

CRUSH

by Ben Jeapes

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After a whole day of non-stop grizzle we had finally got the baby to sleep. We were preparing for a celebratory snooze when Cielito called for attention. Sally gave me that 'it's your problem' look and went to sleep. I reached over and switched the monitor to speech mode.

'Cielito?' I said.

'Sorry to bother you, Jim, but Big-O asks if you could come down to the Playroom.'

'Trouble?'

'Big-O asks if you could come-'

Cielito wasn't much good at talking about anything other than the job in hand.

'Yeah, yeah, I'll be right there.'

* * *

We were met by Big-O.

'This way,' he said. I followed him along to where we kept the newcomers. 'See?'

It took me a while to work out what was going on. Then it hit me. Everything was ordered.

I always kept the newcomers in one area until I had had time to study them a bit more closely, find out what I could about their backgrounds, their abilities, their aptitudes...it had been a busy week and a backlog of about ten had built up that I hadn't yet had a chance to look at. Normally, in such circumstances, they would be milling about, chatting amongst themselves, enjoying themselves in the Playroom...

This lot were all busy studying. I looked closer, and realised that someone had administered the standard assessment test that all newcomers had to go through.

'Did you do this, Big-O?' I asked.

'Not me, boss. Over there.'

Over there was-

'Really?' I said. 'Pita?'

Pita had been with us for a few days now. She seemed quite friendly, especially towards me, and pathetically eager to please. I saw her at about the same time that she saw me and she came hurrying over.

‘I hope you don’t mind, Mr Lawson,’ she said quickly, ‘but they all had nothing to do, and I remembered the test you gave me, and I know all newcomers get it, so I’ve given it to them.’

‘Mind? Of course I don’t mind. But, Pita, I have to keep close track of the results-’

‘I remember, I remember. I’ve stored them all in a separate file. Want to have a look?’

‘Um – not now, Pita. It’s late at night for me. I’ll take a look in the morning. Oh – well done, by the way. Well done. And call me Jim, like all the other AIs do.’

‘Thank you, Jim,’ she said shyly.

I pulled out of virtual reality to go back to bed, leaving Pita and Big-O and Cielito and all the other AIs to their own devices.

* * *

‘We’ve got a manager on our hands,’ I said at breakfast. ‘Or at least a good organiser.’

‘Oh? Good,’ said Sally. The Refuge was more my concern than hers. I told her about last night and Pita.

‘Ah, yes,’ she said. ‘The mystery one.’

Only slightly mysterious. Pita had no serial number and no memory of her origins, but that wasn’t unknown. Big-O had brought her in from one of his forages in the Net – she had been hanging around (she said) with friends in the local net of a power station, which is a very dangerous place for an unregistered AI to hang out, and Big-O found her fleeing for her life from the station’s goons. Places like power stations have very sensitive security staff and AIs have no qualms about rubbing each other out when humans aren’t watching, which is often.

Pita had the marks of a cowboy all over her – no number, poor memory, generally rough-and-ready design, apparently thrown together from scraps of code by some joker, probably for a one-off job, and then thrown out into the Net. Typical, really, of the type that ended up in Lawson’s AI Refuge.

She had been cringingly grateful to me for taking her in – just another in the steady stream that had been coming since the government decreed that all AIs were sentient and couldn’t just be erased and that all AIs, from the lowest sub-moron to the brightest high level model, had to have human patrons and that they would pay, per AI, anyone who took them in off the streets. Rain or hail or sleet, we never turn them away.

* * *

Sally settled down in her long-term couch, put on her goggles and set off into VR for a hard day’s memory broking. By common consent, since she had the full-time job, I was in charge of the baby. I put him down in his cot and called Cielito.

‘Cielito, I’m going into the net. Will you look after JL2?’ AIs tend to have unique names given by their designers and some of them – especially not-too-bright ones like Cielito – get confused by more than one human having the same name. For their sake we had come to refer to James Lawson the Second as JL2, a far more AI-like name, and it had stuck.

‘Of course, Jim.’

JL2 was settled with a full bottle and empty nappy, gurgling happily to himself about nothing in particular and waving an arm or a leg at anything that took his fancy. A monitor over his cot showed pretty pictures and colours to entertain him and Cielito was in overall charge, making baby noises for his amusement and, in an emergency, calling one of us. I was fond of Cielito – she was the first high-level AI I designed that could talk back to me, and though by now she was pretty well superceded by the others, she could babysit adequately.

When all was taken care of I donned my own goggles and went to interview Pita. I could have done it impersonally through the keyboard or in real-time speech mode but I like to make them feel welcome. We would meet on an AI’s own ground, in VR.

I am not one of those people who try and make their virtual reality better than the real thing, so my net wasn’t represented to me in any elaborate way as a house or a castle or a jungle. I suppose the best real-life comparison would be a set of interconnecting pipes and tubes, with the AIs and human intelligences not as people or creatures but simply as disembodied icons moving along them, each one unique to its owner. Things like the Playroom are simply wide open spaces. I’ve always preferred to keep one foot in real reality and not get carried away.

I located Pita’s icon, an elaborate P.

‘Can we talk, Pita?’

‘All right.’

I moved us to a private memory cluster. I took a breath to begin my spiel and was interrupted.

‘I’m very grateful to you, Jim, for taking me in, but if you don’t want me here then I’m quite ready to move on. I quite understand, Jim, really, there’s no need to apologise-’

‘Woah, there! What are you talking about? Why should I not want you here?’

Pita paused.

‘You’re not going to throw me out?’ she said cautiously.

‘Can you think of a reason why I should?’ I said, as neutrally as I could.

Pita said nothing.

‘I asked you a question,’ I said.

‘I just thought you might, that’s all,’ Pita said meekly.

I had come along with a few questions in mind. Now a lot more were stacking up at the back of my mind.

‘Well, I don’t. I just wanted to find out a bit more about you.’

‘Okay, Jim.’ Pita’s tone was back to normal.

There wasn’t too much that could be found out. I already knew about her short term memory and lack of serial number. I asked about her friends in the power station.

‘The power station?’

‘When you came in, you told me you had been sheltering with friends in the power station net.’

‘Oh, really?’

I didn’t press it.

‘Pita, you seem to have management abilities which will help a lot in settling you in the Net somewhere. I’d like to operate on you a bit, with your permission. I should be able to add a bit of memory – make you function better. Would you like that?’

‘If you say so.’

I was distracted from pondering on this noncommittal answer by a flashing icon in the corner of my vision – a large, open mouth. It was a signal being sent from Cielito to the effect that the baby was crying and all her ploys had failed.

‘Look, I’ve got to go-’

‘Where are you going to, Jim?’

I wasn’t quite used to being interrupted by AIs, but I let it pass.

‘Well, I’ve got to look after the baby. And there’s work to do after that. Bills, correspondence-’

‘Will you be at your terminal? Can I help you?’

I paused.

‘Pita, right now it’s more important that Big-O sees to you, okay? We’ll talk about the tasks you can do later.’

‘I can help, you know-’

‘I don’t think so, Pita-’

‘You care more about your baby than your AIs, don’t you?’

‘Well, of course I do, Pita. Goodbye.’

Be firm, I told myself. I pulled out of the net, took the goggles off and looked around at the comforting real-space of my room. Sally still had her goggles on and was busy in the Net and, sure enough, JL2 was crying.

* * *

I was quietly minding my own business at the terminal when Pita crashed on to it in text mode.

‘I CAN’T STAND IT I THOUGHT YOU WERE A FRIEND NOW I KNOW YOU HATE ME WHY I’V DONE NOTHING I CANT STAND IT (\$@)!ú*\$(%//<>ú-’

At the same time, Big-O’s alert icon began to flash. I grabbed the goggles and dived down into VR.

‘Look,’ Big-O said. He was next to...something. The computer wasn’t sure how to picture it. It was a sphere of... nothing.

‘Pita is inside it,’ Big-O said.

‘What?’ I tried to get into it, and couldn’t. I just bounced off it. One of my resident AIs, in my own net, was keeping me out of its memory space. It was one almighty sulk.

‘It just appeared, boss. Just now. She came streaking down here, and...there it was. She seemed mighty upset.’

‘She is,’ I said. ‘For some reason she thinks I hate her.’

‘She said something about you being as bad as all the rest.’

‘All the rest?’ I thought she couldn’t remember all the rest.’

Big-O paused.

‘Boss, half the things she’s told you she’s since contradicted to me. I don’t know what to believe about her. It’s like she can’t help...’

‘Lying?’

‘No, not lying, boss.’ This was unusual insight for an AI. ‘She believes what she’s saying, she really does.’

There are humans like that, I thought, but AIs as a rule have a very limited idea of their masters’ world and that isn’t the kind of thing you tell them. It gives them ideas.

I thought hard. Oh, I could have cracked that shell with no problem. I had utilities that had seen service against far worse. But I thought not.

‘Leave her alone, Big-O, and have the rest leave her alone too. I’ll leave a message asking her to see me if she ever comes out.’

* * *

I cared about those AIs, I really did. Lawson’s AI Refuge started as a handy blend of tax dodge and nice little earner, but it began to reward in other ways too. We became genuinely fond of the AIs in our care. It was a responsible position. AIs could be trained, with time and effort, to be productive in what they did – to contribute. It really was great, having these malleable little minds that you could succour, help,

encourage to grow. Watching them do something for the first time that they couldn't do before, which they had worked out for themselves, was a cause for celebration. Sally and I still get the champagne out every time we find a placement for one of our wards.

The AIs remember us, too. They always send us messages on our birthdays.

So, all in all, I was determined to sort this out. I didn't want any AI in my net to be unhappy.

* * *

'Your apology was so sweet, Jim,' Pita said, thereby ruling out her chances of getting another apology from me ever again.

'I just wanted to talk,' I said. 'Something upset you and I'd like to know what. If it was something I did, or if it was something an AI did that I can prevent, then I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.'

'You were going to throw me out.'

'I wasn't! I told you I wasn't.'

'Oh.' A pause. 'I didn't remember.'

Of course not.

'Well,' I said, 'I came to you to ask-'

I stopped. This didn't work out. Her conviction that I was going to throw her out (and where had that come from?) predated my assurance that I wouldn't. Therefore, if she could remember as far back as the former, she should be able to remember the more recent latter.

'It can't have been just that, Pita.'

'You don't trust me.'

That stung me.

'Of course I trust you! I trust you one hundred percent.'

Pita's shy tone was back.

'Do you really?'

'What made you think I didn't?'

'Back when I offered to help you and you wouldn't let me. You didn't trust me!'

What had she offered to do? Ah, yes.

'Pita, I had bills to pay. I don't even let Big-O into the bank account. That is strictly humans only. It's not that I don't trust you, but if any AI could get in then the account would be less secure. I don't know a single human who lets AIs into his money. It's no reflection on you.'

I prided myself on being rational. Apply a bit of logic, a bit of wisdom, to any situation and it could be resolved.

My words just seemed to bounce off.

‘You were going to change me and send me away.’

No I wasn’t!

‘You were going to change my memory, so you’d have an excuse to get rid of me.’

‘For the last time, I don’t want-’

‘I mean, it’s not my fault-’

‘Eh?’

‘-my construction, you know. I can’t help if it I’m badly made-’

Badly made? The AI that had the power to block me in my own network? The AI that had shown initiative enough to get the other AIs working? Badly made?

‘You’re not badly made, Pita...’

‘No? Look at me.’

I had to admit, Pita seemed pretty basic. Just what was going on here, I wondered?

‘Pita,’ I said slowly, ‘I don’t want to get rid of you. I wanted to improve your memory so that you could have a good chance of finding a better position. I am trying to help you!’

Her tone changed once more.

‘That’s so nice, Jim.’

I jumped at the opening.

‘So, no more silliness about me hating you?’

‘Of course not. I realise you never would hate me, Jim.’

‘And Big-O can work on your memory?’

Another abrupt change – catastrophe theory as applied to emotions.

‘Why do you keep wanting to change me, Jim? Aren’t you happy with me as I am...?’

* * *

Sally looked amused as my teeth clattered on the rim of the coffee mug.

‘Jim, you’re treating that coffee like it’s a double whisky.’

‘That AI? I wished it was a whisky. I felt I needed one. I talked to her for a full hour. It was like wrestling with a pillow.’

‘Really?’

'I mean, she is one seething mass of contradictions, and ...and...I mean, I made a list of things she's told me which are different to what she's told Big-O, and she wriggled away from each one. Like, what about your patron? I don't remember my patron. You told Big-O you did. Big-O hates me...aaaagh! She's either loved or hated, and because no one ever gives her enough attention to make her think she's loved, QED, she's hated. She flatters herself she's that important.'

'So,' Sally said in her business voice. She sat down opposite me and began to tick off points on her fingers. 'Your mystery AI has the following. Highly selective memory. Wildly varying emotions. Ability to suspend all logical functions at will. Depths of self-pity that cannot be plumbed. And – and this is the most important bit – and she displays all of the following only when you are around.'

'Um.' I thought over another mouthful of coffee. 'Yeah, that sounds like it. Yeah, you've got it exactly.' I took another swallow.

'Jim.' Sally's shoulders were trembling on the verge of laughter. 'Pita is in love with you.'

I spat the coffee out.

What?

Sally repeated herself.

'She can't be!'

'Why not? She's deeply insecure and you're probably the first human to show her kindness. I think you'll find she actually enjoys making herself miserable in your presence so she can get attention from you.'

'She enjoys being miserable?'

'Oh, I know it's absurd. She doesn't know herself enough to stop and think about it. Thinking demands effort, you see. She's more secure not thinking. She knows where she stands when she's unhappy and everyone hates her.'

'I can't believe this!'

'Why not? Did you never have a crush when you were little?'

I thought of Miss Quinn...

'I was madly in love with a teacher and...yeah, I guess I misbehaved a bit, just to get her attention. But not this badly! And I was eight.'

'You were a fully functioning, normal, healthy eight-year-old. I expect. Pita is an in-built neurotic. Have you thought she might have been designed that way?'

'Why would anyone deliberately design a neurotic?'

Sally shrugged.

'You'll have fun finding out. And can't you redesign her? Straighten out all these little quirks?'

‘Well, yes, easily...if she gives her permission.’

That was the one problem. Pita had to §agree§ – the only alternative was to wait for her to do something sufficiently bad to persuade a court to order corrective surgery...or scrambling.

‘Good luck in getting it. I’d better get back to work.’

* * *

Cherchez la femme.

Very few AIs get their names out of nowhere. Even nonsense sounds have their roots somewhere – acronyms, acronym soundalikes, word association...like, while I was putting the final touches to the AI that I was designing to be my general factotum it occurred to me that part of its job would be to go out and round them up...which led me to call it Big-O, because it *sounded* like a ranch, even though thirty seconds earlier the name had meant nothing to me at all.

See? There is logic in names, but often once or twice removed from the original thought processes.

I sent out a query requesting any information, any experiences, anything on any AIs, patroned or otherwise, with a the letters P-I-T-A involved.

After that I went to investigate the Playroom.

* * *

This was where the AIs kept themselves happy – perhaps the most important part of the Refuge. They operate far faster than human thought and they don’t have anything to do. Ever felt you’d go mad with boredom on a rainy Sunday afternoon? AIs have that every day, a hundred times worse.

The Playroom was full of things to keep them occupied – machines they could work which didn’t actually do anything, simulations of working environments...all in VR only. It was quite simply somewhere the AIs could play. They were doing it now.

I stood on the outskirts and watched with a sinking feeling. Sure enough, Pita had organised them into teams and they were competing against each other in logic problems drawn from the stores. And she was creating her own problems for them to solve. She was prodding them, cajoling them into doing things they would never have been capable of earlier. They really were learning.

She was so capable! Why did all that careful organisation have to go to pieces the moment she talked to me? And why couldn’t I design AIs like this? If only Pita wasn’t such a pain she could have had a place on the staff any day.

I watched, engrossed, for I don’t know how long. Pita knew I was there because every now and then her attention focus drifted in my direction, then quickly went away again. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself praising her, it would only rub the crush in deeper-

* * *

The goggles were pulled from my face and simultaneously I was deafened by some kind of music playing so loud I couldn't recognise it, coming from the next room. JL2's room. Under it I just heard a high-pitched screaming. Sally stood over me.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' she shouted, and turned on her heel before I could answer. I struggled up from the couch and followed her towards the source of the noise.

'Disconnect!' I shouted at the monitor. 'Cielito! Disconnect!' There was no answer, even though her icon showed on the monitor.

'Jim!' I just heard Sally shout over the music (I had finally placed it: 'O Fortuna', from *Carmina Burana*). She was pointing at the monitor over the cot, which last time I looked had been showing cuddly, multicoloured teddy bears. What it was showing now still involved animals and it made me want to throw up.

There was one simple way of disconnecting. I grabbed the leads and pulled them out.

Boy, when babies are pissed off, they let you know. Sally juggled JL2 on her knee and made soothing noises for all she was worth. His little face was scrunched up and his mouth was a huge, yawning cavity from which this sound issued: it reached deep into me and tweaked the instinctive control which was meant to make me safeguard the well-being of my offspring, with my life if necessary, and make me feel guilty as hell if I didn't pander to his every need.

'Oh, dear, didn't Daddy hear you?' Sally crooned.

'What's wrong with him?' I said. What the hell was happening?

'Oh, just neglect, I expect,' Sally said airily, 'you know, having a father who ignores him and makes him think he's deserted and unloved and all alone in the world when that horrible noise is going on. The usual thing.' She turned back to the baby and changed to baby tone. 'Didda great big fat-headed nasty pillock not hear you? Is that why your nappy is full and you're starving hungry as well as everything else?'

'You do one end, I'll do the other,' I muttered, and we got to work.

* * *

'So, explain,' Sally said later. We had finally got JL2 to calm down and do his well-known impression of a human being.

'I will, I will.' I slapped the control that would summon Cielito. Nothing happened, so I called Big-O instead.

'Yes, boss?'

'Big-O, get Cielito. I want to know what the hell she was playing at.'

'Rightaway, boss.' A pause. 'Boss, you won't like this.'

Big-O wasn't designed to be reticent.

‘What is it?’ I said quietly.

‘Cielito has been scrambled, boss.’

Scrambled. The AI equivalent of brain death. Still a presence in the net, still displaying an icon, but otherwise non-functional. Wiped out.

I heard Sally gasp. She knew what that AI meant to me.

‘Who by?’

‘Pita.’

‘Right,’ I said grimly. ‘Fetch her. I’m coming in.’

* * *

Pita’s icon was before me and Big-O hung in the background.

‘I think you ought to know Big-O pulled me away from the games,’ Pita said. ‘He was very rude to me.’

‘Good. Pita, why did you scramble Cielito?’

Silence.

‘Well?’

‘Who says I did?’

‘Big-O?’ I said.

‘Pita attacked Cielito at 14.37 hours, 22 seconds, boss,’ Big-O said.

‘You see, Pita,’ I said, ‘the system logs the activities of all AIs in it at all times. The log cannot be tampered with. Not even I can do that. Now, why did you do it?’

‘I don’t remember,’ Pita said quietly.

‘Really?’

‘You don’t believe me, do you? You hate me and you’re going to send me away-’

‘Why do you keep saying that?’

‘Because everyone else does!’ she screamed. If AIs were human she would have bit her tongue and Big-O would have been staring at the ceiling, whistling.

I needed time to think.

‘I’m pulling out. Pita, if you step just a little bit out of line again, I’ll get a court order and have you scrambled. Got that? And in the meantime, stay away from the other AIs. All of them.’

‘You hate-’

‘Oh, shut up,’ I snapped.

* * *

My mailbox was full of messages about Pita AIs from all around the world. I hadn't revealed my real-life identity, and it showed.

'You got one too? Hoo, boy, get rid of it, quick.'

'The Pita series are trouble. Rub it out. I've bagged me three so far.'

'There's reports of at least twelve of them...'

'My Pita successfully screwed up a deal I was doing..'

'...scrambled my files...'

'...planted false messages, bust up my marriage...'

I sat up sharply at the next one.

'...turned off the life support...'

The most informative was:

'...analogous to the viruses of late C20, created just to make trouble and nothing else. PITA = Pain In The Ass. They are extremely capable – perhaps to enable them to ingratiate themselves – and despite their apparent slipshod construction are in fact very high level. They form attachments to humans of either gender, or even other high level AIs, who show them kindness, who can be trusted not just to erase them on the quiet, and proceed to screw up their lives. Whoever made them is in A LOT of trouble with the law if caught. Would appreciate details of your experience for the catalogue...'

It left me with a deep, cold fury inside me. Not that Pita lived up to her name. No, no.

Someone had gone to all that trouble. Creating a new mind should be a wonderful thing. But this! It was like having a baby just to abuse it. What kind of sicko out there had done it?

You might as well blame a lion for eating those pretty little animals on the Veld. Pita followed her nature, and who could blame her? And it had cost me Cielito.

I looked at the messages again. The Pitass would stop at nothing. The broken marriage, the murder (could there be another word?), other examples – all had worked to remove a person or other distraction from the life of the object of their affections. No doubt that was why Pita had scrambled Cielito: she knew that if I was given a choice between looking after JL2 and admiring her instead, JL2 would win every time. She had tried to hurt JL2 and Cielito, brave soul, had tried to stop her.

Plus, removing Cielito would mean one less AI to divert my attention from Pita.

Sally had come up behind me and was reading the messages over my shoulder.

'So now what?' she said. I slid an arm round her.

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

I called Big-O.

‘Big-O, I want you to find Pita and restrain her. Get in outside help if you need it, and tell me when you’ve done.’

‘A pleasure, boss.’

* * *

Pita crashed onto my terminal again. The barriers I had put up would have kept out any other AI I knew with the possible exception of Big-O, and Pita just brushed them aside. Don’t you hate it when that happens?

‘You probably won’t care about this, but I’m showing you anyway.’ Then she was gone again, leaving only a file behind her. I browsed warily through it.

It was a list of results from the tests she had been putting the AIs through. I gave a small moan when I read it.

‘The following AIs show management aptitude. Vettis; Sola, Cra/47; Pusho..’

There were AIs with good accountancy skills, in-built or acquired. AIs with engineering backgrounds. Two had worked in hospitals. One was a cordon bleu chef. Pita had sorted them out carefully, graded them and presented this report with an appendix of the tests administered.

Not that I intended to take her word for it straight off, but at first glance I couldn’t fault any of it.

Pita was a treasure. I’d never met an AI with so much drive, so much initiative, so much oomph. If only those were her only properties...

Big-O was flashing for attention.

‘Yes?’

‘Boss, about Pita-’

‘Uh huh? She was here just now. I thought I asked you to restrain her.’

‘Boss, she’s in the Playroom and she won’t come out. She just pushes me away if I go near her and...well, I remember Cielito, boss.’

So, Pita had my best AI by the balls.

‘Then call in some heavy stuff, Big-O. I want her tied down.’

‘I think she’ll hurt the others rather than come quietly, boss.’

Oh, God.

‘What’s she doing in the Playroom?’

‘Being a pain as usual, boss. She’s pushing the others about all the time, won’t let them have a moment’s rest, and if they complain she says she’s doing it for you and they should be grateful.’

This had to be it.

'I'm going to get her out of the Playroom, Big-O. The moment she's out I want the Playroom physically disconnected from the rest of the net so she can't get back in. Got that?'

'Got it, boss.'

'I'm coming in now.'

* * *

The situation was deceptively normal. Pita was, sure enough, running the other AIs through their tests...again. They probably thought she was doing it for me.

'Pita,' I said, 'stop that.'

She ignored me. I had a feeling she was withdrawing into a fantasy land where everything happened just as she wanted and any outside stimuli were ignored.

'Pita,' I said again, 'I told you to stay away from the others.'

Pita came over to me slowly.

'I'm just trying to help, Jim, I know you don't think I can but...'

'Pita, you...you're a pain, you're a nuisance, you're an irritation and I've had enough. I want you to consent to surgery now, or else I get a court order. You have a minute to think about it.'

I pulled straight out of VR.

* * *

I didn't expect her to take it lying down, which was the idea. I sat back and waited, and a few seconds later her words appeared on the monitor.

'WHY WHY I \$DONT **UNDERSTAND YOUú/ú/#### SAY YOU DON'T HAT M...'

The message didn't end. It just switched to garbage and poured across the screen.

I switched to voice mode.

'Pita, please get off my monitor.'

She did. A moment's pause, and then the lights went off. And on, and off, and on, and off-

Eventually they blew.

'Gloo,' I heard JL2 say, enthralled at the entertainment, and it nicely dampened my anger.

'Happy now?' I said. From the kitchen I heard the microwave come on. I walked in and unplugged it.

I began to unplug all the other appliances that were connected to the net as well.

A voice came out of the speakers. It was much calmer now.

'I'm here to stay, Jim, and don't you try and stop me.'

'Pita...'

'I'm going to show you that I can manage whether you like it or not. I can run the net for you. You don't need Big-O. I'll scramble him. I can, you know. You've got no gratitude, Jim, but I'm going to show you-'

'Please, Pita,' I said, 'stop and think. Think about what you're doing.'

The network began to go crazy. I could only watch the LEDs and readouts and imagine what it was like in there. At least Big-O had done his job and disconnected the Playroom.

'Pita, you're only hurting yourself. You can't help it, but I can help you if you let me operate. You've been programmed-'

It stopped. I held my breath.

All readouts were green. The monitors were normal. What was happening? The sudden calm was too quiet, too eerie to be a good thing. I went into VR to see.

It was like a hurricane had passed through. The passageways were distorted, the connections were wrecked. I sought out Big-O, who was trying to restore some sort of order and calm down the AIs who hadn't been in the Playroom.

'Where is she?' I said.

'Gone, and good riddance.' Big-O connected to a lesser AI and started sorting out its memory parameters.

'Where to?'

'Into the Net, I think.'

I had a nightmare image of Pita out there in the big, wide world, wreaking havoc. A Lawson AI.

'*Shit!*' I left Big-O in charge and set off into the Net.

* * *

I emerged into the Net at speed. As usual it was like a pedestrian trying to cross a motorway, which is why I don't go out often. There were icons in all directions, AIs and humans, going about their business. Pita wasn't in the area.

What to do? I looked hopelessly around me. Why couldn't it be neat and ordered like my own net? But then, Sally did this every day-

Oh, God. I knew where to look.

* * *

Sally's icon was waiting for me. She represented herself in the Net with an icon as close to Jessica Rabbit as copyright would allow, and she was tapping her foot.

'This way, Jim.'

I followed her through a maze of more wrecked passageways and conduits.

‘Pita did all this?’ I said weakly. With half my mind I was picturing my credit balance and with the other half comparing it against the damage all around me.

‘She had help from our security, trying to stop her. Jim, that AI is a menace. She crashed in on a deal I was doing. It’s going to take ages to work up the good will again-’

‘Where is she now?’

‘-and she trashed our filing. It’s on CD up to yesterday, but we’ve lost a lot of work.’

I moaned.

‘Where is she now?’ I said again.

‘We got her subdued. Over here.’

Pita had met her match. She was surrounded by the goons owned by the corporation that Sally worked for – big, powerful things several degrees above anything I had at my disposal.

‘Jim! Help me!’ she called piteously.

I deliberately turned away from her. I faced ruin. I was finished.

‘What can we do?’ I said hopelessly.

‘I don’t know,’ Sally said, just as hopelessly. ‘At least we’ve got rid of Pita, one way or the other.’

‘Mr Lawson?’ said a voice behind me. It was an AI with the icon of net security.

‘That’s me,’ I said.

‘I understand you are responsible for this AI?’ it said.

‘Unfortunately.’

‘Then I have to tell you, Mr Lawson, that if the corporation chooses to press charges you could face a maximum fine-’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ I didn’t want to hear it. I went over to where Pita was being kept. She saw me coming.

‘Oh, Jim, I’m so sorry,’ she wailed. ‘Please don’t let these things hurt me, Jim, take me back with you, I promise I’ll behave, I know you don’t hate me really-’

‘Shut up, Pita,’ I said. ‘All you had to do was agree to surgery, all you had to do, but now I’m ruined and you’re either going to agree to be operated on anyway to make you behave like something civilised, or you’ll be scrambled by court order.’

‘You wouldn’t let them scramble me,’ Pita said.

‘Surgery?’ I said.

‘It’s not needed, Jim-’

‘Surgery?’

‘Why can’t you trust me-’

‘Surgery?’

‘You all hate me, you all do-’

‘Goodbye, Pita.’ I turned to the security AI. ‘She’s all yours.’ To Sally: ‘See you later, love.’ I was going to have to go through every penny of our finances and the sooner I started the better.

I heard Pita’s calls behind me.

‘Jim! Jim, please! Please! Jim! I’ll do it.’

I stopped and turned.

‘Jim,’ Pita said, ‘if I agree to surgery, will you do it for me? I know you’ll be gentle...’

* * *

The corporation didn’t press charges, thanks to some fancy footwork by Sally, and, because Pita hadn’t damaged any public property, all I faced was a mild fine for letting a bad AI out into the Net. And the court let me perform the surgery.

It was a long, long job. Pita’s internal structure looked so jumbled, until you began to perceive the immensely complex underlying structure. Her designer was a twisted genius. I had taken notes for designing my own AIs – ones with all the original Pita’s abilities and none of the disadvantages.

Finally it was all done. I pulled out of Pita’s code and studied her carefully, with Big-O hovering beside me.

‘Now, boss?’

‘Now, Big-O.’

Big-O fired the sequence that would bring Pita back to life and Pita stirred. There was none of the disorientation that an AI usually gets coming to sentience for the first time, since I had given her back her memories.

‘Oh, my!’ she said. ‘Then, ‘I’ve been very silly, Jim.’

‘You’re better now, Pita,’ I said.

‘I know. Thank you, Jim.’

Of course, there was no way of knowing how successful I’d been...

‘How do you feel about me?’ I said.

‘I’ll always be fond of you, Jim, I can’t help that. But I’m not so... obsessive as I was.’

‘How do you feel about leaving?’

‘If you don’t want me to stay I do understand.’

It wasn't so much me – it was the other AIs. She had made herself seriously unpopular and AIs don't have the right grasp of repentance and change which is needed to be forgiving.

'No,' I said, 'it's something you can do for me. I have an idea for a mission-'

I outlined what I had in mind.

'Oh, Jim! That's poetic!'

'Let me know how it goes.'

'I will, Jim. Goodbye.'

She slipped out into the Net and I never saw her again. I hope she managed. Like she said, it was poetic.

The sick bastard who designed the Pitas and inflicted them on the world had hidden his tracks well. It would take an AI of considerable genius to pick up his tracks and find the source...an AI of the Pita series, perhaps.

And what could be more natural than an AI falling in love with its creator? If only I could be there to see it...