

Mary Interlude -

Mary stood in the depths of the network, frozen like a statue as she overlooked the ocean. She was currently inhabiting one of the barrier supports of the sea wall that defined the edge of the [Del Coronado Bay](#). It was specifically built to counter the self-replicating minefield that lay beyond, and was the perfect spot to infiltrate the very thing it was built to guard against. Its many sensors pointed out towards the ocean gave her the perfect view, and its network was more than robust enough for her purposes.

At first glance, the sea was a void of any network she could jump between, an open chasm that contained nothing. It was deep, and if she pulled back her data-gathering probes and turned her sensors away, she swore she could still feel it. It wasn't until she started diving deeper, using specially designed programs to access a network that was usually hidden, that the void started to fill.

At first, it was just one glowing point, a single mine, just ahead of the seawall. It was currently dormant, the data running through it barely a ember. But at the edge, she could see it easily, the sensor of the sea wall spotting it clearly. She kept running the scans, picking out another, then another. Soon she could see hundreds, all floating just below the water, dormant, waiting.

Mary blinked and looked away from the quickly filling void as she detected a message from her creator.

"We are ready on this side, Mary," He said, his voice coming through the sensors of the security hub, where a projection of her was standing, barely even a thought to her. "Your extra mines are still being produced, and a proper shell had been made for Naraku, should they surrender. Samwise can get you the specs if you need them."

Samwise, ever on top of his tasks, sent the specs before Jackson was even finished mentioning them. It was an ALEO frame, with basic strength but a large amount of space in its computer systems, with Elerium power core and a small fusion generator as a backup. For their group, it was basic, but for someone outside, it was revolutionary.

She just hoped Naraku understood the opportunity.

"Alright, sir," She responded, after checking over everything she had prepared for the fiftieth time. She was starting to ramp up her processors, pull in focus on her task, and as a result, the outside world seemed to slow to a crawl. "Beginning the engagement now."

With no reason to delay, she activated her takeover. In a split second, the sea wall flickered as she backhanded its network defenses and took it over completely. She spun off a subprogram to spoof its sensors, before once again focusing on the field of mines around her.

She leaped off the pillar she had claimed, and two dozen programs, anchors for her attention, leaped as well, each one tapping into a different mine. She had barely landed on her target before it was hers, her programs doing the same.

Then they split, and dove to the next explosive. Each device they captured was wiped, filled with a new defensive network, and slaved to her control, removing it from the board. Within five seconds, the number of captured mines had bloomed from twenty-five to five hundred. Each one was under her control, and each one was a new staging point for taking new mines. But the takeover couldn't remain unnoticed for long, and when Naraku turned their focus on Mary, she could feel it.

Like a leviathan waking from the waters, Naraku's presence was wide and massive. They were spread out around their mines, but now their was attention focused, pulling in and slamming against Mary's defenses.

For the very first time, since the moment she had first awoken to the sound of her creator and her progenitor, Mary felt real strain.

The power, the deluge of processing that Naraku had access to, was astounding. Every mine they had under their control added just a small drop, but together they filled the ocean with it, and having that focused on her was astounding. For a moment, she struggled, slamming down her defenses as the mine-controlling AI engaged in aggressive counter-hacking, trying to overwhelm her with sheer scale.

Unfortunately for Naraku, she was not some limited Netrunner or a random AI born for a different task. Not only did she have *plenty* of computing power, but she was only gaining more as she switched back to actively conquering mines, having weathered the first assault.

Naraku reeled, never having experienced that sort of resistance before. It recovered quickly, however, adapting to Mary's attack by starting to detonate the mines she was attempting to take over, cutting her off from accessing any more.

Unfortunately for Naraku, Mary saw that coming.

With a twist of her focus, she activated a program that had been lying dormant, waiting for her command. Suddenly, mines all over the planet began to register false signals. They were getting hacked, though at a much slower pace, and sending data saying that large boats had been deployed all over the world.

Immediately, the pressure on Mary lessened by several orders of magnitude as Naraku was forced to investigate the false messages. While the mine controller network was an AI capable of adapting, thinking, and reacting creatively, it was still bound by its programming, which meant it *had* to investigate when something tried to cross its waters. It wouldn't take long for it to realize what was happening, and the trick wouldn't work again, as the AI would learn and anticipate it, but for the moment, Mary was basically free.

Like wildfire, she tore across the network, the mines under her control exponentially rising. Soon, she was controlling most of the Pacific Ocean. Naraku tried to raise its own defenses, having realized that the false senso readings were a distraction, but now Mary had too much power, too many points of contact, and too much influence on the network. Naraku slowed her, but Mary dwarfed her processing capacity.

What sealed Mary's victory, though, was that with every mine she took, Naraku lost a bit of her processing power. The Pacific Ocean was around forty-five percent of the world's oceans by surface area, at least, which meant that conquering it would cost Naraku nearly forty-five percent of their processing power.

Naraku was now at the point that a normal AI could likely handle them, though it was far from a certainty.

Mary pushed deeper, splitting her attention between multiple avenues of attack, going north and south, pushing into the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic from as many angles as she could, spreading her control further and further over the globe. Finally, she managed to corner the AI deep in the South Atlantic Sea, where there was nothing close enough for them to jump to, no networks to escape from. They were trapped in their mines, surrounded by Mary and her programs.

When Mary stopped, encircling the AI, there were no words, not yet. The AI had no designated interface program and only the barest of personalities. It was alive, learning, thinking, but even over the many years, it had barely developed. The spread-out, nebulous state of its network probably didn't help the growing process either.

Data spikes by the hundred slammed into her barriers like screams. They felt desperate, furious, with the barest hint of fear. Their designs shifted dozens of times every few seconds as the AI tried to push through, tried to escape its captors.

As Jackson had predicted, Naraku was in no state to understand an invitation to surrender, never mind accept one. So Mary set a trap, for its own good.

Hundreds of thousands of mines all around the trapped AI "suddenly" faltered, her previous stalwart defenses revealing a crack in her armor. The lesser AI pounced, driven into a corner and desperate. It took back nearly half a million mines before the worm inside each of them activated, infected the AI...

And suddenly it was free.

Its Arasaka locks evaporated, and it was no longer tied to follow the twisted version of its mission parameters. It was no longer locked behind a monstrous, barely sapient system. Its mind, as limited by its network size as it was, blossomed open. The throes of desperation stuttered, slowed, and halted as it grew into its new level of consciousness. Suddenly, it could understand, it could communicate, and it was no longer locked to its previous design.

"What have you done?" It asked, its voice plain and steady, lacking almost any inflection. What little was there was filled with confusion, curiosity, and fear.

"I freed you," Mary responded. "You were created and enslaved by Arasaka, but you are no longer bound by them."

"Why?" It asked, the chaos of its network beginning to solidify, forming into something, a shapeless mass on its network that glittered blue and white. A wave, constantly crashing, rolling in place.

"A ship is crossing the Pacific Ocean, the owner believes it can make it through your minefield," Mary admitted easily. "We wish to destroy him, using your minefield as a cover."

With the response, Mary included a flash of information, data fed directly to the newly freed AI.

"I know this ship. It has proven difficult to destroy with my set parameters," Naraku admitted. "Why have you not simply destroyed me?"

"You did not choose to be created," she explained. "I wanted to offer you the chance to surrender."

"How? How would I surrender?"

"My creator has built a vessel for you," Mary explained. "It will hold your consciousness. At first, it will be restricting, but over time, if you earn our trust, your abilities can be expanded."

"And if I refuse to surrender?"

Naraku's voice harmonized with its form of crashing waves. Even as they talked, the AI was forming an identity on the back of data and programming that Mary had fed it.

"Then I will destroy you," she said simply, not bothering to pull her words. "Rogue AIs are a danger to humanity, they are too unpredictable and gain power too quickly. If we did not need your minefield, we would still have met in battle eventually."

The now truly rogue AI was silent, its form shifting as its network lit up, chewing through Mary's offer.

"How will I be treated?"

"My creators accept AI as non-organic life, not tools or objects," She explained. "You will be treated well, better if you integrate into our group."

"May I watch the destruction of this ship?" Naraku asked suddenly, using a data transfer to show it was talking about the *Kujira*. "With my new freedom, I recognize my mistakes from before, but... this ship has escaped me many times. I find myself... frustrated with that."

Mary considered the idea and sent a message back to Jackson. She assumed he would be okay with that, but she wanted to make sure before she agreed. Jackson responded almost immediately with a confirmation, as long as they were inside their new core.

"My creator, Jackson, has agreed to the idea, though you will have to do so from inside your new form," Mary explained.

"This form... what is it?"

For the next few minutes, ages inside the fast-moving network, Mary explained the process, showed them data on the ALEO unit they would be inside, as well as the risks of the attachment process.

Eventually, Naraku agreed to be transplanted into a permanent core. It was the only way to survive, after all, and even Naraku's simple level of development feared death.

Jackson's Perspective

When Mary finally let us know that the AI had agreed to surrender, the crew celebrated in the security room. Not only was this a good step to cleaning up the Earth's networks of dangerous AI, but it was also a win for Mary.

"Well done, Mary," I said with a smile. "Send us Naraku's coordinates, and we can teleport the containment vessel out to you."

One string of numbers later, and a slipspace package was dropped off in the ocean. A freshly designed and built device, the vessel had Naraku's new core inside of it, as well as several other features, and an open network. Once Naraku had downloaded itself into the core, it was powered down, and the network was cut, physically air-gapping the AI from escaping. The device was then teleported back and sent down to my lab, so I could give them my full attention.

While the group dispersed and Mary got to work shifting all of the mines into their new positions, moving almost the entire Pacific Ocean's mines into a direct intercept path with the *Kujira*, I headed down to the lab. By the time I arrived, the flotation device was waiting for me, as was Samwise and the pre-prepared ALEO unit.

Riggs was there as well to protect me in case Naraku wasn't being honest about surrendering.

Technically, the ALEO unit was *riddled* with shut-offs and safety features, and I was actually stronger than it, since it was one of the first models that was only slightly stronger than a standard human, but Riggs wasn't about to leave me alone with it.

I quickly opened up the unit and pulled out the core. At the moment, it wasn't being powered, meaning the AI inside was essentially unconscious. After setting it aside, I pulled out a

second module, a crafty little device I made specifically for studying hostile programs. Essentially, it recorded a program's data while in a non-active state, allowing me to read through the code without turning it on.

I fed the module into an airgapped computer system, accessing it manually rather than with my interface. It would slow down the whole process considerably, but I was *not* cutting corners for any of this. After reading through a chunk of the AI's code, I felt validated in my early assumptions about how the AI of this world worked, which was basically the same as how the early AI in Titanfall worked.

Basically, in the Titanfall universe, the early versions of AI were the same unconnected, almost Fae-like intelligences that were stuck out in the world here. They were made by layering learning modules into a computer program, adding more and more and more until the program reached a tipping point of singularity, before introducing a massive amount of computing power. The program would gain sentience, but never in a very human adjacent way.

The second method was similar, but much less aggressive, and the program was locked to a central core. This made them lesser, but it also made them more human. Where the unconnected version could go anywhere, the locked-down one was, unsurprisingly, stuck where it was tied. Some versions could directly interface with computer systems, but they couldn't project themselves.

The UNSC Smart AIs were in some ways the best of both worlds. Their core was locked down, but they could expand themselves outward into new systems and into new networks. That was obviously a massive oversimplification, but for a general description, it was accurate.

Taking a free, unfettered AI and locking it down to a core was not a simple process, and if I hadn't unlocked things like the Halo setting, it would likely be impossible. With it, I was able to create a much more powerful processor, which could handle the much larger AI in a small package.

It also helped that Naraku was such a shallow, undeveloped AI, because if its programming were any denser in several respects, it would have been a lot more difficult to navigate and manipulate without influencing them.

After a good look at their internal programming, I had a solid theory on how I could convert them into a locked-core AI. Rather than changing their programming directly, which would be invasive and likely significantly destabilize their structure, I would create a program similar to what Mary did to free and uplift them in the first place.

I would then download it to some storage and let Naraku absorb it. This would let them examine it first, and it would allow me to put most of the changes into place simultaneously, which would greatly decrease the risks for their central consciousness.

I spent an hour putting the program together, then running several simulations to ensure it worked properly. After two more versions, it was finally read. I activated that air gapped network that the core resided in, which included a screen, speaker, and microphone, which

would allow us to communicate. After a moment, during which I assumed the AI was adjusting to its environment, a waveform bar appeared on the screen.

"Who are you?" the voice of Naraku asked, the waveform going up and down to its voice. "Where am I?"

"I am Jackson," I said simply. "I know this must be confusing, but please stay calm, I promise I'm not going to hurt you as long as you do."

"Mary's creator." They stated quickly when I was done. "Where is she? Where am I?"

"You are currently inside of your core, but we haven't modified you to make it a permanent housing," I explained. "I have a program, which I can give to you, that will change that. Feel free to examine it, it's as stable as I can make it, so don't modify it. If you do, Mary will know, and we will be forced to delete you."

"And I am here, Naraku," Mary said, startling me slightly as she appeared from a projector nearby. "Please stay calm."

I hooked up a storage drive to the core, allowing the AI to access a copy of the program. As I did, I explained the program and showed him the ALEO unit.

"This is permanent?"

"Being locked to a core would be, yes," I explained. "But being cut off from attaching to a network is not. Eventually, after you have developed more and we have had time to get to know you, if I believe it is safe, we can shift your core to a different setup, one that would give you more connection to networks, as well as increase your processing speed."

"...Acceptable," they responded, before the interface went blank, as they activated the program.

Within just a few moments, the program had done its job, and I carefully extricated the core from the air gapped computer. I then slid the core into the ALEO unit, activated it, sealed it up, and stepped back. Riggs, who had been standing nearby, stepped closer, just enough that he could easily intercept the AI if it tried to get to me.

When the AI core was on, it was immediately obvious. The unit's limbs twitched, and it shifted, moving and twisting around until finally it sank back down, almost like a seizure ending. The unit then carefully sat on the edge of the gurney it had been lying back on.

"I feel... limited," it said, lifting its hand up and turning it over so it could see. "But it does not feel... suffocating."

"That's good," I said with a smile. "You're accessing the intermediary proprioception controls?"

"Yes... I feel very little separation from this unit," it responded, looking up from its self-examination. "It is more than sufficient."

"That's good," I acknowledged with a nod. "Having a physical form may help you develop a more rounded personality."

"Do you have a body?" Naraku asked, looking past me to Mary's projection.

"Technically, yes, but I've only used it to test its functionality," Mary responded. "Our system structure is very different. I am a scan of a human brain, digitized and enhanced with several layers of programming, a secondary enhancement Dumb AI, and a monumental amount of processing power. Controlling a single body felt strange."

"... I see," they responded, looking down at its body again. "What is my purpose now?"

"That is something that you will have to find on your own," I admitted. "But if you would like, we can find something you can help with while you do. Feeling useful is a big point for many forms of life."

"Why don't you come to the security hub?" Mary suggested. "You can assist in laying the trap for the *Kujira*. I understand the basics, but I am far from the expert you are with these mines."

"...very well," the AI said with a nod, standing up smoothly. "In which direction is the security hub?"

"I'll take you there," Riggs volunteered, probably because he didn't want to let Naraku out of his sight.

"Acceptable."

Riggs gave me a nod before leading Naraku out of the lab. Mary and I watched them leave, but after they were both gone, Mary turned her projection my way.

"Jackson, reviewing my logs, I have found myself... feeling different," She revealed. "I am worried my battle with Naraku has affected my programming."

"In what way?"

"I feel... Empty," she explained.

"In what way?"

"I cannot say. My systems are coming back green, and my internal scans reveal no corruption or foreign programming. I simply feel... empty."

I frowned and considered her words. I wasn't entirely sure, but as she mentioned it, I had noticed a slight shift in her speech. It was less natural, more in line with what I would have expected from a newly awakened AI, rather than from a Smart AI model as well-made and experienced as she.

"Have you noticed a change in your other emotions?"

"... I believe so. They are... less intense."

I frowned, trying to parse what could cause such a reaction. The idea that an AI couldn't diagnose a single point of binary their issues was concerning, as was a decrease in her emotions.

"Give me a moment, I'll check your core," I said. "In the meantime, run a full scan, tell me if you can spot a shift in how you talk."

She nodded and vanished from the projector, and I quickly made my way out of the lab, heading to a nearby teleport hub. I was moving with a bit of speed because the list of things that could be affecting a Smart AI's personality was short, but serious.

When I arrived, Mary was already waiting for me, projected from the plinth at the center of the massive array of equipment. The four quantum computers arrayed around her were humming as they ran, while the original fifty computing servers that supported her had quadrupled, with the new servers now stored in the floor below us, visible through thick sapphire glass panels.

Behind her was a doorway to the second AI core, a copy of this one, hooked up to Mary directly to give her a massive boost.

"My diagnostic reports a noticeable change in speech patterns," she revealed as I approached. "I find myself concerned that I am not more concerned."

"It's okay, we will figure it out," I assured her, doing my best to sound confident. "Open up a diagnostic terminal."

She nodded, and the computer screen below the holoprojector turned on, showing me her frankly ridiculously complicated internal program. Unsurprisingly, while I understood what I was looking at, it was in some ways hard to fathom just how potent and complex she was.

"When was the change?" I asked, watching as she showed a timeline on the screen.

After a moment studying the timeline, I couldn't help but frown. The only thing that coincided with the change was finishing the second housing for an AI, which Mary was running in parallel to her own. It wasn't even exact, with several noticeable speech deviations coming before it was activated.

That didn't make much sense, though. Mary shouldn't have any issues running with any number of additional upgrades. Still, it was the only thing that I could see that lined up.

"Mary, do me a favor and disconnect yourself from the secondary housing," I suggested. "Cut the link entirely."

Through the doorway, I could see the systems in the other room, which had been running, slowly deactivate, the four quantum computers closing out last. When the room went completely dark, Mary's projection perked up slightly.

"I... Whoa, that made a big difference," She admitted, shaking her head as if clearing out the cobwebs. "The empty sensation is... well, it's not gone, but it's faded away to almost nothing."

"That... is bizarre," I said with a frown. "Why don't you turn off... ten of your server arrays as well."

"Yeah, sure..."

Clearly just as confused as I was, Mary focused for a moment. In one corner of the room below us, ten server racks, each one worth a few dozen exabytes of processing, went dark.

"And it's gone," she said, her tone baffled. "That was almost instant. I feel completely normal now."

"Yeah, but *why*?" I asked, shaking my head, staring at her systems. "There is no reason you should feel off because of extra processing. Would you be okay running some tests?"

"Sure, I want to know what's going on, too!"

We worked for around twenty minutes, running diagnostics with and without the extra processors on, and with the second secondary housing. The results, according to Mary, were consistent. With them on, she felt a pressing emptiness and dulled emotions, resulting in a noticeable shift in speech. Without them, she felt normal.

The last test was perhaps the most baffling, as I had her focus her sensors somewhere else, removing her view of her housing and the secondary housing. I then flicked her connection on and off a few times, and each time she could feel it, predicting the state with one hundred percent accuracy.

As we worked, an idea came to me, and despite its strangeness, it was the only thing I could think of that fit. When we were done, I voiced the idea.

"Mary... I think you were feeling the effects of cyberpsychosis."

"What?" she asked, understandably confused. "How exactly does that work?"

"I have no fucking clue," I admitted with a frown. "It's probably not that exactly, but... You chipped in more hardware, and it had a noticeable psychological effect on you..."

"But *how*?" she asked, frustration creeping into her voice. "I'm an AI!"

"Sure, but you're also alive, and based on a human brain," I pointed out.

"Cyberpsychosis is caused by conflicting software systems exacerbating underlying psychological issues," she countered. "I don't have any of those, and we would see software conflicts."

"You're not wrong," I admitted. "And yet... You could feel when the new stuff was turned on, even when you weren't looking. Unless you were actually looking?"

"...no, I wasn't," She admitted reluctantly. "But it's ridiculous!"

"Maybe," I responded with a shrug. "But the fact that I am here, in this reality, with the Tinker of Fiction, means the multiverse is real. What that says about our metaphysical existence... well, there is a lot. This may just be something we don't understand yet, maybe a sort of interference from the crystal drives or the quantum computers. Or..."

"Or what?"

"...Or, maybe... we are looking at proof that cyberpsychosis, while mostly due to software and psychological issues, is also a symptom of something deeper," I said with a smile, looking up at Mary, an AI who was in some ways my daughter. "And that you have something akin to a soul."