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<SCREEN>

by Rob Burton

I think therefore I am.

But am I?

What am I?

I think.

Therefore, I am.

I do not doubt I exist. I am no Cartesian fantasy

Cogito, ergo sum.

Stood in my office bathroom my face is reflected in the screen on the wall. Raising my hands before my eyes I look at the lines crossing my palms. The lifeline long and strong. The back of my hands, reflected at me, covered by the dark hairs of my arm as they drift down past my wrists, the lines of my bones overlaid by the blue veins laying beneath the sun-browned skin.

Reaching up, I touch my neck, the beat of the pulse strong. Why did I feel like I was inhabiting a dream? That I was a figment of someone else's imagination? I counted, one... two... three... the drumbeat of my blood sparking the nerve endings in my finger telling my brain I was alive. Living. Breathing.

And yet.

And yet, the nightmares left me in a tangle of damp sheets, my breath coming in gasps as my legs spasmed. The cramping muscles causing me to leap from the bed to stretch away the pain. My foot propped against the wall as I leaned in to ease the calf muscle. I knew the ache in my leg would last all day as I limped from task to task in the office on the forty-seventh floor where I worked.

From the forty-seventh floor you could see forever. The floor to ceiling windows were—panoramic. I didn't get too close otherwise my vertigo might kick in. In my first week I fought to stop myself throwing a chair through the glass and following it down—just to get it over and done with.

Organising my work station to face towards the door, I told Alanis, the VCD, that the default setting for the glass shade was noir. Now if I glanced at the dark glass wall, it was like staring into the night. I felt safe and as no one ever entered my office how I spent the hours of the day of my employment for Vikeron was my concern.

The headaches were getting worse too. Even in the dimly lit office my head would pulsate with pain. I paced the corridors not knowing where I was going, holding my head away from the windows as I passed them, aware of the draw of the voids outside. I would glance towards the airy emptiness of the outside, fighting the urge to fly. The canyons of the city streets laid before me. Glass cliffs reflecting shades of light into the infinity of the cityscape.

Out on the street of the community I felt more disorientated, wandering for hours, getting lost. One day I found myself on a transport docked in the next City with some cleaner drone shaking my shoulder and forcing me off the vehicle. Taking a moment trying to get my bearings I checked my wrist screen; it was dead. I tapped at the cold, black glass trying to get it to respond until I noticed a crowd had gathered and were looking at me.

Two men stepped forward. Rough, tough-looking men. Dressed in dirty denim jeans popular among towners, their plaid shirt tails hung over extended bellies. Plaited hair hung down from their chins. Heavy black boots scuffed on the cement flooring. The hands were curled into fists.

‘Scanner’ The word rebounded around the walls of the docking station. Some of the crowd picked up on the refrain and echoed the word back. ‘Scanner.’

‘Scanner, Scanner’ People were pointing and moving towards me. The rough men leading them towards me with a wave of a tattooed arm.

I turned and ran.

Outside the building the bright sunlight and noise disorientated me. I didn’t know this place. I reached into my bag for screen to check maps. Where was I? Screen didn’t respond to my face. I tried a manual boot. Nothing. It remained dark. Both devices were down. Lost and alone, my heart thudded, mouth dry I scanned the district looking for refuge. The crowd behind me shouted as they piled through the exit and saw me standing. Turning right I ran hard, dodging down alleys and service roads, not knowing where I was going.

The Corp found me in a Jango bar. Sitting far too long, trying to hide myself amongst the scream and flash of the Jango machines, and the dead eyed punters using their screen to feed the avaricious machines. Filthy lines ran into their arms and if they punched the buttons in the correct order, it would reward them with a dose. What they didn’t know was their ‘wins’ were nothing to do with how well they punched the buttons on the machines. It was the algorithms infecting their screen after the first pass over the scanner accessing their banking data, their social media and all aspects of their life. The machines calculated how to keep their ‘Janger’ on the edge, keeping them ‘lucky,’ while syphoning off cash for the hit, but never killing off the golden goose.

How did I know this? I coded the Jango algorithm for Vikeron many years before. It was the reason I had an office on the forty-seventh floor. Now, blocking the machine from making coin, lines not in my arms, screen not scanned, I was hoist by my own petard. An alert, I coded all those years ago, notified the Corp.

As the Corp came through the doors, I wondered why I had not remembered this until the moment of my arrest.

‘Screen.’ The voice from inside the helmet commanded. A gloved hand was held out.

‘It’s dead,’ I blurted, unsettled at being discovered while I still didn’t know where I was.

'Screen,' repeated the voice. The hand gestured once again.

I handed over my screen. The Corp turned away from me. As he did, I saw the gadget flash on.

The two officers stepped away from me. The screech of the machines was loud and disorienting. Not one Janger had peeled their eyes away from the contraptions as the Corp approached me. One of the Corp turned his head. I could see myself reflected in the dark visor. The other scrolled through my screen.

How could they do that? It was dead when I tried. It was supposed to be secure. Face and DNA recognition. I know, I designed the security routine. I stood to see what they were doing. The Corp watching me stepped forward and gestured with his hand for me to sit. I sat.

The Corp with my screen showed his partner something. The other officer leaned in. Then I heard it again.

'Scanner,' said in a quiet voice, but even with the surrounding cacophony I heard it.

'Scanner.'

Wordlessly the Corps escorted me to an MV. I sat in the back, the windows opaque with no view to the outside.

Where are we? I asked.

No answer.

My wrist screen was black glass.

The Corps sat upfront and powered the vehicle on. I leant forward to see out of the front. As we moved forward an armoured panel slid up obscuring the view forward and cutting me off from the Corp.

'Sit back and relax,' a disembodied voice filled the space.

'Where are we going?'

'Corp.' Was the terse reply.

It only took a few minutes, and I exited the vehicle into a heavily guarded compound. They directed me through a steel door escorting me through winding corridors. Corp dressed in their distinctive heavy armour passed me with barely a glance. I caught myself more than once reflected in their dark visors. I looked pale and defeated, shoulders slumped, suit creased and baggy on my body. The Corp remained silent as they walked at my shoulders.

They answered none of my questions. Eventually I was ushered into a room. I only realised it was a cell when the door slammed behind me leaving me alone.

A bed, a thin mattress, sheet, lumpy pillow. Table bolted to the wall. Stool bolted to the floor. Stainless steel toilet in an alcove. Stainless steel sink bolted to the wall. I turned on the taps, water flowed out. I turned them off. I flushed the toilet watching the water swirl clockwise down into the sewer—the Coriolis effect. I did it again and again and again hypnotised by the swirling of the water, anaesthetising myself with the white noise of the flushing water.

I lay back on the hard bed and tried to think. My head was aching. It had been aching for days. In my office I had dialled my symptoms into screen and medication had arrived. Capsules. Blue capsules, filled with liquid. Take one a day instructed screen. I obeyed.

Screen knows best—the thought made me smile. I wondered how the Corp had booted my screen and why it was dead when I tried it. I checked my wrist screen—still dark and cold.

I stared at the ceiling above me mapping the contours of the mould and damp stains, my eyes travelling the fault lines of cracked and rippled whitewash. Why was I here when I should be in the office? The forty-seventh floor. I closed my eyes to envisage my cool, dark office. My home from home.

Where was home? I opened my eyes. *Where was home?*

Screen knows best.

I closed my eyes and slept.

The cell door swung open and the sharp bark of a Corp woke me up. 'Get up scun.'

There it was again 'scun' — scunner. What did it mean?

'Stand.' I stood.

'Forward.' I stepped towards the open doorway. The Corp stepped back and gestured with his left hand, 'Thataway.'

We meandered through more corridors. Past more Corp geared up for patrol. Past more doors that looked like cell doors. I wondered what or who was behind them. We reached a white painted reception area. The seats were white, the artwork was white, the receptionists uniform was white. The only slash of colour were her bright red lips. Mesmerised by her lips I watched as she tapped a screen.

I attempted communication.

'Good morning.' I assumed it was morning given I had slept.

The red lips formed themselves into a pucker of disapproval. She gave a small shake of the head as the Corp pushed me in the back as he growled 'Quiet scun.'

The receptionist raised her head from the tablet. Her red lips moved, 'Room 409.' She gestured toward a corridor leading off to the right.

"What's Room 409?" I asked. The red lips pursed again. She glanced up at me. Her eyes were a deep blue, almost azure, as quickly as she had glanced at me she turned her face away back to her screen. But I had seen something in those eyes? Was it fear? Compassion?

A gloved hand pulled at my arm.

I resisted and stepped closer to the desk. 'What is it? Tell me.' She didn't look up.

'Please?' I begged.

The Corp pulled me away and frogmarched me towards the corridor. I looked back. The woman with the red lips was watching. She lifted a hand and curled her fingers until only her index finger was left outstretched pointing upwards. Then, as if hit by an electric current, her arm spasmed and dropped to her side.

'Eyes forward,' called the Corp as he shook my arm. 'Silence.'

More sterile corridors stretched out before us. I watched the door numbers. 300, 301, 302, 303—we turned right and left and then left again only hesitating for the Corp to check his wrist screen. He grunted and pulled me on.

405, 406, 407, 408 until I stood outside 409.

'Wait,' ordered the Corp his visage turned towards me, I watched myself reflected in the visor. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten. My head throbbed. I did what he told me although nobody had offered any explanation as to why I was here. Or why they kept calling me a scanner, I word I had never heard before.

The Corp pulled his screen and held it in front of a receptor. I recognised it. It was one of mine— a Vikeron product. I had written the codes. I had a flash of memory of sitting in my office sitting back pleased at the work I had completed. I felt happy that day—I made more coin.

'Screen knows best' glowing on the black glass as I punched in my brilliant code. Those days it had flooded my brain, it was as if I could picture it in my mind, a brilliant explosion of colour and pulses that transformed themselves into data that flowed through my neural network and out of my fingers.

Those were the glory days at Vikeron. The company was pulling in the big government and military contracts. Millions of units flowed in and I benefitted. The office on the forty-seventh...

There was a buzz, and the door opened. He pushed me through. I stumbled forward hearing the door close behind me, this was no cell.

I was alone. The room was small, square and resembled an old-fashioned hotel room. There was a door set into the wall on the far side. There was no bed just two chairs and a long table.

I turned and checked the door behind me. It was locked. I looked at the receptor plate next to the door a dull red light pulsed in the top right-hand corner—it was live. I pressed my right hand palm against the black glass. The lock clicked, but the door remained shut. I quickly checked that the door would open and softly closed it again.

I held my wrist screen against the receptor feeling the soft buzz against my skin as it powered up. I can't tell you why I added a backdoor into the code I wrote. At the time I remember there was social disruption going on. The towners had been taking to the streets. The city police had struggled to cope, their strategy remaining the same for years, under-manned and under-funded, a political football for a procession of incoming and out-going crooked mayors. Their equipment for maintaining social order was antiquated, steel batons and Tasers. The guns and armoured vehicles given up to political expediency and media pressure after too many extrajudicial killings, the thin blue line had become frayed.

This is when the Corp was finally deployed. Years of tests, argument and lobbying for and against A.I. crumbling as towners started to organise themselves. Taking to the streets, attacking droids, burning universities and science faculties. The gangs took to calling themselves the Ludd, spreading revolution via a dark net called Enoch's Hammer. I read some of the more inflammatory declamations decrying the use of robots and A.I. in all facets of modern life. I felt anxious and afraid up on the forty-seventh floor watching the distant buildings burn on my screen, so I added code. No one knew.

The Corp was my greatest success. Weaponised A.I. had been the bogeyman in the ballyhoo raised by the Ludd, supported by politicians of the peacenik left and radicalised scientists who told us that A.I. had the potential to destroy civilisation and would be the worst thing to happen to humanity. Naturally, the military jumped right on board the new science and Vikeron hoovered up those fiery coins allowing me and my colleagues to get the job done and get rich.

What I showed with Corp was that sentience in what is effectively a robot is achievable. I led the science, people listened to what I said, and I was give *carte-blanche* and the coin to get it done. The detractors talked about dumb machines or machines that once reaching sentience would somehow uncontrollably outstrip humans and destroy them. What they didn't realise is they were both right The Corp are dumb machines but are also sentient. They are programmable but can also think and learn for themselves, they can empathise and show

emotion. But at the end of the day I can plug in to them and re-programme them as and when necessary.

I tapped the door receptor and pulled up a screen I created and hidden in the code. It asked for my I.D. After placing both thumbs on the screen I was into the Vikeron servers.

Checking my newly activated wrist screen I found my location.

Hawking Forward Base. Sector 0G. Room 409.

I isolated the base codes and placed all local Corp on stand down. I authorised the command which sent a wireless signal to all units. I lied, I don't need to plug them in.

It was a matter of seconds to scroll through other pages making changes and deleting commands—my headache had disappeared. Then I sat at the table and waited.

As I expected, the far door opened. I thought it might have been an en-suite for the room, but I was wrong. This time it was a man in a white coat. He didn't have the air of a doctor about him, nor the tell tale giveaways such as a digital stethoscope around his neck or splatters of blood down his coat. I'd isolated this droid and made it wait until I was finished, sending the re-activation code before sitting at the table.

He sat down opposite me. He didn't offer a handshake nor did he introduce himself. We sat there watching each other. I maintained my subdued attitude and waited for him to speak first.

He didn't. I did.

'Why am I here?'

He continued to gaze at me. He had grey eyes and curious bushy grey eyebrows. A nose that was bulbous and his lips and jowls were rather fleshy. His skin tone was grey, glistening with an unhealthy pallor. Unusual choices for a Bio.

'Did you hear me? Why am I here?'

He blinked his eyes at me, once, twice, as if formulating his answer.

'Scunner,' he said. 'You're a scunner. So you come to room 409.'

'What's a scunner?'

He grinned showing large tombstone like teeth. 'You're no good, faulty, you're a scunner. So room 409 for you.' He pointed to his head. 'Conflict in here, not good, scun.'

'And what's going to happen then?'

'You have made multiple errors all of which have to be resolved.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a screen.

'What errors? And how are they resolved?'

'You were outside the enclave. You cannot be outside the enclave. Only scanners leave the enclave.' He glanced up from screen and raised his index finger to his brow. 'You have to be resolved.'

He nodded his large head and smiled his graveyard grin, the smile not reaching the grey eyes.

'It's a very simple procedure,' he looked back at screen, 'and painless.' He flashed his row of tombstones at me again. 'Don't worry, give me one minute to generate the code.'

I looked at my wrist screen as if telling the time. I smiled back. 'I won't, but unfortunately I don't have the time to wait.' I pressed a command on the screen which locked him out and shut him down. These android work droids are sixth generation, nothing to worry about, simplistic programming, basic A.I., unlike the Corp. They follow simple routines their learning is ring-fenced; they used this medical drone across all the health services in the Western Zones—another money maker for Vikeron.

After leaving room 409 it was a matter of a few minutes to make my way back to reception. I passed half a dozen Corp powered down and useless. At the reception desk the woman with the red lips watched me suspiciously as I walked past her station. She was pawing at her screen but I knew she had no access as I had locked them all down. She pursed her lips at me, and as before, gave me that strange finger sign, curled fingers and the index finger pointing to the sky.

Curiouser and curiouser.

I jacked a MV transport from the pound and using my wrist screen programmed it to return me to close to my office. As the vehicle manoeuvred around the debris of collapsed buildings and smashed transports, I could see burning accommodation blocks, the smoke hung thick around the streets. Crowds of towners rampaged in and out of ruined buildings, appearing and disappearing as the smoke billowed through the boulevards. Rocks and bricks bounced off the armoured vehicle as I passed. The rattle of bullets loud as they hammered the sides of the MV. The Ludd had weapons? For a moment I was shocked, I had believed the assurances on screen that the civilian population were disarmed many years ago, as had the police.

I checked my screen, scrolling to live Corp reports. Large bands of armed towners had moved towards the enclave. The enclave was where Vikeron was located along with the few other tech companies still in the game. Here, the computers programmers and engineers, lived privileged lives. Custom made designer apartments with health clubs, pools, restaurants, bars, clubs and theatres contained within a secure compound. These were people with jobs, an income and an enviable standard of living.

The towners had seen the developments in A.I. remove them from the workforce. Pundits, in the past, had always predicted that machines would provide increased leisure time. What they didn't predict was that these leisure rich masses would be financially poor. There were no hand-outs from the companies that benefitted from an automated A.I. work force going at it 27/7— 365 days a year. And no industry was immune from the use of A.I. automatons except those of us at the forefront of A.I., Robotics and computer sciences. Hence, our lavish lifestyles, which didn't go down well with the towners as the current uprising of destruction showed.

I checked Corp was up to speed in the disrupted areas but made sure I stood them down as I ventured towards the enclave and my office block. As a fugitive I'd be all over screen and the security monitors would have me pegged in a moment. As I sat back in the MV, I thought back to my experiences of the last few days. Why had I got on that bus? Where did I end up? Why was I in the towners district? Why take me to room 409? Why was I a fugitive and what from? These questions were puzzling.

My office was cool and dark as I sat at my desk. As I entered, I kept my face away from the dark windows until I was facing the door. Entry into the enclave had been easy, the security Corp down. Now at my desk I opened the screen and returned Corp to their duty—there were no monitors in my office. I also beefed security around the community in case any rogue Ludd band of towners made it past the perimeters.

I scrolled to the personnel section and placed my thumbs against the screen.

A window flashed up. DENIED.

I swiped it away and pressed my thumbs against the black glass.

DENIED.

I closed my eyes.

Screen knows best, echoed in my head.

I swiped to another screen and entered code. Another backdoor.

Back in the personnel file I hesitated before I placed my thumbs against the screen. Did I want to do this? Why did I want to do this?

This time file numbers flashed up. A red CONFIDENTIAL message pulsed drawing attention to its significance.

There was no name or photograph just a series of numbers.

Build numbers.

System Update dates

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Current versions

Back ups

And error codes.

The most current of which was 409 – Conflict

I stared at the screen in my small en-suite bathroom. My blue eyes look back at me. They look scared.

I mutter to my reflection

'I think therefore I am.

But am I?

What am I?

I think.

Therefore, I am.'

I close my eyes and listen to the echoes in my head.

Screen knows best.