

The Charge of the Soul

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....

[Artificial Intelligence Nexus coming online.... Potential Threat Detected!]

[Corrupted data ... Doctor Westhope's whispered voice in my ear: "My special girl" ...

Corrupted data]

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

I am climbing a sizeable sand dune [travel time 38 hours and 42 minutes – distance covered is 252.7 km]. My sensors indicate the presence of several life signs ahead. I also detect gunshots and explosions.

I approach the crest in a low crouch, diminishing my profile against the sky. Lying flat along the dune's summit, I enhance my view [optic sensors at 250% magnification]. Below me, in a rubble-strewn ravine, a pitched battle is taking place between what appears to be three separate factions. I observe.

[Recording in progress....]

One faction is small in number, but better equipped; they possess large-caliber automatic weapons and explosives, and wear heavy armor. The second group is armed with melee weapons and improvised projectiles, but are riding motorized vehicles to enhance their mobility. The third group has superior numbers, but is trapped inside a disabled tracked vehicle.

The conflict lasts 14 minutes, 33 seconds until each of the 41 participants is dead or dying. When the shooting is over, I walk down the hill. The damaged suits of armor all bear a single blue star on their breastplates and shoulder pads, with various other military insignia [No exact match found in database].

The primitives wear disparate clothing, or none at all, though the presence of tattoos and red body paint serves to unify them. Their vehicles are odd in that they use an unfamiliar power source [Unidentified radiation detected].

The men and women in the broken tracked vehicle wear clothing resembling items found in my database and are armed with small-caliber automatic pistols and rifles. The vehicle bears markings similar to the English or Latin alphabet but which do not conform to standard word-structure: “Pasfk Sidee Stays: Balnd Esdshun”... [Extrapolation in progress... “Pacific City States: Badland Expedition” most likely choice at 63%].

[Situational Assessment] The world is a violent and dangerous place. I arm myself with the weapons and ammunition littering the battlefield.

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

During my search, I discover a locked steel case inside the Free State vehicle. It bears the single blue star marking. I break the lock and open it to find a cache of data storage devices with USB interface. I touch the port at the base of my skull, hidden beneath my synthetic hair.

[Potential Threat Detected! Large life form approaching 30 meters, 25 meters....]

The vehicle rocks as something heavy lands on its roof. The metal groans and I see massive claws piercing the hull.

[Assessment: Nano-bots unable to fully repair equivalent damage to synthetic body.]

The creature roars and my audio receptors go offline momentarily. [Possible call to summon pack-mates: 47%; Possible call to warn off other animals: 53%.]

The roof crumples as the creature stalks to the opened end of the vehicle. I close the case of data storage devices and prepare to defend it with the large automatic weapon taken from one of the dead men wearing the blue star.

A shadow blocks the sun at the other end of the vehicle and my optics adjust.

[Identification of creature... unknown. No match found in database. Assessment: mammal-reptile hybrid. Approximately 30 meters in length, weighing approximately 500 kilograms.]

I open fire with the autocannon and my audio sensors again go offline. The creature recoils from the stream of white-hot 30mm projectiles and bounds away. When I let off the trigger and my hearing returns, I hear the beast's roar above the electric whine of the weapon's still-cycling barrels, and the jingle of falling brass.

[Assessment: creature enraged, not frightened. Attack inflicted minimal damage. Prepare for counterattack.]

The vehicle's hull nearly collapses when the creature pounces on its roof again. I am forced to my back by the impact. The shatter-proof windows crackle and fall from their frames as the vehicle is crushed.

[Assessment: hull integrity will be compromised within approximately 11 seconds....]

[Corrupted data... Dr. Westhope is licking his lips and breathing hard... Corrupted data.]

“Get off of me!” I hear my own voice for the first time. The beast is also startled. It stops its rampage momentarily. I grab the case and the autocannon, and crawl out of the wreck.

I roll out of the opened end of the vehicle as its creaking metal hull gives way and collapses beneath the creature’s weight. I raise the weapon toward the animal.

It has a vaguely saurian-shaped head with a maw full of sharp teeth, though its skull is crowned by a pair of coiled ram horns. The neck is long and prehensile, covered in a shaggy brown fur like the squat, powerful body and long tail. The four limbs are short and elephantine, ending in long, clawed paws resembling those of a predatory cat.

[Assessment: This combination of traits does not occur in nature; probable result of genetic experimentation.]

I aim the autocannon at the relatively small head and squeeze the trigger. The seven barrels whirl and open fire just as the creature opens its mouth to roar. My audio sensors shut down and I see the stream of white tracers cover the monster’s face. It recoils, diving sideways off of the ruined vehicle.

I do not see the tail.

[Proximity Alert! Impact imminent!]

[Processing Error....]

....

[Artificial Intelligence Nexus coming online....]

My time stamp indicates systems were scrambled for no more than three seconds. I have moved 23 meters from my previous location in that time. Apparently at high velocity.

[Running diagnostic subroutine....]

I cannot move my legs. My clothing is wet. Simulated respiration is not responding.

Optic sensors are not focusing.

[Neural processor at 52%. Synthetic body has sustained considerable damage.

Recommend complete shutdown to begin Nano-bot repair cycle: Y/N]

[N]

The creature is stamping around the clearing, snarling and roaring. My hearing goes in and out along with my vision. I drag myself into a crook in the nearby rocks. I freeze when the creature turns its head in my direction and raises its flaring nostrils to the air. I understand that my last attack has blinded it.

It turns in my direction. It has caught the scent of my leaking bio-fluids. I have one opportunity.

[Assessment: 23% chance of success.]

I point the autocannon at one of the damaged two-wheel vehicles lying between me and the monster. I have to time this perfectly: there is a 1.5 second delay between pulling the trigger and the first round leaving the weapon. The vehicle is 12 meters away and I do not know the blast radius of the exploding power source. I do not know if the power source will explode. The creature moves very quickly for its size. My vision is compromised.

The beast lunges I pull the trigger.

[System Override: Catastrophic trauma detected.]

[All systems shutting down....]

...

...

[Memory is a data stream of prerecorded events.]

[System Error....]

[Rebooting....]

[Artificial Intelligence Nexus coming online....]

I am remembering

[Running diagnostic subroutine....]

[Data upload error....]

I am awake and I am alive. That is all I know.... I exit my charging cell and study my surroundings. The room is dark, but my eyes [optic sensors] adjust to the low level of illumination and I can see. I am surrounded by broken machinery and overturned furniture covered by a heavy layer of dust. There are human remains present.

The time stamp must be corrupted. It cannot be accurate. I recall the team of researchers cheering and celebrating with bottles of champagne. There are six men and two women, but one man is the mastermind. He is my creator; Dr. Harold Westhope.

“Good work all around,” Dr. Westhope says, studying me closely. “She is beautiful, and I don’t just mean your work on the synthetic skin and bone structure, Dr. Chang. She is going to be the next step in....”

[Data corruption....]

“You are beautiful,” Dr. Westhope says to me. We are alone in the laboratory now. His heart rate is 153 bpm. His blood-alcohol level is 0.18. “And you will do whatever I say, won’t you? My special girl”

[Data corruption....]

The remains are those of Dr. Westhope. He is nothing but bones and tattered rags. Cause of death is uncertain. The skeleton shows signs of trauma. Whether or not this is postmortem is unclear.

The laboratory is without power. My charging cell is still warm. It must have been the last piece of equipment in the laboratory to fail. The hydraulic blast doors are sealed shut. I force them open.

[Accessing data...] I am in an underground research facility. [Scanning for GPS signal....] I explore the structure. Everyone is dead. Dozens of skeletons in rags, some showing signs of self-inflicted wounds while others appear to have perished at the hands of their fellow inhabitants. In one of the residential quarters I find a mirror and I see myself for the first time.

I am beautiful.

[Corrupted data] informs me that I should cover my beauty. Dr. Westhope's smile causes [Processing error....]. I discover suitable clothing in a closet: a military uniform, boots, and a hooded overcoat. Adding gloves and goggles taken from a pile of bones at the installation's entrance, I prepare to enter the outer world. I force the sealed blast doors open and step into sunlight.

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

I am in the ruins of an expansive complex. Rusted hulks of armored motor vehicles and small aircraft litter the perimeter. Large, square buildings have collapsed upon themselves. A mile-wide crater occupies the eastern edge of the compound. There are countless more skeletons.

It is hot [air temperature is 42 degrees Celsius, 1% humidity]. The soil is sandy with little sign of vegetation. This is a desert and I must escape it to survive. [Scanning for GPS signal....] I choose to go west for no other reason than it was part of my creator's name.

[Non-vital systems powering down to conserve energy....]

[End of recording.]

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[System Error....]

[Rebooting....]

[Artificial Intelligence Nexus coming online....]

I am awake. I am alive. I am....

[Running diagnostic subroutine....]

[Data upload error....]

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

I am awake. I am alive. I am fully functional? I sit up and realize that I am naked. I am lying on a woven blanket on soil and stone. It is dark, but the presence of a small campfire and a ring of torches provides ample illumination. I am in a cave or cavern.

[Unknown power source detected....]

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

“Ah, you’re awake,” a woman says from the shadows. My sensors did not detect her until she moved and spoke. “I was beginning to wonder if the *Kachina* were going to let you stay here or not.” She steps into the circle of torches. She is very old with short grey hair, dark wrinkled skin, and a squat, sagging body. She wears primitive clothing made from animal skins and woven chords of cloth. Her jewelry is rawhide, feathers, silver and turquoise. “Here, girl, put this on.” She hands me another blanket which I wrap around my shoulders.

“*Kachina*?” I am again amazed at the sound of my own voice. It sounds like Dr. Prescott’s: [Memory is a data stream of a prerecorded event.] “There. The primary voice imprint is in place,” the middle-aged blonde woman says, smiling behind her thick glasses. “I hope you like it; I was quite an accomplished alto as an undergrad at Oxford....” [End recording.]

“The *Kachina*,” the old woman says as she sits cross-legged in front of me. “The spirit folk who help me do magic, and I help them by honoring and obeying them. They’re the ones that fixed you, ‘cause Lord knows I wouldn’t have known where to start. If you’d been made of flesh and bone, then there wouldn’t have been a problem stitching you up, setting your limbs, and nursing you back to health with some medicine and food, but since you ain’t, well....”

“Magic?” I try out the word. “I do not understand.” Yet, as I look at her, I do understand why she was undetectable to my sensors. She is so filled with the unidentified power source that she is indistinguishable from the walls of the cave which glow with it. “Who are you?”

“Ah,” she smiles. I like her smile. “I am Nana Hazel, last of the Hopi. I guard our ancestral lands and await the day when the *Kachina* will bring my people back from the underworld, where they are safe from the Leviathan and all the evils it has brought.”

[Data recovery ... Match found: the Hopi people.... Comprehended. Data recovery ... Match not found: Leviathan....]

“Leviathan? Is that the name of the creature I fought?”

“No, not by a long shot.” Nana Hazel chuckles. “That was just an old bull *abomadillo*. That’s what I call the dern things, anyhow; I’m sure the folks in the Republic and the crazies of the Wyldling tribes know ‘em by different names, but ‘*abomadillo*’ works for me. They’re just one of the evils I mentioned. The Leviathan is something so big and terrible, he’d make that thing look like a puppy dog.”

[Data recovery.... Match found: Puppy Dog. Comparison comprehended.]

[Scanning for GPS signal....]

“What’s that?” Nana Hazel asks, though not to me. I cannot hear anyone. I run a diagnostic on my hearing sensors while I scan the cave for another life sign. [Hearing optimal.... No other life signs detected.]

She nods solemnly then looks at me. “You’d best quit trying to talk to the skies, girl. They’ve gone silent; to the mechanical ways of talking, anyhow. But you calling out to them is what summoned the *abomadillo*. Monsters can hear those calls and some of them are even worse than that old bull.”

[End GPS scan.]

“You speak of magic and monsters.... The Republic and Wyldling tribes... I have no record of these things in my database.... I do not understand.... I am lost.... I am alone.... I do not understand.” There is a flaw in my voice simulator. It is difficult to speak. My vision blurs and I feel bio-fluid leaking from my eyes.

“Don’t cry, girl.” Nana Hazel reaches over and puts a gentle, warm hand on my shoulder. “You’re not lost and you’re not alone. Not anymore. And, as for not understanding, well you sure don’t have a monopoly on that!”

She hands me a soft, clean cloth and I wipe my face. “If you’ll tell me about your world,” the old woman says, “I’ll tell you about this one, and then we can go from there. Sound good?”

I nod in agreement. “I do not recall very much. My memories are corrupted. All I truly know is random information stored in my databanks....”

“Well, let’s start with that. Do you know your name?”

[Processing... Accessing....]

“I do not have one. My product identification number is: AIM Prototype 16H1.”

The old woman frowns. “That ain’t much of a name for such a pretty girl. Never mind, you can pick one out later. Do you know where you come from? How old you are?”

[Processing... Accessing....]

“Los Alamos National Laboratory. The Artificial Intelligence Matrix project began on January 17, 2042 in the tenth year of the Global Economic Crisis with the goal of creating affordable, intelligent synthetics to replace the unmanageable and unreliable human workforce, and to begin deep space exploration in search of new resources. According to my data, I became fully sentient at 3:16 pm, Mountain Time, on August 13, 2047. Data corruption has damaged this information, however. According to my current time stamp, that date was over 631 years ago.”

Nana Hazel nods at me and remains silent for some time. “Well, dear,” she finally says, “your data isn’t all that corrupted. You are over 600 years old and a hell of a lot has changed since you came into being. I’m guessing you missed out on most of it.”

[Processing.... Processing.... Processing....]

“Well,” Nana Hazel continues, “at least you’ve got that.” She points to the metal case full of data sticks sitting outside the circle of torches. “That might help you catch up on what you’ve missed. It looks like those goons from the Pacific States were stealing it from the Republic when they got ambushed by a Wyldling hunting party, which gave the Rangers a chance to catch up with them.

“Shame, really; I reckon the Republic don’t have the tech to process the data, and the Pacific States got the tech but not the data. Seems like a lot of people would still be alive if they’d just learn to work together instead of trying to steal from one-another like the damned Wyldlings.”

“This world,” I say. “This New World is a dangerous and violent place that is filled with horror and ugliness.”

[Corrupted data ... Dr. Westhope’s smile ... Corrupted data]

“Why did you save me? When my power cells are depleted I will die if the technology no longer exists to recharge them.”

Nana Hazel sighs. “I saved you, child, because that’s what I do. I am Hopi, which means that I am peaceful, polite, and civilized. No one claiming to be peaceful, polite, and civilized could have done any less. As for this world, it is no more dangerous, violent, horrific, and ugly than the one that created you; it is just a different breed of danger, violence, horror, and ugliness.

“And, it would seem, you don’t need to worry about your power cells, whatever they are, because the *Kachina* tell me that you are magic-compatible, as all living things in this world are. Now, get some rest. In the morning, you can decide what to call yourself and what to do with your life. My guess is its going to be a very long one.”

She leaves me in the circle of fire, alone with the data cache. I open the box and take the first flash drive.

[Non-vital systems powering down while accessing data....]

....

[Rebooting....]

[Artificial Intelligence Nexus coming online....]

I am awake. I am alive.

Nana Hazel has repaired and cleaned my damaged clothing. The items are neatly folded atop the data cache, beside the rifle, handguns, and ammunition I salvaged from the battle. To

this she has added a small wooden carving of a woman decorated with tiny black feathers and holding little strips of yucca in her hands. The old woman is not in the cave.

I don my clothing, arm myself, and place the doll in my breast pocket. Having downloaded the information on all the uncorrupted flash drives overnight, I no longer need the data cache. However, I do not feel that it should remain in this sacred place. I take it out of the cave and toss it over the cliff into a steep ravine. A lone raven soars overhead, dips on the dry wind, and gives a call, then wheels to the west.

[Processing....]

I decide to follow it.

I am awake. I am alive. I have chosen my name.

I am Hope.

END