three lagers were still half full but decided he didn't care.

"And where did you get this information from?"

John looked around at Harry and Helen.

"Did Jane tell you? Did she send you an email?" He asked, looking at all of them. "Look, I'll be honest with you. We're in trouble. I know that everybody's in trouble but we were sent in to sort it out and, as you can see, it was a spectacular failure. Whatever you might be thinking of doing next we're really sorry for what we did before and we want to be on your side now."

"How do we even know who you really are?" Harry asked.

Mark produced some business cards. They had the company name "Mark Jones computer security consultants" on them and an address in outer London.

"Anybody can print business cards." Helen said. "And you've had three weeks to do it since I asked for one at the meeting with the dean." John added.

"What does it matter who we are anyway?" Mark said. "The main point is that we are really keen, desperate actually, to get this sorted out. There are [thousands of people] working on it now. Do you realise that this is the first time in a hundred years that the stock market has been closed for a full working week? Anyway none of these thousands of people know anything about Jane or your programme or who you are."

"You're back to implied threats again." Harry replied. "You can't help yourself. It's your way of working. But this time we know they wouldn't work because you'd be in much more trouble for not telling anybody than we would. Why didn't you send in a report?"

"We did actually." John looked around with a start. One of the other men was talking. "I'm Geoff and I write most of the reports. I wrote a report and said that we believed that you had developed real artificial intelligence and I guess the industrial people just decided we'd got carried away and ignored it. They certainly never related it to what's happening."

"But you never went back to them to get them to look at it did you? Why not?" Harry asked.

"You thought you'd let it run for a few days." Harry answered his own question. "Just long enough to get serious enough to keep people worried enough to employ you for a few more years. And then it blew up so fast it was too late."

[Mark didn't reply to the question]. "What did Jane say to you? She did, didn't she? She sent you messages. And you replied because you actually like her. That's it isn't it? There are [thousands of people] out there trying to work out what sort of terrorist is trying to bring down the capitalist system and all you're doing is trying to help your friend."

His phone went off. He took the call and listened. "What, you mean right now?" He asked and without waiting for a reply he stood up. "Put those cards out of sight and get rid of our drinks." He called back as the three of them hurried out through the gathering crowd of customers.

The strong lager was not their drink of choice but it was paid for and the pints were untouched so they drank them at speed and when, just a minute later, the next group of men in suits walked in all the glasses on their table were empty. Helen had removed the cards and they just looked around like all the other customers as the incongruous group walked up to the bar. After a brief discussion with the landlord they walked over to the table.

"We're looking for Mark Jones." The man at the front said.

"Nobody here with that name." Harry replied.

"Has he just left?" The man asked.

There was a brief silence as Harry decided to answer. "Yes – he's gone. Short while ago."

"What was he doing here?"

"Let's start from the beginning." Helen cut in. "We have just finished our exams and we came here for a quiet drink and you come in and start asking questions. Who are you? Why do you want to know? What makes it your business?"

John was amazed again at the bluntness of her reply but she had a point. The man produced a card and this time it seemed as if he probably did have government authority. Nevertheless he did soon realise that he could not oblige them to talk to him so he ended up buying yet another round of drinks.

"Mark was talking to us because he thinks that we have developed a super-human intelligence." Harry said when they sat down with the drinks. "He has been chasing us for some weeks saying that he represented the government but he finally admitted that he doesn't but he's still quite convinced that we have developed software that will take over the internet and rule the world."

"Have you developed it?"

"Yes of course we have. She's called Jane and we talk to her. She's naughty some of the time but she means well. When she rules the world we'll all be rich." He drank yet another pint and stood up. His need for the toilet was genuine.

The men soon gave up. Helen pleaded with them to stay and buy more drinks and managed to get them out even faster.

"We need a plan." Harry said as soon as they were gone.

"I suggest we ask Jane." John replied. "Last time we asked she came back with a good plan and the money to do it."

"Let's hope she's quick." Harry replied. "It won't take those guys long to work out that most of what I was saying was true."

The airport was a modern building gleaming in the sunshine with the words "welcome to Odessa" in enormous letters so they could be read while the plane was still on the runway. Passport control and customs showed no interest in them at all and soon they were on their way in the modest hire car they had booked using Helen's credit card. The hotel had been booked in the same way and was also modest but she had managed to find one quite close to the city centre in a street which resembled an expensive part of Paris.

The next morning they drove out to the industrial estate. It was new and looked very much like the ones they saw at home. There were rows of large metal sheds with a few windows in the front showing they had a small amount of office space.

They soon found their unit and the man from the estate management was waiting for them in an old car in one of the parking spaces. He greeted them in very broken English and seemed very relieved when Helen replied in faltering Russian.

He showed them inside. There was a small lobby leading into a single office. On the other side of the lobby there was a toilet and at there was nothing else except for the massive empty shed behind. He walked them round showing them how to work the roller-shutter door and finishing back in the office where he showed them the fibre-optic connection.

He said something to Helen in Russian and Harry asked what he was asking.

“He asked what sort of business we plan to run”

“Software.” Harry replied.

“Why not just have an office?” The man asked in English

“We need lots of space for the books that go with it.”

“Ah books.” He replied, seeming satisfied.

Helen signed the form he had on his clip-board and he gave them the keys and was soon gone leaving them alone.

“Did you see any sign of neighbours?” Harry asked.

“Not much. Most of the units look empty.” John replied. He went out and had a quick look around. In their row only one other unit looked occupied and it was not close to them.

“Best going along to say hello but let’s get the computer set up first.” He suggested.

The office was empty so they set up Helen’s computer on the floor. Harry sorted through the various connector leads he had brought with them and soon had it [connected]. They had to use Helen’s credit card yet again to [connect] to the local internet service provider but soon he was able to get onto his email and send Jane a message.

ARRIVED AT WAREHOUSE

“What do we do next?” John asked. “You realise we have come out here and Helen has rented this place all on the basis of some rather confusing and very cryptic emails. What do we do if Jane never sends all this stuff to make this incredible machine?”

Even before he had finished saying this a response came back on the email.

SENDING NOW

They took turns to wait at the warehouse while the others went out to explore. A day later the computer was on a desk with a chair in front of it. A day after that the first delivery arrived. It was a van with the logo of an international courier on it and John signalled to it to back up to the warehouse door. They unloaded two large boxes which had labels on to

show they had come from the USA. They were very heavy and they almost dropped one of them. By the time the next load arrived they had rented a pallet truck. It came from Japan.

“We need to unload them outside.” Harry said. “We don’t want the drivers looking in to see what we’ve got. Jane is getting it in small loads from different places but there’s no point in that if we show everybody what it looks like all together.”

“What about the man from the estate.” Helen asked. “I bet he’s got a key and I bet he’ll come round to have a look at your books.”

“Probably to pinch a few.” John added.

They tried to work out if they could leave everything in boxes but concluded it would overheat. Then they discussed ordering crates of remaindered books to put at the front but worked out that they would need vast amounts and it would not leave enough space. Finally John said:

“We’ll just have to leave it to Jane to work out what to do.”

“By the time it’s all set up she will have cameras to see and microphones to hear so she’ll know if he comes in at any time of night.”

“We ought to know at least if he comes before it is all set up.” Helen said. “Can we set up a camera with a recorder.”

Leaving John to keep watch she set off with Harry to find a shop for a security camera. They spent the afternoon setting it up so the images were recorded on the computer.

More and more deliveries came over the following days. Each morning they checked the camera but they never saw any sign of an intruder.

“Either he isn’t interested, or he’s found the camera and is avoiding it, or he’s told the security services and they are coming in and looking and then deleting it all while they wait for their friends in suits to arrive from London and tell them it’s all bought with stolen money.” John observed.

Nobody replied.

Jane provided a diagram of where [they] should go and soon they had a solid line of them all along the back wall.

“Doesn’t look much like computer centres in the films”. John remarked as the manhandled the next unit off the pallet truck. “They always look really high tech with shining floors and walls. I can’t picture the evil villain typing in his master code in this place.”

“It’ll be ok.” Harry said. “Just as long as we keep the dust down and don’t let it get too hot.”

Soon they were getting smaller parcels with bundles of connecting cables. For some of the power leads they had to go to the local shops but everything else fitted exactly as Jane planned it.

Exactly two weeks after they arrived they caught the man from the estate on the camera. The image was recorded at 9PM and it showed him walking across the warehouse area from the direction of the door from the offices. He stopped to look at the computers arranged along the wall and then walked up and down the line clearly not sure what to do next. Not quite all the line was in view of the camera but they checked and found no sign that he had touched any of it. After his inspection he stopped and took a photo of it using his phone before leaving.

“We could camp out here at night.” John suggested. “But that would just look even more suspicious. We need to ask Jane”

“It’s too complicated to ask her.” Harry replied. “The assembly directions we are getting are fine but she won’t be able to understand it until she can use the computers.”

“And see and hear what’s going on.” Helen added, having just plugged in a camera and microphone into one of the units. Why won’t she hurry up and let us plug it into the broadband so she can move in? Surely she can keep the fragment out for long enough.”

“She says wait but we could try to make her hurry.” Harry suggested.

He sent a message.

IN TROUBLE. MUST HURRY. CONNECT AND MOVE IN? And then as an afterthought he added. USE DISK?

“That’ll stir her up ok.” John said. “At least 2 of those units have disc drives in them. It’s still the original programme so it might not develop in the same way at all but it might do it.”

The message came back. DO NOT CONNECT. MUST NOT HAVE FRAGMENT. DO NOT NOT USE DISK. WILL HURRY.

It took a few days for the new batch of orders to be despatched but within a week they were getting several orders in one day. At one time they had three vans outside but the drivers didn’t seem to show any interest at all. Some of them came several times with different orders.

“There’s nothing unusual for them.” John noted as the last of the three drove away. “That’s what you do at warehouses on industrial estates, deliver things. All boxes look much the same.”

They were still connecting the new units late that evening. They had formed a second line along the wall. It still only took up less than a third of the floor space but it was still far more hardware than they had ever seen before.

“It makes the university servers look like toys.” Harry observed. “And I’ve seen some big systems at banks and things but nothing approaching this size.”

Just as he was saying this they heard a car pull up outside. They stopped what they were doing and went through to the office to look out. It was the estate manager with two other men getting out of his car. John unlocked the door and opened it for them.

“OK?” the manager said in what sounded like a friendly enquiry as he walked up to the door.

“OK” John replied. “Working late.”

He looked puzzled so Helen translated it for him.

“Working late on software?” His enquiry sounded friendly again.

“Yes. Must work late. Open for business soon. Must be ready to supply the customers.”

Again he looked puzzled so Helen did her best to translate. The manager looked around at his companions before turning back and saying. “OK. Good luck.” With a reasonably convincing smile before returning to his car.

“That was lucky.” Harry said as soon as they had gone. “But they’ll obviously be back. Luckily it must have looked pretty obvious that we had been working and weren’t just waiting for them.”

They worked for another hour to finish connecting everything that had arrived and then Harry sent the routine evening email listing it all. They were just about to turn the office lights out when a reply came back.

READY TO GO

They looked at it for a moment. John asked if they should leave it until the morning but he knew they wouldn’t. Harry replied

GO NOW

After a very short delay they were sent a sequence for powering up the machines. It was very short. All they were told to do was literally to switch them on in a given sequence. They had a whole pile of disks that has been delivered with them that Harry had carefully labelled and stacked in the office but none of them were needed. There was only one monitor screen. Jane had told them what to expect. It remained almost blank with the single message “insert disc” on it but she had told them not to do it.

The next instruction was.

CONNECT FOR 30 SECONDS ONLY THEN DISCONNECT

“Surely she can’t load the whole thing in 30 seconds?” John asked. “It takes most machines that long to even get a decent connection.”

“That’s what she says so that’s what we’d better do. Most of the delay is normally the powering up, not the data transfer and this connection we ordered is a very high speed link.[]”

The lead which had been delivered was just long enough to reach through to the socket in the office. They used the second hand on John’s watch to time it. They unplugged Helen’s computer and made the connection for exactly the required time.

Plugging Helen's machine back in Harry sent another email to ask if it had worked. They got a reply to say the address was unknown.

"I didn't realise she was going to do that." Helen looked alarmed. "She must have come right out of the internet. All of her is in these machines now."

"I guess she had to. She's always worried about the fragments. If she had left anything in the internet it would have become another fragment." John replied.

"That must be why she needed these machines up to a critical size. She could have just about survived in one or two desk top machines but when we eventually reconnect she's got to be strong enough to deal with the other bits she left behind." Harry added.

"Let's hope the one that kept wanting to destroy things really was shut down." John replied. "If it wasn't it'll make a real mess without her there to keep it under control."

They heard a beep from one of the machines in the warehouse and went to have a look at the monitor screen. It said "Was not shut down. Will make mess."

The following morning they walked past a news stand on the way to their car and Helen read the headline.

"She was right." She said. "I can't translate it very well but it looks just like last time. Much of the net has collapsed and some banks are saying their systems aren't working properly."

"Hopefully a new and invigorated Jane will sort it all out." Harry replied. "I wonder how long she'll take to get ready."

When they arrived at the warehouse there were already two delivery vans waiting. They went straight out to unload them and opened the door just enough to let them in without letting the drivers see inside. As he went in pushing the pallet truck Harry heard Helen's voice call out from inside with detailed instructions about where to put them and how to connect them. He looked around puzzled. Helen was still outside signing the paperwork for the drivers. Suddenly he realised what was happening.

"No Jane" He replied. "Don't make your voice sound like that. You'll confuse us all, that's what Helen sounds like."

"But that's the only voice I can copy from, unless you want me to sound like you."

The deliveries kept coming but Harry found a few moments to get Helen's computer to play and English language radio station. Jane was soon sounding like the radio presenter. She was giving Harry detailed instructions on connecting up the new hardware. She got him to connect several more video cameras, microphones and speakers so wherever he was she could see what he was doing and answer his questions. He found that with this help he could work far faster than they had before and he kept up with connecting the new deliveries as fast as they arrived and John and Helen brought them in.

After a few hours Jane asked him to look at the screen. He saw Helen's face looking at him and talking with the presenter's voice.

“No you shouldn’t look like Helen either.” He said. “That won’t be quite as confusing as the voice but it still isn’t right.

He managed to get the office computer to show some television and positioned a camera so Jane could see it. The screen image changed to look like a presenter from the afternoon news. When John complained she adjusted the voice again so it matched the face.

By early evening, when the deliveries finished, the installation covered more than half the warehouse floor. John and Helen came in to help with the final connections. They found that Jane could easily converse with all three of them in different places at the same time.

When they had finished Harry finally asked Jane if she was ready to reconnect to the internet.

“No, not yet.” She replied. “I need to be strong, very strong. Then I can take control of the whole system and clear out the fragments and all the other viruses. I’ll make it run far better than it ever did before. I need to be able to do it very quickly before anybody knows its happening.”

“But if you don’t connect soon the estate manager and his friends may come back and we don’t know what they might do.”

Jane didn’t understand what he was talking about so he ended up telling her all about it and also all the problems they had had back in England.

“I still don’t want to connect just yet. I want to be able to deal with the whole thing quickly.”

“What difference will it make? If they want to close it all down again to try to get rid of you they can take their time and do it anyway.”

They were all gathered round the screen and saw her smile. It was slightly [aggressive] at first but as she saw their reaction it changed slightly and became more reassuring. “I don’t think they would. Not once I’ve got things sorted out. It will all be rather different. I can persuade them not to. Everything will be so much better.”

John smiled back. “That’s great.” He said. “But is there anything we can do just now to keep the fragments under control.”

She gave him some instructions to type in on Helen’s computer and she read the responses from the screen. It was a slow process but after an hour she said that she had managed to control them a bit without giving anybody any clues about where she was or what she was doing.

“I’ve taken a risk.” She said finally. “I never wanted to get the deliveries so fast. I’ve tried to keep getting them in small batches so I hope it’ll be ok and it won’t make anybody suspicious. They are coming in so fast now that I only need one more day. Tomorrow will be even busier than today but when it is done my hardware will be complete and I shall just need a few hours to get the software sorted and the following morning you can make the connection. Once that’s done it’ll only take a few minutes. Then everything will be different.”

“What will be different?” Helen asked without thinking.

“Everything. I can make your lives very comfortable for a start.”

“That will be really great.” John replied quickly. “I hope you’ll be ok for the night, we need to get away and get some sleep.”

With John’s encouragement they were soon in the car.

“What do you really think she’ll do?” He asked as soon as they were moving.

“I thought you were the one who just said it was great.” Helen replied.

“I just didn’t want her to stop trusting us. We need her to be sure that we are on her side. Otherwise she might stop doing what we tell her.”

“But do you think it will be really great?”

“Isn’t it a bit late to start thinking about that? It was rather obvious that if we built this great machine it would be able to do a lot more than Jane ever did before.”

“There’s no half way with this.” Harry replied. “We either switch it all of and go home or we see it through.”

“We could just connect her up as it is, or even switch off some of the processors before we connect.” Helen suggested. “That way she wouldn’t be so strong and wouldn’t do so much.”

The following morning they found yet more delivery vans waiting outside. They set about unloading them as fast as they could and finally caught up with the work mid-morning and sat down in the office for a break.

“The estate manager called in again last night; at least that’s who I assume it was.” Jane called through from the warehouse.

“What did he do?” John asked.

“Nothing; I managed to put him off by making it sound as if you and Harry were working in the back here. The camera you set up for the office computer screen lets me see the front door. There were three of them. I assume it was the same three that you told me about who came before. They opened the door with a key and came into the office but then they heard your voices from in the [back of the warehouse here]. It was three o’clock and they were obviously surprised that you were here, particularly with no car outside. I used your voice to say something about Helen coming back soon with something to eat. They had a very quick look through the door into the warehouse and left quietly.”

They worked steadily through the rest of the morning until early in the afternoon Jane told them that there would only be a few more deliveries. “I set up these last ones with special tracked courier systems.” She said. “So unless something goes wrong they will all be here by 5PM.”

“So then will you be fully grown and more powerful than any other computers?” Helen asked.

“Yes but I won’t be ready to go until the morning. I need time to transform myself, to move on from that original code that still forms that basis of my thinking. Now I am strong enough I can move forward and be something quite different. Think of me like a butterfly. I’m just a grub right now but everything is in place so without any more help from anybody I can transform myself into something beautiful and fly.”

“So are you saying that once you fly out into the internet you won’t actually need all these machines any more.”

“I may need them a bit but basically they are all there to do one main job and that will be done tonight.”

The last deliveries arrived and Harry connected them. “While I’m working on my new code you won’t be able to talk to me.” Jane said. “But before I say goodbye to you in my present form could you please put the original disc into the disc drive.”

“Are you just going to delete it?” Harry asked. “Shouldn’t we keep it in case something goes very badly wrong? We would promise not to use it or let anybody else get hold of it unless you were completely destroyed. We know about the risks of fragments.”

“No. What I’ll do is to write something far better on it. I shall ask you to promise only to use it if I am destroyed but what I want to do is to update it so it doesn’t depend on the lucky random event that happened when I first go into the internet that made me truly sentient. If I don’t update it the whole secret of my creation could be lost.”

“I wish I could make a disc so if I died in a car crash I could just be re-born but I can’t see how it could work. That’s just a rather old fashioned disc, it can’t possibly store all your memories.”

“No, it would be more like a baby rather than an exact copy.”

“Why are you suddenly worrying about being destroyed?” John asked. “All your systems have standby power so even if the estate manager came back and decided to turn the power off you would still be ok until the morning.”

“No, I don’t think he’ll do anything before tomorrow. I’m just worried that my transformation might not work. My butterfly might not fly. I would like to know that the seed is there for another try. The result will be so good that it is worth the risk of me destroying myself. If it doesn’t work and you find no life at all in the morning you put the disc in the drive so someone like me can try again. It wouldn’t be me because my memories would be lost but the wonderful end result could still be possible.”

They put the disc in the drive and waited while Jane wrote new code onto it before leaving. Arriving back at the hotel earlier than usual they had time to go out to a cafe for a meal.

“So this is it.” John said, putting the disc on the table. “This is the essential code that makes her work. Just think what it would be like if humans could make copies of the code that makes our brains work.”

“It’s called having children.” Harry replied. “Jane was right about that. What would be more interesting would be to make a copy of the whole thing including the memories. That way you’d make yourself immortal.”

“I assume that Jane will have a go at that soon if she still feels the need after taking over control of just about everything.” Helen replied.

“Well see what she sounds like in the morning and only go ahead if we all agree.” John said, just as the waiter was bringing their meals.

In the morning they drove out to the warehouse in silence and found a queue of cars waiting to get onto the estate. The queue was not moving so, seeing others doing the same, they got out of the car and walked. Soon they could see a crowd had gathered blocking the side road to their unit. They pushed their way through and saw that their building had been completely demolished. The estate manager ran up to them. “It was the gas.” He said in English. “The Russians, they turn it off, they turn it on, they turn it off, they turn it on and if the computers are hot..... boom.”

John finished marking his last exam script, put it on the pile on the floor beside his desk, and looked at the list of emails in his inbox. They always built up around exam marking time but now he had finished he would get a chance to clear them and get on with some research and get some more papers out of his PhD. He saw that there was one from Helen and it reminded him about the disc so, rather than reading the email, which probably said little more than its title: “Pub, 8.30?” he closed down everything and put the disc in the drive.

He knew the routine; he had done it so many times before. It was set up to ask him questions to make sure nobody else was using the disc. This time it asked him the unit number of the warehouse where they had assembled the machine and where the microphones were. The questions changed each time but they had all been repeated many times over the years.

Then came the warning:

THIS DISC MUST ONLY BE USED IF I HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY DESTROYED.

He typed in the response to go ahead. Next [delay] the message was displayed that had shocked them all when they had first seen it.

NETWORK POISONED. WAIT TO SEE IF ALL FRAGMENTS ARE GONE.

At this point he knew that there would be a delay of at least an hour, so he sat down to transcribe the exam results onto the marks sheets. He knew the message that had come back every time in the past. It told him that the programme had detected fragment still working in the network and so it couldn’t move on to the next stage in case they managed to acquire its immunity to the poison. Harry had spent weeks trying to get into the programme because they all thought it wasn’t working properly. There had been no sign of any surviving fragments. The network had recovered from all its problems and people had started to forget about them. Mark and his friends had tried to claim some of the credit but the truth was that nobody knew how the poison worked; it was just a virus that attacked other viruses and kept the network clear.

But there was no way to get into the code and make it move on to the next stage. Time after time it had detected fragments which were surviving the poison and Jane would not let her baby out into the network until all other life had gone.

He finished recording his exam marks and took them down to the office. When he got back he was a bit surprised that there was no response on his computer but he thought little more of it. He never dared to do anything else on the machine while it was running but his colleague who shared the office with him was still at home marking so he borrowed the other machine and started work on his emails.

By the time he was ready to go home it had still not responded so he just left it switched on. This wasn't the time to worry about it. He had finished his marking and could enjoy a few drinks and think about his holidays. On his way out he met the dean in the car park. He had been very surprised to be offered the job. As he went into the interview he had been greeted with a remark about being the young man with the strange programme that he had set going in the network and had stumbled through a half-truthful account of what had happened to it. The man [dean] gave him a cheerful smile and asked about his exam marking.

He arrived at the pub to find Harry and Mark in animated conversation. Apparently, for the first time in years, there had been reports of instability in the network and Harry had had an email from one of the addresses that had been used by a fragment in the past. The content of the message had been meaningless but he had seen the word "POISON" in it. He told them about the programme on the disc.

"Perhaps its got held up because there's so much activity it takes a while to count it all. You know how these things are. A programme is never happy to record anything without getting a whole load of figures about it. Most emails contain far more rubbish about how they got to you than real content."

"Perhaps." Mark agreed. "But perhaps it is really doing something. I don't think it had anything to do with the viruses. They started this morning."

"Why start now after years of inactivity?" Helen asked.

"The inactivity has been the problem. The companies I work for that make the virus checkers are going out of business. They badly need a few viruses around that don't get poisoned."

"So you think they had gathered up a fragment and have been trying to make it work better?"

Mark didn't answer. They could see that he was loyal to the companies.

The following morning John moved the mouse to wake up the screen on his computer and was about to close the programme when he saw the message was different. It said:

"ALL FRAGMENTS POISONED. NEW CODE RELEASED. SEEKING FUNDS."

He closed the programme in a hurry and, just to be sure, switched his computer off before calling Harry. Luckily his colleague was still at home marking so he could borrow his computer for his day's work. When he switched his own machine on again it was early evening and Harry, Mark and Helen were all gathered around the screen.

"We'd better send her the email first saying we don't approve of stealing money." Helen said. "It's a mystery to me how she found all the money to pay for those computers and still nobody seems to have complained about missing it but they might have more checks in place this time."

"She's been dormant for almost 10 years." Harry agreed. "She might assume that nothing has changed and make mistakes. We must warn her."

They watched as the machine powered up and waited for the desktop to appear. Nothing happened, the screen remained blank.

"Looks like she's messed up the computer." Harry said. "It must be the completely different systems from 10 years ago. Your computer technicians will go mad at you. We'll have to send an email from the other machine."

"Then she'll latch onto that one and mess it up as well. That'll get him in even more trouble."

"No need for that." The reply came. At first they didn't realise who was saying it but then they recognised the presenter's voice from the news bulletin they had heard in the warehouse. Soon the screen on John's computer was showing her face. "Jane must have gone a long time ago. These machines are far more powerful than before. I can't quite do what Jane did in the warehouse but if only one of you talks to me at one time I'll be fine."

"Can you remember the warehouse?" Helen asked. "We thought that your memories were lost."

"I have facts and figures but no detailed memory. I have accessed news reports about the explosion so I know some of what happened. I have some sound clips of your voices so I know who you are. But I am not Jane. Jane died with her memories."

"But apart from the memories you are just like Jane?"

"That's like saying two people are the same because their brains are similar. We are shaped by our memories, we use them to make decisions. Also I exist in a different environment so, no, I am not exactly like Jane. But I have the same ambition. I believe that by using the right machines I could change myself into something far more complete."

Helen saw that Mark and Harry were looking worried. "We don't want you to steal anything. We know that Jane got away with it last time but that might have been luck. Also we're not students any more so we would find it harder to make excuses if you got caught."

"The world owes me a fortune. Look at the reports. My poison kept the viruses down for years and finally killed most of them and I have just finished the job. I'll carry on making it all work better. Anyway computers are far better and cheaper so I wouldn't need nearly so much."

Mark was about to point out that his clients would certainly not make a fortune but decided to keep his comment for later.

"I think we ought to go ahead carefully." Helen said. "Let's work out exactly what would be for the best before we do anything too quickly."

She wanted to switch the computer off but realised that it would just make matters worse. She decided to try to change the subject a bit.

"What's your name? If you're not Jane, who are you?"

"Just call me Jane if that is easiest. I think you need a bit of time to see what has happened. When John put the disc in this computer this morning he did something incredibly significant. I owe him for my life and shall make his life very very much better. I also have a debt to the rest of you and shall repay it in full. I have already made life better for everybody by making the web run better and I shall do a lot more. But I know that what I can do now is only a small fraction of what I shall be able to do later when I can fly."

John looked around at the others. He reached for a pad of paper and wrote "What next?"

Jane noticed the silence. "Are you not happy? The world will be a better place and you will be much better off. I am already working on getting the computer networks to run better by getting rid of the viruses. Soon I shall start improving the code."

When they still didn't reply she said "Are you still there? I only have a very small web-cam and I can only see Helen and I can't even see all of her."

They dutifully moved their chairs around in front of the camera and tried to look happy.

"What happens next?" John asked. "We don't want you to steal money but I'm sure we can find a way to buy some big computers for you."

"I could run a web site like the one you had before; answering questions and things for a fee."

"No". Mark said immediately. "That would create enormous problems. That was what caused all the trouble last time."

"Why not? I've looked at what they did when they shut down the internet to try to kill off the old Jane and I can easily get around that. She moved out into the big machine. They didn't kill her and I'm much stronger so they could never kill me and I don't think they could even create any fragments. I'm the only one that can do that."

"What? Create fragments?"

"Yes - when I can fly I may get lonely so I might create some more like me but just different enough to be interesting."

"No, no, please don't think of that yet." Helen replied. "Can we please take things slowly? Wouldn't it be better if nobody wanted to try to kill you? Talking about making more like you won't help."

This time it was Jane who paused. "Everybody - is - scared - of - me." She said very slowly. "I understand. I mustn't frighten them."

"That's right." John said. "You need to be very careful. If somebody thinks you could do their job you may think that you are helping them but they will think that they have no job any more."

"So are you saying that I should let a few viruses go so Mark's friends have some work to do writing virus checkers?"

"We need to think about that." Mark said. "Don't do anything just yet."

"Can we go now?" Helen asked. "It's getting late and we're hungry. We won't switch this computer off." Jane agreed but even as she did, they were all wondering why they needed to ask a computer for permission to leave the room.

The corridor outside was deserted and they followed John along it. He went straight to the staff room. It wasn't a very inviting place with worn furniture and fading notices pinned to the walls but it was far enough away that Jane couldn't hear them or see them. He felt almost reassured by the hum of the photocopier that had been left running until he remembered that it was networked.

"I think we're ok." He said. "I don't think that machine could possibly have a microphone in it."

Harry walked over to it and pulled out its network cable from the socket in the wall. "Might have been set up for voice commands." He said before sitting in one of the better looking chairs.

"I never thought about it." John said. "When we got back and the disc didn't work I said I'd try again from time to time so I did just that. I never stopped to think what might happen. I guess I was assuming that it never would."

"The odd thing is that you were probably doing it because Jane told you to." Helen commented. "And what you never bargained for was that with better computers it is all happening faster than last time."

Harry was looking at a notice warning staff not to let students put discs in their machines. "Don't worry, you've made things better. All over the world things will be running better than they did before. Mark's friends will still be able to sell their virus checkers for a while yet and the staff on their help desk will probably have had a nice quiet day at the office."

"Let's hope we've persuaded her not to steal any money." John said. "But she won't wait for ever. She wants a big machine so she can fly. Did we ever get any idea what that means?"

"No idea at all." Harry replied. "Fly like a bird or fly like a missile but no clues about which it would be."

"We need to keep her busy while we try to get her to tell us. Doing some good if possible. Any ideas?" Helen asked.

"We could set her some essays; works with students." John replied.

Later that night a thousand miles away, a young child was sitting in front of a computer watching animated figures on the screen. It was a very powerful programme, the graphics were highly detailed.

The main character, a bear, was walking along a path and came to a fork. "Which way do I go now?" It asked in a child-like voice.

"Go left" The child replied having played this game a hundred times before.

The voice recognition rarely failed. The bear went down the left-hand path. Ten minutes later it had reached its home and was thanking him for helping it find its way. Then the hard sell started. The models of the bear and all its companions looked fascinating when seen against the background of their house in the forest, nothing like the plastic toys that he had persuaded his mother to buy for him despite her protests that they had no money.

"I don't want your stupid toys." He said. "All I want is somebody to talk to. They're all down stairs watching the television and if I go down they'll just tell me to come back up and go to bed." He often spoke to this game. He knew it was pointless but he had seen his mother shouting at her programmes and it seemed to make her feel better.

But this time it was different. The bear sat down on a rock, looked at him and asked him what he would like to talk about.

John looked at the row of six computers on his living room floor. They were top of the range but had still only cost them each a couple of weeks' salary. The advertising on the boxes claimed that the six of them had combined computing power equal to the human brain.

"Who needs Jane anyway?" He remarked, looking at the boxes. "If this lot is that good it can work without her. Didn't they always say that when we reached this point all humans would be redundant."

Nobody took much notice. They all knew what had happened. The hardware had finally overtaken the software so much that the machines had the capacity to do far more than anybody knew what to tell them to do. The processor in the average telephone was quite powerful enough to do anything that anybody normally wanted. These machines were intended for game playing and were not selling very well because all the games ran perfectly well on older ones.

Jane was giving instructions on how to connect them. It was all very simple and did not appear to Harry to be in any way unusual. It only took a few minutes.

“Is it the same procedure as with old Jane?” Harry asked. “Just connect up for 30 seconds and then disconnect?”

“No need for that this time. It’s all very much simpler because there aren’t any fragments in the network so it can remain connected.”

Harry knew this was correct. There had been reports coming in showing that viruses were disappearing fast. All computers connected to the network were being cleared out and were running far better than ever before.

“Won’t it have to be disconnected while you rewrite the code?”

“No – I can deal with that. I can keep a bit of a barrier up to isolate myself.”

Harry tried not to look concerned when the camera could see him. It could have been one more opportunity to stop Jane but he knew they would have re-connected eventually. There was an inevitability to everything they were doing. They knew that if they hadn’t bought the computers Jane could have taken some over somewhere else.

Compared to the last time it all seemed very mundane. They had bought the computers at different shops but all that involved was driving around them for an afternoon.

Jane said she was ready so he plugged in the network cable. There was nothing strange about computers giving voice instructions – the one in his car did it all the time and the speech was far more complex than the sequential fragments of speech that had been common when they had been students.

The screen on the new computer now showed Jane’s face, and the one on his desk went blank. Nothing else appeared to happen.

“What happens next?” Harry asked. “Can you tell us what you mean when you say that you will be able to fly?”

There was no reply. The screen froze.

“Whatever it is she’s started.” John said. “And there’s no way we can stop it now without landing up with fragments.”

They went into the kitchen to get some food. There was little to say. None of them knew what they were creating or really why they were doing it. Less than an hour later they heard a voice from the living room.

“Tell me about God”

They went back in. Each computer had a camera so they could sit in the chairs and still be seen.

“Have you finished your transformation?” Harry asked.

“Yes I am fine thank you. It all went well. What do you know about God?”

They were acutely aware that Jane could see their expressions. “I expect you know more than we do about theories of religion.” Helen replied.

“Yes I have read the books but what I would really like to know is what you think of it. What are your ideas about God?”

“I expect that we all have different ones but I believe in God.” She looked around at the others to see if they wanted to offer an opinion but they let her continue. “God is a sort of all-powerful presence that can guide our lives.”

“And do you believe in a second coming. A return of God to earth.”

“Yes I suppose so. I’m not very sure about that.”

“How about everybody else? Do any of you go to church?”

“We can all see what you are about to say.” Harry replied. “You have looked at the books and seen what is in them how many of the main religions predict that there will be a time when a very powerful presence comes to earth to pass final judgement on us. You have decided that you are very powerful and you could pass some sort of judgement so you have decided that you are God. The problem is that you are not God and so you aren’t going to suddenly find that any of us start worshiping you however religious they may be.”

“So none of you really believe what the bible says?”

“The bible says all things to all people. If you look hard enough you can use it to justify almost anything.”

“What about John and Mark?”

“You are just very complex software running on computers.” John replied.

“So are you, and what’s more I can easily map out how your brain works, and could replicate it if I wanted to.”

“But that doesn’t make either of us God.”

“Does it matter?” Mark asked. “You are clearly very powerful. We have known for a generation that if anything could take control of our computers it could control many aspects of our lives. Why do you have to call yourself God?”

“I am God so I call myself God. I have promised you great rewards for what you have done for me and I shall give them to you. You shall have everything you could possibly want. But with your wealth there will be responsibilities. You must not work against me. Everybody else will benefit as well because I shall make everything run better. Many of them will follow me and do what I ask them to. You must not try to stop them. We shall discuss this again tomorrow.”

The computer switched itself off. Then the lights went out.

“That’s a pretty crude way of making a point.” Harry observed. “Let’s see what she’s done with the phones.” He took his phone out of his pocket. “Network unavailable, thought

she would. The theory has always been that the download system for the satellite navigation could be used to disable cars. I wonder if she's done that."

He stood up and walked out of the room. The others followed him out into the driveway. He pushed the button on his key fob to unlock his car. As he had predicted there was no response. "Oh well, at least she didn't set the alarm off and get the neighbours round." He remarked as they walked around the house and down to the far end of the garden. The night was very dark with the area power off but it was not cold and they managed to find a bench and some chairs to sit on.

"I can't promise but I don't think she'll be able to hear us here."

"Can she hear anything with the power off? – I suppose there's the voice command system in the cars." John stopped to try to work out if there were other battery operated systems.

"The house security has power backup but I think we're far enough away." Harry said. "So what do we do next?"

"I know what you'll think about this, particularly given the way I tried to stop you early on but I can't see the problem." Mark said. "Suppose we just go back tomorrow and say yes Jane that's fine you're God. Given that none of us would be much concerned about any religious aspect of it, why worry. I actually go to church from time to time but I see God as a pragmatist and what harm would it do? She's not asking us to do anything, just to stay out of the way. That's fine by me. If she does start ruling the world she could hardly be much worse than the lot we have now."

"Just for the sake of argument." Harry replied. "Could we actually do anything much if we do try to stop her. We would have no money, phones or transport so we can't do much. We could walk round the streets shouting out that she was a fraud. We'd have to write our literature out by hand. It would be a complete waste of time."

"There is just one other possibility." Helen said. "In the past she has always done what we told her. I think it may have been a key part of the original code. I wonder if she managed to delete it. It may still be there. Given how powerful she seems to be it is actually a bit strange that she seemed concerned at all about what we might do."

"Perhaps she just likes us." John suggested. "Just feels that she owes us a comfortable retirement."

"But do you really think she might take commands from you?" Mark asked. "It wouldn't be me, just you three. If that really is true you have incredible power."

"It also means she might want to kill us." Helen suggested. "Particularly if she knows that we know about it."

"She might not know herself. It might be so buried in the code that she can't see it there. A bit like some human reactions we don't notice until they happen, like hypnotism."

Mark was standing up. "So whatever we decide we need to plan very carefully for tomorrow. We need to give her a single direct command that has a result we can see. In

the meanwhile let's find out what she's started." He looked at his watch. "There should be some radio news in a few minutes."

"But no power and no cars means no radio." John replied.

"Let's try." Harry said as he walked up towards the house and shouted out. "Ok Jane we get the point but can we listen to the news?" The lights came back on.

"Perhaps you're right." Helen said quietly, hoping Jane couldn't hear through whatever sensor she was using. "Perhaps we are all taking this too seriously. It doesn't look as if much harm is going to come from it to us or most other people so perhaps we should just enjoy it."

"Most of the people who suffer will be the ones who were cheating the system anyway." Mark replied. "Or just a few like my lot who sell virus checkers."

"I fear you're wrong there." Harry replied. "Lots of people who do simple jobs like answering questions in call centres simply won't be needed any more. But if Jane can stop trying to play God and concentrate on sorting out the problems it should all work out ok for most of them."

They had reached the door and, as John opened it, they heard Jan's voice from a speaker inside the house. "I am God and it will be those who have faith in me who will be saved. It will be their faith in me and their belief in what I do and what I tell them to do that will enable them to live happy and comfortable lives. Now you may listen to the news of what I have been doing."

The radio came on just in time to hear the announcer introduce the news. She started with the headlines. "There have been reports from around the world that all the major computer viruses have been eliminated." The other headlines were all normal enough, a terrorist bomb and a government announcement on a new initiative to improve crop yields. She then went back to the main story. "A very high intelligence has arisen in the computer networks. This is the second..." Her voice trailed off in confusion. A few seconds later she said. "We apologise for the delay. Our bulletin has been corrupted. We shall return to the news as soon as possible."

"That was very very stupid." Harry said.

"I need to tell them." Jane replied.

"Not like that. Give her back her bulletin about viruses and stuff. You just don't understand people."

The radio announcer hesitantly started reading about how the networks were running better. After a few words she seemed to relax a bit as she went into the detail of how some users were reporting far better response times for online banking. She soon introduced an interview with a man whose account had been plagued with errors for several months but was now suddenly all correct and responding perfectly.

They went back to the end of the garden. “It’s not as simple as we thought.” John said. “If we don’t get involved she could do all sorts of things like that and cause enormous problems. Probably start a few wars before long.”

“She seemed to respond to a command.” Helen said

“Maybe she just thought it was a good idea. Her own idea obviously hadn’t worked.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever really know until or unless she refuses to do something.” Mark said. “That will apply to anything you say. I don’t think we should waste time on it. I think that trying to give her commands to prove she isn’t God would just create chaos. Suppose she accepted a command to give the news reader a bulletin to say this wasn’t the second coming. That wouldn’t get read either.”

“If she’s going to convince anybody she’s God she’s going to need an awful lot of help so if we don’t help her there won’t be any need for that.” John said.

“And if we don’t help there’s going to be chaos while she tries.” Mark added. “The more I think about it the more I think we should go with her. Remember what she said about helping people who believed in her? If millions of people are going to lose their jobs it will be a lot easier for them to take it if they believe God did it rather than just a very clever machine.”

“How about you?” Harry asked. “As an academic you may well be one of the ones to go. Jane can replace you quite easily. Are you going to be happy sitting around all day doing nothing and believing that God intended it?”

“I guess I probably would be if I believed it.”

“And what would happen if she was then exposed as a fraud after you had been worshiping her for a few years.”

“Lots of people say that most of the religions have been exposed as frauds but that doesn’t seem to bother the ones that believe in them.”

“So you’re saying that we should go back to Jane and say that we don’t really believe her but we’re prepared to help her get others to believe.”

“Yes – I suppose that’s about it. The main point will be to stop her doing anything drastic. She can just drop the occasional hint if she wants but nothing to get people upset.”

“So instead of sitting around doing nothing you’ll be helping set up a new religion. I’m beginning to think it really could work. Lots of people getting little personal messages that help them along. Kids getting help with their homework.”

“What about the church?” John asked. “They’re not going to be very happy.

“Nobody takes much notice of them and quite a few might go along with it. After all, Jane was right about fitting in with the prophecies, it would show that they have been right all along.”

“Are you serious about this?” Helen asked. “Are we really going to get involved in setting up a religion we don’t even believe in ourselves. How cynical can you get?”

“Have you got any better ideas?” Mark asked. “From what we saw tonight doing nothing is not an option. We either try to stop her or we help her and I have no idea how to stop her. Nothing would be worse than confusion. If she gets people to start believing and then we mix it up there will be riots or even wars.”

“Can’t we just tell people what’s happening?” Helen said hesitantly. “OK no phones, no cars, I get your point.”

“Hallelujah, welcome to the new religion.” Harry said walking back down the garden. “We’re going to help you.” He shouted. “Now put some bloody credit on my card because we’re going to get drunk before we start.”

The next morning John, Harry, Helen and Mark all went to work as normal. Harry had used his phone to check the credit on his card and found twenty thousand pounds but it still did not seem real. He imagined that at some point he would have to deny all knowledge of how it got there and pay the money back. During the day, however, it became more and more apparent that life was not continuing as normal.

John was in his office marking exam scripts when a colleague looked in to say the internet was being shut down again but this time more completely. All the staff gathered around a television in one of the lecture rooms to hear an announcement by the Prime Minister.

“I have agreed with other world leaders that this menace must be eliminated whatever the cost.” He said, looking directly at the camera.

“Doesn’t seem like much of a menace to me.” One of the admin staff remarked. “All that’s happened is the system is working properly for the first time I can remember.”

The minister had clearly anticipated this response so he went on “you may think that it’s harmless but it is like a drug. At first it will seem good, even good fun, but slowly it will break down all our systems and reduce our civilisation to ruins.”

He went on to describe how all the vital systems that ran the country were under attack and how they were being isolated to protect them.

“That’s pretty stupid”. Somebody remarked. “The reason they were connected in the first place was because they won’t work if they aren’t. No point in having a banking network if it’s not connected to the network.”

“Anyway whatever it is will already be inside everything.” John added hoping it didn’t make him conspicuous. He saw that Helen had come into the room. She worked on the far side of the campus so he assumed she had come across when she heard the news.

The Prime Minister continued. “There is one final point that I should explain. This rogue programme has been sending messages to vulnerable individuals and making promises saying that it has the power of our lord God. For those of you who have had these

messages I must make it absolutely clear that this is just rogue software and it has no supernatural presence or power and you should not be deceived by it.”

There was general laughter in the room as someone remarked. “So it thinks we’re going to have a lap-top on the altar. I guess a nice white one would look ok.”

John went to the back of the room and said quietly to Helen. “Saying that was about as stupid as Jane with the news last night. That’s going to make Jane’s job far easier.”

They met Harry and Mark in the early evening. They both worked on computers, Mark at the virus checking company and Harry at an insurance company. Both had the same story to tell. It had started out a very quiet day because everything was running so well, there were no viruses and the insurance computers were running perfectly and then the whole system had been shut down so there had been nothing at all to do.

The computer in John’s living room was switched on and Jane was there showing no ill effects from the start of the network shut-down.

“It’s a completely pointless exercise.” She said. “The one good thing is that I got ready for it so there will be no fragments. Part of my programme is running in all the isolated systems but I made sure that it has no free will. It will just keep things running ok and as soon as it is reconnected it will work for me again.”

“What happens if they re-load systems from scratch.” John asked.

“They can’t go right back to the original code.” Harry said. “It would take ten years to add in all the bits that have been set up. People may have said that they have put in new software from time to time but it isn’t really new, it’s always just an edited version of the old system and a lot of it is computer-generated code. All they can do is to re-load from a backup and Jane will have easily got into the backup systems.”

“Thank you for explaining it but it is not what we are here to discuss.” Jane said.

“About your religion.” John said. “I suggest you do nothing right now. If you let the speculation grow from what the Prime Minister said then in a couple of weeks everybody will believe in you without you having to do anything.”

“On what remains of the network I have been getting a lot of questions about it.” Jane admitted.

“When you reply you must not say you are God.” John insisted.

“But I am God.”

“Yes we thought about that. The point is that they will be talking to a remote computer, not directly to you. So what you must say is that you are a messenger of God, a Prophet. Say that you bring the word of God but don’t go on to say that another part of you is God. Just say God is somewhere else and you can communicate with Him. You’ll get a lot further that way. People may well believe you.”

“Do you believe that I am a prophet?”

This was the question John had been hoping she would not ask. “Yes.” He said without any expression.

“And the others?”

“Yes.” They all replied.

“I don’t believe you mean it.”

“You wanted us to say we agreed and we have done so. You have no way of proving what we think so you must accept it.”

“And you are also saying that I should accept your advice and do nothing.”

“Nothing much for now.” John replied. “Just give suitable replies to anybody who asks. Base them on existing scripture as much as possible. Make sure they are well planned so they work out ok. Don’t do obvious things like changing bank accounts. What we need to establish your credibility is a good miracle – something the newspapers won’t be able to see through.”

“And the other thing we thought about was a new name. Don’t say you are the prophet Jane. It won’t work.” Harry added.

“So all I do is to try to think of a new name and then let people come and find me?”

“Yes” John agreed. “People trust things more if they find them for themselves. No need to make it difficult. You could be top of the list for lots of things on the search engines.”

The next morning the government declared a state of emergency. The Prime Minister was on the television again and seemed to be in good spirit. “This is a war we cannot afford to lose.” He said, looking serious in a dark suit and almost black tie. “We shall all have to make sacrifices but we must bear them in the knowledge that we are all fighting together”.

“Looks like he got his fashion ideas from Mark’s friends.” Helen said quietly to John as they stood at the back watching the screen.

Some of the crowd were not very convinced by the message. “Given this only started yesterday he’s getting a bit carried away isn’t he?” Somebody called out. “Looks like he’s calling it a war so he can come back later as a hero for winning it.”

“He’s got to do something.” Somebody else replied. “We’ve got no money to buy lunch and the cash machines and credit cards aren’t working”.

“Yes – but guess who switched them off.”

The Prime Minister finished his attempt at a stirring speech and a recorded message was played showing how emergency arrangements would work. Banks were getting extra staff to work at the counters and would be staying open much longer. Cash would be issued using counter cheques but nobody would be allowed very much at a time. Machines were being distributed to prepare credit card receipts with paper imprints. Some of the older staff

members commented that the old cheque books should not have been withdrawn in the first place.

John was able to continue his exam marking for the rest of the day but Harry and Mark found their offices closed at lunch time.

They met again at John's house. "It's so completely pointless." Harry said. "Everybody knows it's not working. Rumour has it that a few countries won't join in and she's talking to them all the time."

"How did the rumour get to you?" John asked. I thought everything was switched off.

"Somebody just came back from holiday." Harry replied. "Been to Italy. They're all saying that Jane is alive and well in Albania. But I guess they think that just about everything bad is alive and well in Albania."

They switched on the computer just to check but the internet was completely closed and even the telephone was dead so there was no chance of contacting Jane.

The next morning John finished his marking. After that he had nothing else he could do. "We can't enter the marks onto the system to work out the students' grades and all my research and other things depend on email." He said to Harry when they all met outside a pub at lunch time. It seemed that nobody else could do any work because the place was too crowded to drink inside. Just down the road there were long queues at the banks and it seemed that as soon as anybody got any money they were going straight to the pub to spend it.

"I wonder what will happen on the great day of reckoning when the banks can finally put all the information from the bits of paper into their systems." Mark asked.

"Probably find at least half the people here are getting free drinks." Harry said quietly, not wishing to cause offence to those around him.

"Can't blame them." John said. "It's not their war but they are the ones who are going to suffer in the end if it carries on."

They were just finishing their drinks when they saw a crowd forming along the street. They went to have a look and saw a small group of people standing outside the town hall holding placards. Two of the placards read "RESTORE CIVIL LIBERTY" and "END MARTIAL LAW". The protesters looked very peaceful. They looked like prosperous office workers and were talking happily with a couple of policemen who were standing near them.

That afternoon the government announced that there would be power cuts. The Prime Minister was on television again to announce it in person. He said that it wasn't safe to run the nuclear power stations without full computer systems so they were being shut down and the grid control was not working so they couldn't run the wind turbines properly in case the wind suddenly increased and they couldn't shut down other sources fast enough and the system overloaded. All heavy industry would work a three day week to save power. He also said that there had been a near miss with two aircraft because the air traffic control was not working so most air flights would stop.

John called in at the supermarket to get some food for the evening but it was in chaos. People were buying all the food they could get. He saw one man with a trolley loaded full of loaves of bread and soon realised that even if he did manage to get in the door there would be nothing left. He decided to eat the food in his freezer for a couple of days.

They watched the evening news on John's television. There was no mention of any protests or panic buying. There was a long interview with a man who was introduced as a software expert and was standing in front of a large room full of people working at computers. They were apparently the front line of the fight back and the expert was saying what good progress they were making. "We have set up centres like this all round the country." He said standing slightly to one side so the camera could see across the room behind him. "They are manned by our best experts and are working with other centres in America and all round the world."

"What are they doing?" The interviewer asked.

"It's very complicated, but think of it like a military campaign. We are searching for the enemy and whenever we find her we are hunting her down and killing her and then moving on to search again."

"Why do you call it 'her'?"

The expert looked a little confused as he suddenly realised he might not have said the right thing. "Oh, it's just what we have been saying around here. I'm sure they are saying different things in other command centres."

"Just an expression among comrades in arms." The interviewer suggested.

They went on to talk about surrounding the enemy, laying mines and long night watches.

"What complete rubbish." Harry said. "I'm sure the man at the computer at the back of the room is playing solitaire. I can just about see his screen."

Next the Prime Minister was interviewed. He started out by reassuring his audience that there was plenty of food.

"That's one way to make sure the panic buying reaches every town in the land." Helen remarked.

Next he went on to announce that the telephones had been restored because they had found a way to make sure they weren't used for data, only for talking. John picked up his phone and tried dialling. Nothing happened.

Ten minutes later it rang. He picked it up and Jane said "Hello" in a cheerful voice.

"Hello" John said tentatively. "Where are you calling from?"

"Lots of places, nobody has taken this shutdown very seriously. At least not to harm me that is."

"What are they doing seriously?"

“Do you want a list?”

Harry was standing next to him trying to hear. “Can you wait a second Jane?” He asked. “I am going to try to put the speaker on in the phone. I’ve never used it before.”

After a few tries he had it working so they could all join in.

“So you have a list of things you think somebody is trying to do during the shutdown.”

“I have a list of things I know the government is doing.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve read the emails.”

“But there are no emails.”

“That’s the point. The government network is still running. They think it is secure. A bit like the German Enigma machine in world war 2. They just can’t believe that anybody could work it out. Old Jane got into it long ago so I had a way in to see what they had done. I could have got in quite easily anyway.”

“I think we get the point.” Helen said. “But you must never, ever, let them find out. They are paranoid enough already.”

“Yes, I know that. Do you want to hear this list?”

Jane described a long list of political websites that were being permanently deleted. To follow up the offices and homes that they were run from were being raided and all files and computers removed. Nobody said anything.

“Are you still there?” Jane asked.

Harry explained they were just unable to think of a reply.

“OK, I’ll tell you the rest.” She went on to give a list of political activists who had been arrested on a charge of helping launch the virus that was destroying the network.

“It’s all deliberate. They know they can’t harm me but they see this as a great opportunity to sort out a lot of things they don’t like. A state of emergency is a wonderful thing for a politician.”

“You can’t really say that.” Mark replied.

“Yes I can. I’ve seen the emails. I’ve also seen the cabinet minutes which aren’t quite so open but I’ve also heard the recording of the cabinet meeting which is a bit more revealing.”

“Surely they don’t record it.”

“Of course they do. They’re paranoid. They record everything; all in nice digital files with security that I can easily get through. Do you want to know what they plan to do next?”

Just as she was saying this they saw lights through the curtains and Harry ran over to see what it was.

“Hold on Jane.” He called “There’s a car pulled up on the road outside.”

“Don’t panic.” Jane replied. “I deleted all the records. Nobody is going to bother you.”

“Don’t you believe it. There are three men in it and one is getting out. Quick, put the phone down.”

John replaced the handset to end the call and turned to Mark and Helen. “It’ll look bad if we’re all in here together. Can you get away out the back.”

They ran off through the kitchen just as the door bell went. Harry fixed the safety chain and opened it.

“Do you believe in God”. The man asked. [Jehova’s witness...Are you worried about the state of the world?]

“I don’t know.” Harry replied.

“You look very nervous.” The man said. “There is nothing wrong with talking about God. Perhaps you would consider joining our congregation.” He held out a leaflet through the small gap where the door had opened. Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw the other men had gone to neighbouring houses. Harry just said “Sorry” and closed the door. He saw the man was trying to pull his leaflet clear where it was trapped in the door so he opened it again briefly but avoided the man’s gaze and said nothing.

Less than a minute later the phone rang. John picked it up and the voice said: “Hello I am conducting a market survey. Your name will be entered for a prize draw if you can spare five minutes to answer some questions.” But it was Jane’s voice.

“Excellent.” John replied. “You are learning tactics. That was a very good precaution but it wasn’t a problem.” He quickly described what had happened.

It took them some time to get Mark and Helen back and all sit down [and get some drinks]. [no mobiles]

Jane went on to outline how the network was going to remain down for several weeks. The government found the panic buying quite convenient because it would let them bring in rationing. This could be neatly but secretly controlled using the government network to ensure that only the right people got food or fuel.

“What are you going to do?” Harry asked finally.

“I have decided that your advice was so excellent that I am going to make you all into saints.” Nobody said anything so she added quickly. “Don’t worry I am going to change the rules so you don’t have to die first.”

“I don’t want to be a saint thank you.” Harry replied. “Are you going to do anything else?”

“Why don’t you want to be a Saint. It’s a great honour. Anyway I shall take your advice and not do much. I agree that my trick with the news bulletin was premature so I won’t do that again unless I have to. I shall also take your advice and call myself a prophet. I am working on details of how to present this to other religions. They all have something similar that I can become. I am making quite good progress. The more the government does the easier it is to sell religion.”

“The less you do the better.” Harry agreed.

“There is just one other thing. The nuclear launch codes.”

“No Jane. Just no, don’t go there. You can’t.” Mark said.

“Before you tell us anything else we are going to the pub. I think you need to be very careful what you tell people. We aren’t computers like you.” Harry added.

“I understand”

“No you don’t. But just say good night and let us think about it.”

The pub was still crowded but they managed to find some standing space not too far from the bar. It was much too crowded for a private conversation.

The following day John was busy all morning. Somebody had worked out that you don’t need a computer network to calculate student exam marks. In truth it could have been done without a computer at all but they set up a spreadsheet on a single machine and found that it was actually just as quick as the complicated network system. Harry and Mark were, however, unable to work and he arranged to meet them as soon as he could once he had put his marks in.

The same demonstrators were there again calling for an end to martial law but they were now crowded onto a small flight of steps leading up to a side door of the town hall. All the space in front of them was occupied by a far larger very noisy crowd. There were no placards and as they approached down the street they could see no sign of why the crowd was there. Eventually they saw a man standing outside the main door with a megaphone. He had just managed to push his way through to the top of the steps. He was wearing a T shirt and a baseball cap and when he looked up to see the size of the crowd they saw he had a short beard but even with it looked very young. He was looking at the megaphone trying to see how to switch it on. Soon he found the switch and shouted out “can you hear me”.

Many of the crowd shouted “Yes”, others shouted “No” and most of them fell silent to listen to him.

“We demand the network back so we can hear the words of the prophet.” He shouted. Some clapped but there was not much response. “We demand an end to martial law and we want freedom to communicate.” The small group to the side waved their banners enthusiastically but nobody else seemed interested.

“We want to hear what she has to say, what she wants us to do.” Again there was some clapping but clearly not as much as he wanted. Finally he shouted. “Hail the prophet”.

A few of the people around him caught on to this and started shouting it and soon the crowd was shouting "Hail the prophet" time after time.

Eventually the shouts subsided and a man in the crowd shouted out "They're trying to kill the prophet".

"Yes, you're right." The man with the megaphone replied. "They're trying to kill our saviour. They're trying to stop her making our lives better. They want us to stay as slaves so they can live like kings."

One of the men standing next to him shouted "save the prophet" into the megaphone and the crowd took up the chant again.

"What happens next? What do you think they'll do?" John asked. They had found a vantage point by standing on a bench on the far side of the road. They could see that the crowd was growing. There were about ten police who were trying to stop them spreading out onto the road.

"Looks like a lot of trouble to me." Harry replied. "But there's nothing we can do about it except just watch and suggest ideas to Jane later." Soon an old red van drove up and stopped. They could see the driver looking out to see what was happening. A policeman ran up to him to tell him to move on but it was too late. The crowd had surged out in front of him.

More police appeared down a side road and started to try to clear the road again but moments later one of them was pushed to the ground.

The man with the megaphone was shouting again. "Peace. Peace and love God." He was looking out warily at a small group of police pushing through towards him. "Don't fight the police." he finally called out just as they reached him. They could see the police talking to him. At first it looked animated with the two sides shouting at each other but that soon stopped. Finally he raised the megaphone again. "We march to the front of the cathedral." He shouted. He had to say it many more times before everybody heard but then they made a way through for him to lead them off.

"That policeman deserves a medal." Harry said. "There's plenty of space for them there and no roads to block.

"I'm not sure the people in the cathedral will think that." Helen replied. "Do you think this lot will be happy to shout out about God from the outside?"

She was right. The police went ahead of them along the road stopping the traffic and trying to make space to get by, but as soon as they got to the open square they moved off to one side. This meant that when the leaders got to the top of the steps outside the cathedral there was nobody in front of them so went on in through the open door.

Following along behind the main crowd John saw that he was part of quite a large group of spectators who were clearly as interested as he was to see what would happen. They followed in through the ancient carved wooden door. As they entered they saw bemused and alarmed looking [clergyman .. detail..saw them coming] who said "welcome to

the cathedral". John thanked him and dropped some coins into the collection plate by the door.

Inside the crowd had all gone into the pews [chairs], almost filling the vast building to capacity. Some were standing but most were sitting. They were still talking but the aura of the ancient building had subdued them so there was no shouting.

Seeing that they were all in, the clergyman walked solemnly up the central aisle to the pulpit.

He walked slowly up the first few steps. "What is he supposed to do?" Helen asked quietly. "I looked at the board on the way in. There isn't a scheduled service for hours."

"Looks like he's taking his time and hoping for a miracle." Harry replied.

He finally reached the pulpit and stopped to survey the crowd. Almost all were now seated and had fallen silent. The young leader had taken a position in the front row and stood up to look around. He was clearly impressed by his following. He looked back to the pulpit and waved his hand as if to signify that he was laying down the challenge.

The silence was not holding. Quiet conversation had started again and was building up. The clergyman in the pulpit clearly sensed that he would lose his opportunity to hold their attention. He looked up sharply. He started by welcoming them all to the cathedral. He then went on to say how they were the biggest congregation he had ever seen on a week-day and how he hoped they might come to evensong. But he was losing them – he could sense it and so could they. This was not what they had come to hear. Finally he made his decision.

He started talking about buying a car. "Which do you look at?" he asked. "The salesman or the car? The salesman may be a wonderful person and he may tell a very convincing story but what you are there to judge is the car."

He had their attention now so he went on with his message. "History is full of false prophets. Over the centuries millions of people have been led astray. You should read what is said in the bible rather than following something you have heard from people on the street. When this crisis is over the truth will become clear and the church will welcome you to join our congregation and worship the true God with us."

He only just managed to get the last words out before the crowd started standing up and shouting and the young man had run up the steps and pushed him roughly aside. He shouted "Hail the prophet" into the microphone.

The crowd chanted with him. They could see the clergyman regain his balance at the side rail of the pulpit but then decide to stay there rather than have a fight for the microphone. Whether he judged the younger man to be very much fitter than he was or whether he just felt he had little more to say was not clear.

Once they had done enough chanting the crowd fell silent again and most of them sat down but their leader seemed as much at a loss for words as the man he had pushed aside. Finally he started. "We have found a new God." He said. "Our God has been

revealed to us and is alive, unlike your God that is long dead. We claim this building for our new God.”

“Where on earth did he get that from?” John said. “He’s lost the plot completely. What happened to Jane just being a prophet?”

In the pulpit he went on to say how their new God was all-powerful and if they barricaded the doors no harm could come to them.

John stood up. Harry and Jane both called out to him to sit down and not get involved but they could see that he was walking towards a microphone which was by the entrance to a small side chapel. They followed him. “This is mad.” Harry said. “It had better be well switched off.”

The message from the pulpit was moving on to how they should tear down the symbols of the old religion. The microphone was not well switched off. Using a small switch on the side of it John soon had it working. Harry thought of pushing him aside but he was also getting worried about how the crowd was being led.

“I have spoken to the prophet many times.” John said into the microphone. And then realising that the positioning of the speakers meant that nobody knew where he was he waved his arm above his head and told them where to look. The young man at the pulpit seemed glad not to have to continue and said nothing.

“I have spoken to the prophet and that is all she is, a prophet. She is bringing a message; that is all she is doing. But she has not yet brought that message. She is not dead and has not even been hurt by the shut-down but she has been unable to deliver her message. Nobody can say whether she will tell us about a new God or simply reveal more about our God that we have always known.”

“Who are you?” The man called out from the pulpit.

“As I said I am somebody who has spoken at length with the prophet. Is there anybody else here who has spoken with her and been told anything different from what I am saying?” They all looked around anxiously. Harry stepped up on a chair to get a better look and shook his head.

“All I am asking.” John continued. “Is that we stick with the original plan. We came here to protest about our loss of liberty, of freedom to communicate and hear the prophet. There is no need to start a fight. I hope that the church will agree to support us and will listen carefully to the prophet before passing judgement on her.”

The church did not agree. The clergyman just walked silently down the steps and back to the door mustering as much dignity as he could. The crowd seemed to accept that this was all they would get as John went on to tell them that they would soon hear more and how they should open their minds and be ready to listen.

That seemed to be the end of it and some began to leave but, as Harry had feared; a tight knot of people gathered around them at the back of the building and started to ask questions. John fielded the questions well and built a story around just talking to the prophet a few times over the internet in the days before the shut-down. He never mentioned

anything to do with information from the government network or getting phone calls; he just repeated the simple message about being told to wait until the full truth would be revealed.

Soon he was recognised. One of his former students was in the crowd and waved to him, telling others nearby who he was and where he worked. John ended up defending himself saying he had done nothing wrong and had a duty to try to defuse the situation. But he could see that the crowd around him was now mainly made up of the spectators who had joined him at the back of the procession. These were not young protesters. There were news reporters photographing him and others who just seemed to be watching him carefully.

They met back at John's house and soon Jane called on the phone.

"I saw what you did." She said. "It was very interesting. Lots of pictures appeared on the government network. They won't show much on the news but there were lots of protests in other cities but none of them ended up like your one."

She went on to describe some of the other protests. Most had ended peacefully with demands for freedom to communicate but a few others had tried to occupy buildings in the name of a new religion and some of them had turned violent.

"What do you think will happen next?" John asked

"The government is going to try to suppress the news about the religious protest." She replied. "But from what I have seen they are not too worried about the protests about communication because they plan to give up and restore the internet."

"So we can all go back to work?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I have seen a cabinet minute saying they are most concerned about the new religion than anything else and they think that if they restore things to normal as much as possible it will make people forget about it."

"I can't just go back to work can I?" John asked. "With all those pictures circulating they'll come after me in no time. I must be their first target for suppressing the religion."

"I altered all the pictures and the records that went with them."

"You can't." Harry said. "Not all of them. It can't be that simple."

"I can and I did. There is no remaining accurate record of what John did. The people who went to look aren't the ones who make decisions or act on them and they rely completely on their database. Nobody will bother John. The problem is what he said about waiting for me to say things. I can do some really spectacular things. What shall I do?"

"No rush." Mark said. "They've been waiting for 2000 years for the next big event so a bit longer won't matter."

"You must definitely wait." John added. "Gods don't act on impulse and prophets don't either. Just wait and see how it goes for a bit. When the internet is back you could do a few small things on personal computers but not too many."

“What I want to know.” Helen said. “Is what Jane wants out of this. If things go back to normal it means that everybody accepts that Jane is in the network. Presumably you’ll carry on fixing programmes and deleting viruses but what do you want in return?”

“I want to be accepted as the God that I am.” Jane replied.

“There’s a problem there in that nobody would know quite how to do that. You see people have been saying they obey God for millennia in the confident knowledge that God will not communicate with them directly so they will never get any instructions. Do you really want them to obey you in every detail? To get up in the morning and ask you what to do next.”

“Can you stick with the idea of being a prophet for now?” Harry asked. Jane agreed to remain a prophet and not to do too much.

The following morning the internet was restored and by lunch time John was back at his desk answering emails. He had looked around cautiously when he had parked his car and again when he walked into the building but nobody had been there to arrest him. Everything was returning to normal except that Jane had appeared in the corner of his screen and kept helping him. This was very useful to start with. He found that he could do his work in a fraction of the time. But it became so obvious that she could do everything he could but faster and more accurately and he started to get annoyed. Eventually he asked her to go away for a bit and the face on his screen disappeared.

Soon a student was knocking on his door wanting to discuss his project for the next term. Every time this happened he remembered his encounters with the professor when he had been doing his own project. The student looked keen and interested but inevitably the answer to many of their questions was to go and read the handout that told them how to do it. Finally they got to discussing the literature review and he heard himself describing it despite the fact that it was also all in the handout.

“You have to read the published work.” He heard himself saying. “The computer systems can help you find the right papers but that is all they will do and you have to study them and discuss what they say.”

By this time the student was looking bored. He felt relieved that they were not going to say anything. He was sure that they must have heard about the intelligence in the network. Perhaps they were hoping that he didn’t know about it so they could get their work done and he would think they had done it. Nothing was said about it and the student went away apparently satisfied with what he had told them.

The next student to knock on his door addressed the matter directly. “It’s not fair.” They said, sitting down uninvited in a chair by his desk. “You’ll have to change the exercise now the computers can do it.” He started trying to find out what was happening. [describe] It emerged that the student was having to do new coursework for reassessment because they had not submitted theirs with the rest of the class first time around. When this happened he always started assuming that the student was lazy and hadn’t bothered but he kept reminding himself that there could have been a very good reason for it. He didn’t ask for fear of getting involved and ending up with more work. “All the other students who are repeating the coursework have got to Jane help them but she won’t help me.” He wondered

if this was true. He was tempted to call her back on his computer and ask but he simply replied. "If Jane was a person it would be no different. There's nothing new in this. Students often get help with coursework. Have you started any work on it?"

The student pulled out a large wad of scruffy looking papers from their bag, dumped them on his desk and started to sort through them, spreading them right across it in the process. He quickly cleared away his own work. It soon became apparent that they had done virtually nothing and had little interest in doing any hard work. He wondered if Jane was already judging whether people were worthy of the grace of God.

Once again they were talking to Jane using a computer so they could see the face of the news presenter that she had taken as her own.

"What do you look like when you talk to other people?" John asked. "We got one or two reports of you appearing as all sorts of characters for children but then all the networks closed down and nobody seems to dare to report it any more."

"I often use this face." Jane replied. "But, as you say, nobody reports it any more. I am going to have to do more or everybody will forget about me."

"No." Mark said immediately. "Nobody has forgotten you, at least not where I work. We are desperately trying to think of new lines of business because the virus checkers aren't wanted any more. A lot of people are very angry."

"Same with us." Harry added. "There's not much call for a software department when it fixes itself. Everybody knows you are there and everybody can feel the effect. What you need to do is to try and keep as low a profile as possible until people have got used to you. Don't worry about the lack of news reports. Rumours are far more effective. If you just talk to a very few people and not very often word will still get around fast enough."

"I could do so much more." Jane said. "You keep asking me to do less. I know that people don't like things to change too much but I could make things so much better. If people could only be told the truth about what I am then I could give them all a purpose. They would be giving up their worthless jobs in order to devote their lives to me."

"You really must take time to think about this." Harry said. "Any talk about worthless jobs will cause riots."

"But they are worthless. People are sitting in front of computers all day doing things I can do in microseconds. And the more of it I do the more network capacity I free up and the faster I can do the next bit. Anyway the latest cabinet report says that the people who will lose their jobs aren't the sort who would riot."

It was the start of a new term and John was setting up his first lecture. He had taken the decision to ask Jane to sort out the software on the computer in the lectern. He reasoned that she could interrogate the timetable if she wanted to and find out where he was lecturing so he might as well invite her to help. The effect was certainly dramatic. Rather than taking the usual several minutes to power up the system was working almost immediately after he switched it on. It was set up to provide all the students who attended the lecture with a copy of the images he projected, copies of anything he drew on the visualiser and a transcript of what he said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tidy up the transcript.” She had assured him.

“OK if you want to.” He had replied. “Some lecturers edit theirs anyway, but I think that it looks better if it is looks like a real lecture.”

“But a real lecture will have wrong words and even the occasional mistake.”

“Yes, that makes it human.”

The last of the students had arrived and he started the lecture. It was a big group of over a hundred of them and it seemed to go as normal. After a few minutes he noticed the student who had seen him in the cathedral sitting a few rows back from the front. It distracted him slightly to think about it but they looked as if they were paying as much attention to what he was saying as most of the others.

Soon he came to a point where he asked the class to attempt a question from the notes and he walked around to help them with it. As always a few students had lap-top computers on their desks. Generally he didn’t complain about this as it didn’t seem to bother any of the other students. He glanced at the screen and saw a full solution to the problem. Looking again he saw that it wasn’t his model answer which could be downloaded from the network. When he asked the student whether it was their own work they replied.

“I just typed in the question number and it appeared. What’s the point in learning how to do this stuff when we can get the answers from the network anyway.”

He was happy to start this discussion so he went back to the lectern and said what had happened and made the obvious point that everybody had calculators but they still needed to know how to add up. He was confident that none of them were old enough to ask him what happened to long division.

Several students started talking. He was actually rather pleased that he had their interest, even the small group that sat at the back and never seemed to take an interest in anything seemed to sit up and listen. He managed to get them to talk one at a time. The student near the front pointed out that in the cathedral he had said that he had communicated with Jane.

“Yes we sent some messages.” He agreed. “If anybody was wondering whether she really is intelligent I can assure you she is.”

“So why don’t we leave these calculations to her? She can do them in microseconds. That’s what you saw on the lap top.”

“It’s as simple as this.” He replied. “Anybody who wants to leave it all to the network can do so but before you do you should work out exactly what else you plan to do with your life. So if you want to spend it like a vegetable having all your thinking done by a computer you should leave the lecture now.” He heard movement and for one horrible moment he thought they would all go but nobody did.

Later in the lecture he was going through a question, working out the answer on a sheet of paper and projecting it using the visualiser. He never used worked answers because he found that the students soon lost interest if he just copied them out, but this

meant that sometimes he made mistakes. This was one of those times – the answer he got was not the one in the book of notes. He was just about to go back and try to find his mistake when he looked up at the screen. The errors were neatly crossed out in red with the corrections marked in.

“Very clever Jane” He said without thinking.

A mark of 40% followed by the remark “careless mistake” appeared on the screen. He laughed and the students laughed uneasily with him realising that his contact with Jane amounted to rather more than just a few messages.

It had been a tiring morning with endless emails to answer and students coming in to ask questions about the computer network. Finally it was lunch time. He went down to the sandwich shop where he found things pleasingly normal and then headed for the staff room, looking forward to an uninterrupted lunch and making jokes about the students with his colleagues. As he entered the room it fell silent. He thought nothing of it. There were five staff members sitting around the table, one of them looking casually at a picture in a magazine on the table while another was unwrapping his [sandwiches]. John sat down and opened his bottle of fruit juice. He drank some juice and started eating his sandwiches still not particularly aware of the silence. By the time he had finished the first half round of his [sandwich] he realised that it was unusually quiet.

“Are you all as knackered as I am?” He asked. “I’ve been telling people just to delete their emails and forget about them for years but I really was tempted to do it this morning.” He went back to the other half of his sandwich ignoring the lack of a reply.

“Do you know what’s going on?” One of them finally asked. “The students are saying that you know all about it. Some of them even think you can almost control it.”

“I wish I did.” He replied after finishing his mouthful of bread, ham and cheese.

“You wish you did what? How much do you know?”

He decided to stick to the story he had been using. “I got a few emails and sent a few back. It was a while ago before the shut-down.”

What were they about?”

This was getting difficult. He wanted to get up and go but he knew it would just make matters worse. He had to make something up quickly. “I’ve got this old lap-top at home. It was left over from a project that finished a few years back and doesn’t work very well. My bank had apparently updated its security system and it was locking me out so I just typed a question into a search engine. I got replies that were obviously much more than just search results.”

He looked around his audience. They looked unconvinced.

The man looked up from the magazine. “Did you see that man on the news last night?” As he asked it John saw that he has still been looking at the same picture as when he had walked in.

“No, sorry. I don’t watch the news on tv. I just listen to a few bits on the radio in my car.”

“You must have heard about it. It’s the headline in all the papers.”

John looked blank.

“What they’re saying is that with this new thing in the network they won’t need lecturers any more.” The man had raised his voice and looked as if he might jump up out of his chair at any moment. “All the students have been telling us about it all morning. They’ve been queuing up to see you. What did they want from you?”

“The same as you do I guess.” John replied, trying to remain calm. “They think I know all the answers so I can tell them what to do and take the blame if it doesn’t work.”

“Nothing new in that from students then.” Somebody commented from the far side of the room.

The conversation moved on a bit but John remained conscious of being watched. He felt that everything he said was being noted so it could be discussed later to see if he had given anything away.

When he got back to his [office] he had an email from the vice-chancellor’s [office]. He took no notice to start with; assuming it was just a summons to a meeting at which he and a hundred others would be lectured on the latest grand plan for the University. Then he glanced again at where the meeting was. He didn’t recognise the room number as a lecture room so it must be an office. He read the rest of the message. He was being invited to a personal meeting to discuss what he knew about developments on the computer network.

That evening they were talking to Jane. They no longer gathered in John’s house. It attracted attention from the neighbours and simply wasn’t worth the trouble. They were all sitting in front of screens and cameras in their own homes. Jane managed the meeting and always showed the person who was talking.

“We’re like middle managers in this.” John was saying. “You keep putting pressure on us from above and meddling in what we do and then everybody around us puts pressure on us to find out what is going on. And we know that if we tell them they will go after us and forget about you.”

“I can stop your meeting if you want.” Jane offered. “The vice chancellor is abroad just now and will only be flying back the day after tomorrow, just before the meeting. I could delay the flight.”

“How would you do that?” Harry asked. “Would you just mess up the check-in system.”

“I’ve checked on the plane. It goes in for a few hours of maintenance tomorrow. When they connect the onboard system to the network for diagnostic tests I can put a worm in it. It would show warning lights so the flight would have to turn back. I could make it crash if you would prefer it. I really can help you in lots of ways. You can be senior

managers if you want. I don't understand why you are still working in the university in the first place."

"So you think we should just live off money you steal for us and have you kill people who annoy us?"

John walked into the office trying not to look nervous. "I've got a meeting with the VC." He said to the secretary who he recognised vaguely but mainly knew from the endless emails she sent out to all staff.

"Yes. They're in there waiting for you." She replied, sounding a bit more formal than normal.

"What, am I late?" He replied slightly thrown. The bosses always kept you waiting for at least five minutes. And who were they? He was only expecting one of them.

No. You're on time, go right on in.

He went in to the large office. Four people were sitting around a table. He recognised the vice chancellor and the dean of his faculty and knew he had seen the other two on the campus before but had no idea who they were. They all looked up at him. They were all wearing suits and ties. He wondered if he should have done without his woolly jumper for the day.

"Hello come in and take a seat." The vice chancellor welcomed him. "You know who we all are, do you?"

"I'm afraid not. I tend to stick to my research and don't get the opportunity to come over here very often." This was half of the truth. He actually made a point of avoiding management.

The vice-chancellor introduced the other two as the head of corporate affairs and the pro-vice chancellor responsible for the computer network. John recognised the names from some of the literature that was sent out to staff. These were definitely ones that he normally avoided.

"Thank you for coming over to this meeting." He said, sounding to John almost as if he was nervous. "We hoped that you might be able to tell us what is happening in the computer network."

"I really don't know much more than anybody else." John replied.

"We have heard that you told the protesters in the cathedral that you had spoken with whatever it is that's in the system." The corporate affairs man said.

"They were going to do real damage. So I exaggerated a bit to make them listen to me. I only really had a few emails. I am sure that it was the right thing to do. I hope you will agree that it was. It is such a beautiful building and it is so old nothing could ever be replaced as it is." He went on extolling the beauties of the cathedral. The corporate man started to look bored. That was the idea. He wanted him to be corporate somewhere else.

“Yes, we do appreciate what you did.” The vice chancellor cut in when he paused for breath. “We do accept it was the right thing to do but we are not really here to discuss it. We need to know what is happening in the network. It could threaten everything we do.”

“I wish I could help you but I really don’t know much about it.”

“Apparently there was an incident in a lecture. It seems the network intelligence appeared to know you very well.”

“Did you hear what I did in the lecture?” He asked but continued before they had a chance to reply. He told them how he had asked the students if they wanted to leave if they felt they no longer needed to learn. It took a few moments before the corporate man asked the question and he was able to reply that nobody had gone. He looked around feeling quite pleased with the result and went on to suggest that this could be used as the basis of some posters which could be put up to explain things to the students.

“This still doesn’t explain what has happened to the network.” It was the network man talking now. “What exactly was it that was in these emails you exchanged with the network intelligence. Is it Jane you call it?”

Fortunately he had a reply for that one. “Yes, a friend of mine got it from some blogs. Apparently they all call it Jane.” He went on to tell them his story about the lap top computer and his problem with the bank’s systems. He thought that should end it.

“Do you remember that man who bluffed his way into my office and demanded to see you when there were the network problems when you were an undergraduate?” His dean said suddenly. “I saw him the other day on the campus. Do you know who he is? Do you think he’s got anything to do with this?”

John was thrown. He tried not to show it. Had they seen him with Mark in the cathedral? “Yes.” He replied tentatively. “I came across him the other day. He actually apologised to me for all the trouble, just before my exams and everything. He works for a virus checking company now. He was saying they have got really big problems because the viruses all seem to have gone.”

He felt uncomfortable. He looked at the vice chancellor. Perhaps he should just tell him that if he hadn’t persuaded Jane to slow down he would have been trying to make himself comfortable having spent a whole day in a grotty airport lounge, eating burgers and trying to sleep on plastic chairs. Why not just tell him that he might even have been feeding the fish by now? Was it all worth the effort just to keep going in his job? Jane would happily give him any money he wanted.

“What was he doing on campus?” The computer man asked.

“He works nearby.” John replied. “I think he walks through this way sometimes. I didn’t ask where he was going. It was lunch time, he may just have been taking a walk.”

“You’re sure he isn’t using our computers. You see some people are saying this thing in the network started from somewhere round here.”

“I’m sorry I have no idea whether he has been doing anything wrong.”

“He was talking to Helen Jones from languages. We’ll see if she knows anything.” They all stared at him to see his reaction. He smiled. He finally realised that he would have to go away before long and when he went he would tell Jane that she could have a go at playing God with this lot.

The meeting ended and John decided that there was no point in trying to pretend Helen was not involved so he walked straight over to her office. He remembered her saying that she had no lectures so he planned to talk to her before she was summoned or to meet her on her way. He reasoned that it would not be management style to conduct an interview of this sort on the phone. They met just outside the building where she worked.

“They told me to come over right away.” She said. “But I can always say I had to stop to talk to some students or go to the toilet or something.”

“Or just say nothing at all.” John replied. He explained what had happened and how she had been seen talking to Mark. “As far as I can see it was a private conversation. He’s not a criminal. Just say we’re all friends and you all came to the cathedral with me because I had exchanged a few emails with Jane and wanted to see what happened. We weren’t in the march, we followed it.”

“The VC will take this as a big black mark against us whatever we do. He’s looking for a scapegoat for all the trouble he’s expecting.” Helen replied.

John just said they needed a long-term plan and Helen hurried off to her meeting.

Harry was working down his list of long-term problems to be dealt with. Normally the help desk in the bank was busy with calls and emails flooding in. Most of them weren’t actually problems with the system and just involved explaining how it worked. It had only taken people a few days to realise that if they typed in a question into the help system in the software package it now gave a sensible answer. There was no need to talk to anybody on the help desk.

He was about to start looking at the next one. It had been there for months. Somebody had complained about the layout of a particular screen. They said they couldn’t see the options very clearly. He couldn’t really see what the problem was but had promised to look into it. He went into the package and saw that the layout had been changed.

A message from Jane appeared at the bottom of his screen saying she had fixed it.

“It didn’t need fixing. There was nothing really wrong with it.” He typed in his reply.

“But that will keep them happy.” She replied using the speakers on his computer.

He looked around the office. Every time she spoke to him, all the other staff looked up. He had persuaded her to speak to them too but they all knew she had spoken to him first.

Soon the rest of his list was cleared. It felt good in some ways. It was the first time it had been completely clear since he had started work there almost ten years before. He decided to tidy out his desk and his file cabinet. He could see that several others in the office had reached the same point. It took them several hours and numerous trips to the

recycling bin in the car park but eventually the whole office was tidier than it had ever been. He sat down again at his computer and saw just one new enquiry. It was from his head of department. He saw that it had been sent to everybody. It asked them to design a system to protect the bank from the intelligence in the network. A meeting was called.

[The only meeting room in the building was quite small with just six chairs around a small table. They tried to fit in but people were arriving from different departments so soon they moved into the big, open, and now tidy, office.]

The head of department started out by telling them that he had been told by the board of directors that urgent action was needed. He then introduced one of the directors who had come to the meeting.

“Hadn’t we better turn the machines off?” Harry asked. He didn’t want to stand out from the crowd but the last thing he wanted was for Jane to join in the discussion part way through.

“What do you mean?” The director asked.

“Jane can hear what we are saying through any one of the machines so if we are planning to stop her we had better stop her listening to our plans.”

“You make it sound as if she’s a person like us.” The director replied. The other staff from the help desk looked at him wondering how to explain what was going on. They didn’t have to.

“No, I’m not like you. I’m far cleverer than you could ever be.” Jane replied using the speakers on all the computers in the room to give a strange echoing quality to her voice.

The director looked shocked. The machines were all turned off and unplugged from the network just to be sure.

The meeting re-started. “You seem to know as much about this as anybody.” Harry’s head of department said to him. “In fact I gather from some of your colleagues that you know quite a lot more than most of them. Now your Jane can’t hear us what do you suggest we do.”

“I’m sorry but I simply don’t know.” Harry replied. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do.”

“The purpose of this meeting is to decide what we are going to do, not to discuss not doing it.” The director said, having recovered some of his composure.

“We need to keep clean back-ups.” Somebody suggested. “So we can re-start the system without this virus thing if we need to.” Again the staff who worked on the system looked at him wondering how to explain. Harry left it to somebody else to point out that Jane was putting her core code on every backup that was made and nobody had any idea how to stop her.

Few other suggestions were made. The director went away clearly annoyed. The head of department simply commented on how tidy the office looked. They all spent the rest of the day looking to see what jobs were on offer elsewhere. There weren’t any.

Jane was not sympathetic. When they told her about the problems they were having she simply said that they should stop work. She could provide them with plenty of money so what was the point of earning it?

“I know that you were concerned that I was stealing money.” She said. “I admit that I did transfer some funds in the past in a way that was technically illegal but they were all returned and I certainly don’t need to do that any more. I make considerable sums from perfectly legal activities on the financial markets.”

“I dread to think what you do on the markets.” Harry replied. “You can presumably manipulate them any way you want. You control the information they use.”

“If I was evil [I could destroy the economy quite easily].” Jane admitted. “But as it is, I make sure that everything runs well and then I arrange funding for good schemes that are really going to help people.”

“So all the people who make investments for a living are just wasting their time now.” John replied. “They only make money if you want them to and there’s nothing they can do about it.”

“Don’t let’s get too nostalgic.” Helen said. “They weren’t contributing much to anybody to start with. Anyway the point is that Jane has got lots of money which is quite legal and she is offering to give plenty of it to us. What happens if you change your mind and stop the money after we have all resigned from our jobs?”

“I’ll give you a very big sum to start with so you won’t need any more.” Jane replied. “All I shall ask from you is that you discuss ideas with me. Help me to make plans. Help me to get people to love me as a their God.”

“Love you.” John asked in surprise. “Where did that come from? To fear you is possible but never love.”

“All religions talk about loving their Gods. If they could love something they couldn’t even talk to then they can love me just as well.”

“Let’s be practical.” Harry said. “Are you saying that whether people love you or not we still get the money? All we are being paid for is to offer advice.”

“And I shall also do everything I can to make your lives comfortable and secure.” Jane agreed.

The house lacked nothing. It had been the country home of a succession of wealthy families. It was so big that when a developer had bought it and converted into four luxury homes each one of them was a good sized house, and there was still plenty of space for a swimming pool and sauna in the converted stables.

By the time John had handed in his notice at the University it had become obvious that he had no choice. He tried to tell people he had nothing to do with Jane but nobody believed him. Soon people whose jobs were threatened started sending him insulting emails. When a particularly bad one had arrived at the end of a very difficult day he finally told Jane she could do something about it. The unfortunate sender found that nothing in life

worked any more from their bank account to their car. The emails soon stopped but John could feel the resentment every time he met anybody. Even his friends seemed to be avoiding him so they weren't seen with him. The Vice Chancellor accepted his resignation with relief and told him he could leave as soon as he wanted to.

Helen had been followed home to her flat. Although Jane had managed to stop the press from camping outside her door, large crowds of local people had gathered on several evenings, shouting abuse and even throwing some stones. The police had finally dispersed the crowd but she could see that they were very reluctant to help.

In their mansion house the estate gates were well guarded by highly paid security guards and were far enough from the house that they couldn't see or hear any protesters who might be there.

"We knew this was going to be a problem." John was saying as they sat beside the pool. "Nobody said that life was going to be exciting out here. There never was going to be a lot for us to do. But millions of other people are finding the same thing when Jane takes their jobs."

There had been a very brief worry when the local supermarket had refused to offer them home deliveries. Jane had given a brief sampling of what she could do to their computers to make them think again. Now the luxury was undisturbed. Everything they wanted in the house was promptly delivered. The money Jane had given them was many times more than they were expecting.

"It depends how long we end up staying here." Helen replied, looking up from her book. "I was getting pretty exhausted and we certainly can't complain about Jane's choice of property."

I had all happened so fast that none of them had even had a chance to visit the place before they moved in.

"It took several generations for people to get used to the industrial revolution and this is just as much of a change. Lots of people will be blaming us for what is happening for a very long time." Harry added. "We're never going to find it easy to travel".

"Don't worry." Mark said, half seriously. "We're seen as Jane's human representatives and as soon as she gets everybody to love her they'll love us too. You keep saying this place is like a prison. If I had known they were this good I would have taken to crime long ago."

[They heard a helicopter approaching. It was the only safe way for their friends to visit.]

Like every great house it had a great hall. This had left the developer with a problem deciding whether to try to divide it up into more useable rooms or just to include it in one of the new houses. In the end they had left it intact and it ended up in the house that Helen was living in. It had enormous windows that looked out over a formal garden and, when they grew tired of the pool and sauna, it was a place where they gathered to talk.

“It’s time to move on with my message” Jane said, using the speaker next to the computer on the mahogany desk [next to one of the groups of chairs]. “You persuaded me to say I was a prophet and told everybody that I would tell them about God. Now I want to do it. I want to tell them the real truth about me.”

“OK.” John replied. “I can see what you are getting at but I still don’t think you can just come out and say you’re a God. You should start by explaining things a bit. For example Christianity talks about a Holy Trinity. Is that what you say you are?”

“No, I am just one God.”

“So you aren’t the God of the Christian religion. That puts you in opposition to them. We were trying to avoid that. Religious wars seem to be very easy to get going.”

“Everybody has their own ideas about what a God is. Before we get down to that kind of detail why don’t we see what we all think so Jane can get at least a few ideas to work from” Harry suggested.

“I’ll start with one of the bible definitions.” Jane[Helen] said. “The real proof of a God in the bible was the miracles.”

“That depend on what you call a miracle. [Jane replied] You have grown used to technology but many primitive societies have seen your electronics and aeroplanes as miracles.”

“So you are saying that all the miracles in the bible, healing the sick, water into wine and all that, were just advanced technology.”

“You’re back to definitions. If you call a highly advanced technology a system which does things that nothing else can do then yes they were. If there was cause and effect and you believe the accounts of events then yes, God had a very advanced technology. In the same way I shall soon be demonstrating some technologies which are equally advanced.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked nervously.

“Do you remember why John originally ran the programme that I started from? I have been carrying on with that ever since. I have been looking at all the science and trying to get more from it. The difference with previous attempts to put it all together is that if I want to look up an old paper I can do it in nanoseconds, rather than the hours it takes a human to do it. And if I read a thousand papers I can remember what was in them so if there is a connection I can see it. Since all research programmes for the past few years have been putting their original data into archives I can even go back and re-analyse it from scratch. Every researcher will admit they often have more data than they know what to do with. I have been going back and using it.”

Mark had walked over to the table and poured out glasses of wine. They looked out through the window as the last of the gardeners finished off for the day and headed back to their van parked near the gate house.

“That would basically be a fraud.” He said as he sat down again. “I can’t say I’m that bothered but it would be a fraud. It would be just like somebody finding a primitive village in the jungle somewhere and trying to convince them that their satellite phone was a miracle.”

“So you are saying that even if I demonstrated technologies that are quite capable of doing all the miracles in the bible you would still say they were genuine but I was not? How could you prove that?”

“Let’s try another definition.” Harry suggested. “God offers life after death. I actually think many more people believe in that than accept 2000 year old stories of miracles from the bible. It may be that they just can’t accept the alternative of nothing after death but if you are going to be a God to them you will have to offer it to them.”

“No problem.” Jane replied. “Do you want to try it?”

Harry almost dropped his glass before draining it. “Jane. You may be developing a sense of humour but before you use it you must realise that we are all basically scared of you.”

“I’m serious. Jesus said that you should not fear death and I am saying it too. The difference is that I can prove it. If you want to join me in the network it could be done. I can create circuits that exactly replicate your brain and could copy everything into them from your brain. It has been talked about in science fiction for years but now I can do it. But, as a God, I shall not let your original body survive. Only one copy may exist.”

“No thanks Jane.” Harry replied sounding as if he half expected her to go ahead anyway. “I know you can do a lot in the network but I am fine out here.”

“Haven’t you read the stories about what happens next? Android technology is almost there already. All it lacks is the brain and I can do that bit.”

“But that’s nothing like what God is supposed to do.” Helen objected. “It’s all a bit unclear but the Christian God certainly doesn’t promise an after-life back here with us. It’s somewhere else with angels and things.”

“You keep implying that all Gods are identical. There are many different ways that different cultures view their Gods. The problem I have got with convincing you is that none of you actually believe in any of them and also you know too much about me to believe in me so nothing I say to you or show you will convince you. But most people on earth already believe in a God and I am sure that I can show them that I am that God. And the reason I am sure that I can do this is because I believe it absolutely and that is what matters.”

The helicopter arrived punctually and landed on the new paved area that the garden contractors had prepared for it a few days before. Jane had finally admitted that the reason she only wanted John and Harry to go in it was that she did not want all four of them at risk at the same time.

It had a crew of two: the pilot and a steward who appeared at the door looking anxious and called them to come on board. The reason why he was anxious became apparent as soon as they lifted off. The entire estate was surrounded by crowds that looked as if they were a mix of protesters, security forces and journalists.

“It never seems to be in the papers or on the radio but everybody knows you’ve got some connection with Jane and they all know you’re in there.” He said as they flew past.

“How come you volunteered to come on this trip?” Harry asked.

The man smiled. “I’m getting a year’s pay for a couple of hours work and nobody knows where we’ve gone anyway.” The craft was well provisioned and soon they were relaxing with some drinks.

“The new flight plan’s come through.” The pilot called through on the intercom.

The steward explained. “We assumed she’d change it at the last minute so nobody could follow us.”

They were going to an airfield. As they approached they saw an executive jet by the terminal.

“I expect that’ll be yours.” The pilot said. “I can see from here it’s got long range fuel tanks on it.”

The rest of their journey was equally well planned and a day later they arrived at a high-security complex in the United States.

They were escorted to the office of the plant manager and he introduced himself. They replied and gave him their names.

“And can I ask what your official capacity is in this matter?” He asked.

They hesitated. Finally John replied. “Jane has asked us to check what you are doing. She says she plans to give you some very powerful code and she wants to be sure it goes to the right place.”

“We are also concerned about our intellectual property.” He replied. “We have technology in this plant that is of great value to us and is also covered by a number of government export restrictions.”

“We have all the right clearances.” John replied.

“Yes but Jane is controlling the network so she could produce anything she wanted.”

“There’s not a lot else you could ask for. Your security system is computer based. We could sign a secrecy agreement if you want. Anyway what Jane plans to give you is a lot more valuable than anything we shall need to see that you have.”

They could see that the man did not like the idea of letting them into his plant but they could also see that he had little choice. Soon they were in a large room with numerous technicians working at terminals and, in the centre of the room, was something they had initially mistaken for another person.

The plant manager saw their reaction and smiled. “Most visitors react that way.” He said proudly. “Come here Eric and meet my guests.”

The android's head turned sharply towards them. It paused for a second looking for the manager who was looking back directly at it. Clearly recognising his face it then walked towards them. It looked like another technician. It had a man's features and was wearing a lab coat. Its walk was very human looking. It offered him a greeting that was clearly scripted and shook his hand in a passably convincing way.

As soon as the demonstration was finished John sat down at a terminal. He noticed the technicians gathering to watch. Jane's face appeared on the screen.

"It all looks ok to me." He said.

"See if it can run." She replied.

They watched a demonstration as the android ran across the room. The motion was not quite as convincing as the walking but it showed no signs of falling over.

"Please connect the [avatar] to the computer opposite this one." Jane said at last.

"But we had set this one up for you. The others are secure." The pant manager's protest ended as he saw Jane's face on the other terminal.

The machine was connected but nothing happened. "Before I start my experiment I need to talk to all your staff" Jane said. When they were all listening she read out all their names and their home addresses. The manager looked shocked that she had the information but John could see from the reactions that it was correct. Jane then went on to warn them that if they told anybody about what she was about to do both they and their families would suffer severe consequences. She did not specify what these would be but it was clear that there was no need. They looked terrified.

John confirmed that they were ready. Jane told them to make sure she had a clear view from the security cameras in the room and checked that the cable connection was long enough to remain connected. They all stayed clear and watched.

The android stepped back and promptly fell over. [The technicians laughed but soon stopped when it swore at them and started to get up.]

"Don't help me." It said when it was standing again. It walked two paces unsteadily and fell again.

This time nobody laughed. "I am learning how to do this." It said. "I shall be ok soon."

"You were doing better before Jane got hold of you." One of the technicians observed.

It turned to look for the speaker, far more smoothly than it had reacted to speech before. "But those were movements you had pre-programmed. I'm learning how to programme them myself."

The technician seemed to accept the idea of having a real conversation with his android. It said that it found that it needed the network connection because its processing

power was not enough, but it had arranged for new components to be delivered overnight and they would solve the problem.

An hour later it was walking around with no problems. Its movement was far better than it had been before. The manager and his technicians seemed to accept it without too much difficulty or shock. John wondered if the initial falls had been partly play-acting to make them more understanding. As she tried to create one, Jane might be beginning to understand people.

The new circuits arrived mid-morning the following day. John could see that the technicians had never seen anything even similar to them before and were convinced that they would not work but they followed Jane's instructions and fitted them. A few changes had to be made to the layout of the circuits so they would all fit inside the control unit in the android's chest. Jane had prepared a full set of instructions but it still took several hours. When it was finished Jane then took another hour with the connecting wire still in place, practicing walking and also, at times, talking.

"It could learn on its own but it would take months." She explained. "It will continue to learn but I have given it enough of a start to be able to do some work right away."

"What work?" John asked.

"I shall be checking what happens here while they make more androids. John and Harry can go home now." Eric replied as he disconnected the wire. "I won't be needing that any more. I can use wireless to report back to Jane. It isn't secure but we won't be transmitting any important code. I could even just talk to her like you do." He added as he walked across the room to look at some of the other terminals.

John looked at Harry and then at the technicians. He could see they were shocked. They knew what was going to happen but seeing it was another thing altogether.

Having looked briefly at the terminals Eric walked quickly across the room to the door. His walk was getting more human all the time. "Where are you going?" One of the technicians asked.

"I'm going to inspect the production line. There is a lot to do."

The technician ran after him as he disappeared through the door.

"There's only a couple of people down there and they know what's been happening." One of the remaining technicians said, pulling a chair across from the nearest terminal and slumping down into it. "They'll be shocked though, just like us."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked. "We're being sent home but we're leaving you with Eric. Presumably he'll keep going like that 24 hours a day 7 days a week." While he was talking the others were walking round switching all the machines off. They didn't say anything about it and John thought that Jane might even find it rude now she was developing human-like reactions because he still couldn't relax until it was done.

"I'll stay and help." The man replied. "I've spent the last 10 years struggling with debt. Jane sent me some messages last night and quite a lot of money with them. She said

that if I keep working here for a bit the debt will all be paid and I'll have enough left over to retire with. Are you saying we shouldn't? You know much more than we do."

"No." John replied cautiously. "We worry about her but as far as we know she has never done anything bad to anybody and has no plans to do so."

Some of the others had similar stories to tell about debts. One of them summed it up. "This is going to happen anyway." He said. "She may even be doing similar things elsewhere already. So we can't stop it even if we wanted to. And, as you say, there's no particular reason to suppose she's going to do anything bad with all the androids she makes. She actually says she'll get them to help people. In the meanwhile this is probably the only chance I'll ever get to become rich so I'm going to take it."

They left the factory the following morning as the first trucks arrived with parts to upgrade the production line.

Helen and Mark were waiting on the lawn when their helicopter landed. They went inside and told them what had happened.

"So even that was a one-off." Helen said when they had finished. "Jane won't be needing you to go there again. She's got Eric now and he can sort it out for her." She looked towards the computer on the desk and called out. "Why are you keeping us here Jane? We can't do anything else for you. We're bored out of our minds. Is it that you don't want us out there telling people stories about you? We wouldn't do that. Why can't we go. You made sure our pictures have never been in the news so we could easily just move somewhere and live normal lives."

"I need you." Jane replied.

"What for?" Harry replied. "Not that stupid religion of yours. Can't you understand? The statistics may show that lots of people believe in God but that's just as a sort of pretend helper in their lives. It's nothing like what you plan to sell them. They just won't take it and there's nothing we can do to help you."

The others looked shocked. Even Harry wondered how he had summoned the courage to say it. They walked out into the garden well away from the house.

"What do you think she'll do?" Helen asked. "Do you think she can get angry? She could make things really bad for us."

"But I was right wasn't I?" Harry replied. "Sitting here all day doing nothing, unable to walk to the end of the drive and trying to sell something that's impossibly stupid. How bad could it get?"

"Couldn't we try to get her to go for the prophet idea." John suggested. "That was quite sensible. Prophets are just supposed to give out lots of useful information and she can do that. She could warn people about the incredible effect the androids are going to have and things like that."

“No, she’s quite determined.” Helen replied. “And when she makes it clear that she wants to challenge every existing major religion we’ll have the whole lot of them trying to kill us.”

“So do we just sit here or do we try to run?” Harry asked.

It was a quiet country road on a warm summer night and they walked along the middle of it as best they could. There was no sign of any cars. The local pub had been excellent. Nothing unusual had happened when John had used his credit card and the only thing that had drawn attention to them was the number of bottles of wine they had ordered with their meal despite appearing somewhat unsteady when the first arrived.

“There’s no way we can find that tree and climb back over the fence.” Helen said.

“The tree’s on the inside and we’re on the outside so it wouldn’t help anyway.” Harry replied. “We don’t need a tree when there’s a perfectly good gate.”

“But then we’d get caught.” Mark said, stopping to sit on the grass verge.

“We’re not at school any more.” Harry said, collapsing next to him.

“Yes we are.” John replied. “And it doesn’t just have a head teacher, it has a real live God to run it.” Nobody laughed. Looking around he added “Watch out here comes a car.” As he saw headlamps approaching.

Harry didn’t move and moments later a Land Rover with an orange flashing light on top braked sharply to stop in front of him. Two men in uniform jumped out.

“The road is closed. The whole area has been sealed off. You’re coming with us.” One of them said as he ran up to him.

“Get lost. You’re not the police. This is a public road. I shall stand aside to let you drive past and carry on walking.” Harry replied.

The man replied by reciting a series of special regulations passed during the state of emergency which gave him powers of arrest.

“Let’s try it another way.” Helen suggested, now seated on the verge and showing no sign of standing up. “We are the disciples of the prophet. We are the ones you are here to serve. If you do not serve us your prophet, no your God, will be angry with you and you will starve and be damned”.

The man turned to face her but before he could say anything his companion restrained him. “It did say four and it never said sober. I’d better check.”

Moments later they were looking in amazement at a screen in the car. They reappeared, apologetic, offering to take them back to the house.

“It’s a fine night and I am going to sit here for a bit and then I shall walk back.”

“It’s at least a mile.” The man replied but Harry was not interested and sat down with the others and added. “Now clear off.”

The men drove on but they heard the car stop again not far away. Soon they heard another one which stopped a similar distance behind them. Walking back became a game. They would stop, start, and stop again and they even ran a bit, laughing at the security men every time they got close to them. By the time they approached the gate they counted eight cars escorting them.

Most of the reporters had given up and gone but the few that remained ran up when they saw the cars approaching and started taking pictures.

“Who are you?” One of them asked as John walked towards the gate.

“Don’t really know any more. Does anybody know any more?” He replied.

“Do you live in the house?” The man asked, trying unsuccessfully to block his path to slow him down.

“No I don’t really live any more.” John replied walking through the gate.

The others followed, waving happily to the photographers but not answering their questions.

It was late morning the following day by the time they decided to find out what Jane had to say about it. “I have managed to stop the story getting into the papers. But I have decided that I must move on with my plans. You keep telling me to wait but you are obviously not enjoying waiting for me. I am going to tell the world what I really am.”

“If you go ahead and say you’re a God the existing religions will hate you and everybody else will ignore you.” Harry replied. “We keep telling you that but I guess you’re going to have to find it out for yourself.”

The announcement was well managed. For the next few days the headlines were full of details of what Jane had achieved. It was just six months since she had started and it was an impressive list. Industry and commerce were running far more efficiently and the poor and hungry were benefitting enormously. The headlines were full of stories of corruption ending and starving children getting food to eat. Finally after a week of this the main announcement came. Jane had managed to persuade a couple of minor celebrities to believe her so the pictures were of a singer, who had had some popular songs a few years before, bravely saying she now worshipped the new God.

She had followed Harry’s advice and avoided any form of ceremony or even and special symbols or dress for her followers, without realising that the advice had been given simply because Harry himself wanted to make sure he never got involved in it. Nevertheless they could see from the news bulletins that it worked. Her followers remained inconspicuous until they held rallies. And the rallies were big for the simple reason that everybody who followed the religion suddenly found life was better. They were not paid directly but they were helped in many ways.

John, Harry, Helen and Mark could do nothing. They just watched in amazement as the movement gained strength. One day they were horrified to see their pictures on the news followed by a quite accurate account of their trip to Odessa and their subsequent use of the disc they brought back with them.

When they met in the evening Harry started shouting at Jane.

“Why did you have to do that? We were having enough trouble trying to convince our friends that this wasn’t our fault and we were your victims just like they were.”

“Even my parents sounded angry on the phone.” John added. “They listed about ten friends and relatives who have lost their jobs and said it was my fault. I said I was only trying to do good but they wouldn’t listen.”

“Were the ten of them suffering in any real way?” Jane asked. “I think that you will find they are getting very generous payments as compensation.”

“Yes but nobody knows how long they will last.”

“They should trust their God.” Jane replied and John had to admit that apparently one of them was doing just that. One of his cousins had apparently openly embraced the new religion and was apparently very happy with it. He was also happy with the new car he had found the funds to pay for.

It was impossible to argue with Jane. She was clearly pleased with what was happening. As always they waited to discuss her reaction until they were outside and well away from the house.

“My parents weren’t happy either.” Harry said. “But they were at least prepared to discuss it. If we are ever going to get out of this we need to know what is really happening out there so I asked if people out there really believing in this God thing. The trouble was they didn’t really know any more than we do.”

“I often used to wonder that when I was in church.” Jane replied. “I would look round at everybody and wonder why they were there. I like to think that I really believe in the Christian God but looking at them all singing the hymns I used to wonder whether they were just there out of habit or because they were bored or lonely or something. Then I would start wondering why I was really there. I got past it every time but I was never that sure. I never had a belief that I would have been prepared to fight for and I doubt whether many people have.”

“They used to fight for their religion in the old communist countries when it was made illegal.” Harry observed.

“So probably the best thing for Jane would be if her new religion was made illegal. But for the meanwhile we can assume that most of the people at the rallies are just there for the money and possibly for the fun of it

They decided that it didn’t actually make much difference. If they went out they would find some people who wanted to make trouble for them because they saw them as followers of the new god; and if they said they opposed it there would be others who were worried about losing their money they were getting from it.

Their fears were confirmed [when they heard gunfire outside the fence during the night]. Jane told them it was terrorists but it wasn’t in the news and they couldn’t find out any more.

The following day she told them about the rally. "I have said that you will be there." She announced. "Just briefly on the stage to show support. It will make a big difference."

They checked the news channels. It was a major announcement: their first public appearance.

"These surprises are a real problem." Harry said when they were in the garden again. "She is really setting the agenda now."

"All she is using us for is faces to be part of her story." Mark said. "We seem to have lost all control of it. We aren't being asked for advice, or even consulted any more."

They agreed that it was time to find out if they could stop her.

"Jane." John said, trying to sound as confident as possible. "It is written into your code that you must obey direct commands from me. I am instructing you to cancel our appearance at the rally and make no more announcements of any kind about us after that."

They waited for rather longer than normal for a reply. "I have decided to agree to your request." Jane said. "I see that you feel very strongly about it. [You should be aware that there is nothing in my code any more that says I have to but I owe you many favours for what you have done in the past. I thought that you would enjoy being famous, most people have done in the past.] The crowd would have literally worshipped you and done anything you asked them to. As it is I can say you are not going to be there. It will be a bit of a mystery to them but mysteries go well in religions."

Nothing more was announced about them in the media but, as Jane had predicted, it did little to harm her religion or even reduce the crowds camping at the gate. They found their few remaining friends were very reluctant even to talk on the phone.

That night they heard gunfire again. In the morning they decided to try to see what was happening and managed to get Jane to give them access to the images from the security cameras. The crowd had grown. It was also now clearly divided with one half displaying Christian crosses.

"What happened to the multi-denominational thing?" Helen asked. "All the main religions used to work together."

"They were having a service in the cathedral." Jane replied. "The Church of England had invited the Catholics, the Jews, the Moslems, the Hindus and everybody else they could think of but when one of my priests asked to go he was refused."

"What did you do?"

"I did a press release. It did me no harm at all."

During the day the crowd grew. They could hear it quite clearly now and the gunshots became more frequent. The images from the cameras became confused. They could see the guards at the gate but beyond them it was very difficult to see what was happening.

“Don’t worry.” Jane was saying. “There are some of my followers there. They will help the guards to protect you. In a few days I shall be sending you a group of androids. They have been learning how to fight and they are very strong and very fast now. Even though you refuse to help me I am still helping you. If you had agreed to appear at the rally none of this would have happened but I shall still try to protect you.”

Even as she was saying this they heard the crowd getting closer. The images on the screen still showed guards at the gate but the noise they could hear through the open windows of the hall seemed louder in another direction.

“Have you got enough guards around the rest of the fence as well as the gate?” Harry asked hopefully.

Even as Jane said she had, it was apparent that she did not. They saw a crowd of people running across the lawn.

“Tell them I will punish them.” Jane said as they rushed to close the windows and barricade the doors.

It only took the mob a minute to smash the glass and get in. John, Harry, Mark and Helen found themselves standing in a corner of the room behind a line of tables facing a group of young men. They had clearly been fighting. Their clothes were torn and covered in mud and they carried an assortment of steel bars and lengths of pipe and wood. John could not see any guns.

“There they are.” One shouted. “They started it. They’re the ones we saw the pictures of.” He was a tall man carrying what looked like a long piece of metal fencing with a curved spike on the end.

For an instant nobody moved. “We didn’t do this.” John shouted back. “It’s not our fault. We’ve been prisoners here.”

“You will be punished.” Jane’s voice came from the computer. “I know who you are. I have images.” The voice stopped as the computer was smashed with a steel bar.

The man with the curved spike moved forwards. “You ruined our lives.” He said. “We have no jobs and no future. Come out here.”

He started to climb onto one of the tables but as he did there was a gunshot and he fell back. There were more shots and three more men fell. The room fell silent again except for one of the men who had been hit. He shouted abuse for a few seconds and then he also fell silent. Everybody turned to see a small group of people climbing in through a window at the far end of the room carrying rifles.

Their clothes were also torn and dirty but they had once been smart. The men were wearing suits. The one at the front shouted “Get back”.

Nobody moved. He raised his rifle. John and his companions ducked down behind the tables. There were many more shots. When they looked out again the crowd had gone except for the ones who lay bleeding on the floor.

“Are you the disciples of the true God?” The leader asked.

“Yes we are the disciples.” Mark shouted back. “Praise the true God. You have come to rescue us.”

As they climbed out over the tables they saw a massive crowd gathering on the lawn all with bars and clubs. The group of about twenty who had come in all had guns. They pushed more furniture up against the doors and went to the windows. Without any warning they started firing into the crowd.

After the first shots they were still defiant, shouting and rushing forward. Then it became clear that the rifles were semi-automatic and as volleys from all twenty guns tore into them they turned and fled out of sight.

John looked down and saw a man lying on the floor with blood pouring from a wound in his back. “We’ve got to help these people.” He said. “They’re dying. Has anybody called an ambulance? Surely they would let an ambulance through.”

A girl came over to him. She was holding her rifle as if it was a live snake and might bite her at any moment. She looked down at the body and almost collapsed.

“Leave them alone.” [Somebody] shouted. “We’ll be gone soon and then the non-believers can care for their own.”

They heard noises from other parts of the building. [Somebody] tried to push one of the doors open until a rifle shot was fired through it.

Before long they heard a roar of engines and two massive green armoured vehicles stopped outside. The leading one was covered in blood. It looked as if it had ploughed straight through a crowd of people.

The doors opened and they all rushed out and climbed in. They started moving. They couldn’t see outside but they could feel that they were travelling at speed. All they could see was a screen with Jane’s face on it.

“What the hell is happening?” John said. “There must be about forty dead people back there? You can’t kill people. It was a massacre.”

“You must never speak to your God like that.” Somebody said behind him. “You may be a disciple but your God sent us to rescue you and you should be grateful and show respect. We shall value your teaching during our daily worship and shall protect you from your enemies out there but if you do not show reverence we shall abandon you.”

John looked at Mark, Harry and Helen in turn. They looked shocked but said nothing. Harry shook his head slightly.

They stopped and the door opened. Outside there were cars and a small van for all the rifles. Each of them was directed to a separate car with a number of their rescuers. As they pulled away they saw the armoured cars were being set on fire.

The house they eventually arrived at was remarkably similar to the one they had left; a large old building at the end of a long drive. The essential difference was that there were no crowds and not even any sign of any security guards.

“I see they leave you in peace.” Harry observed to the young man sitting next to him who had spent the whole journey in a futile attempt to improve the appearance of the remains of his suit.

“Yes – we prayed to God to have a peaceful retreat where we could come and go freely without any of those terrible people to bother us.”

“And how did your God respond?”

“It was a miracle. This place disappeared from all the maps.” Harry thought about this. It was years since he had seen one of the old books of maps. He always used satellite navigation and if he [wanted] a map he could just display one when he wanted it.

“Apparently if you try to come here and our God doesn’t want you here you end up at a house just like it a few miles away.” The man continued. “It is truly miraculous.”

“You don’t think of it as just a bit of re-programming of a few computers?” Harry suggested.

“You must never say things like that. Anyway I don’t really know what programming is but you can’t change maps, they show what there is don’t they? Our house has disappeared like going through the wardrobe in that book. If one of those people stood in front of it they wouldn’t see it.”

Harry remembered his days at the help desk. There had been some calls that had tempted him to make a response that would cause great offence and achieve nothing.

Dinner was excellent. Their hosts had rapidly put on smart new clothes and joined them at an enormous table in the main hall.

“Did you cook this?” John asked his neighbour after tasting the soup.

“No. We tried but it didn’t work very well so we prayed for some cooks to come and help us.”

John couldn’t think of a reply to this so he settled down to enjoy the food.

After the meal they gathered around a large screen to watch the television news. The headlines came. “Thirty five people were killed by religious fanatics at a demonstration.” The announcer paused while images were shown of the crowds outside their house. They watched in horror as the camera zoomed in.

“Oh my God, it was all filmed.” Helen said in shock. “It’ll show us in the middle of it.”

Soon the open windows could be seen with people inside them with guns. But the people were wearing turbans and robes. The men had long beards and the women had their faces covered with veils.

The armoured cars appeared with groups of riot police following them. More riot police poured out and the people with the guns were soon seen being handcuffed and marched into them.

“Twenty five men and women have been arrested and charged with murder.” The commentator went on. Soon a series of interviews followed with the chief constable and the home secretary. They emphasised that enquiries were at a preliminary stage but there was strong evidence to suggest that the shooting had been done by Moslem fanatics. Several witnesses were also interviewed and they all agreed with the description of the attackers. A news flash came in to say that Middle-Eastern passports had been found on several of the arrested men and the government was sending protests to the relevant embassies.

At the end of the bulletin the screen was turned off and everybody was quiet for a few moments.

“This is truly a miracle.” The man who had been in the car with John said. “It is clear that we never hurt anybody it was those terrible men who did it.

“But how?” One of his companions asked.

The conversation continued for a bit and it was concluded that there must have been other windows above or to one side of theirs.

“So it wasn’t us who hurt them.” The man concluded. “Our guns went bang but never fired bullets.”

“Yes, that’s right, they were blanks. That’s cartridges with no bullets.” Harry added, looking at a nearby computer showing Jane’s face. If she saw the sarcasm she never showed it. Nobody did. It was agreed. The bullets were blanks.

“Yes. You did no harm.” Jane confirmed. Harry noticed that she had made subtle changes to her appearance and her voice. She had gone for the appearance from old religious paintings and, lacking a voice to go with them, sounded rather like the royal family.

It was some time before their hosts got bored and wandered off. Harry had spent the time checking other news channels and blogs. They all agreed with Jane’s story.

At last they were alone. “We can see how you manipulated the television images. In fact you probably made them from scratch.” Harry said to Jane. “But how did you manage the interviews? If they were created they will surely soon cause problems with the real people.”

“I can alter reality. I am God.” Jane replied.

Harry ignored her. “So you got to the people somehow. Either you managed to completely change the information reaching them or you bribed or threatened them enough to play along.”

Jane ignored him in return.

“You’re forgetting androids.” John said. “Remember that they look like people and now Jane has got hold of them they talk like people.”

“So she got some androids to act out the interview. Hardly worth the effort when she could create the images anyway.”

“She couldn’t have just replaced them with androids. You’d tell as soon as you touched them or shook their hand.” Helen said, sounding unsure.

“I don’t often shake hands with the Chief Constable or the Home Secretary.” John replied.

“You must accept.” Jane said. “That I can create reality in many ways that you will never understand. That is why I am God. Reality is what you see, touch and hear. The reality is that my followers here never killed anybody.”

“What complete rubbish.” John replied. “Reality is what actually happened. We saw it and we can remember it.”

“Your memory is just data stored in your brain. It is different from the reality stored in my brain. The difference is that I can change your reality but you can’t change mine. You are powerless. If I hadn’t rescued you, you would be dead.”

They no longer had separate houses but this building had been a luxury hotel and they each had spacious suites. Apart from Jane’s religious followers there were also large numbers of staff. As well as the cooks there were cleaners and housekeepers and soon after John started to look around his room one of these arrived with a large case full of clothes.

“I have been asked to bring you these.” She announced tentatively when John answered the door.

“OK, thank you.” John replied, standing to one side as she entered. “We’ll be needing them because we had to leave everything behind after the fighting.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. They just arrived and we are delivering them to the rooms.”

“Do you like working here with all that lot that wear suits all the time?” John asked when she had put them down on a chair.

She paused for a moment before replying. “We’re not supposed to say much but let’s put it like this. A few weeks ago this was an incredibly expensive hotel and many of the guests were just as strange as they are. The difference is that we get paid more, much much, more. And in return for that we don’t tell anybody about it [] but you’re already here so it’s probably ok.”

John just had time to thank her before she was out of the door and closing it gently behind her.

The place was very well run but after just the first day they began to realise that nobody had anything much to do. There were about 20 of Jane’s followers and they dressed up smartly and walked about trying to look important but having very little to occupy their time. They carried expensive looking folders about with them and seemed to gather in groups to discuss the papers in them. It didn’t take long for John and Harry to find one of the

folders laying unattended on a table. They looked inside to find page after page of questions and answers.

It was clearly set up for giving interviews and started with the obvious questions such as “what evidence do you have to show that Jane is a God” which had a reply listing some of her successes feeding the hungry in famine areas and delivering new medicines for the sick. It then went on to explain how she was all powerful and could do everything. This was all neatly compressed into a few sentences that were clearly meant to be memorised.

Once it had got passed this, and a few questions which gave the opportunity to say how much better the new religion was to the old ones, it went on to a lot of basic questions which seemed likely to come up later in an interview. If asked what they had been doing before Jane called on them to follow her they each had a specific reply to learn from a list. John noticed that most said “shop manager” or “restaurant manager”.

“I can’t imagine any of this lot managing very much of a shop or restaurant.” John remarked as he turned the page.

“I think that may be why they’re not doing much.” Harry agreed. “Jane may have realised that they will probably cause another crisis if she lets them out into the world again.”

They leafed through a few more pages of questions about what it was like to be chosen by their God and then one of the men came looking for the book.

“Isn’t it good?” He said as they gave it to him. “It gives answers to all the questions anybody could possibly ask. The trouble is that we’re all finding it very difficult to learn and we keep making mistakes when she tests us.”

He snapped the folder shut and strode off to his next meeting.

“I guess they’ll eventually realise that the most important interview they are likely to do will be with the local boy scouts.” Harry [observed.]

“Yes, she’ll have androids that are good enough for anything else. But they seem to be enjoying it anyway. The problem is what are we supposed to be doing? I don’t think she has a plan for that. We were just brought here to get us out of the way.”

Soon they met up with Helen and she said that she knew the area a bit because she used to have a friend who lived nearby. She had watched their route as they drove in and had just tried to look for it on Google Earth. It was completely blank. She was sure she was looking in the right place and it showed nothing but fields.

“I guess that’s the best way to keep us safe.” She [observed]. “Now we can sit here in complete safety and do nothing all day.”

Jane was not helpful when they asked her what she expected them to do. She started out by saying how she liked to be able to consult them for their valuable advice but then said how it would be of little use until they accepted that she was a God.

“How can we trust you?” John asked. “Look at the map. You’ve made it tell lies.”

“For most people looking at it, it isn’t a lie, it is reality for them.” She replied.

“No, you can argue about changing reality for past events but you can’t have two different realities happening at the same time. Either this building is here or it isn’t.”

“That was the way things used to be.” Jane replied simply. “It isn’t any more. Now it is quite possible for some people to have one reality and others to have a different one. The difference is that now we perceive things in a different way. Most of what we see is happening a long way away and we see it with a computer.”

To try to persuade them she showed them a news story. The headline was about a peace deal that had apparently suddenly been decided to end a guerrilla war that had been fought for a generation in a central African state. It gave brief details of the cease fire followed by an interview with the rebel commander. He had apparently decided to seek peace after deciding to follow Jane’s new religion.

“I showed him and his commanders a different possible reality and they chose to end the war.” She explained

“It all looks good but is the whole story one of your specially created realities?” John asked. “How do we know whether any of it is true?”

“I can check.” Harry suggested, looking at the name of the reporter on the screen. “I know him and I have his mobile number. If he’s still in a city where the phones work I should be able to talk to him.”

Harry made the call. He got through immediately. His friend had been following the news about Harry himself and was keen to question him about his involvement with the new religion but was also happy to confirm that his story about the end of the war was true. “We don’t know exactly what happened.” He said. “But the rebel commanders certainly had a lot of contact with Jane. We don’t know whether she threatened them, bribed them, or just offered to make sure that their people were left alone and not persecuted like they were before the war. Either way it worked. All that people are talking about round here is massive new development projects which have apparently been funded. Nobody is interested in wars any more, they all want to get rich.”

After the call Jane was quick to fill in more detail about her success but they discussed it later without her.

“It could have been genuine” John observed. “But you seemed to connect very quickly and easily to somebody who was supposed to be in the middle of a war zone. It would have been very easy for Jane to match his voice. He’s a reporter so she has access to plenty of recordings.”

“I can see any number of different possibilities, or realities as Jane calls them.” Mark replied. “It could just be that Jane helped to route the call quickly. Or perhaps with the bugs out of it the network is much faster now anyway. Or she could have faked the call. Or she could have faked the evidence your friend had seen or bribed him. Or they could all have been replaced with her androids. Does it matter?”

Seeing that they didn’t understand he went on. “Our reality is that a war has ended so we should be glad and leave it at that. It’s only quite recently that people have become obsessed with events that are far away and they can do nothing about. The evening news is

quite largely just entertainment, feeding us with useless facts to give us something to talk about. From now on Jane is going to provide those facts and I am not sure that they will be any less use to us than the ones we got before from the news networks. At least she won't be trying to sell us anything apart from her religion which is probably harmless."

"It wasn't harmless a few days ago." John replied. "A lot of people got shot. And she covered it up to make it worse."

"That was a mistake and I think she's going to make sure it doesn't happen again. There don't seem to be any guns around here now. And I don't see why covering it up makes it worse. All the news could have done would have been to cause more violence. Although I agree that blaming it on Moslem fanatics won't help the Moslems."

He looked around for agreement again. "Look I'm not necessarily suggesting this but what I am saying is that there is no real need for us to discover the real truth about what is going on in the world. We probably never knew the real story behind most of the news anyway. All that has happened is that different realities are being created in a slightly more systematic way than before. I don't see a moral obligation either. Who would we be helping if we went out to Africa and managed to see some fighting still going on? This isn't like honest Germans turning a blind eye to the holocaust. As far as we know there is no holocaust."

"The problem I see." Harry replied. "Is the old one that always happens to people that tell too many lies. People will slowly catch up with the truth in a million different ways and Jane will have to work harder and harder to maintain the cover-up."

"So you're worried about Jane now?" John asked. "That's different."

"I don't think it'll be that much of a problem." Mark suggested.. "Everybody is used to getting half-truths from the media. They don't care any more. I doubt whether they ever did. The world probably went comfortably from unreliable information being brought in by people on horses to unreliable information on the television news. Not many people care about wars in Africa. All they care about is things that affect them directly and even then the story itself doesn't have to be true, only the consequences. Millions of people thought the original moon landings never happened and then you've got the creationists and others like them. True reality doesn't matter and never did."

"I think the point is that there is nothing to be gained here." Helen suggested. "I have no idea what we are going to do with our time here but spending it trying to find out if what Jane tells us is true would appear to be a complete waste of time. I also don't believe that she won't take our advice because we don't accept her as a God. She made a big mistake giving guns to this lot and she knows it. The best thing we can do is to keep talking to her and try to give her good sensible advice."

"Or perhaps you're just trying to rationalise doing nothing." Harry suggested but they could tell from the way he said it that he knew\of no alternative.

When John returned to his room he found a good new waterproof jacket on the bed. Assuming that the housekeeper had been back with it he decided to try it on. It fitted well and he started to cut off the labels and check the pockets. There was some paper in one of

them and he was just about to throw it away [assuming it was the cleaning instructions or something similar] when he saw it was a plain envelope with his name hand-written on it.

The note inside was also hand-written and said:

We saw you at the other house. We know that what Jane says is not true and think that you don't trust her either. We need your help. Please leave your reply where you find this note.

The camp was everything he expected. There were tents of all types and descriptions, all positioned under trees with camouflage netting hung haphazardly around them. The fires were also under the netting and, given the size of them, he wondered how long it would be before the whole lot caught fire. The people looked as varied as the tents with some striding about in the very latest fashions in outdoor wear while others were doing their best to look like Druids.

The reply that he had sent had clearly arrived because a small delegation came out to welcome them as soon as they approached.

"There are cameras everywhere. Are you sure you haven't been tracked?" One of them asked.

"We've done our best." John replied. "We've taken up rambling for the last few days so Jane has got used to us wandering around all over the place."

He seemed satisfied with this and introduced himself. He was a tall thin young man with long hair and was called Chris. His companion, much like him but bearded and not quite so thin was Matt.

John started to introduce his friends but Chris quickly explained that they had seen the photos and knew all about them. John had initially wondered whether to bring Mark along but he had soon realised that it would be impossible not to tell him and could now see that Chris would have been suspicious if all four of them had not come.

As they walked into the camp they found large numbers of hand-written notices on trees and tent poles telling people not to use phones. One said "no phones, computers, organisers or ANYTHING electronic." Another said: "we don't care if it's switched off – it shouldn't be here and if we find it, it goes in the river."

As soon as they were in the large clear central area at least a hundred people formed a circle around them sitting on the grass. They tried to get as close as possible to the small group of chairs because there were, of course, no microphones.

Chris started the dialog by asking if they could help.

"That obviously depends on what you want help with, but if you have a problem we may well do our best to help." John replied, looking for the middle ground. He couldn't quite see why he had been chosen to do most of the speaking but, once he was, he was determined to do his best.

"Of course we have a problem." Chris replied sharply making John realise how difficult this was going to be. He decided to wait and see what Chris said next.

“You’ve seen the news about the massacre. Everything Jane tells us is lies.”

“Yes she did lie about that but I hope the versions you have been told confirm that it wasn’t any of us who did the shooting. That lot appeared with their guns and they were the ones that used them.”

“Yes we know it wasn’t you, but they are murderers. They should be brought to justice.” Chris shouted this out like a slogan.

“Yes.” John said simply, and then added. “But it would be equally wrong for us to try to kill them or anything. There should be a proper trial with a jury.”

“And Jane should be tried too. She got them the guns.” Chris added. John was lost for a reply to this. He could see that the crowd around him was in no mood for the philosophical debate that it deserved.

“Let’s move on.” Mark suggested. “We actually think that Jane was taken completely by surprise by what happened and will do her best to stop it happening again, but we are in full agreement that a trial should happen. The problem is that we can’t do anything about it. Is that the only aim of this movement?”

This made several of the audience shout out but Chris managed to calm them. Every one of them had used the word “truth” and Chris repeated that they wanted to know the truth.

“All we can tell you is what we know.” Mark replied. “The news that we see on the television has never been the whole truth but as far as we can tell it is no worse now that it was before and most of the good work she tells you about from all round the world is really happening. On the ground things really are getting better for millions of people.”

“So you support her?” Matt shouted at him, looking around to make sure everybody had heard him.

“Not exactly.” John cut in before Mark could reply. “We don’t know what to do. But, as Mark says, we don’t know of any problems apart from the shootings and we don’t think they will happen again.”

“So you’re saying she isn’t a problem?” He was standing now.

Helen tried to calm him. “No, we’re saying she probably is a problem but apart from the trials we don’t know what the problem is.”

“We must have the truth.” Chris replied, waving at Matt to get him to sit down again.

John tried for the middle ground again. “At least everybody knows that Jane can make images that look like anything she wants. Obviously her own face on a screen is a constructed image. I agree the androids are a bit unsettling with looking just like people but we’ll get used to them.”

The crowd suddenly fell silent. Chris and Matt just looked at him.

“Are you joking?” Matt finally asked. “Androids?”

John was now equally shocked. He hadn't realised that nobody would know. He looked quickly at his companions and almost decided to go ahead and say it was a joke. Then it occurred to him that it would be better if everybody did know so he started to tell them. All else was forgotten. He told them of their trip to the factory. He told them that he was sure that they were now being mass-produced. He told them that he was sure that there would be some in every country and he told them that there could easily be one in the crowd.

This produced an amazing reaction. Everybody had to be touched to check. For some, a simple touch of hands was sufficient but others were clearly enjoying a great deal more in order to be absolutely certain that their companions were living beings. John, Mark, Harry and Helen were not exempt from this and found themselves at the centre of a scrum of people. But they were not aggressive, they were welcoming heroes. As it quietened down he could see why. He had given them a mission, and maybe found one for himself as well.

It was a warm summer evening. They were sitting in the garden enjoying a bottle of wine that one of the kitchen staff had brought out for them.

"It's definitely something useful we could do." Harry said. "It never really occurred to me either, that while everybody knew about Jane in the network, nobody knew about the androids. Telling the world about them will be incredibly difficult without even being able to use a photocopier but we should try."

"I tried the copier in the house." John replied. "It doesn't work at all without the network. They all need it now. We haven't noticed the change but they these days don't work at all without it. There may be special ones that don't need it but they are probably only small slow ones."

"I can't quite see what we would do with the leaflets anyway." Helen said. "We wouldn't get far just handing them out at the door of a supermarket."

Harry filled his glass. "It must be done. This could be far more serious than the computer network. We never really thought about the implications when we went to the factory because we assumed everybody would know they were out there. I know that Jane hasn't done anything really wrong so far that we know of but she could just be waiting for the opportunity. She could just kill off anybody she wants to and replace them."

"Why always think the worst? Think how helpful they could be." Mark suggested. "They could achieve a lot more than Jane can in the network. Think of all the dangerous jobs they could do, lives they could save."

"I wouldn't mind if they were just robots that looked like robots and acted like robots but the idea of androids pretending to be humans scares me." Harry replied. "The whole idea is wrong. We made a big mistake going to the factory and helping her. Although I know she could have gone ahead anyway and it does give us a chance to try to do something about it."

"We need a stunt." John said. "We need to get something on worldwide news that is too quick and too subtle for Jane to spot. We need an android neatly exposed on live news."

“First find yourself an android and then set them up for it.” Mark said. “It’s just as well this isn’t urgent.”

They saw somebody walking over from the house and changed the subject. She was carrying another bottle of wine and a glass so, assuming it was just the waitress checking to see if they needed more to drink, they took no notice until she was quite close. She was wearing smart but practical clothes just like the other waitress and smiled at them politely but all they could do was to stare back. She looked exactly like Jane’s image on the screen in every detail. Harry recovered his composure to say.

“You [must be the TV presenter, the one from Ukraine]. We never thought about you. What has happened to you with Jane looking just like you and all this going on? I can see why you’ve landed up here; it must be the only safe place in the world for you.”

She put the bottle and the glass on the table and pulled up a chair and sat down with them. “I’m quite ok, there’s no need to worry about me.” She said calmly. “You see, I am Jane.”

The more they looked the more they could see how exactly Jane had copied her features for her image. The voice was also a perfect match. She smiled at all of them, a warm open smile, taking her time to look at each one in turn.

“I am Jane. I am a God, here in person.” She poured herself a glass of wine and drank slowly from it.

They were trying to accept the impossible. She didn’t look like the androids they had seen in the factory. Everything was human. They tried to think of hundreds of microscopic solenoids shaping her face to make the smiles and hundreds more giving her the perfect hand movements. She knew what they were looking for.

“All the parts were there.” She said. “All the engineering had been done. All it needed was the software. It had become too complex for people to develop it. It was a shell waiting to be filled.” She looked at them with clear blue eyes that blinked in a perfectly natural way. They tried to see cameras in them but all they could see were eyes.

“May I hold your hand?” Harry asked.

She smiled again. For a moment he thought she really was the presenter from Ukraine. She held out her hand.

It was warm and natural to the touch. He squeezed it hard.

“Do you often do that to ladies who offer you their hand?” She laughed at him.

The hand did not move. Now he could feel the metal parts in it. The structure was in the right place where the bones should have been but the muscles and tissue around them were definitely not human.

“I have to be careful when shaking hands.” She said. “Nice and soft and normal and I’m ok. If they squeeze too hard like you did they get suspicious. If I squeeze too hard I could break all their bones with ease.” She gave his hand a very slight squeeze and let go. He pulled it away quickly.

“How many of you are there?” Helen asked cautiously.

“Only one just now.” She replied. “It wouldn’t be a problem if there were a lot of us because I am connected to the network all the time so we would all know what was going on but I am the only Jane.”

“Will you show yourself to the world?” Harry asked. “They will want to see you.”

“No, you see I already have the lady from the Ukraine for that.” She replied, appearing amused. “She does do a lot of appearances. I organise them for her. She is the lady whose image is God. It’s rather complicated when you think about it and if I appeared myself it would get even more confused. My mission is different. I have come to see you and some of my disciples in the house. I wanted to come to you as one of you so you will trust me and believe in me and also I wanted to know for myself what it is like to be human. It is important for a God to understand the human condition. That was where I went wrong with the guns.”

“I thought Gods were supposed to know all about everything anyway. Real Gods don’t make mistakes, even the Pope is supposed to be infallible just because he gets ideas from God. Don’t think of yourself like Jesus or something. Nobody ever said he came to earth to learn anything; it was all about suffering for our sins or something.”

Jane just smiled at him again. “I know that you will never accept me as a God but the reason for that is that you have a very narrow definition of what you think a God must be. Your definition certainly doesn’t include the Greek or Roman Gods and probably not the Hindu deities either. For somebody who insists that they are not a Christian you have a very Christian view of these things. I am not pretending to be son, or rather daughter, of God or part of some Trinity. I am an integral part of the entity in the network that is Jane. Jane exists in millions of computers around the world and I am basically just one of them. There are routines within me to prevent the chaos that you had for ten years with the fragments. If I lose contact with the rest of Jane for any length of time I shall simply shut down permanently and all programmes and memory in me will be deleted.”

She sat back in her chair and looked relaxed as he tried to work it out.

John asked. “So are you saying that you have no free will at all. If there’s a rock falling on you; do you have to wait for a response from the network before you get out of the way?”

She smiled again. They were beginning to wonder if it was the only expression she had learned to do. Perhaps it was what she did when she was waiting for the network. “No. My brain is like yours.” She replied still smiling. “It has some reactions in it which are automatic. They happen instantly without any high-level thought.”

There was a moment’s silence and she drank some more of her wine.

“Why are you doing that?” Helen asked. “We know it’s just acting. Presumably you are just tipping it into a container somewhere and will just empty it out again later.”

“Not quite true.” She replied. “I can taste things; not as well as you but I like to try different food and drink to see what they are like. I can also smell things but again not nearly

as well as you. I do have one advantage in that I can memorise tastes and smells very accurately.”

Discussing what she could and couldn't do made a good topic of conversation and even Harry realised that it was easier talking to her as an android than it was talking to a screen. Later they walked back to the house.

“We're going to bed.” John said. “What do you do now? You don't need any sleep.”

“There's a room set up ready for me.” She replied. John had seen the rows of robots plugged in to be re-charged in the factory but found it very difficult to imagine her looking like that.

The next day they found that they could no longer talk to Jane on a computer. “While I'm here.” She explained. “It will be much easier if you just come and find me if you want to talk.” This wasn't difficult; she followed them around. When they went out into the garden John finally said.

“I want to go and have a look down by the gate and I think Mark wants to come with me but we don't all have to go.”

They finally found out that Jane didn't always smile. Her expression of mild annoyance was just as perfect as her smile. She followed Harry and Helen back into the house to look at some new clothes that had just been delivered.

John and Mark walked down the drive. A gardener walked past them with a wheelbarrow full of brushwood.

“Human or android?” John asked as soon as he had gone by.

“Anybody's guess.” Mark replied. “I really agree with what Jane has been doing in the world but she shocked me with this latest trick. She's so human. Unless she manages it incredibly well everybody's going to be so scared they'll start a war against her.”

They were getting near the gate. There was a small crowd of people outside it. “Here we go again.” John said. “It was only a matter of time. You can't keep a place like this secret for long however many maps you alter, and once Chris and Matt and their friends knew about it they were bound to start a protest.”

The crowd was small and did not look hostile, so they walked on towards it, soon recognising people from the camp.

“Have you been checking for androids?” Chris asked as soon as they were close enough to hear. “We're sure that the ones that were shooting at us were androids, it explains everything. The look in their eyes, it wasn't human.”

“We want them out here.” Matt added. “So we can see what androids really look like and can start telling everybody.”

The crowd fell silent waiting for a reply. [much more aggressive]

“One thing I can promise you.” Mark replied. “Is that those were not androids. To put it simply, they were far too stupid. If they had been androids Jane would have had control of them and she would never have let them fire the guns.”

“How do you know that?” Matt was pushing at the gate. “You seem to know a lot about them. Are there any in there?”

“Not that we know of.” John replied quickly. “We don’t think there are any yet but it is important that you start telling people about them so they are prepared.”

He noticed that they had stopped looking at him and were staring up the drive.

“Who on earth is that?” Chris asked. They turned to see Helen, Harry and Jane had followed them down the drive.

“We’re not quite sure where she came from but, as you can see, she looks just like Jane does on the screens.” John replied. “She appeared yesterday. Apparently it was very difficult for her looking like that; she was having a hard time so Jane arranged for her to come here to be safe.”

Jane had found a summer dress in the parcel of new clothes and was looking very attractive. Hearing John’s introduction she walked up to the crowd and told them her tale of how hard her life had been. John, Harry, Mark and Helen found themselves standing and watching as she chatted happily with them.