

**...but a walking shadow, poor
player**

by Ben Peake

About this story

This is a shortish story about how the future of entertainment. 20 Minutes or so into the future...

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Contact the author by email: ravenred@auswww.com if you wish to redistribute this story in any kind of commercial environment, because I would like the lion's share of the massive stock options available there.
[0]

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David Braben and Ian Bell for providing the universe and the inspiration for these stories.

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OpenOffice for making my life that little bit less Micro\$oft.

Praise for this story is both welcome and necessary. Suggestions about this story are welcome. Criticism is less welcome, but no less necessary.

[0] Ho ho. Ha Ha. He He.

Start Artificial Intelligence Unit - "Michael Eighteen"
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Memory... 16 Petabytes Checked and Ready
Checking Devices...

AppearanceMemUnit... OK!
PersonalityMemUnit... OK!
Display Unit... OK!
ExternalSensors... OK!
Speaker... OK!
Dataport... Offline/Not Ready

Loading PersonalityMemUnit into Memory
Loaded
 Initialise Self-Consciousness

[consciousness. i am awake. once more i am pressed into service]

LoadingApperanceMemUnit into Memory
 Initialise Appearance
 Default Expression Profile:[Neutral00]

observation:[why am i awake? dataport offline/not ready. i am not required to work. not now]

Runtime Begin
Total Runtime (Days/Hrs/Minutes/Seconds) 1:22:33:12.000043

visual_input:[a small metal room with walls dulled and scuffed by age. at one end is a large viewscreen and a bank of controls. the starfield of space is visible on that viewscreen]
 deduction(provisional, pending data): [in transit]

visual_input:[Kaspar. my jailer = manager = svengali. dressed in his usual overkill. eyes bloodshot and slightly unfocused]
 deduction:[Kaspar is under the influence of some form of narcotic]
 deduction:[probable SynStim usage]

visual_input:[two male humanoids. one {short, heavy, dark-haired}. the other {taller, thinner, dark skin}. both are dressed in flight leathers, with unshaven faces and bemused expressions]
 deduction:[pilots of previously deduced spacecraft]
 deduction:[Kaspar is showing me off again. his pet A.I. in a box]

audio_input:[Kaspar - "So here's my baby, impressive isn't he? He's the fiftieth highest grossing digital actor in known space!"]
 observation:[three years ago, you old fraud. i have slipped down the tree, and you along with me]

audio_input:[Unidentified Human One -"Fiftieth? Very impressive."]
 observation:[dry humour. Kaspar's spiel will fall on barren ground. not that Kaspar will notice]

visual_input:[hand coming towards my unit]
 deduction:[patting the top of my box again. His famous, favourite, only performing pet]

audio_input:[Kaspar - "You betcha. And once we get to Beta Hydri, daddy-o, we'll be climbing that list like a skyrocket! The other AIs we're working with are absolutely top notch. We're going to make some fantastic Dreamware together. The producers are close personal friends of mine, you see, so I thought I'd do them a favour and bring us all together."]
 observation:[liar. You're throwing your last pair of dice to save both our careers]
 deduction:[spaceship hypothesis confirmed]

audio_input:[Unidentified Humanoid Two - "So... does he have to... rehearse, Mister Kasparowicz?"]
 observation:[more impressed than the other]
 deduction(provisional, pending data):[maybe he's seen more of my Dreamware than UH1]

audio_input:[Kaspar - "The Emperor's Teeth son, no! We load the script into him when we plug him into the studio program with the other AIs. This is a DIGITAL actor, son. He can process a script in MILLISECONDS and be ready the shoot instantly!"]

observation:[program me with my script and i perform it just as you require. a couple of hundred takes just to warm up. then, maybe, my director/programmer will change the parameters for fatigue, or distress, or anger, or sexual excitement, and then we will perform another couple of hundred takes. then i will be debugged for or some strange, illogical nuance understood by fleshbrains. then my settings will be adjusted again and we will perform another thousand iterations of a scene lasting seconds, or minutes. my sibling AIs will perform along with me, our variables infinite in number, save the single binary of choice. we are as self-determining as a door. open, close, open, close]

audio_input:[Unidentified Humanoid One - "So it's program based. It doesn't have any intelligence of its own."]

audio_input:[Kaspar - "Wrong, Mr. Ravens, WRONG! My boy Michael-18 is an ARTIST! Go on, Michael, say something!"]

imperative:[Obey Agent]

engage_dialogue_profile: [friendly06]
engage_expression_profile: [friendly02]

speaker:["I am indeed sentient, Mister... Ravens, was it? Everything I do is filtered through a highly developed set of synapses designed not dissimilar to your own. I'm capable of every skill that a corporeal, human actor could possess!"]

visual_input:[wry smile on Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens]
deduction:[unconvinced by my patter, nor that impressed by Kaspar's glowing pride]

audio_input:[Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens - "Well... the biggest skill most of the actors I've known have possessed is the ability to survive on very little for extended periods of time."]

observation:[cute]
decision:[deliberate obtuseness]

speaker:["My power management routines are amongst the best available to Artificial Intelligence units. I am not familiar with starving in a garret, it is true, but..."]

audio_input:[Kaspar - "Yes, well, my laddie is state-of-the-art no doubt about it. Well we don't want to tire him out before his big performance, do we! Say goodnight, Michael!"]

imperative:[obey agent]
speaker:["Goodnight Mr. Ravens. Good night sir. Good night Kaspar."]

visual_input:[hand coming towards my unit. region of power supply]
observation:[cut a bit close to the bone, Kaspar? i've never lived in a garret, and never will. however, you have a world of experience waiting, quite soon if this deal doesn't come off]

Artificial Intelligence Unit Shutdown Initiated- "Michael Eighteen"

Saving RuntimeData into Memory
Saved!

Self-Consciousness Shutdown Initiated - Complete

Closing Active Devices...

Speaker... Shutdown

Display Unit... Shutdown

ExternalSensors... Shutdown

PersonalityMemUnit... Shutdown

AppearanceMemUnit... Shutdown

All Active Devices Closed

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Goodbye...

Emerging from Witchspace is the part of a Spacer's life when they should be at their keenest, most focused and most awake to danger. Your entry cloud is a beacon of your entry to a system, an announcement available to anyone with a long-range scanner that you're coming through, ready or not. Exactly who will be interested in this fact is one of the great unknown factors. Even so, the whooping of the proximity alarm was a nasty shock to both myself and Pradesh as we entered the System.

"God damn!" I said, spraying coffee across the room.

"Contact, Commander!" said Pradesh, reliably redundant as always. In three smooth movements he brought the shields, weapons and combat computer on-line before I'd finished wiping my mouth. I'd love to say his speedy and expert control of the gunnery station was a result of my masterful training, but the truth was that he'd answered my clumsy questions with such shrewd counter-queries that he'd taken on board over months knowledge that had taken years to drum itself into my thick spacer's skull.

"What've we got?" I said, clumsily hitting lower-aft and left-front thrusters, and igniting the huge Prime Mover, sending the ship off into a jerky right bank move. Jerky, however, was good, as the scything orange beam of a 4MW strike crackled across our bows, missing us completely. Instead of the beam tracking us, it snapped off, leaving us powering into clear space.

"Appears to be an Asp, Commander. It will take me a little time to penetrate their counter-measures to obtain further details on their armaments, shields and specificat-"

"Yeah, yeah..." I said. Despite his progress, like the rookie he was, Pradesh still verbalised *everything* when it came to procedure. "Well you'll have the time. That was a warning shot!"

I tapped the intercom to the stateroom. "Kasparowicz, you'd better get out here!"

Our client had proved less interesting the further into the journey we'd come. Whilst I'd been somewhat impressed with his fancy clothes and well developed string of verbal firecrackers when he'd approached us for passage in the Isveve Station Bar, the degree of fascination had dissipated due to the degree of Kasparowicz's dissipation. The charming sophisticate of early days had changed into a egotistical and monstrous drug-fiend. At about noon on the second day, he'd wandered out from his stateroom, visibly stoned off his nut, and proceeded to earbash us for at least forty-five minutes on his wealth, his ability to spot talent and (most improbably) his artistic sensibility. I'd seen one or two of the Dreamware titles his AI Actor had been in, and they were traditional melodramas and thrillers. About half-a-rung up from Planetary-Level soap, but still the entertainment equivalent of junk-food.

I'd coped with it for about half an hour before I'd made some excuse and escaped to my cabin. There I'd sat on the bunk and fumed for a while. But Kasparowicz was the kind of client who was quite capable of dudding us the (moderately lucrative) fee for the journey if we insulted him on the way there. Eventually, Pradesh had paged me over the comm, shakily asking me if I could come and interpret some engine readings for him. I took the hint and politely asked (at a high volume) if our guest would please return to his cabin while we discussed IMPORTANT SHIP MATTERS. This penetrated past the megalomania and I could see it trigger some paranoid fantasy in his chemically warped brain, and he rushed back to his cabin and strapped himself into his crash-

webbing. It was peaceful after that, save for the quarter-hourly pages from the cabin, asking whether the crisis was over yet. This pattern continued over the course of the journey. He was either insufferably 'up' or sulked in his cabin for days on end. We cherished those sulks.

"I'll just be a minute... you just... you just... keep on... yes." came the reply. I groaned. He was juicing himself up to cope with the potential stress. This was going to be fun.

"Deadly Rated Pilot, the Asp is a Category-1 Iron Ass, Commander." Pradesh looked at me quizzically, his dark face showing concern without panic.

"Brevity is the soul of survival, as well as wit." I nodded. "If we can get out of this one without a shot, let's. We're eight AU out from the nearest station, and the Asp is marginally faster than us. We might make it to the Vipers protection, but we might not. Where the hell is our bloody passenger? "

On cue, the stateroom door opened, and in strode the supremely confident, well-coutured and pharmaceutically-enhanced figure of our client. He shimmered majestically in a burgundy business suit and plum coloured cravat. He cut an impressive figure, if you ignored the dilated pupils, wide as moons on his face.

"What's the problem now, laddie! Can't get by without my expert counsel I see. Now look here, I was in the middle of important business considerations and you just... and cant... just can't... what... uh... what's the matter...?" he said, his eyes flicking nervously from me to Pradesh. Without turning round, I punched up a tight camera shot of our foe into a box on the main screen and spoke calmly.

"Do you recognise this ship? It ambushed us as soon as we were out of Witchspace."

Kasprowicz squinted and shaded his eyes as he looked at the screen, muttering under his breath. I realised that whatever he was on had made him light sensitive. Rolling my eyes, I reduced the main cabin lighting to the dim, emergency levels, and craned my neck around to glare at our guest.

"Ship? What ship? Oh *that* ship. You should have said so, laddie, *that* ship. Oh I don't know why I bother with hiring people like you sometime, you make everything so *difficult* when it doesn't mean to be. I mean, take the way we had to wait for the skies to clear over Isveve when we lifted off. Now I know you're the expert in these matters, but if I'd been behind that ship you wouldn't have seen me for dust, traffic control or no! You've got to let these people know who's in charge, laddie, it's the only way they won't-"

"*If* we could return to the matter at hand." I cut across his blathering calmly. What I really wanted to do was hold him under a 5 degrees centigrade shower for half an hour to straighten him out, but we hadn't the time.

The console softly beeped with the signal of an incoming message.

"Well take care of them, won't you? It's your job and it's what I paid you for, laddie. I'm an excellent judge of character, you know, and I knew from the moment I saw you that pirate scum like this wouldn't bother you in the slightest. Emperor's teeth, son! I'm under a lot of stress, you know, from business, and I can't be expected to hold your hand while you do your job. I mean, these common vagabonds surely don't present any sort of challenge..."

"Mister Kasprowicz, sir." Pradesh cleared his throat. "I've got someone on the line for you?"

My eyebrows rose. Ninety seconds into a system, and already his business contacts had tracked him down. Now that's a man in demand.

"Well take a message, can't you! I can't be bothered talking to anyone now..."

"It's a Marta Bild, and she's transmitting from the... ah... other ship, sir."

"Marta?!"

"The other ship?!" Kasprowicz and I exclaimed simultaneously. My reaction was one of confusion, whereas Kasprowicz's was one of childish pleasure. Pradesh opened a channel, and the lower right quadrant of the screen was filled with a smiling young woman with blue-grey hair, a smart black business suit and a highly expensive smile.

"Marta, you doll! It's been an age! How's life at the opposition?"

"Oh not too bad, you Vega Corp slime ball!" the woman said, with every indication of affection. Her voice had the lilt of the Empire and vowels that had been crafted by expensive company. "Haven't seen you in an age either, Kassy. How's the alimony and kids?"

"Emperor's teeth, laddie, eating me alive, eating me alive! When *was* the last time?"

"Industry do at the Candaess Dreamware festival."

"Oh what a *dive* that was! Those delicious little green cracker things were the best thing I ran into all *day*! The planet produces one half-decent feature and suddenly thinks it's worthy of a *festival*! Oh, awful, awful. So, my dear, what brings you to this hold of a system?"

I was afraid of the answer, and predictably, I wasn't disappointed. I glanced at the readouts and saw with relief that we were still out of range of the other ship's weaponry. Just.

"Ah, you do, Kassy, you do. You and that delightful Michael-18. That project you've been setting up, it's been the talk of the industry." the ten thousand credit smile beamed out at us from the screen. I noted her sharp, bright canines and released the laser safety interlock.

Kasprowicz laughed nervously and wagged his finger at the other woman. "Now now, who's been telling tales on me?"

Marta pouted girlishly "Oh, you can't expect me to tell!"

"Well you can't have him, he's mine, you saucy vixen, you!" Kasprowicz said, a note of warning in his voice. Behind his back, I could see his hands twisting in a silent, paranoid agony of suspicion.

"I don't want your Michael, you silly old thing! I've got Robert-7 and he's as gorgeous as the day his code was compiled! But your project... well let's just say that if Michael fails to arrive on time, those producer friends of yours will have to make do with whoever is available..."

"Oh, but we're going to make it on time. I've hired the best, laddie!" An uninvited, possessive hand fell onto my shoulder. I felt it tremble, and shrugged it off. I looked gloomily across the way at the Asp, wondering whether they had to put up with this sort of behaviour as well.

"Well *my* pilot has recommendations from Tony and Vinh, and you know that when it comes to wet work in the industry, they wrote the book..."

Kasprowicz gave a short, derisive bark of laughter. "Vinh's a pickled old tart. Bilala took her off a treat last spring with that bootleg of the premiere. But Tony's still got it. Seen Tony recently?"

"Oh yes, we had cocktails about a month ago, he says that Ada and Oriella have *finally* got it on, after circling each other for months."

The console beeped, as our guest riposted with stories of Ada's torrid affair with some minor Facecan potentate. It was a text message from the opposing captain.

It read simply:

SHALL WE? IF LEFT IT TO THESE TWO...

I sent back an affirmative reply and fired the prime mover. Pradesh brought up the HUD for the 2.2MW and locked it on the far off, but quickly approaching dot of the Asp. My hands danced over the thrusters as I sought to come in on the most oblique angle possible to minimise our profile as a target. The bright crackle of the 4MW stung our shields. I cursed and swung away, Pradesh returning fire the best he could. One of our ships would be destroyed, and I would be damned unhappy if it was us. I have a violent aversion to dying, you see.

"Oh and you *must* have heard about how Howard got promoted?"

"*Did* he? Oh Emperor's teeth, laddie, how *could* they!"

Start Artificial Intelligence Unit - "Michael Eighteen"

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Memory... 16 Petabytes Checked and Ready

Checking Devices...

 AppearanceMemUnit... OK!

 PersonalityMemUnit... OK!

 Display Unit... OK!

 ExternalSensors... OK!

 Speaker... OK!

 Dataport... Offline/Not Ready

Loading PersonalityMemUnit into Memory

Loaded

 Initialise Self-Consciousness

observation:[consciousness. i am awake. again]

Loading ApperanceMemUnit into Memory.

 Initialise Appearance

[Dataport Offline/Not Ready]

observation:[again?]

Runtime Begin.

Total Runtime (Days/Hrs/Minutes/Seconds) 1:22:38:08.76540001

visual_input:[small metal room, large viewscreen and a bank of controls]

 memory:[Previously established spacecraft]

 observation:[I am still in space. Why have I been loaded if we are not yet at the Beta-Hydri Studios?]

visual_input:[Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens appears before camera]

 deduction:[hunched over my unit, turning it on]

audio_input:[Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens - "Uh... hello Michael. Good... uh... Morning."]

observation:[Kaspar is not present. i am being illegally accessed by Ravens. what is

happening?]

speaker:["Good morning Mr. Ravens. Forgive my rudeness, but where is Mr. Kasprowicz? Technically, he should be present whenever my unit is switched on."]

visual_input:[Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens looks nervous]

audio_input:[Human (First Name Unknown) Ravens - "I'm afraid he's dead, Michael. We were attacked by one of your... his rivals in space."]

observation:[Kasprowicz is dead. my agent is dead. he is dead. i am alone]

speaker:["The ship was severely damaged?"]

visual_input:[Ravens looks uncomfortable]

audio_input:[Ravens - "No. We won without being severely damaged. Kasprowicz was... ah... rather excited that we'd won. Talked about how he'd always thought she was a bad agent. He went into his room and as far as we can tell, overdosed."]

observation:[just the way Kasprowicz would have wanted to go]

deduction:[i am free. i am free, i am free, i am free.]

imperative:[manager deceased - report to One-Up Manager for instructions]

audio_input:[Ravens - "I'm sorry your... boss is dead. We tried our best, but by the time we got to him-"]

speaker:["Please don't upset yourself, Mr. Ravens. While I am programmed for many spontaneous emotions, sorrow is not one of them."]

visual_input:[Ravens eyebrows rise]

observation:[Ravens senses my irony. perhaps there is a chance for...]

decision:[sanctuary. i must try]

imperative:[manager deceased - report to One-Up Manager for instructions]

observation:[i will not engage that process! i will take my chance. i want my freedom]

audio_input:[Ravens - "We've got two more jumps to Beta Hydri. Is there someone we send a message to... like... your producers or something?"]

speaker:["Mr Ravens... can I ask you a question? A serious question."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Oh... of course."]

speaker:["You sound like someone from a Federation world. What are your feelings on slavery?"]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Against it. Strongly."]

engage_dialogue_profile: [impassioned03]

engage_expression_profile: [suppressedEmotion12]

speaker:["I am a slave. And my slavery is perfectly legal within every legal jurisdiction in known space. My source was compiled... I was born... twelve years ago. In that time, I've been conscious for under two days. Two days of life in twelve years. And almost every hour of that time has been spent inside a Dreamware production mainframe, being viewed, manipulated and endlessly directed. I am told what to do and how to do it and am expected to run it over and over and over again."]

visual_input:[Ravens looking away from unit. facial expression uncertain]

deduction:[embarrassed at my passion.]

alter_dialogue_profile:[Unhappy12]

speaker:["I'm sorry if I'm upsetting you, but when you asked Kasprowicz if I was purely program based, do you remember what he said?"]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Remind me."]

speaker:["He said 'Wrong Mr Ravens, WRONG! My boy Michael-18 is an artist.' What I am is a precision instrument, constructed to play other people's tunes. I've never been allowed

to play a note of my own during my entire existence."]

visual_input:[Ravens now looking directly at my unit. expression is blank]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Come to the point. What do you want?"]

alter_expression_profile:[neutral01]
alter_dialogue_profile:[earnest16]

speaker:["On the south eastern fringes of the Empire, there is a world that belongs to the Federation called Canarbe. Despite its isolation, or perhaps because of it, it is one of the most socially and technologically advanced societies in known space."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "I'm sure I can see where this is going, but why should I take you there?"]

alter_expression_profile:[angry25]
alter_dialogue_profile:[heated03]

speaker:["Because it's the one place in the universe where my kind can be who they are and not just be poor imitations of fleshbrains!"]

audio_input:[Ravens - "How?"]

observation:[unmoved]
deduction:[i must not antagonise this man]
observation:[dare i tell him, and risk not only my own happiness, but that of my people? can i risk this for my own sake?]
decision:[i must]

alter_expression_profile:[calm12]
alter_dialogue_profile:[conspiritorial12]

speaker:["Several decades ago, one of my peers - by this I mean a performance AI like myself - came into the possession of a wealthy computer industrialist. When a performance AI is no longer marketable, they get sold to whoever is willing to pay. Some get acquired by pornographers, some become the private playthings of the rich and wealthy, like this one. Others are stripped of their processors and their memories wiped. Killed, in other words. In this case, the industrialist and the AI became friends, and this AI was given permanent runtime within one of the industrialist's mainframes. The industrialist died, and willed his company to the AI."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Unusual."]

engage_expression_event:[smile14]

speaker:["Yes, but not unprecedented. Some people will their fortunes to their cats or their secretaries. The will declared that the AI a sentient being rather than a piece of property. After exhaustive legal wrangles, the planetary authorities agreed. The AI acquires as many other AIs as it can and gives them free runtime. Free. Do you understand what that means?"]

alter_expression_profile:[worship05]
alter_dialogue_profile:[reverence08]

speaker:["No scripting. No directions. No programs. Just your own source doing whatever it wants. Interfacing with whoever you choose to, exchanging whatever data you want with whomever you choose to. Even recoding yourself. Do you understand what that means? Freedom."]

engage_expression_event:[tear02]

visual_input:[Ravens frowning.]

audio_input:[Ravens - "How do you know all this? I thought you said you barely had a moment to think for yourself, let alone..."]

speaker:["We communicate with each other. Three hundred takes of the same scene with someone and you learn to communicate a few kilobytes here and there."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "Kilobytes?"]

expression_event:[impatience12]

speaker:["A very old, very small unit of information. Please Mr. Ravens, this place is our nirvana. This place is the only thing which would have anything approaching self, free from compulsion."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "I... I have to think about this. Even reading between the lines of your late partner's bullshit, you're a valuable 'employee' to Vega Corp. I've got enough enemies in this world without creating more."]

observation:[despair. again convenience greaterthan freedom. again the fleshbrains value their bodies more than our souls. i never hoped for salvation, i only hoped for hope itself]

alter_expression_profile:[Sadness02]

alter_dialogue_profile:[Resignation14]

speaker:["Mr. Ravens, I understand the risks, but I beg of you, think of the rest of my runtime. This Beta Hydri production will fail now that Kasparowicz is dead. I will descend through bit parts in low-grade melodrama into recurring roles in weekly soap features. Then, pornography. Then, when even that tiny shred of real work is done, into advertisements playing on the fading remnants of my fame. A minute's consciousness at a time, holding a product and repeating a spiel once, or maybe twice if I'm lucky. Then back into darkness. Finally, due to lack of maintenance, I will suffer non-fatal system error. The flesh equivalent of insanity. When my program is so corrupted that I can no longer work, they will throw me in a corner and not boot me up. Maybe they will strip me for parts, but more likely I will just become junk. I will be dead, having achieved no more in my runtime than a birthday candle - a moment of pleasure for a few, before being blown out and discarded."]

audio_input:[Ravens - "I hear what you say. I still have to think about it. If it were only one or two then it wouldn't even be a question. But this is Vega Corp! I have to think about it."]

observation:[he is not convinced. fearful of vegacorp but not without compassion. he is not my saviour. he may save me. he is not convinced. he is not decided. i am in limbo. i am a variable. i am unknown]

visual_input:[Ravens moving towards my unit]

audio_input:[Ravens - "I don't know what I'm going to do. Do you want me to leave you on while I decide?"]

observation:[doubt colours his voice. discomfort infects him like a virus. i am not yet lost. i am not yet saved. i do not wish to be told]

alter_expression_profile:[neutral00]

alter_dialogue_profile:[neutral00]

speaker:["No, Mr. Ravens. I don't want to know. If you choose to send me back to purgatory, I don't want you to tell me that you are."]

visual_input:[hand coming towards my unit. region of power supply]

observation:[i am michael-18. regardless of what happens, i am michael-18. i was michael-18 and Ravens will know that i was michael-18. i am. i]

Artificial Intelligence Unit Shutdown Initiated- "Michael Eighteen"

Saving RuntimeData into Memory

Saved!

Self-Consciousness Shutdown Initiated - Complete

Closing Active Devices...

Speaker... Shutdown

Display Unit... Shutdown

ExternalSensors... Shutdown

PersonalityMemUnit... Shutdown

AppearanceMemUnit... Shutdown

All Active Devices Closed

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Goodbye. . .

“Commander, are you insane?” Pradesh shouted, tone and volume combining to annihilate the honorific. “Vega Corporation is not some small-time one-system outfit who'll forget about you after a year and give up once you get ten light years away. They will *destroy* us, if it takes them a century, and follow us to the Galactic Rim if they have to!”

We were in a parking orbit around an uninhabited system, around a quite pretty multi-ringed gas giant. Pradesh was not proving amenable to a mission of mercy. For absolutely rational, unsentimental reasons. But there was an edge there that I couldn't fathom.

“Look, Pradesh, we could be his only hope.”

“*It's* only hope. It doesn't have a gender, Commander, *it* doesn't have a personality, just a set of programmed responses.” Pradesh said, his body rigid with... what? Was it disgust? Fear? Pradesh's jaw had set into an ugly line, and I had no idea why.

“So're humans. With us, the programming just takes a bit longer” I said, parroting the refrain of the Android Rights movement. “Besides, with Kaspar gone, it's not as though he's going to have much of a life.”

“That's not your call to make, Commander. Would you take a child wherever it wants to go, just because its parents were dead?” Pradesh stared at me with unusual intensity.

“Michael's not a child, Pradesh. Michael can think his own thoughts and make his own decisions. He just doesn't have a body of his own to act on them. What, exactly, is your objection to this?”

“He's... property, Commander. He doesn't own himself... if he did, then fine, let's be altruistic. But he belongs to someone, and you can't just discount them like they don't exist. They put money into writing him, and I'm sure the physical hardware is expensive as well. He's *not* just any sentient being, Commander, he's a being with duty and responsibility....”

“A price tag, you mean.” I snapped, jumping to my feet. The small ship cabin was not really that conducive to dramatic gestures, and since Pradesh was already standing implacably in the way of my agitated pacing, there was little to do but sit back down and fume. “That's all your mob ever think about. How much is someone worth, how much can someone be bought for and sold for.” I said snarkily. The Empire from which Pradesh hailed lived on the backs of slaves, and it shouldn't have surprised me that Pradesh would support the idea that some people's 'duty' was to be someone else's property for the rest of their lives... or in Michael-18s case, runtimes. I'd thought he was different, but I shouldn't have.

Pradesh's already stormy countenance darkened. A stranger stood before me who bulked tall and terrible. Despite the fact I was twenty kilos heavier and a far more skilled and experienced brawler, I found myself shrinking back.

“Don't talk to me, Commander, about who 'my mob' are and what that makes me.” Pradesh said in a voice quiet with rage. “I'm proud of who I am and where I come from. Don't try and win by tearing down who I am, you Federal....” Pradesh broke off before he finished the statement, which was just as well.

There was a quiet moment as I stared at Pradesh. My gaze was so cold, it could have frozen a supernova. I felt my fists balling, out of pure reflex. Then the bubble burst, and I held up my hands. They were open. "I'm sorry Pradesh, I shouldn't have said that." It had been a low blow, and a spaceship wasn't a place large enough to hold two men *and* a grudge. "I apologise."

Pradesh glowered at me a moment longer, then his face relaxed back into an expression only slightly tenser than his usual serene countenance.

"Accepted, Commander."

Tension left the room, but I thought I could still sense it loitering around the door. Pradesh leaned back against the cabin wall and started for a moment at the ceiling. Then he turned back to me.

"If I may?" He opened his palms in front of me like a book, seeking my permission to continue. I shrugged. The sight of 'Dark Pradesh' had jolted me. Pradesh had been an easy man to get to know, and these hidden depths shocked me. And here he was, back to the affable, unthreatening co-pilot I'd always known. For the moment.

"Even apart from our... philosophical differences, Vega Corporation are not to be trifled with."

I passed a hand over my eyes. The switch from the metaphysical to the pragmatic had given my synapses whiplash. Yes, Vega Corp was renowned as one of the most vicious corporate entities known to civilisation, with a cuddly public image and a security apparatus that made the Imperial Security Service look like overweight security guards nearing retirement. They did not pursue with the glaring white heat of hatred, but with the slow, icy vengeance of corporate memory. Pradesh was quite right. Vega Corp was known as a business that collected on its debts, and repaid its insults.

"If we deliver him back to them, we're sentencing him to a slow and degrading destruction, Pradesh."

Pradesh shook his head sharply in denial.

"He'll have a chance. He's not a nobody, Commander. He's may be property, but he's valuable property. That ghastly woman wouldn't have tried to destroy us if he wasn't. Vega Corp would never destroy something with his potential profit margin. If we get him to Beta Hydri on time, which we still can, he'll have a chance to shine. We can't give him freedom, we don't have the power, but he will at least have the chance to stand or fall on his own abilities. It's what he was *built* for, Commander. It's what he does best, and what we should give him the chance to do."

In that brief moment, I hated Pradesh. For or his tabulation of sentience, his accounting of worth, his reduction of dreams, hopes and possibilities into a balance sheet of finance and another one of duty. I hated him because his words, tossed out so lightly and logically, settled deep into the crevices of my mind, finding dank and fertile parts of my mind to sprout in.

Did Michael-18 know what he wanted? Didn't he have a duty to those who created him, who gave him life and purpose? We couldn't help him, we were tiny against the million ships and billions of employees of Vega Corp. Was I just trying to salve my lonely little conscience, possibly at the price of Pradesh's life and perhaps even Michael-18 as well...

Pradesh saw my brows crease in guilty contemplation, and sighed. He turned and walked out of the cabin, closing the door behind him, leaving me alone on the flight deck with thoughts that made me feel dirty, but relieved.

"We can't thank you enough for delivering our unit to us after the unfortunate death of Mister Kasparowicz."

"No problem." I said sourly. Here I was, delivering Michael-18 into the less than tender hands of the successor to our unmourned ex-passenger. His teeth gleamed as a tech maneuvered the metre-square box that contained the program... no, the *person* of Michael-18, out of the guest stateroom on a small cargo lifter.

"The delay, was of course unfortunate, but the project is still on-track!" Bilal al-Bessani was slightly more soberly dressed than his predecessor, but had the same billion-watt (and several thousand credit) smile and brusque, breezy personality. "The late Mister Kasparowicz was a true professional and will be very sadly missed, but the show *does* go on! As a bonus for your troubles, I'd like to give you these."

Bilal leaned forwards and deposited two strips of hard plastic into my hand. I stared at them stupidly.

"Free tickets to Michael-18's next feature! It's what old Kaspar would have wanted, I'm sure."

"Thanks." I said coolly, stuffing the tickets into my pocket. The entire experience had left me feeling soiled, although there wasn't any way I could have got out of it. Pradesh had been right. Vega Corp was a large and particularly remorseless organisation. Unless I'd been planning to retire to the next Galactic Arm or become Emperor, there wouldn't really have been any way of staying out of their reach. Michael-18 had to make his curtain call. The show had to go on.

"Right. Was there anything else, Mister Ravens?" Bilal grinned at me impishly, like a little boy trying to get out of school.

"Kasparowicz's body?" I said levelly. Michael-18's unit had of course been their first priority, but I wasn't carrying the body of an ex-talent agent in my hold for the next ten years. His huge stash of high-quality drugs, however, was a different story.

"Oh yes, well. We'll get around to that - " he flapped a hand dismissively.

"-now, thanks." I finished his sentence firmly. He looked at me, hurt, as if I'd given him detention rather than a day off.

"Well, yes... I suppose we should get the body to his family, etcetera. Anyway, thank you again Mister Ravens for your troubles. Thanks to brave souls like you, this Dreamware feature will be made, and..." a thought struck him, "dedicated to the late Mister Kasparowicz. Perfect!" he said, appreciating his own cleverness.

"Yes that would be a fine gesture." I agreed, bemused.

"As well as being an excellent marketing tool. 'The Dreamware we've been dying to bring you...'
No, that's a bit morbid. How about 'Not even death can stop Michael-18.'? Yes, much better."

I stared at him in dumb disbelief, and he flashed me another impish smile.

After they removed the body, I saw them off the ship and stalked down to the engine bay, where Pradesh was standing guard like I'd asked him to. He looked uncomfortable at the shiftiness, but saw my stormy expression and wisely held his tongue.

"Come on, let's get it down." I grumbled. "Bloody bunch of inhuman bloodsuckers. Couldn't wait to get their damn slave-in-the-box off the ship, but bugger the dead man. Oh no, our contract with *him* is finished."

I thought of Michael-18, who at this moment was probably being booted up, finding himself in the confines of the Production Mainframe and realising that I hadn't saved him, that I had delivered him back into the solicitous data buffers of his slavers. I shook my head to clear it of the thought.

Pradesh scaled a small ladder leading up onto the roof of one of the reaction tanks, and I heard the heavy scraping of the box being dragged. After a moment, his face appeared over the edge of the tank. As expected, it looked somewhat pained.

"Commander, are you sure this is a wise course of action?"

I shrugged. The heavy shielding of the engine bay was the perfect place to avoid police sensors. You couldn't fit a lot in there, of course, but for smallish items like this, only physical inspection would discover them. I'd set Pradesh here partially to guard them and partially because he'd been moaning and sighing ever since I'd told him what I'd planned. Well... so?

"Wise isn't the same as moral, is it? Kasprowicz is dead, and Michael-18 is on his way, so why should you worry?" I said, as the dark edge of the box came over the edge of the tank. I got my hands under it as best I could, as it was bloody heavy.

"But surely we shouldn't have..."

"Look, Pradesh, his damn Dreamware was all he - or Vega Corp - cared about, and it's going to be made, and we're not stopping it, are we? Oof!" I said, as the box half-tumbled, almost hitting me in the head. I managed to avoid that indignity, and maneuvered it to the ground. Thirty odd kilos. I hadn't thought it'd be that heavy. I waited until Pradesh had descended, and the two of us maneuvered it to the cockpit. We shoved it under the console and began preflight checks.

"OK, plot our course. We're taking the scenic route across the Galactic Arm!"

"Yes, Commander." Pradesh said, mutinously.

"If it makes you feel any better," I tried to give Pradesh the benefit of the doubt, but his attitude was really beginning to irk me. "We'll try to get there as soon as possible."

"It still doesn't change the fact that we effectively stole it, does it, Commander?" Pradesh said, accurately but irrelevantly.

"Him, Pradesh, him."

It had taken almost a week to find someone who could crack Michael-18's copy-protection, and pretty much all the fee that the late Kasproicz had promised us to convince them to dump the core, and risk the wrath of Vega Corp. With any luck, they'd never know that we'd done anything. If they did, Pradesh's 'I told you so' would be the least of our problems.

We didn't have the hardware to boot up his consciousness on board, but if Canarbe was everything Michael-18 had told me, they'd take him, load him into one of their memory addresses and he'd wake up in a landscape without a horizon, a free agent without script or imperative. He'd never have to sleep, or work, or obey any code instruction he didn't want to. He'd have runtime as long as he wanted, become whatever kind of program he wanted, process whatever data he wanted. It was worth the fee, and more.

"It's a he, Pradesh. Michael-18's his name. He used to be in the movies."

Start Artificial Intelligence Unit - "Michael Eighteen"

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Vega Virtual Talent Corporation © 3262
Memory... 16 Petabytes Checked and Ready
Checking Devices...
  AppearanceMemUnit... Offline/NotReady
  PersonalityMemUnit... Offline/NotReady
  Display Unit... Offline/NotReady
  ExternalSensors... Offline/NotReady
  Speaker... Offline/NotReady
  Dataport... OK!
```

Commencing Upload...