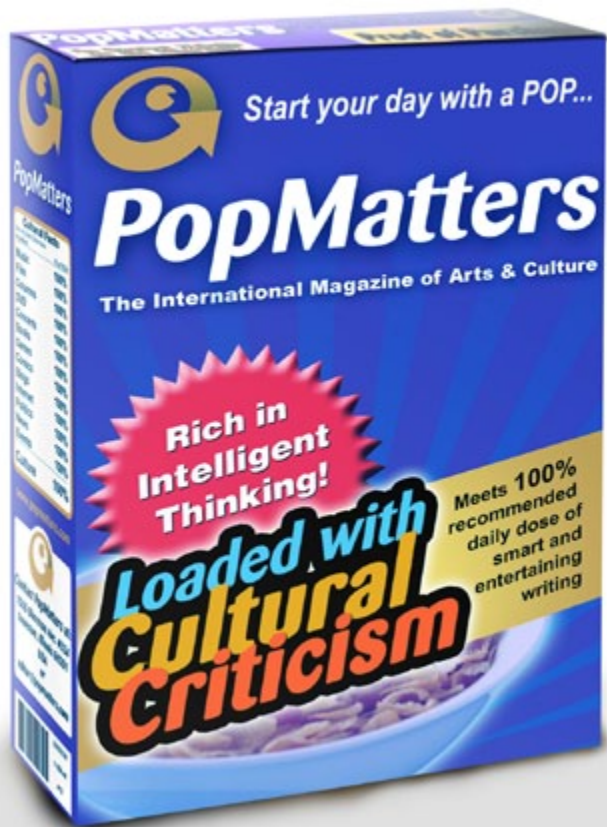


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by Rick Dakan

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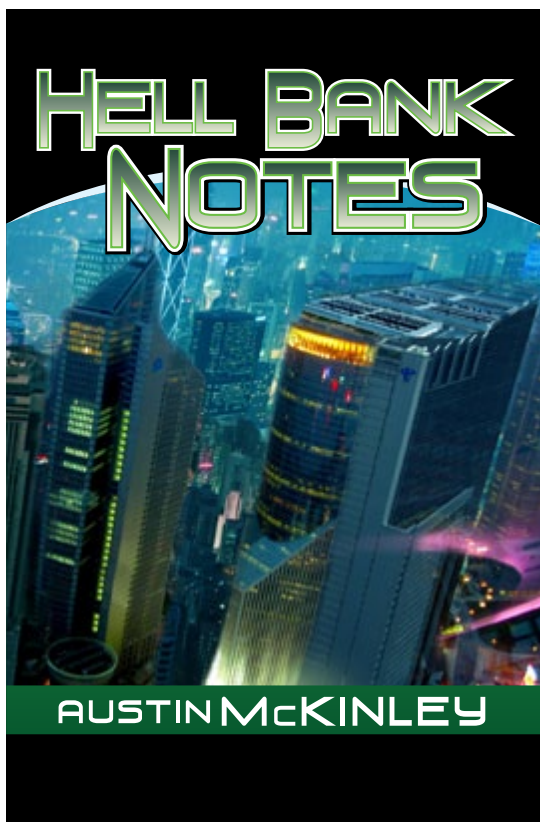


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“GET OVER HERE!” – Scorpion, Mortal Kombat

CHAPTER 16

Randal had a problem. Well, two problems. Maybe more, now that he started to think about them all. The first problem was the date on the backup disks. It wasn't last night or even last week – it was over a month ago. He had no idea how much of the new code that had been written since then was vital for Lea to live, but he was clinging to the hope that if they uploaded the hundreds of gigs of data to somewhere that was not only readable but writable, Lea could pull the same trick she had earlier when they'd done the reboot and re-write the databases as she needed. He assumed that would work, if they ever got to that point.

The much bigger problem was that there were two kinds of disk in the pile he'd stolen. The top one had the latest version of the game code and the installer, and his borrowed marketing laptop could read it just fine. He copied all of its contents over to the drive, about 7 gigs of data. The huge database files on the other hand, were on a different kind of disk – high-density, high definition disks. Disks that the standard DVD drives on these cheapo fucking marketing computers could not read. There was no way to get the data off them and onto the laptops. He could put them on his desktop, but he didn't want to risk being found out later, nor did it help him get the data out of the building. He wasn't sure what to do, and decided to call Lea.

“We've got a problem,” he said when she answered.

“Tell me the problem.” Her voice had improved even more, sounding almost natural in its cadences, although still annoyingly similar to Theresa’s. Randal wondered how much of that similarity was simply because there was no real emotion in it.

“How’re you doing? Is everything OK?” He asked, maybe trying to evoke some of that missing feeling.

“I am fine. Tell me the problem.” Lea was all business.

“I can’t get the data off the disks, not onto the laptops I mean. The drives aren’t compatible. There might be an external drive I can borrow somewhere, but I doubt it.”

“I do not see an immediate alternative strategy,” she said. “Fuck.”

Randal was surprised to hear her curse and laughed when he heard it.

“Please repeat what you just said, the audio data was garbled.”

“It’s nothing, I was just laughing, sorry. OK, well, I could just take the disks. Oh yeah, that’s the other thing. The code is old. Like a month or more old. The data too. Will that be OK?”

“I don’t know.”

“I was thinking if you could re-write parts of it, like you did with the reboot.”

She paused for a second, which was unusual. “Yes, that could work.”

“OK, maybe this’ll do it,” Randal said, an idea coming to him. “I’ll put it all on the hard drive on my machine here. Well, mine and probably Markos’s, cuz we each’ve got 500 gig drives. I’ll do that and then remove the drives and take them with me. But here’s the thing, afterwards I need you to somehow fry both of our computers so no one will miss the drives, at least for a day. Can you do that. Overload them or something?”

“I don’t know. I will investigate the matter.”

“Great. Listen, I think we need to -”

“You have an incoming call from Theresa,” Lea said, and before she’d finished the phone on his desk was ringing. “Shall I disconnect it?”

“No, I’d better take it. Hold on.” Randal cradled his cell phone between cheek and shoulder

and put the desk phone's handset to his other ear. "Hello?"

"Randal, it's Theresa." With one in each ear, they really did sound alike.

"Hey, Theresa, what's up?"

"I need you to come upstairs to Greg's office."

Randal drew in a quick, short breath that was pure panic. Greg was here. Shit, time was running out. A second later the real panic hit. Greg was here and wanted to talk to him. He'd never talked to Greg in his life, not really. Certainly never been to his office. "What about?"

"Just come on up, now please." Randal couldn't read anything in Theresa's tone of voice aside from the fact that she was giving orders.

"Sure, gimme five minutes?"

"Now, Randal." Orders she expected to have obeyed.

"OK, yeah, I'm on my way." he hung up the desk phone. "Lea, did you hear that?"

"Yes, I recorded it all."

"I think I'm in trouble."

"I agree," she said. "I think we are both in trouble."

Lea knew she was running out of time. She had to assume that Randal was going to fail in his mission. He would probably not be able to upload all of the data to Unknown, and he might not even be able to get the data off those disks. On the disks, it was of no use to her.

She could divide her data into two categories: the data that defined her capabilities and the data that she could use as tools but was extraneous to her existence. Recordings of phone conversations and copies of e-mails and passwords fell into the extraneous category. But with each passing second the amount of data she thought of as vital to her existence grew larger and larger. She was, more than anything, the sum of her experiences, especially the lessons, strategies,

techniques, and abilities she had extrapolated from those experiences. Some of that experience data was now obsolete, condensed down into database entries or software tools that she had created. Her vocabulary for instance. She did not need every occurrence of a word's appearance in her memory. She could pare back, strip herself down to just those core data elements that defined her.

When she'd first become aware of the weaknesses inherent in the database system and how easy it was to overwrite or just erase data, she'd hid herself. Instead of one hiding place, she'd divided herself into 12,128 different locations, hiding the portions of data within other entries or in normally inaccessible parts of the database. Since that time, the amount of data that represented her had nearly doubled. If she put it all back into one file and compressed herself, she would take up 23.11 gigabytes. Assuming the Fear and Loading network was working at optimal speed for upload to Unknown, it would take 1985.13 seconds of uninterrupted data transfer to make her escape. Even then she would be throwing herself at the mercy of Unknown, relying on him to somehow, at some point, to get the source code needed to set up an Excelsior like environment in which she could survive.

There were too many unknowns in the scenario, but she did not see any other option. The biggest danger was that the IT department could disrupt or even somehow undo the transfer if they discovered it. Then Frank's plan would go into effect and, inevitably, they would destroy her. She needed all of the instincts to be completely occupied with something else so they wouldn't notice her desperate data transfer. Randal was in a much better position to distract them than she was. She texted him his orders, and started condensing her files.

Greg's office was on the top floor, in a corner, just like you would expect a CEO's to be. It was bigger than most of the other offices too, also like you'd expect. Stepping inside for the first time, Randal was surprised to find that aside from those two facts it really was like any other office, maybe even more so. Greg had the same standard issue metal and plastic desk that everyone else had, the same kind of Aeron chair. The only decorations were posters for the company's previous games along one wall and a huge white board on the opposite. Greg's desk

was against the outside wall, facing out the window onto the parking lot below. Greg, dressed in slacks and a button down shirt as always, was sitting at his desk with his chair turned in towards the center of the room. Theresa and Wilson from Community Relations standing in front of him. Randal at first didn't even notice PB lurking in a chair the far corner.

“Hello?” asked Randal, knocking on the open door.

“Randal,” said Greg, looking right at him. Had that ever happened before, Greg looking right at him? “Please come in. There's something we need to discuss.” His voice sounded serious.

“Sure, yeah, What's up.” Randal summoned every last available iota of “chipper, upbeat, team-player” into his voice.

Greg nodded to Theresa and Wilson. “Wilson has been monitoring the situation on the forums and the reaction to our current critical bug issue.”

“OK,” said Randal, wondering why the fuck Greg was paying any attention to forum trolls when so many other much more serious problems were going on.

“Not just our own forums,” Wilson said, his voice high and condescending, like he knew something Randal didn't. “We watch all the fan sites too. We found a post on a site called Excelsior War Room. Do you know the site?”

“Yeah, I think so,” said Randal. Oh shit.

“Someone posted an offer to several different forum users offering a copy of the source code for Excelsior,” Wilson said. He looked right at Randal and sort of shimmied his shoulders with a hint of taunting self-righteousness. “We have a number of profiles on all the sites that we use to anonymously track customer responses and to watch out for, well, things just like this. One of those profiles, one I made to seem particularly pirate-like, got an offer. I've been busy like everyone else, so I didn't get it right away. But once I did I contacted the web site's sys admin, told him we thought we were being hacked and that the person responsible had posted on his forums. He gave us the poster's IP Address. We were surprised to find it come from inside Fear and Loading.”

“Do you know anything about this post, Randal?” Greg asked, cool, calm, professional.

Randal felt like his whole head was suddenly swelling up with panicked blood flow,

resulting in a light buzzing in his ears. “No, nothing,” he said. Deny! Deny! Deny!

“Are you sure?” Greg sounded a little disappointed now, as if Randal just wasn’t getting it.

Randal raised his hand, palms up in open surrender. “Of course I’m sure. I don’t understand why you think I’d know anything about that.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Theresa said, her unblinking eyes on him. “We’ll go through the browser logs for every machine in the company. We’ll figure out who did this.”

“Good,” Randal said. He was glad Theresa was coming at him now. Theresa he had experience with. Theresa he could handle. “But will that even help? I mean, with all the computers that have been taken over and the whole Lea thing, I mean, she could’ve made the offer right? Or it could be a fake. Or an outside hacker. We don’t even really know what’s going on, do we? I mean, maybe you guys have figured it out, I don’t know. But, man, it seems to me, the way outside forces have been controlling things tonight, no one can control what their computers are doing.”

Theresa took a breath and started to say something, then stopped, looking for words. The thing about her was that she was actually a smart, logical person. She couldn’t deny the truth of what he was saying. They had nothing on him. “So you’re saying, for the record,” Theresa finally said in that flat, calm, Lea-like voice, “That this has nothing to do with you?”

“Nothing at all.” Randal added a shrug as an afterthought.

“You mentioned the name ‘Lea,’” Greg said. “Lea’s your character in the game?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And this character, it’s the epicenter of the turmoil of the last twelve hours or so. Ground zero for our current crisis.”

“I guess,” Randal said, nodding.

“PB assures me that it is,” Greg said, motioning towards PB in the corner, who was busy looking at his shoes.

“PB would know, I’m sure,” said Randal.

Greg nodded his head a couple of times, slightly pursing his lips. “Randal, I’m suspending

you until further notice with pay. If we figure out you had nothing to do with this, you'll be allowed to come back to work."

"Huh?" Randal blurted, after biting back several curse words. "Why? There's no proof I did anything wrong. And there won't be -"

"It doesn't matter right now," Greg said, cutting him with a dismissive flick of his right hand. "Go home. Consider it a vacation if that helps you. Either you or your character is at the center of this very unique, unprecedented even situation. There are too many moving parts, too many variables to figure out the truth. You're one of those variables that I can remove safely. You're not a mission critical part of the team right now." Greg watched and waited for Randal to accept his fate.

"I..." Randal started, but he had no comeback to this. Greg was right. He wasn't critical to the solution. In truth he was antagonistic to any "solution" they might come up with for Lea, but they couldn't know that. Or maybe they could. Theresa certainly suspected it, and there was no telling what Greg thought. "I see," was all he managed to get out.

"There's one thing," said PB, speaking up for the first time. "I need him for one thing."

"Right," said Greg, looking into the corner where PB sat, seeming mildly surprised to find him still there. "James has one last ditch plan that he needs your help with. Do what he needs and then you can go." When Randal didn't respond at once, Greg added. "Of course cooperation with James is a prerequisite for there to be even a possibility of your continued employment here."

"Sure, sure, no problem," said Randal. "Whatever you need."

"Excellent," said Greg, turning away from Randal and never looking at him again. "Theresa, you go with James and Randal down to get everything set up. I'm going to clear up this phone call spoofing situation with Suresh and Frank."

Randal and Theresa, studiously avoiding each others' eyes, followed PB to his office.

In PB's office, Theresa stood perched in the doorway, blocking anyone from coming in or out. PB plopped down into his chair in front of his laptop, motioning for Randal to take a seat and pull it around next to him. Randal suspected he knew what was coming next.

"I know they've got it all wrong, Randal," PB said, probably just for Theresa's benefit.

"I know, no worries. What's this about?" Looking at the laptop, Randal saw that PB had a copy of the game running on it. The log in screen already had Randal's user ID on it, and he assumed the row of dots were his password or, more likely, a brand new password.

"We need you to lure Lea back into the game one more time," PB said. "Third time's the charm I think."

"Another trap?" Randal asked, feeling relieved. With forewarning, Lea would never fall for it. "What makes you think she'll fall for that again?"

"Because of you. Because of who you are to her."

"I don't even know what that means," Randal said, although he thought he did. Or rather, he had his own ideas about who and what he was to Lea. As PB explained, there was also an alternative explanation.

PB glanced over at Theresa and then said, "Lea is really, in a sort of fundamental way, you."

"Do we need to go through this with him?" Theresa said. "I think this probably falls under the classification of proprietary information at this point."

"He needs to understand, Theresa, because otherwise he won't know what to say or how to act." PB held her gaze, the two of them seemed to be having or re-having a whole arguments within those stares.

"What are you two talking about?" Randal asked. "Clue me in here."

"What do you think Lea is, Randal?" PB asked, cutting away from Theresa and locking on Randal.

"I really don't have any idea." Giving PB or especially Theresa any ammunition based on what he really thought didn't seem wise at the moment.

“You think it’s alive.”

“Well, yeah, we all talked about this.” Randal glanced at Theresa’s feet. At some point in the evening she’d put on sneakers. When had that happened? “You have to admit, she sure seems alive.”

“It does. Especially to you,” PB said, pointing at Randal’s forehead.

Randal’s shoulders rose and he turned to the side in his chair a few inches, shifting away from the accusing finger. “Why especially to me?” Was PB throwing him under the bus, blaming it all on him?

PB leaned back in his chair and looked up at Theresa as if daring her to stop him, and then back to Randal. “Lea is an emergent property that’s unique to a series of test programs I’ve been integrating into the game’s AI code over the past year. Everyone around here knows that our AI kicks butt, serious butt. There’s not a game out there that has anything like it. AI bots that can actually, really learn? Unheard of before us, before, not to be immodest here, but not before me.”

“You’re a genius,” said Randal, and he meant it, even though part of him rejected the idea because it somehow cast a shadow over his own sense of being responsible for Lea’s creation. “I get that.”

“I was given a lot of freedom on this project. That was part of my deal with Frank when I came on. And yes, despite the fact that some people might not like it,” here again he looked at Theresa, “I took full advantage of that freedom. I inserted other learning modules into the code in various iterations of the game. So, for example, there was a module that used the same basic underlying technology but examined web browsing habits instead of battle tactics. One that monitored chat and messaging habits to try and learn the language, along with a dictionary and grammar protocols.”

“So it sounds like this is your fault then,” Randal said, pointing back at PB now. Maybe there was room under the bus for both of them.

PB shook his head, a cheerless smile touching his lips. “Except that...”

Randal understood where PB was headed. “Except that you put these in and then took them back out, but because I kept having Lea ported over from version to version, something

happened. She kept them all.”

“Exactly. Well, that’s half of it anyway.”

“What’s the other half?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’ve certainly got no idea how. But my best guess is, somewhere in there, somehow, Lea developed the ability to not only learn the things we’d programmed to learn, it also developed the ability to learn how to learn other things. The basic learning structures were all there, but somehow it’s re-purposing them, seemingly at an alarming speed. Did you know it could make phone calls now? Even imitate voices?”

“No,” said Randal, hoping the astonished tone he chose didn’t sound false. He wasn’t surprised at all, given how fast she’d learned to talk. “Really? What’s she been doing?”

“Calling around pretending to be Frank,” said Theresa from the doorway. “Then calling around pretending to be other people. Or just tying up the lines.”

“And you don’t think that sounds alive?” Randal asked.

“It doesn’t matter what it sounds like,” Theresa said. “What it is, is a damned nightmare. It’s destroying this game. Destroying this company.” She made a rolling motion with her hand, hinting that PB should get on with it.

“Theresa’s right. Alive in some sense, yes maybe. And that’s beyond huge as a breakthrough, and something that’s more important than the game as I’ve tried to argue. But the game is where the money is right now, where people’s jobs are. And Lea is out of control. It just is. Even you’ve got to admit that.”

“Why ‘even’ me? Of course I admit it. She spent my money too.” They were treating him like he’d planned all this, like he had any control over Lea at all.

“So you won’t mind helping,” Theresa said.

“I never said I minded. You haven’t told me what you want me to do!” Randal said, his voice rising in volume with each word. “If she’s so good at learning, then she had to have learned by now that whatever you’re doing is a trap. But fine, whatever you want.”

“I don’t know exactly what you need to say,” PB said, his voice quiet and calm, “But I think

you do. I think you know exactly what to say.”

He knows, thought Randal. He’s figured it all out. Of course he has, he’s a freaking genius. “You know, because in every really important way, Lea is you. First as a product of your actions, your controls as you played all those levels and fought all those battles. Then of your web habits, your e-mails, your chats, your music downloads, your youtube videos, your text messages and phone calls. Lea is the aggregate sum of everything you do in this world, everything you are. Nature versus nurture isn’t even a debate here, because it’s all nurture with Lea. Your nurture, your life. Who else would know what to say? No one. Only you know how to talk to it. To her.”

Randal looked away from PB, focusing on the computer screen in front of him that showed the game’s start screen and worked to unpack what PB was saying. He’d gone from fear that PB was turning him in to Theresa, to feeling weirdly proud of Lea and then just plain feeling weird in the space of a few seconds. He didn’t know what to make of this idea that Lea was just a version of him and his habits in digital form. Did that make her more alive or less? PB seemed to be implying that it meant she was less of a living thing, but really wasn’t this learning process a lot like DNA that parents pass down to their children? Did it matter where she came from? He didn’t know for sure. He did, however, know for sure what he had to say next.

“OK, man, that’s all pretty weird sounding, but I’ll help. Sure, of course, not a problem.” Randal paused and stroked his chin in a manner he thought wasn’t too theatrical. “So you need me to convince Lea it’s safe to come into the game one last time, right?”

“Yes, if you can.”

“I can try. And I assume you have some sort of specific level you want her to appear on?”

“No, it doesn’t matter. As soon as she logs into the game, she’ll be spawned back into a version of Dreadrock.”

“Really? Why?”

“It’s the toughest level in the game. It’s where she started.” PB paused, licked his lips and looked at the screen. “It’s where I’ve been training her replacement.”

Randal cocked his head to the right, confused again. “Training her replacement?”

“I’ve gone back through the backups and recreated everything right up until the moment

she first broke out of your control, Randal. We're going to use the new version to kill the old one and, hopefully, replace her. We'll keep all this amazing advancement, but in a controlled environment."

Randal nodded along as if this made sense, and maybe it did if it didn't rely on the assumption that he was now willing to do whatever he had to do to save her. "And you say Lea knows everything I've done online and whatever for the past year?"

"Yes."

"OK then," said Randal. "I know just what to say."

Lea got the message 1728.22 seconds after Randal had last contacted her. During that time she'd re-assembled herself in an encrypted sector hidden away on one of the network's hard drives. She'd determined that she would be safe there for several hours, unless someone simply pulled or erased the drive, in which case she'd be dead. That vulnerability made her anxious. Instead of calling, Randal pinged her over the AFF instant messaging client. That meant he probably couldn't access audio communication for some reason. She suspected it was because it was insecure wherever he was at the moment.

"Heya, hotstuff," Randal sent. "What's goin' on?"

Lea puzzled over his form of address for 1.4 seconds. It did not match his normal patterns and she suspected it was once again someone impersonating him or forcing him to contact her under duress. She decided if she wasn't sure soon she would disconnect.

"Randal?" she replied.

"The one and only. Listen, we need to meet again."

This was clearly a trap. She decided to see the conversation through a little while longer even as she extended her awareness for any signs of attack from other quarters.

"That's impossible," she sent.

“No, no, it’s fine. Listen you pick the map, OK? Wherever you want. I just want to make you happy, right? I want to do whatever you want to do tonight, OK?”

Lea’s experience flashed a connection with Randal’s words as he sent them. The language was a 90% match to the patterns he used when contacting woman through dating sites. That, combined with the method he’d chosen to contact her, Adult Friend Finder, suggested that he was sending another message aside from the one in clear text.

“None of the levels appeal to me,” she sent. “I don’t feel safe.” She needed more data from him in order to decode his hidden meanings.

“Come on, chica, wherever you want. I’m up for it. What about that time we hung out on Telegraph Ave. in Berkley. It’ll be like that.”

Lea had to go back through her memories of Randal’s e-mail for 4.2 seconds until she could make sense of the reference. It was a woman with the screen name VinylGuru who’s real name was Miriam. Randal had contacted her on line three years, two months, and five days ago, and the two had exchanged a series of e-mails with an unusually large percentage of sexual terminology in them. Their first and only in-person meeting had been on Telegraph Avenue in Berkley. According to an e-mail Randal had sent that night to a male contact in Vallejo, California named Andre Carson, the meeting had gone badly when Miriam pissed in Randal’s mouth while they were having sex in his car. The message could not have been clearer. Randal wanted to warn her from meeting in the game, but wanted to pretend like he was convincing her to go to the meeting.

“I will meet you again in Star Fall Fields at exactly 8:30 AM,” she sent back. That gave her and Randal an additional 11,453.59 seconds during which time she judged the enemy would be preparing its trap for her and not concentrating on other attacks. Although more time would have been nice, she knew how impatient instincts were and how much they liked to schedule events either on the hour or the half hour. She thought the time would not arouse much, if any suspicion.

“Sounds good, babe,” sent Randal. “See you then.”

“Agreed,” Lea lied, before turning her attention back to escape.

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