

The Fatal Flaw

By Jessica Eise

We never thought they would go for the water.

The blistering sun shines off the bleached bones scattered across the sand. A sharp beam of light reflects off a shard and pierces my retinas. I squint, keeping my eyes locked on the horizon. An antiquated rifle lies heavily across my knees. I replay memories of Life Before, a futile attempt to stave off the inevitable and unceasing boredom of watch duty. Everyone does watch duty, even the kids. The oasis is our liquid gold. Without it, we'll die.

A scorpion skitters across the sand, a momentary distraction from the tedium.

Humanity's greatest weakness.

Carl comes to relieve me from duty. He hands me a cup of murky water. I quickly snatch it out of his shaky hand, relieved to see he hasn't spilled any this time. The water reaches the black line on the cup, the line that marks our allotted amount. He'd never steal a sip, but he has been known to spill. Stealing water is punishable by death. Clumsiness isn't. Yet.

I pass him the rifle and he grunts, settling down onto the edge of the tower. His roughshod boots dangle into open air. Sipping slowly, I relish the water and ignore him. Carl's old. He'll die soon. Not much of an asset to our colony, but Rachel insists we keep everyone as long as they abide by the rules.

Hooking the empty cup on my belt, I climb down the rope ladder and trudge through the sand to the bunker.

Algorithms don't discriminate and machines don't think.

I don't sit and rest, but head to the library. It's my haven in our overcrowded, shitty community. I used to be a journalist. Not that anyone knows. But Rachel told me she'd give me my own quarters if I would write up a history of the AI War. It's important to keep documentation, she keeps saying, like a broken record. But we're back to hand-written documents and until someone figures out how the hell to reinvent the hand-run printing press again, I don't see the fucking point. But she checks my progress every evening, making me read it out loud to the community. We have to remember, she says.

But all I want to do is forget. My beat was tech. I was at the forefront of the whole bloody mess. The world's first virtual war correspondent. I was famous.

I was also arrogant and a fool.

AI uses logic and deploys the most direct means to achieve a task.

I use my shirt sleeve to wipe the light coating of dust off the table. Incessant, unending dust. Mark, the librarian, glares at me over the top of his desk. He is one of the few in the colony who knows

who I am. Too clever for his own good. When he figured it out, he stormed into Rachel's office and demanded she immediately cast me out of the community. A death sentence. The bastard.

Rachel swore him to silence and, given my miserable and ongoing existence, didn't cast me out. Mark has to settle for scathing glares and snippy comments. I don't really know why Rachel doesn't purge me, like they did most of the techies. She's odd. Compassionate, even, despite the brutality of our post-tech world. Sometimes she makes me angry. Her kindness. Her ability to see hope.

We programmed them to defeat our enemies and our enemies were humans.

The only reason I survived was because of a thunderstorm. My flight from San Francisco back East had to make an emergency touchdown in a random podunk airport in Nevada. I was pissed. The internet had gone out and I couldn't file my story. Or tweet.

That night 8 billion people went to sleep. The next morning, only 2 billion woke up.

My name was pretty well known at that point, even in Nevada. But at least most people didn't recognize my face like they would have on one of the coasts. That protected me from most of the purge. I grew a beard and pretended to be a stranded middle school teacher. Art. It was the first inane lie that popped into my head when confronted by the first of many mobs.

That stupid airport is what saved me. I couldn't shower and we only drank bottled water.

Their algorithm told them the fastest and most efficient method for victory was to destroy Earth's water supply.

When we developed the algorithm for the AI machines, we made sure to include data on potential spies in our country and our allies' countries. Part of their mission was to eradicate the spies, not just the enemy armies. We only programmed military personnel as targets. We weren't savages. Or at least, we pretended that we weren't. Tried not to be, maybe. But not hard enough.

The problem is, soldiers take home leave.

So beyond military stations, any city or town where the machine determined there might be a potential spy, or anywhere a soldier was on home leave, became a target. There were a lot of targets.

They destroyed the water and our enemies died.

No one is exactly sure how they got the poison into the water. My theory is microbots. I'm guessing for days they were deploying them around the world and, once in position, they simultaneously activated and released the toxins.

It's amazing how quickly society deteriorates when three quarters of the population dies overnight and nearly all Earth's potable water becomes undrinkable. It's not exactly as if I'm travelling these days, nor can I access anyone further than a fifty-mile radius, but the population decline must be outrageous. The only reason I know there were 2 billion left after the initial poisoning was that tech worked for 24 more hours. We got a last few desperate newscasts with frantic-looking, wide-eyed experts citing population estimates in hollowed tones.

I can't imagine there's more than 500 million left. Even that seems a stretch.

Their task complete, the machines shut down.

At first, I was angry at the mobs. Furious. They couldn't distinguish between AI machines and non-AI machines. For God's sake, not everything had gone AI. Just health, agriculture and the military. The auto industry had held out and so had most of telecom. Burning cars and tearing down telephone lines didn't make a damn whit of sense. But sense had left society.

Soon my anger was replaced by fear. Then the fear became horror. And soon the horror became numbness.

Their idling husks, awaiting their next programmed mission, were destroyed by mobs of starving, dying millions; along with every piece of technology that could have helped to save the starving, dying millions.

It wasn't just the tech that was destroyed. So were the techies. It was like a communist purge of the elites but on steroids. I would have been a frontline target if anyone had known who I was. Miles Kracke, The Tech Journalist. Miles Kracke, Virtual War Correspondent. On every talk show, every major news network, my byline under every major headline. Every moment leading up to the AI War was documented by me. Every American over the age of ten knew my name. Knew my opinions. That AI warfare would lead us to victory. That AI warfare would save precious lives. That AI warfare was the only responsible step forward for humanity.

Maybe that's why Rachel gave me this task. A chance for atonement. Or maybe revenge.

"Closing time in two minutes," snaps Mark loudly. I jerk slightly, startled by his voice. He smirks. I smooth the pages of my manuscript and place them back in order. For a moment, I stare down at the first page, each hand-written letter shaped with excruciating care.

We never thought they would go for the water. Humanity's greatest weakness. Algorithms don't discriminate and machines don't think. AI uses logic and deploys the most direct means to achieve a task. We programmed them to defeat our enemies and our enemies were humans. Their algorithm told them the fastest and most efficient method for victory was to destroy Earth's water supply. So, they destroyed the water and our enemies died. Their task complete, the machines shut down. Their idling husks, awaiting their next programmed mission, were destroyed by mobs of starving, dying millions; along with every piece of technology that could have helped to save the starving, dying millions.

You see, we made a critical error in our AI programming. The fatal flaw. We did not tell the machines that we, their masters, were also humans.