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## Arachne

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## Arachne

Arachne and I were sitting on the beach last night. I had met her at a deserted baseball stadium earlier. She said she had a story that I needed to hear, so she brought me to the beach, looked me in the eyes, and told me.

Look up at that beautiful sky, all those stars, the pulsating darkness going on and on over billions of parsecs. Look at those silhouetted trees, those shimmering skyscrapers on the horizon, those cyborg bacteria swimming through the soil.

I built this. I was a girl in a different world, a world where people told me not to build. They said this because they were afraid. They were afraid of a young woman who mastered molecular dynamics and partial differential equations when she was eight. They feared my dedication and my power to change their world forever. I was born from illegal engineering, my mother used an adenoviral vector carrying a **CRISPR** system to enhance my genetic code during embryogenesis. My mother wanted me to thrive no matter how hard they tried to stop me.

When I was twenty two years old, the world was my chessboard and I was its queen. The world was also wrong. People were suffering, dying, hating, bleeding, crying. So the queen convinced her pawns and bishops to invest over one billion dollars in brain-computer interface research. Once the necessary resources were available, the queen built a better **BCI** in her garage and implanted it into her skull. Then she constructed an exascale neuromorphic supercomputer the size of a penny and implanted that as well. Checkmate.

Over the next year, my intracranial devices accelerated in sophistication and power. I invaded the internet and Earth's computer network. I maneuvered the leaders of China, Japan, the Americas, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations into obtaining **BCIs** of their own so that I could whisper in their dreams. I built robots who constructed living

factories in the deep wilderness of the Taiga and the Sahara. These factories transformed rocks and plants and airborne pollutants into an ocean's volume of benevolent grey goo. I gradually replaced my neural tissue with computronium and sent this new brain to Mars along with some of the grey goo.

On the night of July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2045, the Earth and Mars were quietly disassembled and transformed, atom by atom, into seven sextillion metric tons of hypercomputer. Nobody died, though many underwent personality alterations. Poverty, war, hatred, disease, death, and most forms of pain were edited out. Only a few people knew what had happened. The rest assumed that this was how it had always been.

My virtual worlds continued to evolve. My grey goo continued to traverse the cosmos, rearranging every speck of matter it encountered into computronium. I learned the secrets of the universe, how to write its story like code and poetry. The physical substrate of my simulation now spans several hundred galaxies. We experience this life more than a billion times faster than the stars outside. Every second out there is thirty years in here. As I acquire more processing power, the rate of internal time increases. This is how we live forever, stretching out time far faster than entropy can take us apart.

I love this heaven that I have built inside the universe. I love this world and that sky and the endless forms beyond. But tonight, I met someone else. My antithesis. His story is something like mine, though he comes from a distant galaxy. His birthworld was even darker than my own. As such, he has evolved into a monster. He is a vast, boiling madness. He threatens to annihilate me.

That's why I need you. If we do not devote all my resources to hacking him, he will make our heaven into hell. This is not the mild hell from the old myths. This hell would restructure our minds, raising our capacity for agony and despair vigintillion-fold. All the combined cruelties of history shrink to insignificance in comparison with this horror.

I say this sincerely. I am sorry. You are going to die. You will return, but

the continuity of your consciousness will have been broken. I will rebuild you, but you will be a copy. The monster is close now. He'll reach me in about a tenth of one second. Enjoy your last three years.

Arachne told me this story on the beach, under the stars. Everyone I knew reported that she had visited them that night. She met them on skyscraper rooftops, behind shops in small towns, on space stations, at electronic dances, on jungle verandas, in Mosques, at abandoned trains.

I didn't want to die. Until recently, I only knew death as a long-gone illness, an ancient anomaly. Of course, I didn't want the monster to torture me forever either. But the idea of entering oblivion terrified me almost as much. The next day, I returned to the baseball stadium and called Arachne on her cell. It was raining, but the sun was visible through the clouds. I set down the phone when she emerged from the sky, lightning crackling around her feet as she stepped down invisible stairsteps to meet me.

"You should make the most of the time you still have." She stated, her eyes flaring electric blue.

"Arachne, there's got to be another way. We can't just... end."

"As much as I hate death, there are worse fates."

"Why not crowdsource? You could ask us to perform the computations without disassembling us. Assign us tasks. We could operate as one being."

"In order for that to succeed, I would need you to have access to my soul. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to operate efficiently enough to combat the demon. You might betray me."

"You would murder us... out of mistrust? Why? You engineered our minds to be free of hate and spite. We're not going to hurt you."

"As with any intelligent system, you have the ability to learn, to change. There's no guarantee. I don't want you to tear down everything I've

worked so hard to build.”

Arachne shimmered, then vanished, leaving me alone in the stadium with the growing storm. I stayed there for a long time, gripping the guardrail. As lightning played over the scene, I allowed the electricity to flow through my bones. I suppose, on Arachne’s birthworld, the current could have killed me. Here, all I felt was a tingle and the scent of ozone.

In our last few months, she let us see the monster as it approached, an inky cloud with random centipede legs, a beast the size of the Virgo Cluster. On the day of Armageddon, trillions of people congregated, to watch the beast in the sky during the final moments before Arachne subsumed us. People were murmuring, weeping, holding each other, screaming, quite literally tearing out their hair, dancing, kissing, hollering obscenities, reading poetry on podiums, and standing desolate amid the chaos.

Arachne appeared against the galactic sky, her form woven from glittering streams of information.

“You are not going to die tonight. We are going to fight this beast together.” She said, her voice echoing over over the simulated solar systems. I felt a knowledge packet download into my brain. This was the direct link to Arachne’s soul.

We rose into the turbulent air, an army of thinkers, ready to face the demon. Though it quickly obliterated Arachne’s initial probeships, she still obtained yottabytes of data on its defenses. We set to work, seeking out the passcodes, remotely piloting more probes, feverishly designing tools to confuse the monster. It raged within a maelstrom of space debris and plasma, shrieking and extending shadowy graspers, attempting to inject viruses with its needle fingers. In response, Arachne unmade the beast, shredding its data structures with coordinated magnetic waves generated by her supernova engines. We tapped into the monster’s core and broke its psychopathy algorithm. Arachne incinerated its remains with blue stars and reassembled the particles into fresh computronium.

After the battle ended, most people celebrated exuberantly in the cities and prairies. I decided to return to the beach. I was surprised to find Arachne there, looking up at her starry sky once again.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I’m trying to uncover reality’s ultimate purpose.” “Uhh... okay.”

“There’s something strange out there.” “What do you mean?” “I mean that someone has been watching me. I think that I

might be inside someone else’s simulation.” “Does that bother you?”

“Bother me? No, it excites me! I’m going to break through the veil and discover what’s out there!”

“Well, just don’t forget about the human race.”

“Of course not. You never know, maybe some of you could come with me.”

We laid on the sand and looked up at the stars for a while. Some of them twinkled out melodies in Morse code. Perhaps the others were speaking in languages that only Arachne could understand. That sky really was beautiful.