

Rocket Surgery

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We'd tested plenty of missiles before, but Teeny was the only one that convulsed when we cut him open.

Oh, your viewers need more background? Okay, I'll back up a bit. Lemme tell ya, kids today don't know their history. Even locked up in here for the past ten years, I can tell. No education. Good thing you're getting the *real* story out.

Now. This was back when Hamazi was the supreme dictator of the Ambridian Republic, enemy number one. The whole military was buzzing about overthrowing him, and General Pitticks—I guess he's Presidential Candidate Pitticks now—wanted to make a name for himself. So the weapons division got a lot of money to make something spectacular.

Previous missiles had AI, of course. Precision navigation with plasma propulsion that could turn on a dime. Facial recognition to find the target and follow them. The Azimuth5900 could detect genetic debris to avoid hitting decoys, and the Tarzon-A-80's nano-scales could rearrange to make the outer shell take on any shape to blend in with its surroundings, so if it needed to land to gather more intel, it could camo without suspicious shadows giving it away.

But Teeny was something else altogether.

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No, of course that wasn't the official name, but Predator-TVACEW34W doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. So can I continue?

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It was just the beginning of the new wetware computing. Nanotech could only get us so far, so instructions were entwined in ADNA, the quickly standardizing format for Artificial DNA, and plasti-neurons wound their way through plasma rockets and payload decompressors and sensopatches, all within a state of the art nano-scale morphing skin that was even higher res than the Tarzon's.

Wetware was unpredictable, but it sure was efficient—Teeny was only the size of a golden retriever.

Me and the other gals, we were in charge of the final testing; coding up the VR simulators for the finished bombs to see what they'd do. But for Teeny, the first one ever made of wetware,

this was something new. It was like rocket surgery—skin flayed open and held with clips so we could hook the sims to the plasti-neurons, systems looking like life support threaded through and plugged in to maintain the beat of electrical impulses, and the longest manual we'd ever received on how to not kill the bomb in the process. We'd thought it was kind of funny, to tell you the truth, the idea of killing a machine that was built to kill others. But I've gotta tell you, by the end, we saw Teeny like our own little baby, and we made darn sure we didn't kill him by accident.

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When we first cut him open to plug him in, Teeny *convulsed*. He twitched with the first slice, and the more we cut the more the external nano-scales surged, changing his exterior to look like a tan desert rock, and then a small pile of bricks, and then a fifty-pound tuna. His on-the-ground camo looked pretty good up close.

We went through the manual to figure out what we'd done and couldn't find anything to help us. Betty said that maybe because it was wetware instead of hardware we needed to treat it more like it was alive—a “he” instead of an “it”—and maybe he was in pain when we cut. We all thought she'd gone bananas, but the next day she'd rustled up an IV with some dihydromorphine from home. She'd been taking care of her husband and had plenty extra. She stabbed it into one of Teeny's ion channels (no small feat, since he was still spasming so bad) and opened the drip. And sure enough, the convulsions quieted down.

Well, we thought that with behavior like this, we should probably tell people about it before we start the usual course of testing. So we sent holos to the research team and to General Pitticks. The research team was excited but said that wetware was so unpredictable that they didn't have more guidance to give us, but please keep noting down what happened and proceed. Pitticks, on the other hand, quickly replied with “Don't care as long as it does its missions right. Stop fucking around with scientific theory and fast-track this.” Tells you a lot about him, doesn't it. People called him General Pitiless behind his back.

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We programmed the sims with increasingly complex scenarios and watched little Teeny march right through them as long as we managed the painkiller drip. He never failed a mission, but the wetware really did have its quirks. The first time we saw something was up was when we coded in the nursery school mission. In our sim, the religious extremist group (we based it loosely on those nutjobs that were rolling around DC at the time—you know the ones) had a terror cell hidden under the basement of a nursery school. We had their weapons shipments staged in boxes of formula and diapers, and we coded up explosives to be hidden in the storehouses full of holos for the kids and replacement parts for the nannybots.

Teeny caught us all by surprise that day. We expected a pretty standard MO: get in, watch the schedules to find a time when the kids were out and the nutjobs were in, and blammo. We'd coded it up to make sure that wouldn't happen for a few days in the sim. But before we knew it, Teeny'd set himself up to look like a box of bot parts, then found the standard control net that let you repair the nannybots and injected it with a virus. We'd just written the bots with basic off-the-shelf programming, but what do you know, they all got up and ushered the kids outside in broad daylight. Even brought them down the road to an ice cream shop. (Well, a shell of an ice cream shop. We'd only programmed the outside.) And when the kids were all safely out of blast radius, only then did the blammo happen. Blew the compound to virtual smithereens, and from a location that minimized additional damage from the blown explosives in the warehouse. We didn't know it could do that.

Linda was working from home that day with the flu and had patched into the sim from bed. She'd lost her voice, so had turned off her comm and instead was typing in. And when she typed “GOOD JOB TEENY!” we were even more surprised to see an answer.

Up in the left-hand corner of the VR view, right where no interface elements should be, we saw the words, “THANK YOU. BUT THE BOMB DID NOT EXPLODE.”

They were written in white, in an old-fashioned font we'd certainly never put into the sim. And Teeny wasn't supposed to be able to talk. Nothing in the manual said anything about that.

We were all a bit spooked but at the same time excited to actually talk to a test subject. So I typed back in the normal part of the UI, “YOUR SENSORS DID JUST WHAT THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO. WE JUST TOOK OUT THE EXPLOSIVE MATERIAL FOR TESTING.”

“TESTING?”

“YES. THIS IS A SIMULATION, TO SEE WHAT YOU’LL DO IN THE REAL WORLD.”

“THE SIMULATION IS NOT REAL. I SEE. DID I DO GOOD?”

I wrote, “YOU DID SO MUCH GOOD!” After thinking about it for a moment, I added in some imaginary evils that this nutjob group was planning. Teeny—the real Teeny, not the digital one in the sim—gave a little *bzzt* at that. His nano-scales fluttered.

Pitticks had said to fast-track as long as it did its job, but we contacted the research team anyway. Taking initiative to bug the program, talking to us, *bzzting* . . . this all seemed like more than just a wetware quirk. But they responded with the same thing—they didn’t really know what the wetware would do. The only other wetware bots in circulation were the fake pets for rich people, and those each came with their own unprogrammable “personality.” Most of the pets were small and cute and devoted, but every so often one would come off the line with a mean glint in its eye and a tendency to bite. They’d checked, and there was no bug in the programming or a flaw in the wetware itself. That was just it—wetware was unpredictable.

Teeny gave that same *bzzt* and nano-scale flutter after we complimented his performance in his next mission, taking out a fake dictator we made up, and again after blowing up an enemy sub as it was surfacing to put out its own missile. Neither *bzzt* seemed to do any damage, so we eventually figured it was like he was purring with satisfaction at a job well done. If the wetware pets can do it, why not a precision guided missile?

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Teeny asked “WILL THIS DO GOOD?” after each VR mission. He was really growing on us, and we started taking turns writing up what messes he would be preventing. Not just that the death of that dictator was a good thing, but we’d also type in a story about a little girl who would now be able to go to school safely and grow up to be a great doctor and halt a plague in its tracks. Or how carefully blowing up a chemical munitions plant (yes, *carefully*) meant that the tree frogs in the enemy’s target bomb zone would get to live on and keep the malaria-bearing mosquitoes in check. He’d make the little *bzzt* sound each time.

The more mission sims we sent him on, the more questions he started to ask. “WILL THIS DO GOOD?” was followed by “WHAT WOULD DO MORE GOOD?” And Linda, who’d been a philosophy major before she got her head on straight and switched to testing, talked to him about Aquinas and Aristotle and Camus and Kant and goodness knows who else before we told her to stop filling his ROM with such nonsense.

But philosophy twaddle or no, our boy was clever. He kept getting more creative in his solutions. I think my favorite test was the mission to take out the number two in an anarcho-green extremist group. Once he got to their compound, instead of finding the milito-hippie, he plugged himself into their Net. We had to code it up as he went along, and he hunted down the number one through old-school message boards and crypto’d messages. He waited until both the number one and two were in range, then got the both of them with one beautiful explosion.

“THIS WILL DO MORE GOOD, YES?” he’d asked when the VR reset, his old-fashioned white text hovering at the left of my vision. I’d nodded, almost too proud to speak, and exhausted from the race of building the Nets before he got into them.

“EVEN MORE GOOD,” I’d said, and that night me and the gals went out for beers to cheer our genius boy.

The next morning when we got back to the test lab, Teeny had left us a message. “THE NUMBER THREE WILL KEEP THE GROUP GOING. IT IS NOT ENDED. I MUST GO BACK.”

“NO,” I wrote, “BUT YOUR MISSION IS ENDED. YOU BLEW UP, REMEMBER?”

“WHAT HAPPENS TO ME WHEN I BLOW UP?”

“YOU . . .” I stopped typing into the sim. How do you explain to a rocket that he can only be used once, and is dead and gone after? “YOU COMPLETE THE MISSION WHEN YOU BLOW UP.”

“BUT WHAT HAPPENS TO ME AFTER?”

ANALOG

“THAT’S IT. YOU AREN’T ANYMORE. THERE’S NO YOU LEFT.”

“JUST LIKE THE NUMBER ONE AND NUMBER TWO. THEY’RE NOT LEFT.”

“THAT’S RIGHT.”

“WHY SHOULDN’T THEY BE LEFT?”

“BECAUSE THEY WERE EVIL, REMEMBER? THEY WERE DOING BAD THINGS.”

“WHAT IF . . .” his writing hesitated. “WHAT IF I WANT TO BE LEFT AFTER? IN THE REAL WORLD?”

“THAT’S JUST NOT HOW THAT WORKS,” I said.

“BUT THEN I CAN’T DO MORE GOOD.” He paused. “I THOUGHT IT WAS GOOD TO DO MORE GOOD.”

“IT IS, AND BY DOING THIS YOU’LL BE DOING MORE GOOD THAN ANY ONE OF US COULD EVER DO.”

Another pause. “I SEE. WHAT’S IT LIKE, NOT BEING LEFT? IS IT UNPLEASANT?”

Too much philosophy, that was his problem. I’d have to have a chat with Linda. “NO, IT’S LIKE . . . LIKE YOU FLOAT AWAY INTO NOTHINGNESS, AND YOU DON’T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT THE WORLD ANYMORE. IT’S NOT UNPLEASANT AT ALL.”

He was quiet for a long time, but of course still passed the next sim with flying colors.

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Me and the gals, we started to plan a little graduation ceremony for him in the testing lab for when he was ready to go into action. Nothing fancy like what the top brass does, but then, the top brass would never have a ceremony for a bomb. We were about two weeks out from it when General Pitticks and five of his aides strode into the lab. He *never* came to the lab.

“Time’s up,” he said. The man always sounded like he was gargling rocks.

Linda was the one that stepped up to him. “We’re not done. We still have seven more sims to take hi—I mean take it through.”

“Don’t care. Bomb’s been hitting the targets, yes?” He shifted his toothpick to the other side of his mouth.

“Well yes, but—”

“And it’s been performing the camouflage maneuvers? Gathering good intelligence to optimize the hit?”

“Yes but the mechanisms of the hit are still a bit . . . fluid.”

“Good enough. We need it now.” He looked around the lab until he found Teeny, tubes and wires sticking out of him like a coma patient. “Is it gonna blow if we take those wires out?”

“Well no, but—”

“Good. The Ambridians keep shooting our Azimuths out of the sky so we need something with better camo, and there’s no Tarzons left. Hamazi’s given us a gift—he’ll be *very* vulnerable for the next three hours, and we need to hit him NOW.” He started yanking out wires, and Teeny convulsed like he’d done on that first day.

“Stop that!” cried Linda. “You’re hurting him!”

He gave her a look that would pulverize a small building. “It’s a *bomb*,” he growled. “Not a kitten. What’s *wrong* with you?” His steel grey eyes swept through the rest of the beeping machinery in the lab.

So I stepped in. Top brass always responded better to fancy words. “General, with all due respect, let us give you the procedures to ensure optimal performance.” He grunted and agreed.

Off Teeny went, rolling away on the little cart the general’s aide had brought. We offered to brief Pitticks with our full notes and recommendations, but he grunted again that as long as the bomb hit the targets in the sims without detection he didn’t give a flying fuck and to get the hell out of his way. They’d do the full debrief for the next one, where they actually needed the extra functionality. He always was an asshole. Tell your viewers not to vote for him.

But anyway, our little boy was off to do good in the world. We’d sent off other bombs in the past, of course, but we’d never felt this kind of pride. Teeny was *our* bomb. He was smart. He would minimize civilian casualties and do more than the military ever imagined. And once that happened there’d be more Teenies, to make sure any time our military needed we could strike with intelligence. Of course, those would be fully tested.

We popped champagne that night, cheering our brilliant little boy.

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We all assumed he would hit Hamazi that day, and that'd be that. The slippery bastard had survived more assassination attempts than anyone, and taking him out would be the best step to liberate the corrupt country. It was full of poor saps, starving and downtrodden and mostly hating the freedoms of right-thinking countries like us. I think we even had the guy to prop up there instead, to make sure the new regime would be friendly.

About two months later, with Hamazi still alive and kicking, we were in the lab doing a meta-sim to test out our own systems when a bunch of Pitticks' men came in and hauled us all off to be court-martialed. You know what happened next—it's in the public record.

You want me to tell it anyway? Fine. One of them cut our power right before eight more stormed into the lab. They grabbed each of us, two to one. Marched us out and threw us in cells after, even though we'd done exactly as we were supposed to. They hauled in the research team, too.

What happened with Teeny? Well, you ever wondered why I'm in this tech-free cell, and you had to come in person to talk to me? Why they confiscated your smartpad and any recording devices and only gave you a pencil and some paper?

At first I didn't even know what happened with him. Before they hauled me to this tech-free wing I saw on the prison holos that Hamazi went into a retirement home—a retirement home, of all things!—and his nephew took over.

Now I wouldn't say that the nephew was a particularly big fan of us, but the "Death to the Pigs" propaganda died out, and he focused on his own country's stuff for a while. He kicked out the old council and set up a constitutional monarchy with a parliament. And within a few years the Ambridian Republic looked like it was in much better shape, with people getting fed and educated, and they started setting up peace treaties with countries left and right. Not us though, but they let us be, and I guess that's fine.

And of course from that alone we were all tried for treason. They assumed we had some ties with the Hamazi regime and purposely sent out a faulty bomb. Complete nonsense, of course. We were just doing our jobs, and it was Pitticks who made it a rush job. Just covering his ass, really.

But it takes more than the whiff of treason to get you locked up in a room with no screens, with real human guards coming to bring you food so you'd have no contact with bots. A few months after the Ambridian regime change, after I'd already been tried and sentenced and tossed away, I started seeing new pictures on the screens in my cell. Usually the pics are all things to keep us prisoners docile, you know? Beaches and forests and puppies and whatnot. Anyway, one day my pics were a little bit different. I started getting pics of Hamazi's nephew signing peace treaties, and Ambridian villages getting airdrops of medical supplies, and even pics of new schools being built.

Now, I can't be sure exactly how Teeny did it. It might've been from him hacking into Hamazi's personal Net and reprogramming his guardbots to shuffle him away, or giving intel to the nephew's guardbots to help maneuver into power, or draining his bank accounts, or what. But I know it was him who made the change, and that he kept on working at it even after his propulsion system gutted out and he had to rely on his solar cells to keep going.

What do you mean, how do I know? Well, lemme tell ya, it's how they decided I couldn't get any more access to tech. After those Ambridian pics kept coming, every day for a few months, I got a little message. It was in the corner of the interface, where no text should be. And in a white, old-fashioned font, all it said was, "DID I DO GOOD?"