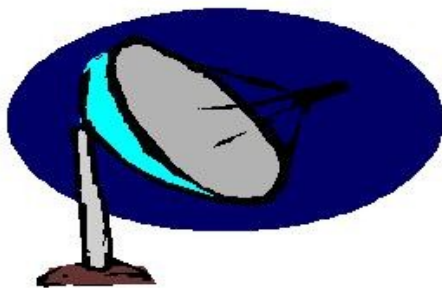
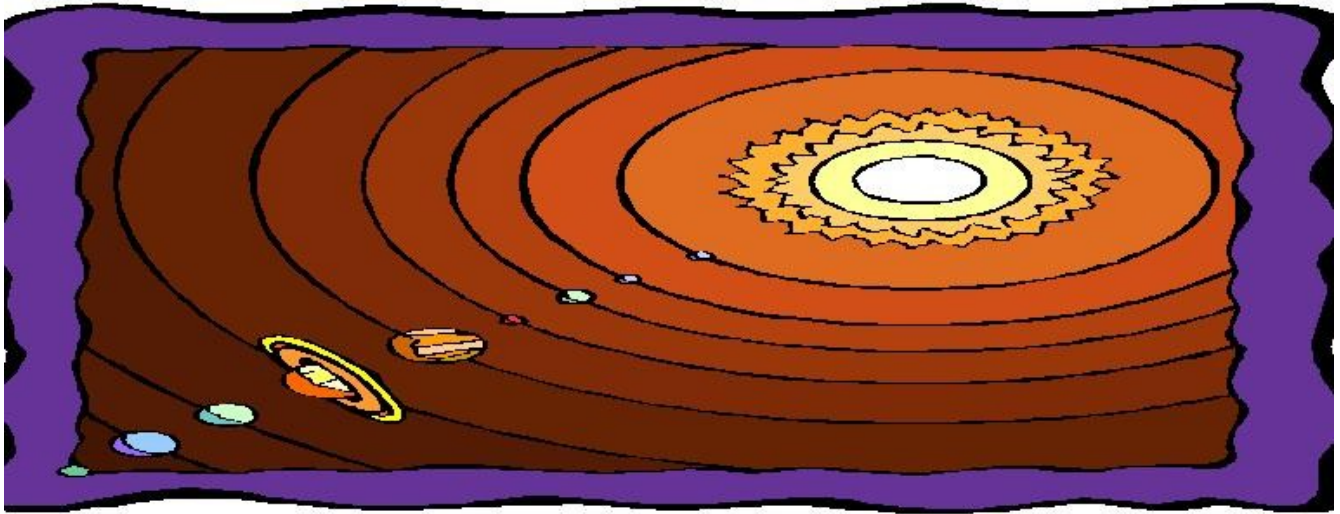


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# **I Am Not Me**

**By Michael J Renner**

## Chapter 1

It was all over, nothing, nil, nada, total darkness, an endless void, a bottomless abyss, endless dark space.

It was as if no one was there. No matter how loud he shouted there was no answer, only an eerie echo. He looked around into every niche and corner but still no luck. Was he the last of his kind to survive? Yes he survived, that's what he thought, but survived what? A plague? A war? An asteroid? Did the world crash into the nearest sun? Or was he just in a coma somewhere and this was how his brain was reacting? Maybe he was dead and this was just the afterlife.

If something did happen, where were all the bodies? Where was the destruction? Why wasn't he affected by whatever it was that happened?

Slowly but surely Mark started getting his bearings. But what was it that happened? And where was he? Is this his bed? Is this his house? Is this his City? Is this his world? He wished he could just see something, anything. Maybe he has gone blind.

Questions, questions, questions, but no answers were forthcoming.

A sound, what was it a click? It was faint, but discernible. Yes it was a "click" he heard. Now voices, again faint, but definitely human voices. But where were they coming from? It was as if they were coming from all around him. Talking around him, but not necessarily to him. He even thought he heard his name mentioned, but again it was hazy. He could make out the voices, but not what they were saying. It was as if they were talking through a thick wall or something.

Yes that is it, as if they were talking through a wall of water or gelatin. That is why the voices were muffled.

Another faint "click", and the darkness was lifted. Yes he recognized now that he was laying in his bed. Still not the best light, it must be late night or early morning, but the lights from the street lamps outside streamed through his bedroom window.

Yes, "his bedroom window" he thought. At least now he knew where he was, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. But there was now sounds. Yes a car drove by. He saw the headlights cast a shadow on the wall above his bed, then fade away with the red of the taillights following.

"Whew, thought Mark, " Maybe just a bad dream or something I ate".

Mark lay in bed and stared at the shadows of the trees and window panes on the far wall of his room. There was a slight breeze and the branches swayed back and forth in a nice rhythmic pattern. The occasional lights from passing cars added to the effect. Mark tried to get out of bed as he wished to look out the window.

Nope, couldn't move. he could feel his arms, legs, torso, yep all there, but moving was out of the question.

"Maybe it is a dream", he thought, as in dreams it is common to have th feeling of complete awareness, yet unable to move.

"At least I'm not falling, or being chased through a hall way in my underwear", he chuckled. But still something just didn't seem right. He knew he wasn't sleeping, yet he couldn't be awake could he?

Again the faint voices, still muffled, but angrier this time. No just one was angry, the others seemed to be apologizing. "What are they apologizing for?" wondered Mark. If only he could understand, if only there was a way to figure out exactly where the voices were coming from.

Mark felt like maybe if he could remember the last few days he could come up with an answer or two.

"What did I do today?" seemed to be an innocent enough question, but yet Mark couldn't answer this. "How about what was for supper then?" Again no answer. In fact he couldn't remember anything but his name.

"My name," said Mark, "What is my full name?" Again, no answer came forth. He could only remember that is first name was Mark. Or was it? He really couldn't be sure if anything he thought was right. "Are these even my thoughts?", he wondered, "and if they are why am I not sure that they are?" he was starting to whimper. The voices died down and the clicks started getting louder and faster. It was as if someone was typing at a keyboard or clicking a mouse on a screen.

"Well this is a fine mess I got myself into Ollie", he mused, wondering how he came up with that name.

He rubbed his eyes and was wondering what he was going to do, when he realized,

"Hey", he shouted, "I just rubbed my eyes, I can move my arms after all". He started waving his arms and rubbed other parts of his body, and was laughing to himself.

"First the arms, maybe next the legs?"

With that he tried once again to stand up and go to the window. No luck. However he was able to sit up and look out. Yep, definitely night as he could see the stars shining on the dark background. He tried to stand again.

"Success", he shouted with glee, and walked to the window and surveyed a street he saw many a time, but for some reason nothing was registering.

"Amnesia, that is what it is, nothing more, nothing less. But what did I do to bring this about?" Still the idea that he could move around was cause for celebration enough.

He felt that he should go to the bathroom, not that he felt like he had to, strange but he felt he should, but it seemed the thing to do. He looked into the mirror and was startled at what he saw.

He definitely didn't recognize the face looking back at him. It was as if the face was at least 10-15 years younger than he thought he should be. He ran some cold water and splashed some on his face. The voices were at it again, still faint, but now a few more clicks, and then they stopped. He stood up and in the mirror was another face, this one more to the age he thought he should have been, and a small beard, stubble really as if he needed a shave.

Still the memory was fuzzy, blocked as if his life was suspended. Yes definitely as if his life was suspended.

Then the lights went out again.

## Chapter 2

"Get the transmission working now people", bellowed an older man in a lab coat. All the other people, also in white lab coats were scurrying around saying , "yes sir as fast as we can".

Dr Samuel Silverton ran his lab like clockwork. He was really big on being a dictator, but when an experiment was running, he expected his assistants to do their jobs and pay attention to details. Especially one as important financially and socially as the one they were running now.

He was an older man, 50 something, divorced, with silver hair and a goatee to match. His dark rimmed glasses were on a chain to keep from being mislaid. He was average in height and slightly overweight, but still athletically in build. Middle aged paunch was starting to creep in as it does no matter what one tries to do. He was a leading researcher in Biogenetics and Artificial Intelligence. He was looking over the shoulder of his main assistant, Maria Gomez.

Maria was 35, and single. She has worked for Dr Silverton for the last 14 years since she left college, with a Masters Degree in Biogenetics, and they made a great team. She was slender in build

and her dark hair matched the beauty of her dark eyes. She was staring into a computer screen with intense sincerity. Somewhere the program was not running properly. She was on the phone with Jason the programmer who was trying to find the bugs and fix the errors. he was sure he could find them and get them fixed and recompiled within the next two hours, and yes he new th importance of the project. After all if it worked, and he was in charge of the software side, they would all be able to retire on their own islands within the next year.

"Maybe even have Maria go away with him", he thought as her silky voice glided through the phone wires.

Maria hung up the phone and reported to Dr. Silverton who just scowled.

"Well it's not your fault Maria, so it's not fair for me to yell at you. Get the rest of the team together and get as much done as you can tonight, until we're ready for the next run."

"Okay Doc, and I am sorry it wasn't ready, but this is the first time we are running this live".

"I know Maria, I know, well at least we are finding the problems early." With that he turned and went into his office to write out the status report for the people upstairs at GeneProbe, the owners of the lab and the funders of the project. he really didn't mind except that the CEO of GeneProbe would never let him forget each and every delay and error.

"But that is what exes do don't they", he thought with a wry smile on his face. In fact Debra Hargrove was his ex wife of twenty years.

The marriage was one of bliss at the start, but as with most professional marriages, both wanted to go their own way. He was a scientist, she a businesswoman. They were both very bright and very competent at their respective jobs. In fact thy met at another company and decided to open up heir own experimental facility. He just wanted to work in his lab, she wanted to run the company.

After a few years, they saw less and less of each other, and decided hat the best thing for the

company was to divorce. They both stayed with the company and found out that they worked better this way and the company grew. He didn't even mind that he owned 49% and she 51 % of the company. As long as he was left alone to work in his lab he was happy. She was happy because he never bothered her at her job, and whatever deals she made, he would just "rubber stamp", as it meant more work for his lab. This was a marriage made in heaven. Both agreed with this assessment and the company prospered.

Maria assembled the staff and gave them the update. There was 5 members on the team, besides her, Jason the programmer and Dr Silverton. The two lab techs were Alan Sanders and Dick Sutton. They were the bio-chemistry experts in charge of testing and creating all the solutions that were needed for the project. Sonia was the geneticist and assisted Maria in that capacity. The two computer techs, Jerry Bowerman and Mary Swartz were there to run the computers and make sure all the communication interfaces worked as promised. It was they who found the bugs in the program that precipitated the latest slowdown in progress. All were handpicked for this delicate project, and all were loyal and trustworthy. Their financial future also depended upon the success of this project.

She gave them the update, and told them how pleased everyone was at their progress so far, but they do need to understand that going forward things were going to be moving at "warp speed". The crew laughed at this, but also nodded in agreement. They were a tight team and understood the concern.

"Well", she added, "I guess it is time to suspend the project until we get the new program installed".

With that Mary typed in the commands that suspended the program, and they all took a well needed break.

### Chapter 3

Darkness, void, nothing, nil, nada, the abyss, again.

Then the doorbell rang and Mark sprung up in his bed.



He quickly put on his bathrobe and moved into the front room of his apartment, and opened the door.

"Susan", he cried in delight in seeing his fiancée. "Come in, and tell me what brings you around this morning. Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I took the day off remember? After all it has been 6 months since the accident and we planned to spend the day together, tell me you don't remember?"

"Well my memory isn't working so well, today. Let me tell you about a nasty dream I had last night."

"Well no wonder after all you drank last night at the party, and then just leaving like you did, as if you couldn't wait to leave. In fact you never even said goodbye, and you were supposed to stay the night."

"I'm sorry, I just don't feel like myself lately. What party was that?"

"The party I was throwing you last night to celebrate your first day out of the hospital. It was a miracle after all, the doctors originally thought you would never walk again, and yet here you are."

"Oh yea, I seemed to have blocked out the memory of the accident, and things before that are quite hazy. Maybe I had a concussion or something. As far as the party, it is coming back to me. I was standing there talking to Mitch my detective friend, when all of a sudden things went blank. I do remember waking last night, or maybe I was just dreaming, that I couldn't move and that I was hearing voices in the apartment, but I was all alone."

He then recounted his experience from the previous night and how his memory of the last 6 months is nonexistent. He couldn't really remember much before that either, and wondered if maybe the accident gave him amnesia.

"You know what", he said, "let's forget about all that for now and just enjoy rekindling our relationship".

"I agree", she smiled and they hugged and kissed with a passion of long lost lovers that they were in a way.

Yes things were getting back to normal as they made love and everything seemed right with the world.

"Yes", thought Mark, "All my problems are suspended".

#### Chapter 4

Dr. Silvertown and Maria looked over the latest results and nodded to each other with the knowledge that the experiment was working. The pair worked together very well and had a genuine fondness for each other. Dr. Silvertown felt guilty as he was close to 20 years older than Maria, yet he felt a certain desire to have her. Maria felt the same way, wondering why she was in love this old coot. But both being scientists first, human beings second, they let logic talk themselves out of thinking about a relationship. But somehow this didn't get in the way of their great working relationship.

They were hoping that the bugs were all worked out, and that they would be able to demo the project for Debra and her new investors. She said that this project would be the "Mother Lode" for the company, and if it was successful they could all retire to the paradise of their choice.

The new communications protocols seemed to be working fine and the input interface was running smoothly, just about on automatic pilot, but still needed a few tweaks here and there, but still presentable.

The phone rang and Dr Silvertown answered it.

"Oh Hello Debra, what's going on?"

"Hello dear, I was just calling to find out if you are ready for an initial demo later this week? I have some very important people coming in and they are ready to put up great amounts of cash if we have anything to show them."

"Well there are just a few bugs left in the program, but I think it is serviceable, as long as they realize we still have a way to go. But great amounts of cash would go a long way to solving some problems."

"That's what I thought, but one can only hope. I'll ring you tomorrow with the details, so you can have your staff looking sharp and at their bests, Okay?"

"Sure, anything for the boss lady."

With that they rang off.

He took one last look around the lab, sure that everything was going well, and since it was late at night, he pressed the buttons and the program was suspended for the evening.

## Chapter 5

Even after the great time Mark had with Susan, things just didn't seem right. He still had a block in his memory and felt he needed that removed, or at least investigated. He went and visited his old friend Mitch Robinson who happened to be a private detective, and asked for his help.

"Mitch I need to know if there is anything you can do for me."

"What would like done Mark?"

"Well I want you, and this might sound crazy, but here goes. I want you to investigate me and what I did over the last 8 months or so."

"Why did you kill someone? I know you felt you were cheating on yourself right?", quipped Mitch.

"No, I'm serious. I have this block in my memory and I feel like I am missing some very important memories and information about my life."

"Well Mark, the accident was pretty horrendous and the experts said you would never walk again, and were surprised when you left the facilities as soon as you did."

"Yes that is all well and good, and Dr. er.. uhm... What was the doctor's name, and come to think of it what was the name of the clinic where he did his rehab?"

"It was uhm.. er.. , you know Mark I don't remember either."

"Yes strange, neither does Susan. In fact I don't even have a bill or a card or anything from them, as if they don't want to be known."

"One would think if they had a miracle cure they would want it to be known. I'll take the case, and just for god measures I'll get my best operatives, Jeanie and Margie on it right away."

"Thanks old friend, I owe you and by the way I guess I will be owing you once this is done, but don't worry money isn't a problem. My bank accounts and investments seemed to grow while I was doing whatever it is I was doing. And by next week I should be going back to work for Green Tree Investments. They said my old job as broker is still waiting for me."

With that the old friends parted ways and Mitch gave his operatives a call.

Jeanie Donavon was a different type of Cyber Detective. She seemed to live without ever leaving her house. She ordered their food and stuff over the internet, in fact she all but lived on the net. When she wasn't working on something, she would be playing her online video games. She even had special chairs built where she (she had two in case someone was over to play along) didn't have to take breaks,

very useful when in intense battles or quests. This of course meant that she usually didn't wear pants either. This made some of her occasional visitors uncomfortable. But Mitch didn't mind as it wasn't an unpleasant site when she got up out of her chair to get him a beer or something when he came by to give her an assignment. She didn't seem to mind showing off to him as well. In fact she enjoyed teasing him this way.

Besides she was one of the best investigators he had ever seen as she could crack into any database and find any and all information one would need. He was lucky to come across her on one of her sojourns out to a Private Detective Convention, and she took an immediate liking to him as he was the only detective, male or female, that took her pitch serious. He used her talents as often as he could, and she enjoyed working with him as well. Besides he paid her expensive rates and passed it off to the clients of course.

He was sitting in her dining room discussing Mark's case. He gave her all the information he had, including the time and date of the crash, and the name of the hospital that he was originally taken to that night.

"Interesting case here.", said Jeanie, "Might take me some time, is later in the week fine with you?"

"That works well", replied Mitch, trying to keep his eyes focused above the table. "There is no real hurry as it isn't a life or death situation, at least I don't think it is, not yet anyways."

"Okay I can get right on it and finish it up, I need a new controller for my game console and there is this absolutely fabulous one out there for \$1,000 that does just about everything, and even has programmable cheat codes built in. The sooner I get one the happier I will be." She smiled and a bright twinkle shown in her eyes as she dreamed of her new controller.

"Thanks, I'll let you get back to your games and let myself out".

As Mitch walked towards the door, he couldn't help but look back as the comely woman made her way back to her gaming chair, not bothered in dressing for him, and he smiled as he left.

She went back to her all important games which she had left suspended.

## Chapter 6

Again the darkness, void, then clicks, voices and everything seemed to be back to normal for Mark. But still he felt something was not right. He still couldn't recall dreaming, yet he thought he remembered that he recalled dreams in the past. why had he thought of that?

He decided to call Susan and see how she was doing. Were they supposed to spend the day together again today? Did he just leave her again last night as before?

He dialed her number and as she answered and he started to speak.

"Hello Susan, it's Mark I..." and he just froze up and dropped the phone. For some reason he lost consciousness, yet walked out of the apartment, got into his car and drove off. Susan was yelling into the phone which just hung there suspended in mid air.

## Chapter 7

Barney Burd of the American Security Corporation ( A front for a secret government security organization) was amazed at what Debra and Dr Silverton was showing him. He thought that their brainy scheme sounded a bit far fetched, but was all in all pleased at their progress.

"What we have here" said Dr Silverton, "Is the control center where we can monitor all the test subjects and control their movements, or let them go on autopilot. Of course on autopilot we still monitor the actions, we just don't need to make every move for them."

"Interesting, very interesting, so what are these for?". Barney was pointing to huge tanks filled with a greenish gelatin like substance.

"Oh those are our subsistence tanks. The subjects need to be nourished."

"What if you need to do maintenance on the subjects or maybe reprogram them?"

"Well there is a recall function that activates a homing device and they come to the nearest maintenance center and it is all done."

With that he had Mary push the recall button on their test subject's monitor and suspended the program

## Chapter 8

Susan immediately called Mitch and was so frantic that he agreed to meet her at Mark's apartment. When they arrived she didn't need to let them in with her key, the door was open. On the desk the phone lay, the receiver suspended in midair hanging by its cord.

There was no sign of any forced entry or a struggle, so he must have gone willingly was the conclusion Mitch made after a quick glance around.

"He was talking normally and then he just stopped", cried Susan. "All I heard was the phone drop and then his footsteps and then the door opening and nothing after that."

"You know he was worried lately about some of his actions and his lack of memories. Sure he thought maybe the accident hurt him worse than he thought, and it was because of that. But this is a doozy."

"Yes I know", replied Susan. "I could feel it as well. Have you come up with anything?"

"I do have my best operative looking into mark's condition and history from the moment he entered into the hospital. I was going to go see her when you called, would you like to tag along?"

"Sure I would love that. It can only ease my mind and maybe give us a clue as to where he might have gone?"

"Well I wouldn't get my hopes too high on that, but I will help you look for him and we'll see what Jeanie had come up with first."

With that the two of them left the apartment, after hanging up the phone and locking the door. It just didn't make sense for him to just walk out like that.

Arriving at Jeanie's Mitch was happy that he called ahead so Jeanie would be presentable. They sat around the kitchen table and Jeanie pulled out a folder filled with her findings over the last few days.

Jeanie began, "Here is what I was able to dig up. It was difficult and I had to call in a few favors but I think I have it pieced together."

"What did you find?" asked Mitch.

"Well, we all know that Mark had a terrible accident about a year ago and when he entered Sinai General Hospital they were surprised he survived. Of course they determined that he would be a paraplegic for the rest of his life, when a mysterious Dr Samuel Silverton suggested a radical experimental technique."

"I don't remember any Dr Silverton, do you Mitch?", asked Susan.

"No, but, wait a minute. There seems to be a hole in my memory here I do remember Mark being admitted, but I don't remember clearly what happened after that".

"Neither do I. In fact I haven't even thought about that. I just accepted Mark's return".

Jeanie continued, "Interesting, but would either of you be surprised if I told you there is no Dr Silverton on the staff there?"



They both looked at her quizzically.

"Yes I had to dig deep to come up with that name. I have a friend who works in the IT department there, and she couldn't find anything about Mark. Luckily they keep backup tapes for two years so she went back and found his records. She is a gaming partner, though we never met in person, only over web cam. It was as if someone was trying to erase any record of his admission or his stay. Even back then Dr Silverton was not a member of the staff. In fact there was nothing in their records about him. Just that he took Mark for treatment and that is all that is known."

Again they looked at her as if she was speaking Greek.

Susan spoke, "Yes and what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm getting to that, I decided that maybe this mysterious doctor was worth looking into. Well I found, and it took a lot of time and effort as he obviously doesn't want to be found. I even dropped a level behind my partners in 'Dragon Treasure Quest' and 'Community Chest' , and that really hurts."

"What are.." started Susan but Mitch stopped her and pointed at the gaming consoles, and she just shook her head and rolled her eyes at him.

"So what were you able to dig up on him?"

"Just that, and this was the really difficult part, he is in charge of a lab called GeneProbe, and that they are one of the most secretive companies in the world. It is run by him and his ex-wife, but for some reason hardly any of their research is published, but they seem to be flush with cash and always busy with projects."

"This just made me even more curious so I dug deeper and using my hacker skills and contacts found out that they do a lot of work for the Pentagon. I won't tell you how I know, as this way you could plead innocent if they ever came banging down my doors.", she smiled at the two.

"Luckily, I have an in to this lab. They use a 'Martha's Catering Service' to stock their cafeteria and pop machines, and I just happen to know the driver that services that account, and yes Fred is another gaming partner. He says he is sure he can sneak us in if we wanted to check the place out. He is making a delivery this evening, and we just have enough time to get ready."

"What do you mean we?", asked Mitch.

"Well I figured the two of you would want to go and confront this Dr Silverton, and I am dieing to see inside this lab at the equipment they must have. Besides if they are that secret I must know what goes on behind those doors. It's a geek thing you understand. And either I go or no deal."

"Well what do we need to get ready then?"

Jeanie related her plan to hide in the truck, they never really search them as they now their vendors, and how Fred plans to distract the guard so they could sneak out and into and around the lab.

However she stressed, they had to be careful because if they were caught, they probably would go to jail or worse, and poor Fred would probably be fired, or at least suspended.

## Chapter 9

The delivery truck drove up to the lab entrance as usual and was waved in by the guard. It was just a routine delivery and there was no reason to suspect anything was amiss. After all the suppliers to the lab had to undergo just as strict a background check as the employees, and if there was a change in routine or driver than it was strict policy for an intense search and impounding of the vehicle and driver until all could be checked out and a satisfactory answer given for the divergence. So stage one was completed without a hitch.

Maybe if the guard he relieved an hour ago would have told him about the strange man showing up without ID or any explanation he might have thought different. But since the man was allowed to go

through by orders of Dr Silverton, he didn't think it was worth mentioning, just a notation in a log that nobody ever paid attention to unless there was a problem, which was hardly never.

Stage two, getting off the truck was trickier but doable. Fred took the dock manager to one side, by the camera and was showing him some game cheat sheets he acquired, payment from Jeanie for the favor, and as the two gamers went over the cheats, Jeanie, Mitch and Susan slipped inside the main building undetected.

They knew the layout from a sketch Jeanie had drawn from Fred's description of his route to the various pop and candy vending machines, and they found the back entrance to the lab. Jeanie was agape at all the wondrous and beautiful machines she saw. She was calculating how much better her gaming experiences, not to mention her hacking activities, would be if she had a few of these nice super computers. Surely they wouldn't miss just one or two would they?

Mitch and Susan were hiding behind a bank of computers and other sundry devices trying to listen in on the group huddled around a table. It looked almost like they were operating on something, or someone.

"As we can see here the recall function works perfectly.", said Dr Silverton. "Again the intricacies of the positron network allows us to send messages and instructions via simple radio or microwaves. We also have a large memory capacity that allows for independent actions based upon the downloaded paradigms from the test computers".

"Hmm looks good so far", said Barney as he peered into the mechanism on the table. "Yes good for one test at a time, but how about for thousands? Are we going to have to direct each one individually or can we adjust the network so that all work as one?"

"Ah good question, perhaps Maria would be better suited to tell you about that."

"Well", said Maria coughing slightly and giving Dr Silverton a wink and a demure smile, "I think it would be easily done. Of course the objects being controlled would have to be programmed all at once,

based upon one model, and then it would be easy to control all of them as a set from one control panel. The danger is of course the capacity for independent thought and actions might be diminished but that we can only find out by field tests."

"Sure", said Barney, "I understand, too bad we couldn't get another test going in conjunction with this one".

"Are you prepared to sign a contract and fund us some more?", asked Debra.

"Yes I think I have seen pretty much all I came to see. Funding will be no problems. Heck it is only a blip on the budget anyway, so no one will even miss a few \$500 million dollars a year. "

With that the group stepped away from the table and the thing they were working on stood up.

"Oh my God that's Mark", screamed Susan as she raced out from her hiding place. "What have you monsters done to him?"

The scientists and government agent turned and when they saw her, Mitch and Jeanie they turned pale.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?", demanded Dr Silverton. Maria was calling for the guards and the remaining techs grabbed the three interlopers and held them.

"You are in grave danger of never seeing the light of day again" yelled Debra. "This is a private and highly secret lab and this is a very top secret government project. In fact if we shot you now, no one will ask questions, nor will any answers be forthcoming."

"That's my finace' you were carving up you hideous monsters. What have you done to him? Are you responsible for his actions this past year?"

Dr Silverton broke in, "I recognize you now, from Sinai General, right? Yes you were the one who

gave us permission to try an experimental procedure on Mark here."

"What are you talking about? I never saw any of you before and I am going to.." she stopped mid speech as she saw the green gelatinous tanks of to one side of the lab. In one of them was a body she thought she recognized.

It was Mark's body, floating in the gelatinous goo, suspended by wires and electrodes over all parts of his naked torso. he seemed to be asleep, but not asleep.

"Well let me tell you, this is not Mark at all, but an Android copy made from his body."

Debra, turning red screamed, "Samuel, stop talking to these interlopers, and have them locked up right away. They don't need to know, nor do they have the right to know."

"Now now dear, I think they do, as they were the friends and family. I think we owe them an explanation before we kill them don't you?"

Mitch, Jeanie and Susan all turned a pale white at those words and started to shake a bit.

Dr Silvertown continued, "We are experimenting on ways to help people who have been severely injured get back their lives. True it has military applications in making android soldiers, so in a way we would be saving more lives in times of crisis and wars. Mark here was our first test subject. We captured and downloaded his brainwaves into this computer to record memories. Then we fashioned this body making a double to test how well he could pass in society. ingenious, no?"

They all nodded.

"Anyway we keep the body alive in this tank of amorphous green gelatinous amino acids and nutrients. As long as the body is alive we can keep the android alive. But enough about that, how did you find us?"

Jeanie raised her hand sheepishly, "I guess my curiosity got carried away."

Mitch piped in, "Mark was worried about his lack of memory and he felt he was acting strangely and erratically. So he hired me to find out what had happened after the accident and if he was hurt more seriously than he thought. And by the way if you know us, how come we don't know or remember you?"

"Interesting, yes I see now, if we had planted a false recovery memory he wouldn't have suspected a thing. Oh that, well we just erased parts of your memory and thought we erased all traces of our existence and complacency in this matter. Oh well sorry we have to lock you up and possibly have you terminated, but it is a matter of national security you know."

Maria approached Dr Silverton and whispered something in his ear. he started to smile and nodded. He went to Debra and Barney, pulled them to one side and they were listening and nodding at him. After a few minutes they all were heard to say "Sure, why not. It could just work, but no mistakes or comebacks this time all right?"

With that Dr Silverton approached Susan, Mitch and Jeanie, and said, "I think we have a way to solve this without anyone getting hurt. Of course we would have to erase you memory of this place. But there is one other condition, let's say more of a request if I may."

"Sure, anything if it means having our freedom and not being killed" said Mitch. Jeanie and Susan agreed vigorously.

Dr Silverton told them his plan of action. They felt they had no other options except to comply.

## Chapter 10

Mark and Susan decided to go on a nice cruise and get away from it all. For some reason that they

couldn't seem to why they were tired and needed to just go away.

They decided to just forget it all and just have fun and worry about life when they get back. Just "suspend" our worries and all will be fine.

Mitch joined in with Jeanie on one of her online gaming experiences, and agreed that these chairs were extremely comfortable as well as practical. They couldn't remember much about the last few days, but they do remember something about a case they were working on, and they must have settled up as both their bank account balances have increased quite dramatically. But for the life of them they couldn't understand why or where the money had come from.

Well no use looking a gift horse in the mouth, and got back to their fun and games.

Debra was very happy to see the enormous check from the ASC come in and knowing that under her GeneProbe will prosper made her giddy with excitement.

"That old coot and his band of loonys did me right", she thought.

"Maybe I should do something nice for them".

After she thought about it for a while she decided that the bonus checks was good enough.

Dr Silverton and Maria decided to take a vacation to the mountains for a couple of weeks. The lab was in good hands with the assistants and the project is now running smooth. So the could just go and enjoy

themselves and each other. After all when they get back, the next phase would prove a greater challenge. But for now, none of that.

Jerry Bowerman took up his position in front of the computer terminal and settled in for the night shift. He was glad that the project was greenlighted. He volunteered to work the night shift, as that was pretty much down time, and this gave him time to do his own projects as he monitored Mark's progress.

He went down to the tank room to make sure nothing was wrong, when he discovered an additional tank was added. A female subject at that.

He hurried back to the control center and noticed the note from Maria. It appeared that Susan decided that if she was to be married to an android, well if you can't beat them.....



# Falling Through The Cracks

By Michael J Renner

## Chapter 1

"I tell you Mark it is driving me mad". "I know I am being watched and I can't figure out who is doing it or why." "I am at my wit's edge".

Mark Driver looked at his old friend John Harley who has been just relating the weirdest and rummiest tale he has ever heard. He knew his friend since back in High School and he always seemed to be a stable reasonable guy. But now this, as if he was turning paranoid. For the past few months his friend was slowly turning into a wreck.

"Maybe it was because of his recent break up, or maybe things aren't going well at work", thought Mark, but knew he should let his friend ramble and maybe he will drop a clue.

"Now John why would anyone want to do this to you?" asked Mark straining to be heard over the thumping beat of the music, wishing they had thought of a quieter place to talk.

"I'm telling you Mark, it is real, as real as we are standing here as real as these beers we are drinking, as real as that music from the DJ's stand". "Now I think I am seeing ghosts!"

"Ghosts?" exclaimed Mark as he shot beer out of nose not expecting this word to come from his friend's lips.

"Well a Ghost, a female, youngish maybe 20's, I only see her in periphery and for only a second or two, then she vanishes".

"Of course then again I feel the same thing as I walk down the street. As if there is always someone just around the corner".

"Have you seen any sinister Black Helicopters or maybe the CIA is sending microwaves into your brain as an experiment, after all you did work on a lot of their system upgrades haven't you? Maybe you need some tin foil to make a hat for protection."

"Ha Ha", laughed John, "Yes I did do a lot of work, and yes I know they made me go through a bunch of background checks and paperwork, but I never divulged anything, and by now they should realize what a good patriot I am."

"Besides, haven't you heard about the conspiracy to stop us from blocking the radio waves?, back in the 80's the government outlawed the use of tin foil and all you can buy is aluminum foil. It's not as effective, and lets the micro and radio waves through."

John winked as he recanted the last. They both had a good hardy laugh knowing the joke they have read many a time on the internet about the “Lack of tin foil conspiracy” put forward by namely parody conspiracy sites (but also by some site run by serious conspiracy nuts who were paranoid enough to believe anything against eh government).

It was a good hearty laugh that came from deep within and can only be understood between two friends that know and share each other's warped and depraved sense of humor.

But John was serious about his problem. He knew what he believed and what he believed in, but there was something too real and and too fantastical and too close to allow him to just brush this all off as a paranoid dream.

The two friends parted company, agreeing to look in on one another in the morning, and each went on his way home.

Mark grabbed a cab as he was too drunk to hassle with the subway crowd,

John walked home, forever looking around, but feeling better now that he was able to talk it out with his old friend.

Down the street he went passing other bars and restaurants that catered to the late night crowd, not for him as he knew he had to fly to Charlotte in the morning and fix their systems. Yes maybe a few days back on the road will be good.

He stopped in a convenience store and picked up some cheap small cigars. He lit one as he walked into the misty evening. Yes a bit of fog is always good for a night walk, and the slight chill of a late spring evening always felt good. The rush of cigar smoke filling the mouth, roll back to the rear of the tongue, and exhale. Yes that always soothed the nerves.

“Maybe I am just imagining all of this”, he thought, but still he couldn't shake the sensations as he entered his building and took the elevator up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. He slowly put the key into the slot and gingerly pushed the door open and entered his apartment. He was expecting, well he wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he was expecting something not good.

Nothing, nada, zilch.

All the paranoia of the last few days has gone. He looked around and decided that a nightcap would be in order. After opening the beer, the giggling returned he turned around and thought it was coming out of the fridge.

He slowly made his way to the fridge and carefully reached for the door.....

#

## Chapter 2

It was a few weeks later that Mark thought about calling in on his old friend. Yes he promised that he would call him the next day, but they were drinking so promises made under the influence don't really count, right?

He tried calling him at home, and all he got was the answering machine. He tried his cell phone, no answer there either. He tried his work number, only to find out that John hasn't shown up to work for three weeks. In fact the last day he did come in was the day the two of them had been together. That fateful night in the bar where John was trying to tell him something, but Mark just wasn't listening properly.

He started wondering if he should call the police or not. He also wondered if John had any family local. He tried to think if his parents were still alive, and didn't he have a sister somewhere? Well maybe a visit to the apartment later will give him some answers. In the meantime, these spreadsheets don't analyze themselves.

Mark hurried home after work and changed his clothes. He decided that it might be better if ate something first, then call around to John's place.

When he got there he noticed that the door was locked and as he pounded he heard nothing from inside. He decided to call on the building manager who lived on the first floor. Luckily he was in.

Mark introduced himself to the manager.

"I don't know if you remember me but I was here helping John move into apartment 2B?"

"Well we get so many people coming in and out it is hard to remember most of them", replied the manager.

"But I was wondering what has become of John. It's not like him to leave town without telling me, and he has a month's mail I've collected for him."

"Well yes, it is weird as no one has heard from him in about a month or so, and we were starting to get worried. I guess I should have worried sooner, but I was busy and am used to not hearing from him", added Mark.

"All right", said the manager, "I see that you are listed as a reference, so it should be okay for me to take you up there."

"Thanks, I appreciate that".

The two made their way up to 2b and entered the apartment, the only thing they could do upon entering was to gape and stare at the sight.

#

### Chapter 3

Tape everywhere. All types, sizes and color were covering the doors, corners, drawers, windows, you name it there was tape. It was as if John had decided to start a new art movement by himself.

As the pair looked around they were too dumbstruck to speak. They only stared at each other as they walked through the maze of empty and full tape rolls. There was an awful smell coming from the kitchen area. Mark slowly made his way there, afraid of what he was going to find.

He shut his eyes as he moved behind the counter and when he opened his eyes he saw nothing. It was just rotting garbage. He let out a sigh, as he feared it might be his friend's body. So maybe he was still alive somewhere.

Further investigation showed the fridge was also full of rotten food. The two of them bagged up the garbage and took it outside. They had to remove tape from one of the kitchen drawers to get to the fresh bin bags, but otherwise nothing else seemed out of place. Again they were in too much shock to talk.

finally the manager spoke up:

"John had paid his rent in advance for the next 6 months, so I guess I could lend you a key and you can look around some more. I have other duties I need to take care of."

"OK", replied Mark, "I'll look around a bit more and lock up. This is too weird, and what is with all that tape?"

"I don't now, maybe he was feeling drafts?"

"Yeah, sure hat must be it."

With that Mark went back to the apartment and gave it another look. As he was settling down to the desk, he thought he heard some faint laughing. It was a female voice, definitely giggling. He looked around and saw nothing. He tried to boot up John's computer, but he left it unplugged and the battery on the laptop was dead. As he reached to pack up the power supply and cords, he thought he saw some movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Mice? Rats?", thought Mark, "I'll tell the manager on my out. No surprise with all that garbage that was left laying around."

Mark had decided that whatever happened to his friend, he definitely left in a hurry and didn't bother to pack or take anything with him. This made Mark worry that John might be in grave danger and decided the best thing to do was to call in his friend Mitch Robinson who was an ex-cop turned

private detective. He packed up the laptop and left the apartment. He left a note for the manager to look into a possible rodent problem.

#

#### Chapter 4

The manager grumbled as he saw the note Mark left behind. He wondered why if there were rats or mice, was the only apartment affected was 2B. No one else complained.

He dug out his exterminating kit and made sure there was enough poison in the tanks and made his way up to the apartment.

As he unlocked the door he heard a faint giggling. He thought it was coming from inside.

"A female's voice?", he thought. But upon entering, he noticed the apartment was empty. Still with all the tape up it looked like something out of a B-Movie. He decided that he would start at the kitchen and removed the tape from around the floorboards and started spraying.

Again the giggling, and he thought he saw some movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and for a fleeting moment he thought he saw a young woman standing by the entrance to the kitchen. But maybe it was just a mirage. As he continued his spraying, a feminine hand reached out of one of the floorboards towards him and his eyes widened as he felt the hand on the back of his shoulder, and as he turned around ...

#

#### Chapter 5

Mitch sat at his desk and listened as Mark related his strange tale of John's disappearance. When he was done Mitch just sat back and whistled.

"You know he came to me a few months ago" said Mitch, "He wanted me to tail him to see if anyone was following him. He seemed quite certain that someone was out to get him, and just sat there babbling on and on in a paranoid rant."

"What did you do?", asked Mark.

"Well I followed him for a week and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then I went through his apartment and tried to investigate the voices and noises he thought he heard, but again I came up empty."

"You know I first thought he was a bit paranoid, but I thought I heard the voices myself earlier when I was in his apartment."

"Well I can attest to there being no "Black Helicopters" or men in gray suits out to get him, but I am

not sure about the voices. I haven't heard them."

"Well not so much voices as laughter and giggling. The pitch suggests a female voice, or maybe small children."

"Hmm sounds interesting, well let's look and see if there is anything on his computer. Plug it in there, will you?"

Mark plugged in the power supply and after hooking into the back of the computer they booted up John's computer and wondered at what they were seeing. On the screen was a typed document that read :

"They are coming for me, I can't stop them, They are everywhere!"

Over and over again to fill up at least 40 pages. Nothing else, just that same line over and over and over.

Closing the document they found a video file taken from John's Web Cam. They played the film, and it was John looking frenzied and a bit harried. He was drastically taping all the doors, windows, drawers, vents and floorboards. he was screaming "They're here, I can't stop them, Please someone help me." He was looking over his shoulder as he dropped the roll of tape he was desperately trying to cut and they just saw him stand up and then it was if something reached out and dragged him away. he was screaming, some giggling, then nothing.

Mark noticed the date on this file as the date he last talked with John and felt guilty not calling in on him as promised.

Mitch spoke up first, "Well maybe we need to go and look in on his apartment a bit closer, eh?"

"What?, Yeah sure I got a key from the building manager. When do you want to go?"

"How about now?" With that the two left Mitch's house and headed for John's apartment.

#

## Chapter 6

They reached the building and Mark decided to let the manager he was back, but got no answer from his room. He left a note, and they went to look in on apartment 2B.

As they entered, Mitch started immediately looking around at the taped surfaces. He noticed that one of the kitchen drawers was opened, and there was an exterminator's tank sitting on the floor. He went back to the living room area and asked;

"Did John have a rodent problem?"

"I think so, but it was more of a problem after he disappeared. I left a note for the manager. Why do

you ask?"

"Well, there's a set of exterminator tanks in the kitchen, I thought maybe John was spraying."

"They weren't there earlier, maybe the manager left them."

Mark went into the kitchen and looked at the tanks. He was absentmindedly leaning on the open drawer, when a hand reached out and grabbed his wrist. He started screaming as he tried to pull his way free, but was dragged into the drawer.

Mitch, hearing the screams ran into the kitchen where he saw his friend's feet disappearing into the drawer, then he heard the giggling and laughter. He drew his gun and slowly started to back out of the kitchen and towards the front door.

a hand reached for him and he fired. It withdrew and the laughter increased. He grabbed a roll of duct tape as he sprinted out the door and slamming it behind him, he started desperately taping the cracks and crevices along the door jamb.

He taped down the left side, over the top, then down the right side. All the while the laughter and giggling grew louder from inside the apartment. It sent a chill down his spine as he taped up the keyhole and around the door knob.

Finally he bent down to do the bottom of the door, the giggling increased as a hand reached out for him and .....

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