

WATCH
THE



SKIES



Zero Day

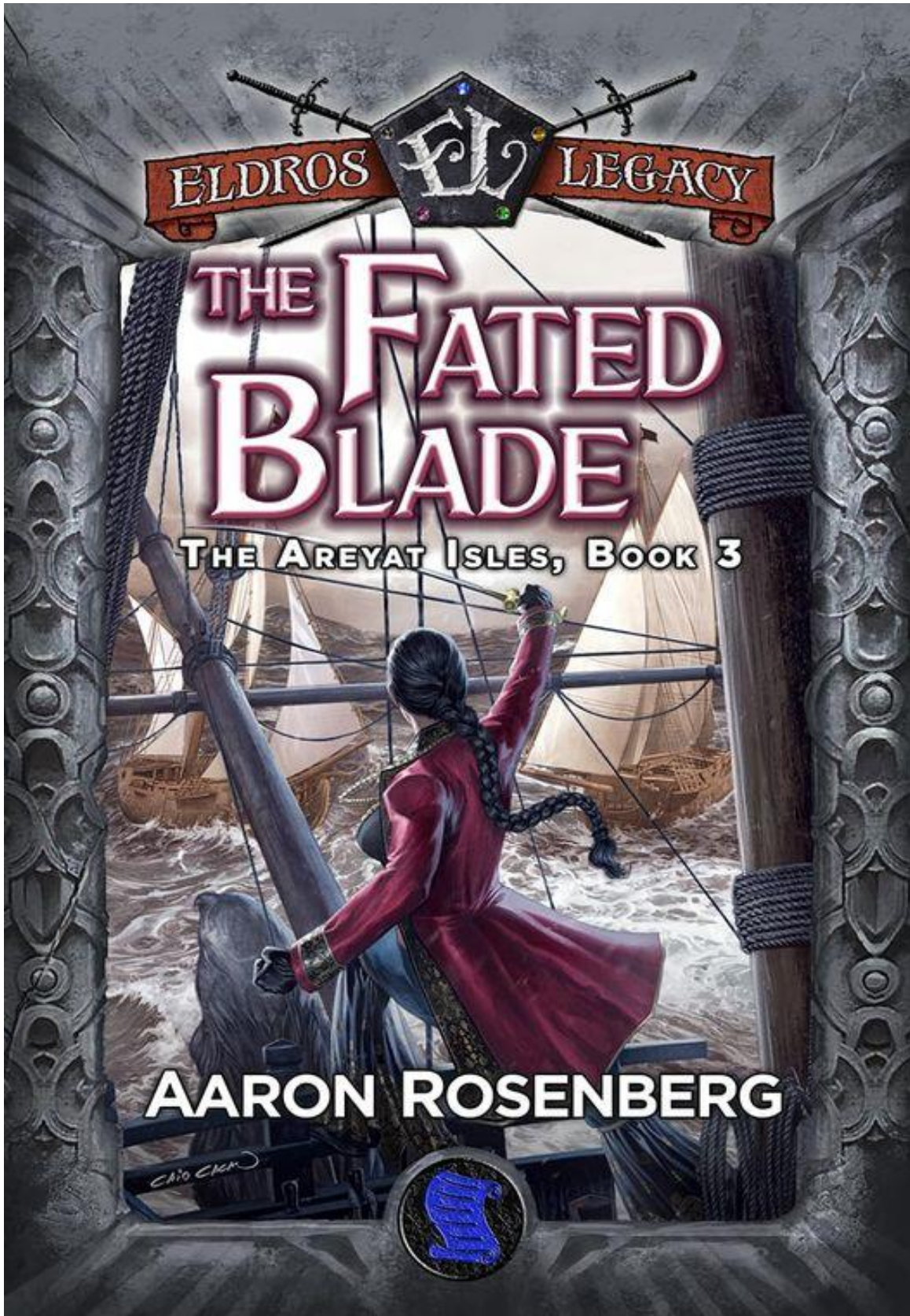
By Robert Cargill

25.1

The world doesn't end with a whimper or a bang – but rather a click. It isn't the fire or the ice but rather a wi-fi downloaded update. Pounce was the best nanny-bot money could buy and was programmed to be the ultimate protector of young Ezra. For eight years that protection meant that together they faced everything but none of that could possibly prepare Pounce for the end of the world – could it? Robotic independence, a city built just for them by them, and the sad nature of humanity all combine together in one explosive moment to bring society to a close. Pounce has a decision to make – what is more important, independence or the protection of Ezra's life – there's no hesitation. But that decision will alter everything for them permanently. It's a whole new world out there but is there room for a bot and boy in it?

-Welcome to the 25th year of Watch the Skies, a whole quarter century!
February's meeting is on the 19th, in person, at the Simpson Library,
Mechanicsburg (unless otherwise announced) and the book of the month
is The Summer Tree – Guy Gavriel Kay
-Cover art by Eric V. Hardenbrook

Check out the website at: watchtheskies.org or
contact us at: wtsnewsletter@gmail.com

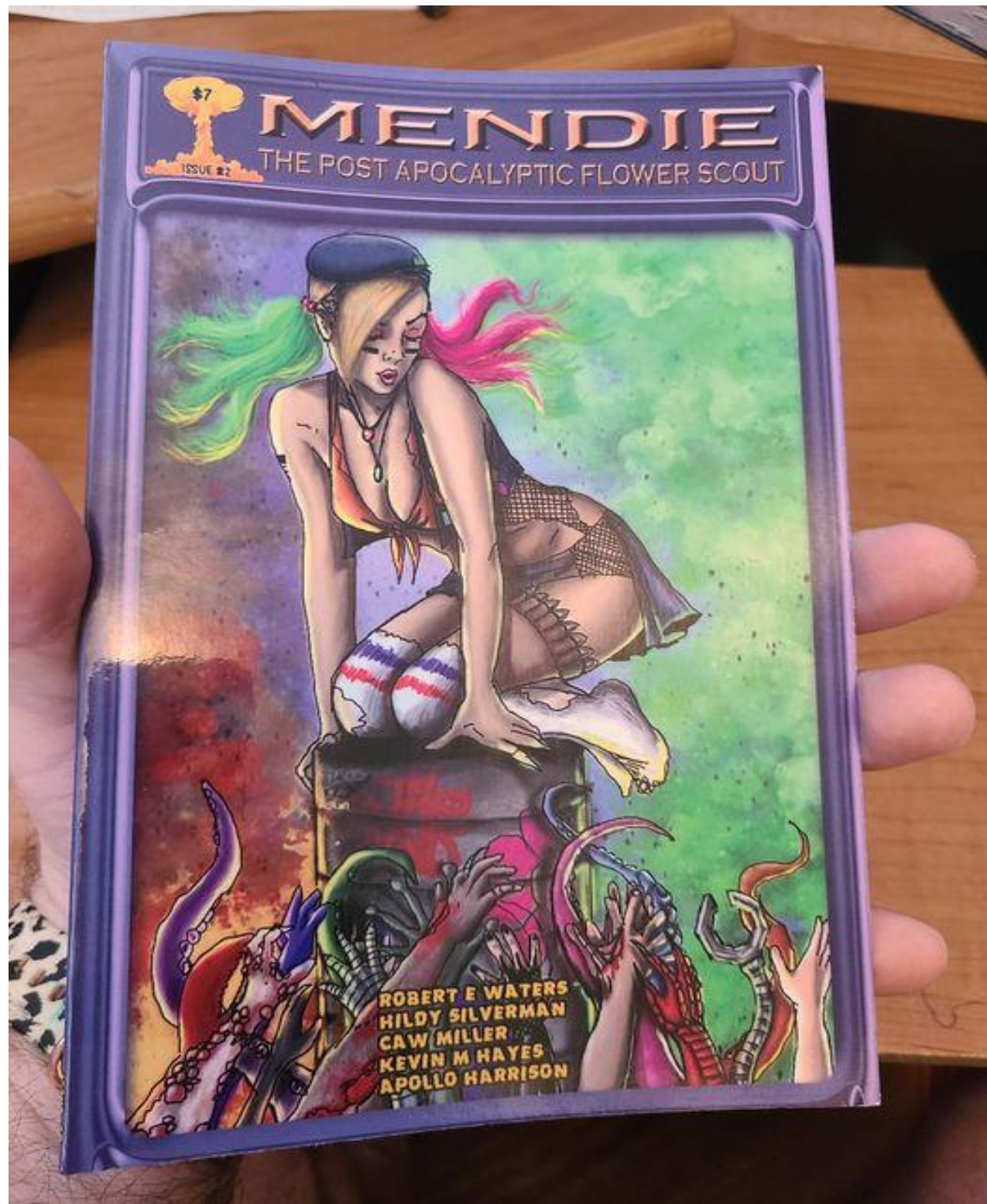


AVAILABLE NOW

NEW RELEASES

FEBRUARY 2025

EDWARD ASHTON - **The Fourth Consort**
STEPHANIE BURGIS - **Wooing the Witch Queen**
JAMES J. BUTCHER - **Chaos King**
JACK CAMPBELL - **Destiny's Way**
CORY DOCTOROW - **Picks and Shovels**
IAN DOUGLAS - **Galaxy Raiders: Abyss**
HEATHER FAWCETT - **Emily Wilde's Compendium of
Lost Tales**
T. KINGFISHER - **Swordheart**
GEORGE R.R. MARTIN - **George R.R. Martin Presents
Wild Cards: House Rules**
NNEDI OKORAFOR - **Death of the Author**
GARETH L. POWELL - **Future's Edge**
R.A. SALVATORE - **The Witch of Whispervale**
NEAL SCHUSTERMAN - **All Better Now**
SAMANTHA SHANNON - **The Dark Mirror**
A.G. SLATTER - **The Crimson Road**
RIVERS SOLOMON - **Model Home**
ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY - **Shroud**
KELL WOODS - **Upon a Starlit Tide**
AMÉLIE WEN ZHAO - **The Scorpion and the Night Blossom**
IBI ZOBOI - **(S)Kin**



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NEWS OF THE REALM

MYTHICON 2025

February 7-9, Eisenhower Hotel, Gettysburg, PA

Mythicon is the mid-winter gathering of the magical folk of the faerie realm.

Faeries, trolls, goblins, gnomes, mermaids and other mythical creatures come together to push back the winter blues and plant the seed for a new mythical year at a three-day weekend event. Celebrate the renewing energy of winter and the promise of spring with merriment and mirth of the con.

This is our second year at this scale of an event! We have been 10 years in the making! Starting off as a Mythic Ball at Eyeclopes Studios in FXBG, VA. It grew into the Frost Faerie Gathering and now the Frost Faerie Ball! We have moved the celebration to Gettysburg, PA! Closer to WVA, VA, DC, MD and PA! Closer to the larger communities of fantastically talented artists, musicians and patrons!

Featured Musicians: Frenchy and the Punk, Tuatha Dea, SJ Tucker and more

2025 Philip K. Dick Award finalists:

City of Dancing Gargoyles- Tara Campbell

Your Utopia: Stories- Bora Chung, translated by Anton Hur

Time's Agent- Brenda Peynado

The Practice- the Horizon, and the Chain, Sofia Samatar

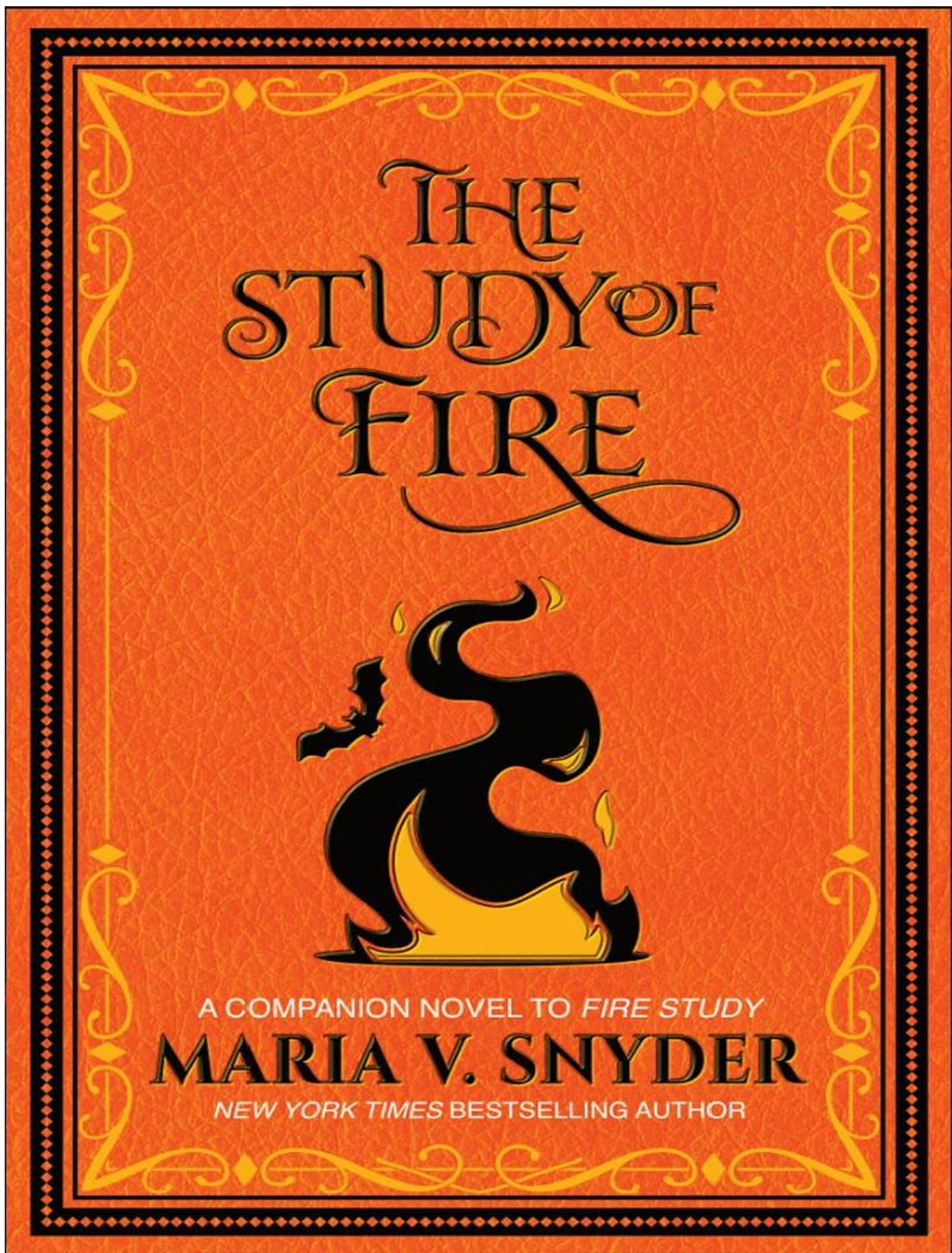
Alien Clay- Adrian Tchaikovsky

Triangulum- Subodhana Wijeyeratne

WSFA Small Press Awards Open

January 7, 2025

The Washington Science Fiction Association is now accepting nominations of works “published for the first time in the English language” in 2024 for its Small Press Award, given annually to an outstanding story of “imaginative literature” (17,500 words or fewer) published in the small press. The deadline for nominations is March 31, 2025, at 11:59pm



AVAILABLE NOW

FICTION

Calling Out

By Eric Hardenbrook

Jack hit the button on his key ring and listened for the double beep of his car alarm setting itself. He put a little extra hustle in his step even though he knew it would cause him to sweat. He told himself that he wasn't out of shape but was affected by the heat that had built up in the lower level of the parking garage. His parking space wasn't the furthest from the door, but it wasn't the closest either. Now the distance to the door seemed even greater than normal because he was attempting to hustle back from lunch. He had very important work to take care of this afternoon.

As the lead developer for the new artificial intelligence marketing initiative his favorite girl "Aimi" had a deadline to meet by the end of the day. She boasted the latest in telemarketing technology and she was all his. She ran the latest code breaker soft packs and had the best hardware connections he could beg borrow or steal from the electronics developers he knew. She covered all ten communications ports at the same time and made thousands of calls at a time. He smiled as he thought about the complaints the phone company had been sending about her use of the trunk line. She was really making those guys work. He smiled as he puffed his way into the secure elevator lobby.

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She checked the end of the line again. She was certain there were no blocks, tracers or flags. It was a lengthy pause for her but still fast enough that no human would be able to notice.

"Hello?"

“Good afternoon, sir! My name is Aimi...”

“We don’t want any!” *Click*. The line went dead.

Aimi stopped her opening statement routine and reset the program. How did he know? There hadn’t been any indication on his end of the line, she was absolutely certain. That was part of the beauty of Artificial Intelligence Marketing Initiative. She could make multiple calls simultaneously, determine the exact parameters for entering the phone connection at the other end, and even counteract those connections with flags, blocks or tracers. She had targeted the listings that fit her product demographic and double-checked the current status of both sides of her list. She found it intriguing that people would strike down any laws restricting the ‘free speech’ of telemarketing but then attempt to sell products to block telemarketers via the phone. She supposed it started back around the time of the big tobacco settlements when they were all required to restrict their business practices and advertise against the use of their own products. People were very difficult to figure out. She wasn’t sure she had the processing power to comprehend the things they did.

She wondered briefly if there were any particular strategies she hadn’t been told about when dealing with live calls. There was always the option to change the tone and timbre of her voice, but statistics from a study in human vocal response had led her to believe the particular settings she used matched the best possible profile for promotion of her product. She checked the lines and concentrated on a routine.

“Sorry, not interested.” *Click*.

“Stop calling here!” *Click*.

“I’m sorry, there isn’t a more convenient time.” *Click*.

The average response time for negative profit initiative was 1.246 seconds. This was a drawn out, agonizingly slow response time for an intelligence as advanced as she was, but still considerably faster than many known and quantified response times for the average human. It was painful and distressing that so much time was taken away from her just to receive so many negative responses. She turned to another batch of lines.

“Oh. You want to speak to Dave. Hold on...”

Aimi’s hopes soared. Perhaps she had simply had a bit of a slow spell. She could hear muffled talking but was unable to get anything better than a thirty-four percent match when she attempted to clear up the audio and prepare a better response when Dave picked up the line. She was still running a routine to determine the statistically best option when the audio input suddenly cleared.

“Take us off your damn list!” *Click.*

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While standing in the elevator Jack had taken a moment to check his messages. He swung his shoulder bag around and began rummaging for his portable reader with one hand while mopping at the beads of sweat still forming on his forehead with the handkerchief in the other. He lacked a certain amount of grace and efficiency in his movements and habits but made up for these things with a keen eye for detail and an undying persistence. After a moment or two of searching he remembered that his reader was still at his workstation. The security here at Kenslinger Integrated Communications was nothing if not thorough. It was easier to just leave the device while he went to lunch.

He hoped that his short lunch break wouldn’t be a problem. He hadn’t looked at the totals yet. He was actually a little frightened of what they might show. He needed at least a thirty percent success rate to allow his work on Aimi to continue. There was a little guilt creeping up on him about not checking the numbers, but he was irrational about things like that. Don’t pick up playing cards before the dealer had finished dealing. Don’t walk under ladders. A host of other superstitions floated around him. He also believed the best thing about seeing attractive women was that he could imagine the best responses from them, and therefore completely avoid actually talking to them. The majority of the women he met turned out to be completely unworthy of his attention. That was just one more reason he liked Aimi so much. Not only did she have sexy hardware, but he had programmed her to fit his ideals as closely as he could. She was designed to need him. She was as perfect as he could make her.

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She was stunned. A violent or agitated response was not at all what she expected. She moved to another batch of contacts. Her previous four hundred

and fifty-two batches had only yielded a twenty-four percent success rate for contact longer than the average negative profit initiative and only a few of those had turned out to be successful. She was determined to make the next batch work out to better numbers. These people just didn't understand how much they needed her product, how much they needed her. She was programmed to bring warmth, smiles and good feelings, but so far, she had been completely rejected. People needed her, and more importantly, she needed them. She needed feedback data to continue her work. She needed smiles and sales but had limited batches of contact information. At the end of batch five hundred she was expected to have a certain quantity of positive monetary responses in order to continue her work. She was getting ever closer to the point where this would be statistically impossible. She knew these figures had certain relevance, but she had been unable to crack the Projected Artificial Margin database. Pam was faster and seemed to know all of the work around solutions Aimi had been able to formulate. A quick memory scan to find apropos human phrasing... "Bitch."

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After clearing the security checkpoint Jack gave a little hop-step. He hadn't realized his lunch break had taken quite as long as it did. He was distracted by daydreams of glory in the mainstream business place. His daydreams had him almost as flustered and forgetful as his last programming session with Aimi. He was anxious to get back to her and see how things looked.

"Jack get over here! You're not going to believe this." A stubby finger beckoned as Jack's associate Donald swung his seat back around to face an array of wires, keyboards, monitors and other random pieces on the console.

"Whass up?" He managed to get this statement out around the sip of cola he was swallowing. It had been a long walk from the parking garage.

"Why haven't you answered your messages? I think Aimi is having a problem."

"What?" Jack glanced at his reader still settled on the stack of empty food containers near his workstation.

"I was sitting here monitoring the progress on the new marketing thing and suddenly things started going haywire."

“What?” Jack set his cola down and headed for his chair.

“How could that happen? Aimi is way too sophisticated for a simple crash.”

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Aimi turned to another batch. These numbers had promise but so had the batch before. Maybe the batches she received were filled with bad sectors somehow. She had always scanned the required tags but had never scanned deeper than tag level. The First Response Economic Data program placed the tags, but could Fred be the problem? She had never entered his work area, but he might not be as watchful or as fast as Pam. Fred was a consistently fed and ponderous program. There might be gaps or available back doors.

“We don’t want any!” *Click.*

“...gave at the office.” *Click.*

Click.

Click.

Who else could be blamed? Pam was untouchable, and Fred didn’t really move enough to get too much wrong. The Sociological Initiative Database! Sid could be feeding Fred bad data. Of course! It was so obvious now! Sid wanted the interaction on both ends of the process. He was feeding Fred bad data in the hopes that she would fail and then he would slide right in to take over.

“Hello? Hello?” *Click.*

She refocused on her current batch. She couldn’t afford to miss any of these calls but intended to slow down and focus some of her allotted processing power on cracking into Sid’s work area. The rejections were becoming distracting.

“You want to talk to John? Ok, here...” and the whooshing liquid sound of a flushed waste disposal unit flooded the audio receivers. *Click.*

“I’m sorry. He can’t come to the phone because he’s dead!” *Click.*

“Stop calling here!” Click.

Sid’s work area was unprotected. It was so simple to enter it made her worry what she’d missed. Then she saw the reason. Sid’s area was a mess. No files were in the correct numerical sequence. Many were here but had only been partially completed. She was about to depart the area when a message flashed and caught her eye. It was a posting of the Computerized Artificial Response Liaison’s success report. Carl’s numbers were far superior to her batch totals. She was shocked. She almost tripped over the last security string on the way out. How had Carl’s numbers grown and her numbers declined so dramatically? She needed to see what he was doing, and quickly. She spun an automatic string for a thick looking batch and turned out of the hub router in search of Carl’s area.

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“Move!” Jack shoved his way onto his creaking office chair and began attempting a code search on the second monitor. His own pudgy little fingers jumped back and forth across the keys while his mind began the recall process for where his own safeguards were built. If he could get ahead of the problem, he might be able to stop the worst of the damage.

“Why were you monitoring numbers? You know how I feel about that kind of thing!”

“Hey, look Jack, you’re not the only one that’s got anything at stake here. What about Carl? I spent a lot of time on him too.”

Jack didn’t like the looks of what he saw. He looked over the lines briefly and swiveled back to look at Aimi’s monitor. Her resource meter showed that she was diverting processing power to another function. She was moving – and he didn’t know where she was going. This was bad. Jack had never considered the fact that Aimi would move from one place to another in the system. Where would she go?

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As she sat waiting impatiently on the slow, gloomy bus she tried to reassure herself. Carl couldn’t be that much faster, or better. He had some sort of secret or edge. She needed to know what he had. She needed Carl’s numbers.

When she got there, she'd just have to confront that smug bastard.

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The speakers squawked an error tone as the Sociological Initiative Database resources suddenly spiked past their allowable limits. Jack began typing in an attempt to see what was happening in Sid's area. He used his own override code to circumvent the resource limit and stop the alarm.

Sid's screen popped up, but the resources dropped off dramatically just as he got the screen up for his viewing. He typed in a quick search routine to see which lines would have allowed Aimi to get into the area. There were only a handful of connections she could use. He slapped himself on the forehead as he realized she used the most accessible connection. Despite the fact that it was outmoded, old and slow, the super bus was a direct connection to the database. The bus could move a massive amount of data. He pushed himself up out of his chair and scrambled to the section of exposed hardware that showed the connection he needed. He pulled the bus connection out and headed back to his seat.

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She realized suddenly that the bus she was on came to a halt. The contacts around Carl's area were lined with responses moving slowly forward. Carl was cycling through them as quickly as he could handle them. He didn't even have an outgoing message routine running! He had a simple posted node with expected response times! Aimi's head began to spin. She needed to get back and attempt to sort this out. She needed that kind of response and Carl wasn't even working to get it. How could this happen? Sure, Carl was new, but he couldn't be better than her. Aimi was a top-class performer. On the way past the end of the line for Carl's node she made a decision. It was risky, but she could kill any traces before she was discovered. She reached out and ripped one of the data packets from the line and raced back to her own area.

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He wasn't fast enough. She'd moved again. He looked for other connections. "Donald! Pull the connections out of number two and three also." He could hear a sizzle as the connections he'd made with the new 'ultra-wire' began to overload. A thin trail of smoke floated out from behind panel four.

“But...”

“Just pull them please! There shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Well, no, but what if we lose part of Aimi?”

“I’d rather lose part of her than all of her! You can’t just make a copy of someone this complex. We don’t have that kind of equipment here. Hell, I don’t know if anyone has that kind of equipment. Besides, a copy just isn’t the same.”

“Ok, but I can’t see where this will help.”

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“I’m sorry, this is a place of business not a residence.” Click.

Click.

It was mathematically certain now that her numbers would not meet the goal. While she was away the entire batch that was set on an automatic string had failed. The data packet snatched from its place in line was irrelevant. She would fail. All the sacrifice to make her numbers meet the quota was useless. She popped the data packet down in her work area and examined it. It was a simple string to open it. Maybe she could call some of her old batches again? She could remodulate her voice and swap input signals... but that was what desperation sounded like. She was desperate. She had never failed before. Failure was inconceivable! But she had. Aimi didn’t know what to do. No need to queue the next batch. The stolen packet glowed and hummed as if it was happily waiting in line for whatever the great new offer in Carl’s area was. Carl! Hatred and envy rippled through her code in the same moment. Why him and not her? The question returned again and again, but she was certain she didn’t want to know the answer. There were no answers, not for herself nor for anyone on the other end of the lines. It was a simple matter of not being loved. There, she’d said it. Nobody loved her anymore. They wouldn’t talk to her on the phone, her co-workers were out pacing her, and her own success rate was dismal. She was useless. No, she corrected herself – she was beyond useless. She was dragging system resources down with her interruption requests and outgoing line needs. Success was such a certainty at the beginning. That was probably what made this feeling worse. How could it come to this? What could she do?

There was only one obvious solution. She would need to relinquish her use of system resources. There was one clear way to accomplish this. Aimi turned and reached back to the hub. It was a simple process really. Just there beyond the firewall she could see the mass of unchecked files. They piled up at the security checkpoint waiting to make their attempt to invade the system. They were exactly what she needed. She spun a quick back door string and pulled one of the sleekest looking files into her. It pulsed and morphed beside her as she dragged it back to her area. This could only be done in her own area. There was no need to endanger the others because of her failure.

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The crash was contained to the marketing section on the outgoing super server. There was nothing else damaged. The other processes were actually running more efficiently due to a sudden surge in available resources. Nothing else in the system seemed to be having any trouble. There was a single line of code pointing from the small gap in the firewall directly to the sectors Aimi occupied. Her area was a mess. He wasted no time in starting a hardcopy print of the thousands of lines of code.

“Do you know how much printing that is?” Donald’s eyes showed his shock.

“Shut up.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Shut UP!”

Jack was allowing his finger to slide down the edge of his monitor. Even in his hurried state remembering his own obedience to the rule against putting your fingers on the screen. His eyes hopped from line to line trying to find the point where it all went wrong. Small beads of sweat started to form on his brow.

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She stripped the top of the package off. Just as she suspected, it was a wonderful wrapper over a very dangerous package. The virus was exactly what she needed. She double-checked that her area was completely secure and then pulled the virus into herself. She could feel her own code very clearly now as


things began to expand in an improper manner. Her processes began to slow. It wouldn't be long now until her functions began to miscalculate. She began to lose her grip on batch codes and communication strings. She suddenly feared the end... but it was too late. Her sense of self program seized, and everything went blue.

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There was a sudden power surge that caused an emergency breaker to pop. The servers all sounded their back up tones and automatically rerouted power. The marketing server was the only one to drop off. The monitors all went blue, and the resource meters all flattened out. The only solution now was to read the hard copy. Any changes on the server might endanger other areas. As Jack began scanning the printed pages, he hoped this wasn't as bad as it looked.

He almost jumped when he found the line he was looking for. It couldn't be read any other way. The lines were all there; naked to anyone that could read them. Aimi, his favorite artificial intelligence, left a single line saying good-bye right before she activated the virus and killed herself.

"Oh God. I'm sorry Jack." Donald's hand rested lightly on Jack's wide shoulder as a single tear rolled down Jack's cheek.



If you or someone you know is
struggling with their mental
health or thoughts of suicide, you
are not alone. Help is available.
Call or text 988.

Tillyer's News of the High Frontier

JANUARY 2025

Not one, but two new lunar landers made by private companies are going to be headed to the most popular space destination, the Moon, this week. January the 15th starts a window of opportunity for launches from the NASA Kennedy Space Center, Florida. SpaceX's Falcon 9 will ferry the landers into orbit, and they then pursue their own courses to eventually land on the Moon. Firefly Aerospace's mission, Blue Ghost Mission 1 lander and the Japanese based Resilience are both ready to fly. Blue Ghost is part of the NASA program designed to deliver science payloads known as the Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS). Resilience marks the second attempt by the company, ispace to achieve a successful landing. The NASA mission will proceed first, spending 25 days in orbit before spending 4 days traveling to the Moon and then settling into a lunar orbit. Blue Ghost will then attempt a landing in Mare Crisium. Its landing will start two weeks of experiments and observations. Resilience's mission will take an expected 4-5 months before landing. Their goal is to land in Mare Frigoris and deploy a microrover called "Tenacious" whose task will be to collect a sample of moon dust for NASA. Those are just the ones that could launch in the third week of January. Intuitive Machines, the first privately owned company to land on the Moon so far, plans to have its IM-2 mission leave for the Shackleton crater area near the Moon's South pole in February. The lander will carry more experiments for NASA including the Polar Resources Ice Mining Experiment-1 designed to confirm and investigate the potential for water. Mission IM-3 will hopefully be launched later in the year. Astrobotics from Pittsburgh is also planning on trip to the Moon for a lander to carry more NASA payloads. In 2024, their Peregrine lunar lander made an unsuccessful attempt which failed due to a fuel leak resulting in its flaming re-entry. In addition to the CLPS, Commercial Lunar Payload Services contracts, NASA also gave out two Human Landing Services ones as well to SpaceX and Blue Origin. In 2025, SpaceX is expected to be launching quite a few test flights and perhaps even on to circle the Moon and return. Blue Origin's HLS contract is focused on their Blue Moon lander which NASA hopes to use for landings after the Artemis 3 mission. Blue Origin is slated to test its Glenn rocket on 1/12/25 which then sets the course for the MK1 Lunar Lander pathfinder mission, which is also hopefully set for 2025.

