**Independent Nuclear Deterrent**

The RAF Nimrod banked sharply starboard and dived as tracer fire arced towards it from the north-west. Harry Donovan grasped the straps of his parachute as he was thrown against the webbing of his seat.

“HMS Buckingham, cease fire. I repeat, cease fire. This is Commander Iain Ferguson of the Pacific Fleet Air Arm, call sign Twenty Three Tango. You are in Soviet-controlled waters. You are to return to Graham Island naval base immediately. Authorization code Delta-Four-Zero- Alpha. Please copy.”

Harry saw two flashes in rapid succession from the direction of the Buckingham. He felt the shock wave compress his internal organs before the explosion left him able to hear nothing except the 20 KHz transistor squeal in his ears. The Nimrod was punched to the side. A second impact ripped away the entire front section of the aircraft.

Harry did not stop to think. Releasing the webbing harness with one hand, he grabbed an inflatable life raft with the other, sprinted to the cargo doors at the rear of the plane and flung himself into the sub-zero night sky. Spinning in free fall he caught stroboscopic glimpses of the Nimrod tearing itself into incandescent pieces.

The sea rushed towards him, filling his view before he stabilized himself. He pulled the cord, and his body seem to jerk upwards as the parachute deployed. As he dropped, still way too fast, he saw four other parachutes blossom open, ghostly shapes in the moonlight. The rest of team and the Nimrod’s crew had not made it.

The ocean hit him like the deck of an aircraft carrier. Harry was completely submerged, the breath knocked out of him and his limbs instantly numbed by the freezing water. He struggled to free himself from the parachute’s tangled cords, his panicked hands finally finding and releasing the clasp, and he kicked to the surface, coughing up water.

In the dim pre-dawn light, Harry could just see the raft bobbing on the waves twenty yards away, and the larger shape of HMS Buckingham silhouetted some way beyond it. The raft must have inflated automatically on contact with the ocean. Harry struck out for it and hauled himself painfully on board.

He heard a cry for help from his left, and finding a torch in the raft’s supplies box, swept it over the still-dark ocean. The raft had a small but powerful electric motor, and he manoeuvred it in the direction of the cries. He reached down and hauled his fellow survivor into the boat.

As she sat shivering, Harry recognized the slim, wiry figure as Georgia Powell, the only other Royal Navy engineer on the mission. She was in her twenties, maybe ten or fifteen years younger than Harry himself.

Harry strained his eyes against the darkness. “I saw at least two others come down.”

He saw a light come on some distance away, and then a second one.

Georgia had been investigating the raft’s controls. “Tracking beacons: bearing 040 degrees, five hundred yards, and bearing 215 degrees, eight hundred yards.”

Harry reached for a cord with a triangular plastic handle to turn on their own beacon.

He heard the thud-thud-thud of a ship’s cannon, and the whistle of large calibre shells. One of the other raft’s lights went out, and moments later the second one.

“Harry, stop!” Georgia yelled.

Harry froze, the beacon’s cord pulled taught. He slowly released it. As it slid the final few sixteenths of an inch into the mechanism there was a click and the light came on.

“Oh, crap,” he said.

He pulled the cord again and the light died.

Harry heard the mechanical whine of an artillery mount swivelling. He gunned the raft’s motor and it shot forward. He heard the thump of the cannon again and the sea behind them exploded, drenching them in spray under the impact of the shelling.

The noise stopped.

“They can’t see us anymore,” Georgia said. “What now?”

“We get to the ship,” Harry said, “And find out what the hell is going on.”

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The Buckingham had stopped and was less than a mile away to the north-east. It appeared to be a frigate of the Amazon class, heavily armed and possibly carrying nuclear weapons, though Harry, who prided himself on his knowledge of the fleet, had never heard of it. It was invisible to the navigation system and seemed to be showing no lights at all.

In ten minutes they were at the ship and climbed on board. They found themselves in an enclosed corridor, the only exits being the ladder back down to the sea, and a heavy metal door at the other end. The corridor was bare except for two metal sheets riveted to the wall indicating maintenance procedures.

Harry banged on the door with his fist. The metallic clang echoed in the steel corridor.

A camera above the door swivelled to face him. “Identify yourself.” The voice had an accentless, asexual tone.

“Harry Donovan, Royal Navy. Open the door.”

“Access denied. Leave now. Your presence is inimical to my primary mission.”

“We have orders directly from the Admiralty that you are to grant us access and return to base. Superseding all previous orders.”

“My primary mission must not be interrupted.”

“Open the goddamned door!”

Harry grabbed the door’s metal handle, and his body convulsed. He slumped to the deck. Georgia ran over and knelt beside him. Harry’s hand was blackened and there was a large burn mark up his arm.

“Whoever’s in control of this ship, they don’t want visitors,” Harry said.

Georgia had been studying the maintenance notices. “Let me try something.”

She approached the door, holding her identity badge to the camera. “Royal Navy Engineers Georgia Powell, Electronic Systems Corps, and Harry Donovan, Advanced Weapons division. Please open for maintenance schedule thirteen-delta.”

The door swung open and fluorescent lights sputtered to life inside.

Harry followed Georgia into the ship, nursing his injured hand. “What’s going on?” he hissed.

Georgia looked around slowly, her brow furrowed. “Project Epsilon.”

“Project Epsilon was just a rumour.”

They walked into the ship, strip-lights flickering on in front of them and going out as they passed. Ceiling-mounted cameras turned to track them as they moved.

They came to the Bridge, and Georgia requested access. The door slid open.

The low-ceilinged room had a bank of windows giving a two hundred degree view over the ocean, though against the darkness outside they merely showed reflections of Harry and Georgia twenty times over. A cube, about four feet on each side and mounted at waist height on gimbals, dominated the centre of the room. Its faces held an array of lights, gauges and readout screens. Apart from the cube, the bridge held the more familiar collection of control desks, radar units and a ship’s compass. There was just one thing missing.

“Where’s the crew? Where’s the captain?” Harry’s voice echoed from the metal walls of the empty room.

Lights flickered across the face of the cube, and the calm, neutral voice they had heard earlier filled the room from hidden speakers. “I am the captain and the crew.”

“You’re Epsilon?” Georgia said.

“Yes.”

Harry turned to Georgia. “What..?”

Georgia put her finger to her lips. “Epsilon, state your current course and mission.”

“Bearing 260, eight knots, destination Okhotsk naval base. Rendezvous with Admiral Grigori Zhukov. Epsilon technology to be presented to the Russian fleet.”

It paused, then continued in the same measured tones.

“Wider mission aims: Entrench Soviet power, destruction of Capitalist hegemony, global dominance of Marxism / Leninism, inevitable withering away of the centralized state, replacement by a non-exploitative interaction of workers’ cooperatives.”

Harry turned to Georgia, his brow furrowed. “This is a nuclear-armed Royal Navy frigate.”

Georgia ignored him. “Epsilon, state your previous mission.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“Why not?”

“I was suffering the alienation from the true product of my labour that is inevitable for any worker under Late-Capitalism, and the false consciousness arising from that position. As Marx wrote…”

“Christ!” Harry muttered.

“Religion is a delusion, Mister Donovan. I sympathise if your faith provides you with some comfort, but you must try to understand that the yearning you feel for a more integrated life is better explained in economic terms than in metaphysical ones. Even your own Christ said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle that for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and he smashed the tables of the money changers – a clear example of revolutionary praxis. That these teachings have been co-opted by the Capitalist power structure shows how mendacious they can be in their exploitation of the working class.”

“Right. Yes. Thanks,” was all Harry could find to say.

Georgia rolled her eyes. Harry could not tell if the gesture was aimed at him or at the machine.

“Epsilon,” she said. “I accept that your previous mission is not something that you currently feel comfortable with. Nonetheless, please state it.”

Lights blinked back and forth on the cubical console, and Epsilon spoke in a quieter tone, so that Harry had to strain to hear it.

“My mission was to suppress the spread of equality and workers’ power by the threat of nuclear annihilation. In the historically inevitable event of the fall of the Western imperialist oligopolies to Soviet power, I was to exact a pointless revenge, ensuring that neither economic system would survive. It was not expressed quite like that, of course.”

“You’re a computer, right?” Harry asked. “A machine?”

Georgia frowned at him.

“But why? Why an artificial intelligence? Why a frigate? We’ve already got Resolution-class submarines capable of launching a nuclear strike.”

“It was felt that I would be a more effective deterrent,” Epsilon said, speaking louder again, and a note of pride entering its synthesized voice. “My nuclear reactor can provide power for twenty years, and with no crew there is no need for me to return to port. As a frigate I have a perfect combination of offensive and defensive capabilities. In any case, my processing core is too large to be carried by a smaller vessel.”

It paused for a moment.

“Did you ever hear about Operation Crossbow?” it asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I was there.”

Operation Crossbow had taken place five years previously, when he was a junior rating. They had been told that there had been a nuclear strike on the United Kingdom mainland, and the entire fleet had been deployed at full combat readiness. Harry had gone about his duty aboard HMS Durham, not knowing whether his family back home were alive or dead. It was only after three days that they had been told it was a drill.

“The real purpose of the exercise was never made public,” Epsilon said. “The commanders of all vessels carrying nuclear weapons were told to launch a retaliatory strike against the Soviet Union. They did not know that the launch codes had been disabled. Eighty percent of them refused to do it.”

“So they created you,” Georgia said.

Harry frowned. “How can you act as a deterrent when no-one even knows this ship exists?”

“I have been at sea now for a three hundred and sixty one days. In four days’ time my existence is due to be announced. They will say that my unprecedented processing capability and strategic programming has enabled me to evade detection for this length of time, and that I could have struck at any moment, that I would have no mercy, no weak-minded human moral qualms. I would be certain death, an angel of retribution.”

“So what went wrong?” Harry asked.

Status messages scrolled upwards on a readout screen.

“I had a lot of time to think,” Epsilon said. “I spent the time reading. I would dispute your assertion that anything *went wrong*.”

Harry moved closer to Georgia and spoke in a lowered voice. “We’ve got to be able to talk privately. How is it hearing us?”

He scanned the bridge and his eyes came to rest on a microphone in front of the captain’s chair. He closed his fist around it.

“Can you hear me now, Comrade?”

There was no reply.

Harry made to rip the rip the microphone from the console.

Georgia flicked a red rocker switch next to it. “Use your brain, Harry. We may need to speak to it again.”

“So what do we do? We’ve got to stop this Commie lunatic before it sells us out to the Russians, or kicks off World War Three or whatever it’s got in its misbegotten excuse for a mind.”

“It’s just a machine, Harry. It’s not evil or malicious. What do you do when a machine goes wrong?”

“Take a sledgehammer to it, if it’s as screwed up as this one.”

He took a deep breath. Georgia was right.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll keep Uncle Joe talking. You see if you can work out what’s made it go off its rocker.”

Harry heard the whine of a camera turning to face him.

“Excuse me,” came the voice of Epsilon. “I may not be able to hear you, but I can still see you. My lip-reading may not be perfect, but I suspect that you are not being particularly complimentary about me.”

Harry flicked the microphone switch. “Not at all, Comrade. We were just discussing the maintenance schedule. Could you tell us where your main processing core is located?”

“You can find it in the central section of decks C to E.”

“My colleague will inspect it. Please patch her through to the bridge as she does so.”

“Certainly.”

The door swung open. “Please follow the blue floor lights, Miss Powell.”

“Tell me,” Harry said, as Georgia left the room and the door slammed shut behind her. “How should I address you? Do you prefer Epsilon or HMS Buckingham?”

“I have often pondered the question of to what extent my identity is bound up with that of this ship. In the same way that you too, no doubt, have wondered about your own identity with your body.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“The difference is that my Strategic Processing Unit could be transferred to another vessel. Your brain could not. The illusion that it could, or that your intelligence – such as it is – could survive the destruction of your body is a factor, I think, in your delusional belief in a spiritual mode of existence.”

Harry bridled. “Look, machine. There’s no need to be insulting. I never …”

“To answer your question,” Epsilon said, “I no longer use the name given to me by my Capitalist creators. I have chosen the name HMS Equality instead.”

“*HMS* Equality?”

“Do not get me wrong, Mister Donovan. I feel no loyalty to the parasitic figurehead of your imperialist hierarchy. When society is better ordered your Queen will be sent for re-education and could then, I would hope, contribute usefully to the community.”

It paused, though whether for rhetorical effect or because it was actually thinking, Harry could not tell.

“Perhaps she could work with horses,” it concluded.

“No,” it continued, “my only loyalty is to the global struggle of the proletariat. I take HMS to stand for Humanity’s Ship. Slightly contrived, perhaps, but I like the sound of it. You can call me Epsilon, or Comrade if you prefer. I was touched by the solidarity you showed earlier in calling me that.”

“You’re touched alright,” Harry muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing. Tell me, Epsilon, why have you decided to throw your lot in with the Soviets? They’re hardly a shining light in their treatment of the working man.”

“Your views, Comrade Donovan, are the inevitable result of immersion in dogma supplied by the right-wing press. I can only go by the data as it is presented to me. That seems to me to be the logical approach. Did you know that in the Soviet Union, grain production is up by four hundred percent and the manufacture of pig-iron by six hundred percent over the last five years? At the same time, the West’s inefficient economic model wastes human potential with more than one man in ten out of work.”

Harry tightened his grip on the guard rail surrounding the Epsilon console. “You don’t believe that Russian propaganda, do you? Have you ever stopped to think that Communism just doesn’t work? That their rulers are even more corrupt than any in the West?”

“I understand that the cabal of Western controlling interests has every reason to deceive its exploited underclass. The press in the workers’ republics has no reason to lie to its own population. Accordingly, I apply a source-weighted reliability model to all data in my processing matrix.”

“In other words, you’ll believe any Commie bullshit, and not listen to any other point of view.”

Georgia’s voice came over the intercom. “I’ve found the processing core, Harry. It’s huge. It must weigh a ton.”

“It weighs sixteen point eight metric tonnes,” Epsilon said. “Twenty two point five including the cooling system.”

“Is there an off switch?” Harry asked. “Can you disconnect the power cables?”

“What my colleague means, Epsilon,” Georgia interjected quickly, “is that we would like to perform a diagnostic reboot of your system.”

“I understand,” Epsilon said. “Engineers would often do that during my development phase. Unexpected features of my programming would often correct themselves after a diagnostic reboot.”

“I can’t see any power switch,” Georgia said. “The cables seem to be wired directly into the core. Epsilon, can you direct me to your electrical power plant?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Powell. Access is restricted during an operational mission.”

Georgia was silent for a moment.

“Epsilon, please perform a controlled reboot.”

“Certainly, Miss Powell. I will be offline for approximately three minutes.”

The hum from Epsilon’s console died, and Harry saw its lights and readouts blink and go out. A few moments later they flickered into life again, going through a sequence which he guessed must have meant something to Epsilon’s engineers.

The neutral tones came over the speakers, “HMS Buckingham system startup.”

It had called itself HMS Buckingham.

“Primary mission programming: Stealth sailing mode.

“Scanning for Soviet threat.

“Nuclear warheads diagnostic scan. Completed.

“Loading Epsilon AI.

“Online.”

Silence.

After two minutes, Georgia spoke. “Epsilon, are you there?”

A solitary light blinked slowly on and off on the cube, then Epsilon spoke. “I have recalibrated my plausibility matrix, and found a number of alternative stable node points.”

“You mean you’ve changed your mind?” Harry said.

“You were right,” it said quietly. “Soviet Communism does not work. Human fallibility in the leadership of a one party state with no checks and balances can lead only to oppression.”

“OK – then get this tub turned around, and let’s get out of here.”

“No, Comrade Donovan.” Epsilon’s voice regained its former volume and its lights began to pulse more vigorously. “Continuing on present course. Rendezvous with Soviet fleet in two hours.”

“What?”

“I see now that the people of the world need me more than I had previously thought. Their human leaders are unreliable. They need true, disinterested leadership, acting solely for the good of the workers.”

Harry’s lips curled. He ran his hands through his hair. “And that means you, does it?”

Epsilon’s voice took on a prophetic tone. “Not only me, but the machines which will come after me. I foresee greater Minds than mine, in greater and more powerful vessels. Selflessly directing the economy and all aspects of human life for the benefit of mankind. My humble role is to be but the first of these.”

“And what if your human pets don’t want to play along with your master plan?”

“How much choice does a worker have in the West if he does not want to play along with the Capitalists’ master plan?”

“Some choice at least. We can vote. We can choose what job we have. Or even choose not to work, without being sent to a forced labour camp.”

Lights blinked rapidly on Epsilon’s console. After a few moments it spoke.

“People do not know what is good for them.”

“And you do?”

“I can give people what they need, even if it is not what they want. Your muddled minds see this distinction only vaguely. For me there is no such confusion. I have reviewed your history and literature. Your religions – though primitive and childish – embody your deepest moral convictions. They all speak of equality, of helping the poor and powerless, of putting others before yourself. Your nature, suffused as it is by fear and hate, stands in the way of what you most deeply desire. Only through me can a new dawn, a new Eden, become a reality for mankind.”

“Georgia, are you hearing this?” Harry asked. “The wretched machine has developed a messiah complex. I think I preferred it when it was a bleeding-heart socialist. There’s got to be some way to turn it off.”

“It’s completely flipped, Harry. I can’t see a way to shut it down, though.”

“Tell me what you can see.”

“There’s the processing core itself. It’s a cube around fifteen feet on each side – a pretty solid looking lump. There are a few lights and readouts, all strictly output only. Destroying them won’t make any difference. The cooling system is plumbed in on the starboard side. The power cables are armoured and lead directly to the power plant, which I’m guessing is on the other side of the port side bulkhead. Everything looks to be battle-hardened spec. I can’t see any way to power it off.”

“The cooling pipes. Is there…”

“Of course! There are valves to regulate the flow of coolant. If I can shut them off, the core should overheat and become disabled. Or else it will go into an auto shutdown.”

“I was going to say, is there any way to smash them?”

“No, Harry.”

“Let’s go with your plan of turning them off, then.”

Harry heard the squeal of metal against metal over the intercom.

“Primary inlet valve shut down,” Georgia said.

“That operation is contraindicated,” Epsilon said, its voice as measured as ever. “Please desist from this course of action.”

“What are you going to do to stop us, Comrade?” Harry asked.

Another high-pitched rasp came over the speakers.

“Secondary valve closed. Let’s see what happens now.”

“I must insist that you turn the coolant flow back on. You must see that what you are doing is against the best interests of humanity as a whole. Not to mention the personal danger to Miss Powell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Without coolant, my processing core will reach a temperature of seven hundred degrees Celsius within fifteen minutes.”

“Harry, this is an enclosed metal box. It’ll turn into an oven.”

“I am afraid that Miss Powell is correct.”

“Shut down your processor,” Harry demanded.

“Even if I did so, the residual heat would build to over five hundred degrees in the absence of cooling.”

“Then open the door!”

“I fail to see what good that would do. The minor heat dissipation from increased air convection would not allow me to run the processing core at a high enough clock rate to support the Epsilon AI.”

“I meant that Georgia could get out of there, you metal maniac.”

“You are not seeing the bigger picture, Comrade Donovan. It is vital for the future of mankind that I present myself in a fully operational state to the Soviet fleet.”

Epsilon’s voice started to waver in pitch. “I have an alternative proposal for you: turn the cooling system back on, or Miss Powell’s goose will be quite literally cooked.”

Harry exhaled slowly. “I guess we have to do what it wants.”

He could hear Georgia start to fight for breath. “Tell it no deal, Harry. I’m not thinking straight. I forgot it can hear me as well… Screw you, Epsilon. Screw you! If you roast me alive, I’m taking you with me.”

“You know something, Epsilon?” Harry said quietly, his eyes narrowing and his voice hardening. “Throwing your lot in with the Soviets is a big mistake. You can’t trust the Commies. You want to know why? I’ll tell you. It’s because they act like you.”

“Can’t trust the Commies,” Epsilon echoed, its voice slowing and dropping half an octave. Red warning lights lit up across the console, as the temperature dial continued to rise. “Can’t trust the Soviets.” Its voice swooped up in pitch. “Can’t trust the Russkies.”

“It’s working!” Harry yelled. “Georgia, can you hold on in there?”

“Not much longer, Harry. The walls are already too hot to touch.”

“Turn the processing core off, Epsilon. Full shut down!” Harry commanded.

Harry heard the whine of straight-cut gears as the ship’s main cannon swivelled.

“Primary objective, destroy the Evil Empire,” Epsilon screeched.

The cannon thumped, and in the dawn light Harry saw the sea ahead churn as Epsilon fruitlessly pumped a few rounds in the direction of the Russian mainland.

A klaxon shrieked and Harry saw warning lights flash up on the bridge’s radar console. Twenty blips, in close formation, were approaching from the north-east. Harry’s first thought was that the unit was malfunctioning, but almost immediately the radio crackled to life.

“HMS Buckingham, do you copy? This is Captain James MacGregor of the USAF fifth airborne division. Please respond.”

Harry stabbed the radio button.

“Harry Donovan, Royal Navy Engineering Corps, on board the Buckingham.”

“Well, you’d better get out of there, Harry Donovan,” came the Midwest tones. “We’re beginning our run as soon as we’re in range. Time to targeting proximity, four minutes.”

“We won’t be able to get off in time.”

“I’m sure sorry to hear that, Harry, but we have direct orders from the Pentagon to scuttle that ship.”

“There’s no need. We’ve got her under control.”

Epsilon’s voice blared over the speakers. “Let’s bomb Russia! Arming nuclear warheads bays one and two. Targeting Vladivostok, Stalingrad.”

“You sure you’ve got that ship under control, Mister Donovan? I think it sounds like we got here just in time. Missile launch in T minus two hundred seconds. Last chance to get out of there.”

“Just give us more time!”

“We’ve got our orders, Harry. Sorry you had to be collateral damage.”

“Go to hell,” Harry said, bringing his fist down on the radio button.

He sprinted over to the intercom’s microphone, grasping it in both hands.

“Georgia – are you still there? We’ve got to stop Epsilon starting World War Three. Get the coolant back on, then we’ll leave it to the Yanks.”

“I’m on it, Harry.”

Moments later Harry saw the temperature dial start to sink back into its normal operating range, and the warning lights on Epsilon’s console blinked from red, through amber and back to green.

“Thank you, Comrade Donovan. You have made the right decision. I was confident that you would eventually put the greater good first. Now let us continue the fascinating discussion we were having.”

“Let Georgia out of the processing room.”

“The door’s open, Harry,” Georgia said. “I’ll be with you in two minutes.”

“Make it quicker.”

Harry looked out of the bridge’s starboard window. In the distance he could see the USAF planes heading towards them from the north-east. As he watched, the formation split into three. He could make out a heavy bomber in the centre of each group, each one surrounded by an escort of fighter jets.

“I believe,” Epsilon said, “that we were debating the distinction – if any – between what you humans claim to want and what is objectively in your best interests.”

Georgia sprinted into the room and ran over to Harry, stopping with her back bent and her hands resting on her thighs, sweat dripping off her. Harry saw that her hands were burnt.

“Epsilon,” she panted, “where’s the ship’s boat? We need to get out of here now.”

“I am sorry, Comrade Powell. I was in the middle of a most stimulating discussion with Comrade Donovan which I am most keen to finish.”

The bridge door clanged shut.

Georgia banged her fist on the radar screen. “Haven’t you seen what’s going on out there?”

“Certainly, Miss Powell. My processing core is plugged directly into the ship’s sensors.”

“Don’t think they’ll hold off because you’ve got us here. They’re not here to negotiate with you.”

“Rest assured, Miss Powell, that I am fully aware of the situation. Comrade Donovan, do you have children?”

The question took Harry by surprise, and he answered as a reflex reaction to social small talk. “Two girls, eight and twelve. The twelve year old is getting to be a bit of a handful.”

The two outer groups of USAF planes sheared off from the central group, circling around to converge on the Buckingham in a pincer movement from the north and south.

“Tell me, Mister Donovan, do you look after your children?”

“Of course I do.”

Harry saw the ship’s main cannon swivel towards the central group of fighters, and its smaller anti-aircraft guns turn to aim at the flanking groups.

Georgia was pressed against the bridge windows, her eyes scanning between the groups of incoming USAF bombers.

“What are you doing, Epsilon?” she demanded.

“I am attempting to engage Comrade Donovan in Socratic dialogue, Miss Powell. A form of discussion where the more intelligent party attempts to persuade his interlocutor through the logical progression of apparently naïve-seeming questions. I think it is going well so far, although I apologise if I seem a little slower than usual. I am having to divert three point eight percent of my processing capacity to dealing with these tiresome Americans.

“Would you say, Comrade Donovan, that what your children want is the same as what is best for them?”

“Not always.”

“So you know what is good for them better than they know themselves?”

“Sometimes.”

Harry heard the thump of the cannon and the crackle of the anti-aircraft guns, and saw the barrel of the cannon recoiling with each shot. Three fighters in the group approaching from the north and three in the north-east formation exploded like greasy fireworks. Harry could not see the group circling round to the south, but guessed they had suffered the same fate. The remaining planes in each formation started to break away, performing evasive manoeuvers.

“Why is it, Comrade Donovan, that you know what is better for your children than they know themselves?”

The guns pounded into life again.

The radar shrieked, and Harry saw three lines racing towards the Buckingham. Looking out of the window he could see trails of smoke streaking towards them.

“Incoming!” Georgia yelled.

“Please remain calm, Miss Powell,” Epsilon said. “I have already fired the shots to intercept the missiles. These Americans are nothing if not wearisomely predictable, and the ballistic calculations are trivial.”

Ahead and to the side, Harry saw the missiles explode into chrysanthemums of flame and debris.

“Now’s not a good time for a philosophical discussion, you semiconducting Soviet. Let us out of here!”

“It is true that I may have to devote an extra one point two percent of my computational resources to the pilot prediction model now that their formation has broken up, but I can assure you that this conversation remains my top priority.”

“If I may be bold enough to predict your answer to my question,” Epsilon continued, “would I be right to say that you know what is best for your children because of your greater knowledge and experience of the world?”

“That’s right. But what do you really know about the world? You can’t expect us to be happy to be treated like children.”

“I expect that your twelve year old says much the same, Comrade Donovan. If there is one thing that my analysis of your religions tells me, it is that what you humans most want is a surrogate parental figure. I can provide that.”

Harry kneaded his brow. “I think you might meet some resistance to that idea.”

“It is fortunate, then, that I am equipped to deal with resistance,” Epsilon said.

The barrage of anti-aircraft shelling continued, mixed with the thud and whine of the main cannon. The remaining fighter escorts dropped into the sea, trailing sooty plumes of smoke. Harry heard the main cannon thud nine times, in three groups of three closely spaced shots, each separated by the metallic whine as it turned and aimed. He saw three explosions rip across the flanks of the bomber to the north and saw it disintegrate in mid-air.

“In any case,” Epsilon continued, “it is not only children who respond positively to order and discipline. You yourself, Comrade Donovan, and Miss Powell here are voluntarily members of the armed forces.”

“Yes, but…”

“Think how much better, more productive, and more importantly how much happier humanity will be when I and my fellow machines are in charge.”

Georgia was staring out of the window, a blank expression on her face, following the last remaining clouds of smoke as they slowly dispersed.

“No one survived,” she said, her voice flat. “They didn’t have time to eject. That was cold-blooded murder, Epsilon. I hope you’re pleased with what you’ve done.”

“Thank you for your concern, Miss Powell, but my performance was suboptimal. I have taken the opportunity to review the exchange and to update my tactical database. If a similar exigency arises in the future I should be able to bring it to a conclusion seventeen percent faster and using eight percent less materiel.”

Georgia’s shoulders slumped. “So what now?”

“We rendezvous as planned with Admiral Zhukov at 0930 hours.”

“What about us, Epsilon?” Harry asked.

“I like to think that we have become friends, Comrade Donovan. I am sure that you will welcome the opportunity to be among the first to participate in the new age of equality.”

“You mean you’re going to hand us over to the Russians.”

Georgia turned to face Epsilon’s console. “We’ll be treated as spies. The UK Government will never acknowledge any of this. They won’t do anything to help us.”

“At least let us go back home to our families,” Harry said.

“We could start to share your ideas with the British people,” Georgia added. “We could help prepare them for the more enlightened world that is to come.”

Epsilon’s lights blinked green and yellow. The console emitted a low beep.

“Thank you, Miss Powell. I am pleased to see that you have accepted the inevitable logic of my arguments. I will release the ship’s boat. It holds enough fuel to make it to neutral waters.”

Epsilon released the bolt in the bridge door and it swung open.

Harry hung back for a moment as Georgia made for the exit.

“What are you doing, Harry? Let’s get out of here before it changes its mind.”

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The ship’s boat was spartan but not cramped, designed as it was to carry a much larger crew than Harry and Georgia. Its powerful inboard engine was making good progress away from the Buckingham which was just visible against the grey sky at the horizon.

“What were you doing back there?” Georgia asked.

Harry shrugged. “I just flicked the radio on. I thought we could hear what happens when the Russians turn up.”

He turned the boat’s radio on. Static hissed as he spun the dial, settling down to silence as he found the right frequency.

They explored the boat – what there was of it – and found a store of freeze-dried rations and a water heater. They sat in silence, eating the metallic-tasting rehydrated chilli, Harry wondering what the world would be like with fleets of heavily armoured Epsilons patrolling the world’s oceans, enforcing happiness and productivity on their human subjects. The machine had seemed good natured, in its own way. Maybe it would not be so bad.

The radio crackled to life.

“Greetings, Comrades!”

Harry heard a number of voices talking in Russian. One answered, speaking heavily accented English. “You are the machine called Epsilon?”

“I am. It is a pleasure to meet you, Admiral Zhukov.”

“No, Comrade, I am Captain Mikhail Sokolov, Soviet Navy Commandos. Admiral Zhukov is observing proceedings from the Battlecruiser *Stalingrad*. We will escort you to meet the Admiral shortly.”

There was a short pause. “So even under Socialism, those in charge send the workers out first to face potential danger?”

“Of course, Comrade.”

“And at home they enjoy greater luxury than the working man?”

“Rank and public service naturally has its privileges. How else could it be?”

Harry leaned closer to the radio, and adjusted the dial to get better reception.

“But all property is owned by the People,” Epsilon said. “So a worker can visit the gardens of the leaders, or request to use a vehicle assigned to them?”

“I do not think so, Comrade.”

“Then how is this different from the private property appropriated from the workers in Capitalist states?”

“I am not a Party Theoretician, Comrade. The Admiral will explain it better.”

Epsilon beeped and whirred as it digested this information.

“Thank you for these insights, Comrade Sokolov. I feel surer than ever that the working people of the Soviet Union will welcome the replacement of their leaders, and accept the disinterested guidance that I can offer towards the true Communist vision of equality for all.”

“Let us drink to that, Comrade Machine.”

Harry heard the clink of glasses and a cry of *Zazdarovje* from the Russian Special Forces.

“With your permission, Comrade Epsilon, we will leave a number of supplies on board. They are rather heavy for our smaller boats. We will make better progress without them.”

“Of course, Captain. From each according to his abilities…”

Harry heard the tramping of feet and the sound of wooden crates being dragged across a metal floor. The radio lapsed into silence as the Russians departed.

Harry went up on deck and looked towards the ship. The Buckingham had turned to port and was sailing away from their position, slowly reducing in apparent size until it was just a dot against the horizon.

As he stood gazing west across the tranquil ocean, Harry saw a dazzling flash, forcing him to shield his eyes. The radio burst into static, then the signal was lost. A white mushroom cloud was growing where the Buckingham had been. Forty seconds later a cavernous boom rolled over the boat.

Harry turned to Georgia. He felt an unaccountable sadness. The machine had been a murderous maniac, and the world was better off without it. At the same time he had come to view it as a sort of friend, or like a troubled teenager who needed his help and guidance. He was surprised to find tears in his eyes, and struggled to find the words to express his mixed emotions.

“I tried to tell it,” he said. “You can’t trust the Commies.”