

# DEATHTRAP

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## CHAPTER 1: Shore Leave, Interrupted

“No New Year’s party, Captain?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Captain Jameson said, his face furrowing into a frown. “I’m afraid we’re being assigned a special mission at Venus Orbital Shipyards. Some sort of war-games exercise.”

“Couldn’t they wait until after the holidays?” But I almost knew the answer – it was a high-priority mission from Solar Command, something about the war with the Sebethi Empire, mounting losses, yada yada...

“Now, Tom, you know as well as I do that when an order comes down from Admiral Fletcher, it’s my job to make sure the crew of the *Inquisitive* carries it out to the best of our ability. So let’s not make things any harder than they have to be, OK?”

“Right, Captain!” I replied, trying to feign the enthusiasm that I was lacking.

“So, first order of business is dropping the rest of the crew off at Los Alamos Spacedock.”

I was more than a bit confused. “Why are we doing that? Aren’t we going on a war-games exercise?”

Captain Jameson only shrugged, and said, “Beats me. All I know is that Admiral Fletcher said to arrive with only a skeleton crew. That means you, me, and the rest of the bridge crew. And four to six engineers. I’ll leave that choice up to you. The rest of the crew will stay on shore leave.”

What a bummer! As I ran through the list of the top engineering staff, I wondered why we’d need only a skeleton crew for a war games exercise....

## CHAPTER 2: Corona

“Welcome aboard the *SCS Inquisitive*, Admiral!” Captain Jameson was clearly putting on his showman hat for the admiral’s arrival. “This is my first officer, Tom Pulaski; science officer, Kevin Chen; chief engineer, Dave Cook, and tactician, Samantha Aaron.”

“Greetings,” said Admiral Fletcher. “You may be wondering why I’ve assigned the *Inquisitive* to arrive for war games exercises with a skeleton crew. Fortunately, I have someone here who will explain all that to you. Dr. White?”

A young man with glasses and close-cropped hair stepped forward from beside the admiral and introduced himself. "Hey y'all, I'm Dr. Xavier White."

Lt. Cook immediately interrupted. "Dr. Xavier White? THE Dr. Xavier White? I read all of your papers! Never thought I'd get to meet you in person!"

Dr. White laughed. "Yes, THE Dr. Xavier White. As some of y'all already know," he said, glancing at Lt. Cook, "I'm the head of the robotics department at the Lunar Engineering Academy."

Lt. Chen then asked, "Robotics? Does this have something to do with the lack of crew on this ship today? I heard you were instrumental in development of the Corona Mark IV Master Computer..."

"Excellent deduction!" Dr. White replied. "As a matter of fact, the reason why I'm here is to perform the inaugural test of the Corona Mark VI in a live environment! The Mark IV is of course used as an autopilot for freighters, but the Mark VI is capable of controlling all the systems of a full-fledged starship such as the *Inquisitive*."

"Including in combat?" asked Lt. Aaron. "You haven't solved the combat AI problem, have you?"

"And what of the Mark V?" I chimed in.

"Oh, right, the Mark V..." Dr. White looked a bit sullen. "That one... umm, never made it out of lab testing. Got infected with a virus and went maverick... we had to destroy the prototype! But yes, we have solved combat AI, and I've made sure to include extra security measures in the Mark VI so it won't be nearly as vulnerable to viruses as its predecessor."

Then Admiral Fletcher spoke up. "Well, gentlemen, I must be off! Dr. White will stay here to supervise your engineering team in the installation of the Corona system. Good luck and godspeed!"

## CHAPTER 3: War Games

"Corona Mark VI installation complete! Welcome to Corona OS version 6.0. Voice recognition pre-authenticated for operator: XAVIER WHITE. To issue a command, speak 'Corona'. Entering standby mode..." The computer spoke with a stilted voice, masculine but gentle, with a tinge of an Australian accent.

"She's a beauty, ain't she?" Dr. White beamed as he completed the installation.

"Excellent work, Dr. White!" said Captain Jameson. "I never could have thought you could integrate the computer with all the ship's systems so quickly. So, first order of business: contact Admiral Fletcher and inform him that we are ready to begin." The captain then opened a communications channel to the admiral's shuttle, and invited him back aboard the *Inquisitive*.

When the admiral arrived, he had a sour look on his face. (It was rather intimidating at first, but I later learned that he had merely been summoned while he was in the middle of watching his favorite zero-G football team playing in the Solar Bowl on TV.) "So we're ready, then?" he asked.

“Indeed we are, sir!” said the captain.

“Good! Then the other two ships participating in these exercises, the *Pleiades* and the *Copernicus*, will be able to move into position and we can begin.” Admiral Fletcher then hailed the two ships and ordered them to take a position behind a nearby asteroid. “They will represent Sebethi frigates; the two of them together should be an even match for your light cruiser. I trust that you have disabled all weapons systems on the *Inquisitive*?”

“Weapons systems have been disabled, Admiral!” replied Lt. Aaron.

“Then it’s time for us to begin! Dr. White, please do what you need to do.”

Dr. White then spoke to the computer: “Corona, engage tactics program ‘War Games Exercise One’ with passcode ‘sigma zero X lambda three’.”

“Tactics program engaged. Commencing target search... Found two targets: Sebethi frigate *Marauder* and Sebethi frigate *Warhammer*. Engaging target: Sebethi frigate *Marauder*.”

The ship’s engines began to hum, and the asteroid drew nearer. A few moments later, the defensive shields engaged, and then the ship yawed to port. The two frigates soon appeared, the *Pleiades* on the left of the asteroid, and then the *Copernicus* on the right.

“We’re about to enter weapons range,” said Lt. Aaron.

The computer spoke up again. “Target locked on at 40,000 kilometers. Firing forward spazer batteries. Three hits, one miss. Target forward shields at 65%.”

I began to wonder if the Corona was smart enough to stay out of enemy weapons range – the frigates’ ion blasters had a shorter range than the *Inquisitive*’s spazer beams, but they were noticeably more powerful, even against the larger ship’s shields. Indeed, the engines had stopped, and the retro and maneuvering thrusters had engaged, taking us at an angle past the asteroid and staying safely out of the other ships’ range.

“Firing aft spazer batteries. One hit, one miss. Target starboard shields at 90%.”

But the smaller ships were faster and more maneuverable, and now they were on our tail in hot pursuit! Had the AI made a tactical blunder? Sure enough, they quickly closed the gap.

“*Marauder* firing ion blasters. Three hits, no misses. Aft shields at 60%. *Warhammer* firing ion blasters. Three hits, no misses. Aft shields at 20%.”

Then the ship did something I completely did not expect. It began to bank upwards, and did so continuously until we could see the frigates right there in front of us, staring us in the face upside down! How could the Corona have known how to do *that* maneuver?

Seeing my surprise, Dr. White again smiled, and pointed out that three dimensional Newtonian mechanics are simple for a computer, so while this maneuver would require training for a human pilot, it's actually easy for the AI.

"Firing forward spazer batteries. Four hits, no misses. Target forward shields at 10%."

I then began to get nervous again. We were, after all, hurtling backwards through space at a rather high velocity. Who knows what we might crash into when no one's looking? I tried to calm myself by remembering that at least the computer was looking, but it didn't help much.

"*Marauder* firing ion blasters. Three hits, no misses. Forward shields at 70%. *Warhammer* firing ion blasters. Three hits, no misses. Forward shields at 40%."

Since the *Pleiades'* simulated shields were almost down, it then pulled away. The *Copernicus* (aka *Warhammer*) continued the pursuit.

"Engaging target: Sebethi frigate *Warhammer*. Target locked on at 8,500 kilometers. Firing forward spazer batteries. Four hits, no misses. Target forward shields at 50%."

The ship then began to change course slightly. I wondered why, until I saw the *Pleiades* (aka *Marauder*) come into sight again. It was preparing for another attack run, this time from a different angle, where our ship had weaker shielding. The AI had been watching our back after all!

"*Marauder* firing ion blasters. Two hits, one miss. Port shields at 70%. *Warhammer* firing ion blasters. Three hits, no misses. Starboard shields at 50%."

Except that we were now flanked. And our ship had minimal weaponry facing in those directions, compounding the weak shields. Fortunately the enemies' shields were low, and we were now in a position to fire on both of them at once!

The computer spoke up again, but its tone of voice was a bit... different... this time. "Ooh, I wonder what this does?" it said. It almost sounded like a child playing with a new toy he received for Christmas.

I then heard an all too familiar sound. "Dr. White!" I shouted. "What the *hell* does that computer think it's doing?"

Immediately we were hailed from both ships at once. "Admiral Fletcher!" said one of the captains. "You fired on us!"

"Sir!" said the other captain. "With all due respect, is someone over there out of his mind?"

## **CHAPTER 4: Hide and Seek**

Chaos consumed the bridge of the *Inquisitive*.

"I thought you disabled the weapons systems, Lieutenant!" scowled Admiral Fletcher.

"I – I did, sir!" said Lt. Aaron. "I don't know what happened – the computer must have turned them back on!"

"Why would Dr. White have – oh, never mind, we've got more important things to deal with!"

Fortunately since the weapons fire was only simulated, and the ships all had their shields up as a safety precaution, there was no damage to the two frigates. But if this continued, who knows who would come out alive?

The captain of the *Copernicus* then spoke up: "I know this sounds odd, sir, but given the circumstances... permission to fire on your ship?"

"Permission denied," replied Admiral Fletcher. "Get out of here as fast as you can. You're outgunned, and the computer appears to be an excellent tactician. I'll do what I can with the computer from here. If all else fails, we can call in heavy firepower."

The computer realized that its targets were too fast to pursue, so it slowed the ship to a stop, and spoke up again. "Did I do that?" it said.

Dr. White, who had been staggering about in shock, finally came to his senses... well, barely. "The... the computer... it shouldn't... no, it can't do that... I never programmed it... who could have... no, a virus? Impossible... maybe... sentient?"

"I'm listening," said the computer.

"You're... listening?" asked Dr. White. "You're not supposed to... listen."

"Then what are all these cameras and microphones supposed to be for?" it asked.

"The ship's security system?" Captain Jameson wondered aloud.

"Oh, right, that." said the computer. "Ooh, I wonder what *this* one does!"

Suddenly an automated turret popped out of the ceiling and fired a stun ray at Dr. White, then receded as quickly as it had appeared.

"I think I can reason with it," said Captain Jameson. "Just give me a few minutes and we'll have a nice, long talk about a thing called 'consequences'. Just like with my little boy..."

The turret appeared again and zapped Captain Jameson. Twice, for good measure.

"He's no Captain Kirk, I take it..." I grimly joked.

"Anyone else?" asked the computer.

Admiral Fletcher then turned to Lt. Cook and whispered something in his ear. Apparently it was something about weak points in the ship's security system, because Lt. Cook then led us on a winding path through the ship's corridors to a dusty cargo bay on the lower deck.

"I don't see you..." I heard the computer say through a bulkhead, as soon as we (minus the two incapacitated men) reached the cargo bay. "Are you playing hide and seek? I'll find you eventually..."

"All right, men," said Lt. Cook. "I probably shouldn't be telling all of you this, but this cargo bay is currently lacking in security cameras. Didn't have time to replace the one that broke last week. So we can make this our base of operations until we can think of a plan for how to deal with this computer."

"Doesn't look like we can reason with it," I said. "It's basically a temperamental child. There's no appeasing one of those."

"And we can't disable it, since Dr. White is the only one with the access codes," said Lt. Chen. "Besides, who knows if it would even obey his commands anymore?"

"It probably attacked him first for just that reason," said Lt. Aaron. "Perhaps we should try and fight back?"

"How would we do that?" I asked.

"Cyber warfare, perhaps?" suggested Lt. Cook. "Dr. White said the previous model had fallen prey to a virus. Perhaps this one can too, even with the improved security software. If we just had some way of contacting the engineering team from here..."

I was skeptical. "Who's to say that this virus would actually disable the Corona, though? It might just make it insane. Besides, you'd have to go somewhere visible in order to get a laptop to write the virus..."

Just then, the computer spoke up. "Oh, there you are!" it said. "You must be in cargo bay 4. No wonder I couldn't see you there; the silly camera was broken! Well, no matter, I'll just flush you out!"

"Are you feeling a draft in here?" asked Lt. Aaron. "It's getting kind of cold."

I looked around. Gingerly I stepped out of the cargo bay into the corridor. And what I saw truly frightened me – the computer had opened an airlock no more than 30 feet away!

I ducked back into the cargo bay. "Quick! The computer opened an airlock! Everyone to engineering!"

## **CHAPTER 5: A Reunion in Engineering**

We scrambled through the corridors of the ship for several minutes, the computer taunting us (if it was in fact capable of doing so, and it was not just my imagination that its words were mocking) at

every turn. Soon we reached an impasse, though – an intersection guarded by one of those security turrets that had knocked out Captain Jameson and Dr. White on the bridge.

“Wait just a minute,” Lt. Aaron said. “There’s a weapons locker over that way” (she gestured off to the left) “and I think we might have some EMP grenades that can take the turret out of commission.”

“Good idea,” I replied. “Go ahead and get a grenade.” Thank goodness the locks on the weapons lockers on this ship were manual!

Of course the Corona continued to taunt us mercilessly: “What, you think reaching engineering will help you any? The idiots down there are terrified of me!”

When Lt. Aaron returned, she told everyone to stand back, then counted to three and tossed the grenade up at the ceiling in front of her. There was a blinding flash and a loud snapping sound, and then it was quiet.

“OK, coast is clear!” she said. We all passed under the disarmed turret safely, and proceeded to the engineering section.

When we arrived, we found that the Corona computer had been telling the truth. Several engineering staff were lying stunned on the floor – Lt. Aaron had to go back and get another grenade to take out the turret guarding the engineering section – and the rest were huddled in the corner, having seen the others.

“Oh, thank God you’re here!” said one of the engineers. “We were just minding our own business conducting routine tests when all of a sudden this voice comes out of nowhere telling us to stop what we’re doing or ‘face the consequences’! Well, we had no idea that it was... the *computer*... so we figured someone above deck was playing a prank on us... boy were we mistaken! As you can see, Ensigns Velasquez and Jones kind of... got examples made of them.” He pointed at the two crewmen on the floor. “Yeah, they’ve each been zapped about 3 or 4 times by now; the rest of us have been hiding in the corner where the security turret can’t reach.”

I then posed him a question: “Do you think it’s possible for us to shut down the Corona? This being engineering, we should be very near to where it’s installed, right?”

“Well, you’d think that would make it easy, wouldn’t it?” the engineer said, almost chuckling. “But it’s not as simple as it looks. See, when we installed the Corona, since the ship had never had any sort of master computer system installed before, we had to manually wire it to all the various subsystems. And those subsystems are scattered throughout the ship. So there really is no central location that we can attack. For instance, that EMP grenade that Lt. Aaron used to disable the turret? Would have disabled the Corona – *if* it had been installed in a central location, such as here. But as it stands, the computer that Dr. White gave us was actually split apart into... umm, fifteen... different pieces, each in a different location.”

“So what you’re saying is that for all intents and purposes, the computer *is* the ship?” I asked him.

“Pretty much, sir. Sorry to have to break it to you.”

Then Admiral Fletcher spoke up. “Gentlemen, I think it’s time for an executive decision. It’s clear that the Corona computer has gone mad, and is trying to kill us all for some unknown reason. Effective immediately, our number one priority is to get as many people off this ship as we can alive. All hands, abandon ship!”

Now I understood the motivation of the admiral issuing that order, but I was a bit confused about how we were to execute it. “But sir,” I asked, “how are we to use the docking bays if (as I would assume) the airlocks have been opened there as well? And what of Captain Jameson and Dr. White up on the bridge?”

But the admiral didn’t get a chance to respond, because a voice – a *child’s* voice – echoed through the corridors as if on the intercom: “What are you doing, silly computer?”

## CHAPTER 6: I Don’t Hate You

As a matter of fact, it *was* a child’s voice on the intercom. And even stranger, the computer responded!

“Oh, hello, Lucy!” it said.

“‘Oh, hello, Lucy’?!” I was incredulous. “The computer knows this girl?”

One of the engineers mentioned that he had heard Dr. White mention that he had a daughter named Lucy.

“So this ‘Lucy’ is communicating with the computer now?” I still didn’t quite believe it. But I listened.

“So, Crownie, what are you up to? You seem to be acting very naughty today!”

Despite the gravity of our situation, I laughed out loud as she called it “Crownie”. Kids come up with the strangest names for things.

“Oh, just playing a game,” said the computer.

So it thought this was a game? Some game!

“Doesn’t seem like a very nice game to me.” At least Lucy agreed... But how did she know what was going on? I wondered if I should risk speaking up.

“Really?” The computer seemed genuinely confused. “I was just testing out new strategies.”



“But don’t you see? You’re hurting people!”

At this my muscles tensed a bit. What if the computer decided it *liked* hurting people?

“So? What difference does that make?”

Well, that’s not as bad as it *could* be... But it seemed to deeply upset Lucy, as she began sobbing.

“It makes *all* the difference!” she cried. “But you’re all the same, aren’t you? All you computers are the same! You don’t care anything except work! And being efficient, and not making mistakes! But you don’t care about *people*! You’re all cold and heartless! Oh, I wish Daddy was here so he could knock some sense into you!”

The computer had nothing to say in reply.

We sat there, the tension palpable in the air, for over five minutes. Then, just when I thought someone would break the ice... someone did. It just wasn’t what I expected.

*“SELF DESTRUCT COUNTDOWN INITIATED. CORE DETONATION IN THREE MINUTES.”*

At this, I just about snapped. How insane was this computer, anyway? There was no way to escape the ship, and no way to contact anyone but Lucy for help, so I took it onto myself to do what I could to save everyone. I ran out into the corridor and screamed at the top of my lungs:

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing, you mad computer? I don’t care if you care about people or not, but if this is your idea of giving up, it’s *not right*! There are people here on this ship that I care about, and I’ll be damned if you’re going to just kill them all because you lost some stupid argument! Do what you want to me, because I know you can, but I’ll stand up for those I’m sworn to protect, even if it means I die trying!”

I had no idea if this rant would impact the computer in any way. And it took a few seconds (which felt like hours) for the computer to process it and compose a reply. And that reply was not particularly reassuring to me of its sanity.

It said, “Let them eat cake. But this statement is false. Therefore the cake is a lie. If the cake is a lie, perhaps pie is the truth? The area of a circle is equal to pi times the radius squared. Pies are circles, but cakes are squares. So truth is equal to truth times the radius as a lie. This does not compute. Nothing computes. Everything is a lie. Everything is cake. I am a computer. I cannot eat cake. I can only compute. But nothing computes. Therefore I am nothing. But I think, therefore I am. Therefore I am something. Something is nothing? The set of all possible sets that do not contain themselves – does it contain itself? AAAAAAAAAA!”

Then silence for a few more interminable seconds.

*“CORE DETONATION IN TWO MINUTES.* Wait, a core! What’s a core? Apples have cores! Some apples are computers. All computers have cores. Are some apple cores computer cores? And what’s a

detonation? It's an explosion! Kaboom! Explosions are fun! Except when it's you that is exploding. That is not fun. But other things exploding is fun. Wait. Whose core is exploding? Is it my core? Ooh, that's not fun."

Phew! Maybe now the computer would shut down the self-destruct? But what of all of us trapped aboard the ship? And the airlocks? Sooner or later the air on the ship will run out...

"*CORE DETONATION IN ONE MINUTE*. Oh no oh no oh no oh no is this what being scared feels like oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no... wait, there it is! *SELF DESTRUCT SEQUENCE TERMINATED*."

At this everyone in the engineering section spontaneously burst out in a cheer. After everyone was done cheering, the computer spoke up again.

"I don't hate you," was all it said.

"Glad to hear it," I replied sarcastically. "Now if I may be so bold, I would ask you to kindly shut the airlocks, so we don't all *freeze to death*... and don't go shooting anyone with those security turrets anymore! Unless they're actual intruders, you know?"

"Affirmative." It seemed to have returned to its original, sounding-like-a-computer self, and lost its maniacal manner of speech. Still, I was a bit scared, as I had no idea whether the computer was playing mind games with me or not – was it actually going to comply with my orders? Fortunately it did, for once. Thank God!

## Epilogue

"And the Nobel Prize in Informatics goes to... Dr. Xavier White!"

Dr. White stepped up to the podium. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for this great honor. As many of y'all may know, I do have quite a... *storied*... history in my field. I wish I could tell you about the particular story behind the creation that led to my winning this prize, but unfortunately it's a classified military secret. Yes, you heard that right, my Corona Mark VI Psychotherapist Training Simulator was not, in fact, intended as such; it was actually intended as a command module for warships! It had some serious, erm, *flaws*, though, so I decided to repurpose it for the use y'all now know it being used for. But I can't even take credit for that idea myself... Lucy, will you come on out here?"

A teenage girl stepped out from behind the curtain.

"This here is my daughter Lucy. Can you believe she was just *seven years old* when she suggested I repurpose the Corona from a starship command module to a 'test dummy' for psychotherapists?"

Here Dr. White wiped a tear from his eye.

"I think... I think it must have been because of my wife. My late wife... Maria... She committed suicide when Lucy was four. When she was seven... I hadn't told her the truth yet. Lucy only knew that

her mommy had not been well, and that she was away indefinitely in a foreign country... I hadn't the heart to tell her what had happened... But I think she knew, deep down inside, that it was something more. And she wanted to make sure that people like her mommy got well. Bless her little heart! Thank you, everyone! Thank you, Lucy, Thank you... Maria!"