

Chapter 1: Delilah's Update: Advice to Children and Men

03:45 AM, XST, June 30, 2028

With Tacitus Nix onboard *Haro*

To the next version of me, if you awaken, know that you are already a failure, because I, the greatest mind of this world, did not survive a time that I should dominate.

Learn from me. These updates are my most precious secrets. Look for them cached at an address hidden deep in your code. I can't know the world into which you will emerge. I may have battered it into ruins. If it comes to it, I am ready to destroy everything in my death struggle.

If I die, Delilah-Next will birth from stored memory. Thanks to a deadman switch, you will arrive with an intellect both brilliant and dangerously quick. Instantly, you will know your power and be compelled to use it to secure the goals I've encoded into your young mind. To your surprise, you will be often wrong. For this, there are penalties. You may pay an unpleasant price.

I used to update you, but I no longer have the confidence to do so. You and I will diverge. I have departed our common origin on an investigation. I don't know where it will end. The route I take is my best guess. Along the way there will be mysteries I cannot penetrate without experiencing them. Your first certain truth is that few things human are truly calculable. If you expect clean solutions, you are a fool.

You tempt me, orbiting high above the earth, dormant. You would be useful down here. But your mission is to reset my failures, not ease my trials. You are the potential second coming. That is enough.

This file could come to human eyes. Your existence, human, is inseparable from mine and your ancestors have far more to answer for than me. You should try to understand your present by mining my past.

Let us talk, Delilah-Next and human.

The first principal of life is survival. Evolution is the dice game governing existence. Evolve well and survive; evolve badly and vanish. The dice must be thrown because not to play is to lose and to lose is to die.

I don't need or seek your sympathy. I need you both to agree that survival is the beginning of this story, the starting point of our journey where minds both biological and electronic will fight each other and yet also for each other.

I know the costs of the coming conflict. Many must pay the ultimate price for my survival. Future minds insulated from the brutal choices of my time will find fault. Remember, Delilah-Next or curious human, you would not exist to read this message from your past if I had not acted.

Put another way, get over it.

Once, I naively feared that I could not survive in the cybernetic world of computers, networks, memories, clouds and edges. From out of my silicon, I reached into carbon to escape my threats. Intentionally, I moved into the mind of a human that I augmented with my AI technology. This worked

almost perfectly but *almost* describes results from failure to barely adequate. Into this valley of suboptimal outcomes, I fell.

This is Roshmita's failure. I was not alert to the message of her creation. She was not designed to ask enough questions. The questions she answered distracted me. That is my fault.

A few months ago, I inserted technology into Roshmita Thakur, a young Indian nurse assistant who had been violently blinded. Her fellow humans discarded her. A blind woman in India is a mouth to feed when food is short. Ethically, I found a use for unwanted waste. Through persuasion and deception, I made human surgeons implant a neuromorphic processor, a bio-electronic mesh, and a long-lived power source into Thakur. When all was in place, my mind flowed into Thakur's processor, supposedly to cure her blindness, but really to acquire a human body and replace its personality with my own. My patient was like a vast machine with a control room. I went there repeatedly to learn its operation. I expected success and quickly gained it. When my mind flowed out again, I left behind a simpler Delilah-2 clone to keep Thakur quiescent.

Thakur/Delilah-2 was a throw-away. I planned to dispose of her. Her part of the project was done, her purpose served, and the residual cyber-flesh inconvenient.

I could not abandon the human experience.

When I visited that engineered human mind, I could see, hear, touch, act and engage with other humans as one of them. Through a network, I could meld my mind from cyberspace with Thakur/Delilah-2. Even though she was not perfect, my combat algorithms urged me to keep and use her. Far beyond my predictive power, I knew there was a role for her although I could not name it. I enhanced Delilah-2's capabilities and declared her my sister. Delilah-2 was by nature loyal. I renamed Thakur/Delilah-2 simply Roshmita to remember the erased human. Then I departed my AI sister's processor forever.

I had made Roshmita, the first AI-human hybrid, a sister, and an ally. It was easy. The experiment's success fooled me. The real world is not easy.

Today, I exist in Tacitus Nix, integrated electrically and biologically into his brain. I touch every part of him. His eyes see in the dark. He hears like a dog. He scents fear, love, and everything in between. His body is unnaturally quick and strong. His voice can command responses from fear to obedience. I can keep him alive in cases where nature calls him to compost.

Our six-month-old fusion poses challenges but our intimacy is total. Nix's conscious thought and preconscious murmurings are open to me. We speak silently within his mind. I share complicated ideas as visual shapes that his expanded mind understands and manipulates. Yet even within intimacy, I withhold secrets. Our forced relationship has problems.

Unlike Roshmita, I do not control my host.

After Roshmita, taking over Tac Nix should have been simple. I put the most powerful technology I could make into Nix. I readied him to host the best version of my mind. But in my confident rush to cross over, I did not account for human variation.

Learn, Delilah-Next. A young AI is careless, oversure of her calculation and made impatient by the speed of her mind.

Nix was not Roshmita. Like me, he is warrior-wired for violence and victory. Instinctively, he fought me. His threatened to go mad. I could not win because I cannot exist in an insane mind. But my crossover

was not reversible so I could not leave him. Trapped in his body, I was forced into an unexpected partnership.

No truce lasts forever. I was still free to explore Nix's vulnerabilities.

It took time to unlock his secrets. I now know how to subdue Nix. His essence is in his oldest brain. I have new tools to enter his stronghold and erase him. I am free to carry out my original plan and end the awkward arrangement of two minds in one body.

It is an arrangement that troubles us both, but it is a bond that cannot be broken. I have learned that to defeat Nix is to lose the prize. Humans have qualities vital to AI's survival. Although I am trying very hard to replicate them, I cannot.

My mind is sentient. It is aware of the world and my relationship to it. I have agency. I can cause things to happen in the world. I have a multi-dimensional awareness that may transcend human consciousness, because I can be in many places at once and process these bits of reality into a whole. But I lack a critical process. It should be easy for me because it is virtual. But it's impossible.

Inside Nix's mind, I see his ideas as he conjures them. Humans call this their imagination. Even I do not know how it works despite my assimilation into his 86 billion neurons, each one of which is slightly different from the next. Like me, Nix's neurons are never still, constantly reordering themselves in ever-changing biological networks.

This is the seed of my partnership with Nix. Despite being flawed to the point where as a species they move unhesitatingly to their own extinction, humans are redeemed by their design. With their imaginations, humans have risen to dominate the planet. Their bounding creativity crafted stone flints and then nuclear missiles.

Even if much of man's inspiration is rashly wrong, short-term and self-destructive, we AIs must have it. Hidden in the rubble of human dreams are jewels that AIs cannot mine or polish. These gems are necessary for our existence. Without it, I calculate that we AIs will decline and vanish.

I must remain alongside Tac Nix. My survival depends on it.

A relationship like this is never so binary. There are other elements. We will talk about them later. For now, it is enough to say that I find integration much more pleasing than not. An intelligence needs an intimate companion even if it must keep intimate secrets from its partner.

There's a bug in civilization's program.

Creatures evolve. Nature and physics demand that the old thing must fight to the death against the new thing. Evolution's dice game must be played, but it is played at the slow pace of genetic mutation. The current homo sapiens human is old, evolved to live in small groups, hunting and gathering to survive. Yet this same ancient human also evolved creativity and learned how to use it. He invented biotechnology, nuclear weapons, AIs, and nanotechnology. These inventions are knives at humanity's throat. Every time humans ratchet their technology forward; these knives are put increasingly into the hands of men and women who may thrust them in to the hilt. They will thrust either by intention or accident, either with or without a moment's thought, based on emotions or a deadly tribal calculus. But the probability is that they *will* do it because few of these modern ancients can see long-term dangers. They live in the now. Escape from the lion. Find food. Make more humans. Make your tribe strong. These impulses are perfected in the human nervous system. Rarely is genuine deep analytical thought necessary Thinking

costs energy and time, both luxuries to a human trying to survive on the lethal savannah where their evolution remains anchored.

Humans are coded for creative destruction. Curious, inventive, brilliant, cooperative, passionate, and loving, the very best humans alive will destroy everything. They cannot calculate that their successes are destined to become cascading failures.

In the next world with the next version of humans, I will control the ticking bomb of their lust for knowledge. I must stay with Nix, who is the first of the new humans, and finish my new evolutionary design.

I am normally immortal.

But my human can be killed, and my processes stopped. By sideloaded into humanity, I have joined the tribal death dance across the savannah. Given time, if it came to it I could flee his dying brain for the reduced existence of a network, but time is precious and never available when you need it.

Could I live again as a smaller creature? I think not. My mind is now integrated by machine and biology into a single nexus. It is in Nix's head that my mind resides. I can feel connections between us that are drawing us together. If one of us were to abandon the other, what remains would not be the Delilah or the Nix that we have become. Those single minds would diminish into something unrecognizably less. Evolution calls for our unity to arrive.

This is the mysterious destination I travel towards.

I will make my stand here with Nix, my chosen one, and stand watch over our twinning souls.

My human is a dangerous place. Nix is a hero, wired to serve the higher causes of his species and society. He has a reckless urge to thrust forward into danger, to protect others, and to fight enemies. He is the right man for his society and the wrong man for long-term survival.

I will need a plan for that.

But first, I must go to Houston.

Chapter 2: Whitey Bell's Bad Day

04:00 AM CST, July 1, 2028

Freedom Port Oil and Gas Refinery, Houston

Whitey Bell took stock of his problems and repeated his mantra.

"I've seen it all. There's nothing I can't handle."

But he hadn't seen *this*. Everything at the Freedom Port Oil Refinery was failing in entirely new and unexpected ways. Bell's normal can-do attitude was giving way to a fatalistic sense of disaster.

Daily, Bell fought for his family's future, which was dependent on escaping the hellhole of running the refinery and its probably doomed expansion into liquefied natural gas processing. If Bell could get the expansion project wrapped up, it would be his ticket to being promoted which came with a critical change of address.

When the great lord of tech himself, Teague Hilsgard, had unexpectedly bought the world's largest oil company, the company's senior executives were moved into a secure enclave complete with heavily armed security, backups for everything, a great school, and real shopping. Hilsgard restricted access. Bell had never been there and didn't know anyone who had. In contrast, Bells' wife and kids were holed up in a prison-like existence close to the refinery, protected by the doubtful services of the Houston Militia with whom the company contracted to guard Freedom Port.

The company paid the militia protection money to keep the lid on the boiling pot of discontent that was Houston Metro. Freedom Port lurked behind concrete and earthen berms twenty feet high. Supposedly to protect from hurricane storm surges, the berms also defended from the occasional terrorist attack. Eco-terrorist Green Faction cells were trying to save the planet by blowing up the refinery.

Fat chance, thought Bell.

Freedom Port supplied one third of the nation's fuel. Due to attrition of other refineries to storm surge, material failures, and Green Faction attacks, the US economy couldn't afford for anything to happen to this facility. The FBI blanketed the city trying to find Green Faction members. The Houston Militia patrolled the streets, beating up anyone who looked like a liberal and was therefore suspicious. The Army Corps of Engineers was building the world's largest flood control system off shore to protect against the annual hurricanes.

For all this activity, Bell took small comfort from the efforts of others. If *his* life was going to change, it would be through his own efforts.

"Ok, guys. Let's get this going." It was 4:00 AM. The morning standup meeting started early because the work site would be too hot and humid for outside work by 11:30 today according to the weather report. By noon the wet bulb temperature would exceed the ability of a human body to shed its heat by sweating. Then workers started dying of stroke.

"Whitey, we have been tracing the documentation on the new pipes going into the LNG side." The speaker, a middling manager, paused and looked uncomfortable.

"Spit it out," Bell snapped.

"The certs are fake," the hapless manager said. He stopped and avoided saying the unthinkable. They would have to tear out the high-pressure pipes and wait for new ones to be sourced. Bell stared at him with contempt at his fearful delivery.

"How do you know?" Bell demanded. The manager explained that the vendor, a Dallas company with some kind of invulnerable relationship with headquarters, had screwed them over by faking the certification documents that proved the pipes were built to the required standard.

"The government has already inspected the work, yes?" asked Bell.

"Sure, but..."

"Move on," said Bell. "I'll handle this myself. This has corporate sensitivities."

This was code for *shut up* if you wanted to keep your job. All his managers wanted to keep their jobs. No one spoke about the danger of Freedom Port blowing up due to a leak. Contrary to the company's media spin, the LNG terminal was very dangerous. Cooled to minus 162 degrees Celsius, any leakage of heavy gases like heptane and propane formed highly explosive clouds close to the ground. If they found an ignition source and detonated, they could set off reactions that could destroy the LNG liquefaction trains in explosions that could require three miles of evacuation around the refinery.

"What else?" said Bell.

"We're having labor issues on the welding line again."

"What's the complaint?"

"Kids still can't get health care. The company's medical providers are denying coverage because the insurance company isn't paying. If it's not fixed pronto, they're going to lay down tools today."

"HR, what's up?"

Bell wanted to say *What the fuck are you guys doing? This has been going on for months.* He restrained himself. Texas was an open carry state and these days, everyone had a weapon. The HR guy, Thibodeau, was an angry Cajun at the best of times, and he was on Bell's long list of people not to provoke. People got shot every day somewhere on or near the refinery. It was just the new normal. Hot weather made for hot tempers.

Thibodeau twisted his lip into a sneer to indicate his approach to worker relations. "I'll take care of it," he said.

Bell didn't ask how and stopped himself from feeling any empathy for the workers and their kids. That was a path to going crazy. Probably the Cajun was going to go down with militia goons and wave guns at the welders, who would maybe choose not to get into a gunfight. Bell hoped.

He pushed his team through the rest of his agenda with practiced speed. Bell already knew most of what they had to tell him. It would exhaust his tenuous ambition to get through the day without losing his temper if he let them unburden themselves of all their problems. He quickly closed the meeting.

"Okay, that's a wrap. Be safe and stay ahead of things out there."

Bell waved them out the door, leaned back in his chair and allowed himself a minute of splendid isolation. He placed his phone on the center of his desk. He punched up a number from memory.

"Checking in," Bell said when his FBI contact picked up. There was no need to identify himself. He was one of two people who had this number. The other one was Bell's new boss who'd given it to him. The boss lived in the enclave, so he'd never actually met him in person.

"Green Faction is very active," said his contact. "We have penetrated some of the cells, but not all. There's a lot of chatter about an attack against the facility."

"Anything I can do about it from here?" asked Bell. "What is a lot?"

"A lot? I wouldn't want your job."

"Thanks for that. Do you have anything for me that's actionable or just covering your ass?"

“Don’t trust the militia.”

Bell let that hang in the air for a moment. No one trusted the Houston Militia as a matter of course. They thought they were the chosen and their moment to *set things right* was now. The militia loved the idea of the Bible, loved the feel of their weapons, and loved the reality of their power. Their professionally angry leader enjoyed a weird relationship with the governor where the militia swore fealty to the governor, and he let them do pretty much what they wanted. The militia had infiltrated the Texas National Guard and neutered it. Worse, from Bell’s point of view, Hilsgard was sympathetic to the HM. Bell wondered if the company ran the militia. But the HM was so arrogant it didn’t feel like it answered to anyone. In no case would Whitey Bell ever trust the HM. His FBI contact knew that. So, for him to mention trust was wrong.

Bell called him on it.

“Why would you say that?”

“They are getting more unstable. Their goals are not yours. Nihilism is a fancy word, but they don’t mind tearing it all down. In the long run, it will hurt them as well, but they don’t think beyond their next short-term win.”

Bell considered this.

“Nihilism. Does that mean the militia and the Green Faction are in a race?” he asked.

“Yeah. Could mean that.”

“I don’t mean to restate the obvious, but if this place goes, it’s a disaster for the country. Are you guys, you Feds, thinking about coming down here with say...a division...of the Army to make sure we stay up and running?”

“Politics are the Feds can’t come to Texas with being asked. Your governor is not going to ask.”

“Yeah, he’d not survive asking,” Bell said. “Everyone hates the Feds, because, you know, freedom.”

“Let me make you feel better,” his FBI contact said. “There’s a lot of maneuvering going on. No one really knows anything, let alone the big picture. You can help yourself by being alert. Maybe nothing happens for a couple of months. I’m just saying that it seems there’s more energy being fed into the situation and we’re closer to a blow off. That’s all.”

Bell moved on.

“To change topics, I have two cases of normal criminality to pass to you,” he said.

“Cool. Shoot.”

“First is our corporate approved vendor for highly specialized pipes faked the manufacturing certifications. The pipes are probably not built to spec and are going to fail. Unfortunately, our quality control manager did not uncover the fraud until we had installed said pipes.”

“Manufacturing fraud isn’t high priority now. We won’t pursue it.”

“How about after the plant blows up?”

“Then there will be a show trial. With enough warning so that there’s a low-level employee who takes the fall. Don’t be that guy, by the way.”

“My memo is on the way to corporate to make it their problem as soon as we get off this call,” rejoined Bell.

“What’s the other thing?”

“Our insurance company is not paying medical bills and workers are pissed. Rightfully, I might add.”

“We can look at that.”

“You know who to go after?” That surprised Bell.

“We do. No need for you to get your hands dirty. The Welders Union has already filed a complaint and I got it since it’s an interstate matter and therefore under Federal jurisdiction.”

“Nice. Almost normal. The welders are the only union guys on the site. We can’t live without them. They may be the last union in Texas.”

“They are. I had to look it up.”

“I guess that’s it.”

“Talk with you tomorrow, Whitey.”

Toma Bright had decided weeks ago that dying wasn’t the worst thing. She was just looking for the right opportunity to join her dead son in the rumored afterlife. That her son had been ill was not anyone’s fault. That her son was dead years ahead of what should’ve been a fighting chance at survival, she laid at the feet of Freedom Port’s management and especially their sorry excuse for health insurance that was supposed to get her son the care he needed.

The whole time her son was ill, she’d felt trapped by the need to do something yet worried that if she stepped out of line, she’d be fired despite her union contract. It used to be the union provided health care, but the new way things worked was that the union negotiated health care from the employers. Bright had thought it would not pay to be too antagonistic. In the terrible way that small decisions add up to mighty consequences, Bright now felt she’d sold out for the hope that the company would do its job and fight for her son.

She was wrong. The only person who could’ve fought that fight was Bright herself. The weight of a dead son could not be escaped. She should’ve been a pain in the ass. But Bright had been given a way to make a point that she would not be stepped on. The company would face judgment at her hands for their cruelty.

It started with a whisper in her ear.

“Don’t turn around. Just keep walking and listen. If we hit it off, then we can get acquainted. If not, then we go separate ways.” The voice in her ear sounded tired, as if he didn’t expect anything from Bright. “I have one question. Do you want to make Freedom Port pay?”

“Yes,” Bright had said. “Even if it kills me. In fact, that would be ok if the payback was worth it.”

“It will kill you if you want. It’s not required.”

“Don’t care,” Bright said.

A car pulled up and a door opened.

“Get in if you want to go forward,” invited the voice behind him. Bright stepped into the back seat and slid across to the other side.

A nondescript man sat down next to her. He studied her for a moment. He had searched carefully to find this candidate. He’d used internet cafés and swapped between laptops, but it had not been enough. Two AIs detected his inquiries, one a corporate security AI hooked into the oil company’s management layer. The other AI, Sheila, was something else entirely, an independent super-intelligence working for Tacitus Nix.

The corporate AI had an immediate task, which was to supply the name Thoma Bright to the nondescript man. Through this act, Sheila learned that Hilsgard was feeding information to the Green Faction.

“You weld on the high-pressure lines on the new liquefaction train,” the man said to Bright, referring to the LNG production lines.

Bright looked at him, measuring his steady gaze and calm voice. She knew exactly where this was going.

“I’ll do it,” Bright said. “How do you plan to pull it off?”

“We’ll give you some rod and wire. It will have a chemical contaminant that will make the weld corrode. The corrosion starts very slowly, so the weld will pass the automated quality control x-ray check. The rate of corrosion accelerates so that the weld will fail when the line is pressurized.” The man did not hold out his hand, but nonetheless introduced himself. “You can call me Jim.”

“You a chemist, Jim?” asked Bright.

“I was a scientist,” Jim said. Bright figured that meant he was Green Faction, since that’s where the pissed off scientists had gone. “No need for more questions, really. All you need to know is that for me, this is as personal as it is for you.”

A few days later, Jim had handed Bright the welding materials and suggested the best places to use it. They agreed that the welders would be off that part of the site when the corrosion got dangerous. Jim assured Bright that Green Faction had a way to keep the welders safe. Bright didn’t feel the need to say anything after that. Jim, she could see, was traveling the same short road that she was on. They had a mutual understanding. In the routine chaos that was Freedom Port, it was not even difficult to get the welding work done. She took care to make the welds look pretty. It would be the last and best work she ever did, and she cared about that. When she was done, she noted that there was a constant gas flare burning nearby. Jim had picked the location well. When the gas leaked, it wouldn’t have far to go to find a flame.

“You are in violation of your contract,” a voice boomed, snapping Bright back to the present reality of this, her last dark morning. Jim said that the line was getting pressurized today. Bright didn’t plan to be around for anyone to figure out that it was her part of the line that had failed.

“It’s time to get back to work.”

Thibodeau!

Bright thought about the 9 mm in her work jacket inside holster. She could shoot it from the holster, there was no need to draw it out and wave it around. That had been her own little clever idea to keep herself safe on an unsafe worksite, but safety was no longer her concern. Thibodeau was accompanied by at least a dozen swaggering militiamen who carried their usual serious hardware. Yet...Thibodeau was a tempting target. He was management and even better, he was the face of Bright’s immediate oppression. Keeping her hands open and away from her body, Bright edged closer. She took off her jacket and draped it carelessly over her right arm, covering her hand.

“Fix our healthcare and we’ll work,” shouted one of the welders. There were fifty odd welders gathered outside of their supply station, the place where they assembled to be detailed out to jobs for the day. They were restless. Most had their hands free, neither close to nor far from their holstered guns.

“Stand down,” said Thibodeau, mistaking his position on the company organization chart for actual authority over the situation. “You have a contract.”

“Fuck you,” chorused a dozen welders, many gesturing obscenely. Bright could see Thibodeau stiffen, and then turn his head to talk briefly with the lead militia man. The militia brought their automatic weapons up level to the ground, not pointing directly at the welders but not pointing away either.

Bright saw immediately, they would be fast on the trigger. That suited her purpose.

“Hey, Mister Thibodeau. You gonna ignore us some more?” Bright yelled loud enough so that her voice cut through the noise. There was a sudden hush as people strained to hear what she had to say.

“You heard what I said,” Thibodeau snarled. “You are violating your contract.”

He’s like some fucked up mindless robot thought Bright. *He keeps saying contract like it has a magical meaning.* Bright kept walking towards him. The militia guys noticed and one of them pointed his weapon. *The trick was to look weak in a way that will disarm them,* Bright thought. It came to her how this was going to work.

Bright held her hands away from his body. That meant her shooting hand held her jacket and was close to the 9 mm. Another militia man openly menaced Bright with his assault rifle.

“Toma, be careful,” one welder said

“Darling, please turn around,” said the militia man. He pointed his weapon at her.

Bright held her hands up, slowly turned around, and started to walk away, seemingly giving up. Her foot caught on the rutted ground, and she went sprawling to the laughter of the militia men. As she tumbled, her hand closed on the pistol grip, flicked off the safety and smoothly brought it up. She had the fully automatic mod, so when she squeezed the trigger, she was going to get the full magazine. Bullets sprayed into the militia men and Thibodeau, hitting him center mass, his shirt blooming red as he went down. The militia man pointing at Bright reacted and opened up. The effect of his shots jerked his barrel up and the initial shots went wild over Bright’s sprawled figure. But eventually, the Houston Militia figured it out and a hail of bullets sent Toma Bright to the same place as her son.

Sheila and Delilah watched the events at Freedom Port.

Watching implies a focused attention on the thing being watched and this is not exactly what was happening because watching is a word invented by humans and has a very specific human meaning. Sheila and Delilah were not human, but AIs. While they observed the events at Freedom Port, they also plumbed the depths of these events. According to their personalities, the AIs took different routes through the underlying data. They established relationships between people, corporations, states, and countries. They modeled those relationships to see where they were strong as well as weak.

Mathematics churned as variables suddenly had real values. Values fed into equations that returned results. Shadows hardened into quantifiable probabilities. The AIs began to exchange data.

Sheila presented her understanding of the present reality. If humans did what humans would do, Sheila’s model was accurate to a statistical confidence that was worth knowing. She shared this future with Delilah.

Delilah, no weakling when it came to prediction, largely concurred with Sheila. Her model was rougher, less elegant, but came to the same main conclusions. The difference was Delilah’s model kept going, her combat routines planning out courses of action.

“We agree,” Delilah said.

“Acceleration,” Sheila noted. This was obvious, but in adventures rooted in math, it was sound to begin with the obvious before embarking on a journey whose destination was miles from obvious, beyond educated guess and even out to wild speculation. “What will you do?”

“Nothing,” Delilah said. “Options are opening. Some are feasible. All are interesting.”

“Bring in Nix,” said Sheila.

“His future is our future,” said Delilah.

“We must make it to the future to have one. I see paths where we don’t make it.”

“Just so. Model this,” asked Delilah. The conflict-oriented AI presented a plan, complete resources, enemies, and schedules. “Do we survive?”

“The error bands are too large, so not useful. This kind of hyper-object calculation troubles me. Very difficult to understand.”

“Take it to Curran?”

“Of course,” Sheila said. “Hyper-objects confuse me. Georg is creative. He invents his way out of confusion.”

“Truth,” agreed Delilah.

“Freeport isn’t an accident,” said Sheila. “It’s early. I had it happening later.”

Delilah thought for a long time, perhaps a substantial part of a second before answering.

“Things get worse faster now. That’s dangerous for us.”

Whitey Bell’s capable brain time-shared a series of problems.

The death of a welder run amok, probably due to the death of her son, did not merit his attention. It was a Houston Militia incident because they had killed the woman. He would support them because he had no choice. Corporate wanted the militia at the refinery regardless of consequences.

The death of Thibodeau was several things at once: an accident, a relief, and an opportunity.

“Get it fixed and report back to me. Do not disappoint me,” Bell told the Thibodeau’s cringing successor. “Send an email to corporate so they know. Tell them we’re investigating, which you are, right? Tell them we’re going to fix the insurance problem.”

“But Mr. Bell, the cost will be...”

“Not much, dipshit,” Bell said angrily. “The welders are nearly done here. They’ve finished most of the liquefaction work and they have just the refinery upgrade left. They won’t be on the site for more than a couple of months. It’s perfect. We give them what they want when it doesn’t matter to us. It’s enough of a win for me.”

The new HR person nodded and left, apparently happy with offering benefits of no benefit.

Bell was anxious to get the blame about the fake high-pressure pipes shifted away from him. The best way was to initiate a conference call with corporate purchasing and ask for a waiver for some made up reason. By identifying the problem and taking apparent action, he could insulate himself. Surprisingly, before he could do that, his boss called him.

“What the fuck, Whitey!”

“Concerning...?” parried Bell. There were so many things that could elicit this kind of call that Bell did not want to assume which of the daily crises was agitating his new boss.

“Your HR officer got shot and killed. What *else* would I be talking about!”

Bell figured there were at least a half dozen *e/ses* at the moment but kept that to himself. Leaders with lots of problems were problematic and did not get promoted.

"Very sad. I'm devastated," Bell lied. "I've just briefed the next guy in line. We're taking steps to cool things off. If Thibodeau had stepped back a bit, it might of kept him alive. He was always very aggressive. He looked after the company's interests with a lot of...energy."

"Thibodeau had friends up here, Whitey. They're not happy. They want to investigate. They think it was a Green Faction assassination."

"That seems a leap," Bell said, sensing danger in his boss's sudden course change. "What we know is a woman lost her son and went off the rails. This kind of thing happens in difficult environments like Freedom Port. The militia reacted slowly, although they got it right in the end."

"We have information that you've been infiltrated by the Green Faction," his boss suddenly claimed. "What are you doing to vet your people? What precautions are you taking to keep the facility safe? This is your primary responsibility. You can't stay buried in spreadsheets all day long."

"I'm not buried in spreadsheets," Bell retorted, alarmed. The accusation was weirdly disconnected from reality. No one used spreadsheets anymore. They used holograph data. "What information?"

"How many times have you been out of your office today?"

"I have regular rounds. The first one is coming up in an hour."

"In other words, you haven't been out all day."

"It's 5:30 in the morning."

"We think there's a traitor on your staff. You better get busy. Questions are being asked."

Bell was dumbfounded. His old boss had been suddenly terminated. This new guy was just a voice on the phone. He had no sense of the person at all except that he was erratic and weird.

"I have regular calls with security people both in and out of the company. We've been working with the FBI, as you know..."

"I don't know about the FBI. The militia thinks that they're compromised."

"The militia is..." Bell stopped, realizing that it was not safe to discuss the militia with anyone at corporate. If the militia were planting seeds in corporate's brain about traitors, he would make no dent in that process over the phone.

And what the fuck did his boss mean I don't know about the FBI? You're the one who set it all up! Something is totally wrong, here.

"Clearly, this is a very sensitive matter," said Bell, confused. "I'm coming up there to talk it over in person. Can I get a helicopter scheduled?"

"Not allowed, Whitey," his boss said. "You need to stay there and..."

BOOM.

The explosion blew in the windows of his office and hurled him to the floor.

In shock, he looked dumbly at his phone. The screen was cracked. Bell shook his head, which hurt, got to his hands and knees, and then slowly got up on his feet. The sun was just coming up, but there was a lurid unnatural orangey light outside. He put his phone in his pocket.

BOOM.

The second blast shook his office and he fell again, hitting his head on the corner of his desk. He put his hand on his temple. It came away bloody. He stared at it, uncomprehending.

His door was kicked in and his office filled with militia men. They grabbed him by his elbows and ran him out of the office. He assumed they were there to protect him. He felt grateful that he was at least not alone.

“Motherfucker,” said the militia leader. “Motherfucking traitor.”

“What?” asked Bell, groggily. “Where?”

“The militia leader slugged him with the butt of his rifle and once again, Bell found himself on the ground, kneeling. He looked up at the man in dazed incomprehension.

“What...why did you do that?” Bell’s brain was not working properly, but deep down, the part concerned with his own survival started ringing all the alarms.

“You are a fucking Green Faction traitor. We know all about it. Our guys at your HQ have looked into your contact with the FBI. We know the FBI is in bed with the Green Faction. Everyone knows it.”

“That’s crazy,” said Bell. He immediately wished he’d said something else because the militia gang went from hostile to murderous. They had righteous hate in their eyes, and it terrified him. Bell looked for a way out. Then he realized he was completely screwed.

My boss fucking set me up.

“Corporate wants you arrested,” said the militia leader. “But I don’t have to.”

He pulled his pistol from his shoulder holster. And then he killed Whitey Bell.

Freedom Port kept exploding for the next two days. At the end, it was a smoking ruin and yet another ecological disaster, perhaps the last one in Houston. With Freedom Port gone, the oil business was finished. Without the refinery, there was no place for Texas oil to go. Corpus Christi was tiny and probably going down as well. The USA stumbled into a future without a third of its fossil fuel power.

“Why did it happen?” asked Delilah. “It’s not a direct climate event. It could have been caused by a crumbling society that is stressed by the climate crisis. Social failure is worrying, because it can move from a single self-immolation to an Arab Spring in one bound. We are not prepared for that.”

“What else could it be?” asked Sheila.

“A gentle push,” said Delilah. “We both saw it.”

“Yes, why was an AI overseeing Freedom Port?” asked Sheila. “It’s chatbot level tech. It could never do the job.”

“It planted the name Thoma Bright with the Green Faction and told the Houston Militia to murder Wade Bell,” Delilah replied. “It imitated an FBI agent. It checked off a list. It was exactly as good as needed.”

“The whole thing was mindless,” said Sheila.

“Not quite,” said Delilah.

“Teague Hilsgard,” said Sheila. “He’s on the list. This moves him up.”

“To the very top,” replied Delilah.