Reboot

by James Bloomer

A quantum worm uncoiled itself out of the machine being restored, suddenly collapsing into a specific state and wreaking havoc within the operating system. Alarms sounded and the graphs scrolling across Tom's screen spiked wildly. His laptop was plugged into a large black box of qubits, the liquid hydrogen coolant vented slowly in quietly dissipating clouds. Inside, beneath the desperately stylish matt black metallic exterior, beneath the ultra-cooled chamber, inside the electron traps, sat a countless number of electrons, reduced to acting as quantum bits. The qubit box was plugged into the local network, copying its state carefully in a safe, isolated, two-phase restore of the destroyed machines.

Tom sat in the data-centre, a vast room, full of server racks and devoid of people. His laptop prompted him to instigate the isolation of the worm and to acknowledge the test conditions for the newly discovered dormant state. It would repeat the trigger actions in the next scan. The system learned case by case, trying to unearth worms.

Tom's hands hovered over the keys. His head spun in a dizzy fuzz that dredged up memories of static, the static that the screams had turned into after the explosion. He felt an aching loneliness and only prevented himself from vomiting with deliberate concentration. He cancelled the quarantine, negating the find. Another flurry of keystrokes and the network lowered its defences. Another alarm. The remote traffic graph shot upwards as the machine connected to the network.

The phone beside Tom rang and he jumped with shock. He answered it.

"Hey," said the voice, "are you the Rebooter?"

"Yes," answered Tom brusquely.

"I'm sure you've got it under control but I was just monitoring the network and it's gone crazy."

"Why were you monitoring the network?" said Tom.

"I'm in charge of network capacity," said the voice.

"I see," said Tom, "you better get down here."

Tom hung up. He stood and paced the room, head racing with panic. No one ever monitored the networks while he worked. They trusted him. He was a Rebooter. He played through the options in his mind like a game of chess, but every game ended the same.

The voice on the phone belonged to a young man, pale, gangly and unstylish.

"Sit down," said Tom, pointing to the expensive swivel chair in front of his laptop. Tom remained standing as the young man sat.

"Sorry, your name is?"

"Luke."

"Right Luke, well you see, what's happened is that there was a little outbreak. But I've contained it, nothing to worry about."

Luke's eyes widened in surprise. "But it could be lying dormant in any of the machines."

"I've taken care of it," said Tom.

"How? You haven't had time to restore every machine."

"Just don't worry."

"But-"

"Don't worry," hissed Tom. Luke cringed back into his seat. "You see," continued Tom calmly, "if you report this, then I'll lose my job and I can't have that."

"But I _have_ to report it," said Luke.

"No, you don't understand, if you do I'll get fired."

"Sorry," said Luke, "but you were negligent."

The possibility of the reboot programme continuing unchecked flashed through Tom's mind. Adrenaline began to course through his bloodstream.

"No," said Tom, "you don't understand. I wasn't negligent." He punched Luke hard in the face, then smothered him to the ground while reaching out to grab a roll of gaffer tape. "I won't let it happen again."

#

Tom left the data-centre and the heat hit him like a sledgehammer. He walked across the baking asphalt of the car park towards his car, a bag of qubits in one hand, his laptop in the other, and the sound of Luke's muffled screams looping in his head. Before him, the carefully manicured landscape gave way rapidly to the bleakness of the desert. Rugged red mountains rose towards the oppressive blue sky. Ahead, along the valley, the horizon disappeared in a heat haze.

Tom reached his car and turned back towards the building, attempting to persuade the hot air to blow strands of hair away from his eyes. The building was modern: chrome and mirrored windows, pastel pink stonework intermixed with granite grey blocks. It was the regional internet exchange point.

It exploded.

Tom froze. Amongst the fire and smoke of the explosion he saw the image of a mushroom cloud, and remembered the pictures on television as they repeated ad infinitum, slow motion as the blast flattened the city. Again and again.

Only when the super-hot wash of the explosion hit him, even hotter than the desert air, did he move, diving behind his car to shelter from the rain of masonry.

#

Tom emptied his bag onto the bed. He plugged the satellite modem into a port and booted his laptop. Whilst waiting he unfurled the dish receiver on the modem and turned it around a few times in a vague attempt at guesswork alignment. Once the computer was up and running he dialled HQ. A face filled the screen.

"Tom," said David.

"David," said Tom, "I'm calling in my status report for sector one, one, three, eight."

"Go ahead."

"All routers in the IXP were successfully restored from the template qubits and rebooted. The virus sweep and many-condition worm analysis ran without incident. Everything looked good."

David looked up and actually met Tom's eyes for the first time, "Looked?"

"The building exploded."

"Exploded?"

"Yeah, the local agency branch is on the case."

"I see," said David slowly. "And how far through your monthly schedule are you?"

"Twenty three percent," said Tom.

"And what is your slippage?"

"I should be on forty percent."

"I see. And how will this incident affect the schedule?"

"It depends on how long I have to hang about for questions," said Tom.

"Just tell me when you think the sector will be fully functional."

"Well, it's difficult to-"

There was a loud, forceful knock on the motel room's door.

"What?" shouted Tom.

"We need to ask you some questions," said the voice from behind the door.

"One moment," shouted Tom to the door, then he turned back to his laptop. "Sorry David, it's the agency."

"I see," David paused. "Tom, when do you think that the sector will become fully functional?"

"To be honest, David, I don't think it will be until the IXP can be replaced or rebuilt, it was the super node for the whole region."

"I've made guarantees about our schedule, Tom."

"Sorry.″

"Hmm," David turned away from the camera, lost in thought. He turned back to face Tom with a sudden decisive flick of his head. "I'll send someone to help you, double the resource and cut the implementation time."

"What?" said Tom stunned.

"Let me see who could do it."

"It doesn't work like that. It's a sequential task, we'll be treading on each others toes."

"I'm sure you'll work it out," said David.

"No, it'll never-"

"I'll get back to you when I know who I'm sending."

"But-"

"Goodbye, Tom," David flashed a quick smile and then hung up. The screen turned black.

Tom pushed the laptop shut, then walked to the door, opening it to an oven-hot blast of air and an agency man wearing sunglasses.

#

The bar was devoid of people, looking tattered and dirty in the bright sunlight, the dark and dingy corners banished until sunset. Tom sat on a stool at the bar, drinking a cold beer and staring blankly into the rack of optics. The sound of the television washed over him. His fingers idly caressed his wedding ring.

Another man arrived and sat on the stool beside him.

"Tom," said the man. Tom recognised the voice and turned to look at him.

"Patrick," said Tom, shaking his hand. He forced a smile and concentrated on his bland corporate mask.

"How are you Tom?" said Patrick.

"You know," said Tom, "could be better."

Patrick nodded. "Your reboot rate has slowed."

"Really?" said Tom.

"Yeah right, as if you don't check the leagues."

"You're the one aren't you?" said Tom quietly, staring intently at his beer. "David's sent you to babysit me."

"Tom! Come on, no one thinks of it like that. We're a team," he slapped Tom on the back. Tom flinched. "The best team there could be. We're going to have the internet up and running on schedule, I can feel it."

Tom tried to suppress the rising revulsion. "On the road together again?"

"Exactly, Tom."

Tom smiled quickly, and then turned to face the television above the bar. Everything the news anchorman said mutated into haunting echoes of the past. Words that had embedded like shrapnel in his mind. Words of destruction and horror and the death of a city, and the end of his life as he knew it. Words that made him feel alone, and sad to be alive.

\#

Tom and Patrick drove slowly onto the university campus. The wide roads swept through clusters of anonymous buildings. Between the buildings sat large expanses of open ground, sprinklers working overtime to maintain the grass's luscious green.

They stopped in front of a large, cube-shaped building and parked among a handful of other cars that gleamed in the bright sunshine. One of the cars had a bumper sticker that read, "My other computer is a megalomaniacal AI".

They walked into the building looking like twins; black laptop bags slung over their shoulders, qubit backup held in a black briefcase, and regulation Rebooter suits. Drawing awed stares and welcoming smiles. Into the cool air conditioning of the building, greeted by their contact, into the server room with an extra chill and the roaring whirr of fans.

As they set up the systems their hands moved like preprogrammed robots, the repetitive tasks burned into their brains.

"Do you ever wonder if we're doing the right thing?" said Tom, trying to sound casual despite having rehearsed the words a hundred times in his head.

Patrick stopped what he was doing, standing up straight, and looked Tom in the eye. "No. Do you?"

"I mean," said Tom, "the memories are still pretty fresh in the minds of the public. What if they don't want to risk it again?"

"I see," said Patrick, "don't you think that the safety measures are enough?"

"It's not that."

"Do you think that the qubit state we're restoring has a flaw or is susceptible?"

"Patrick-"

"Do you think that we couldn't neutralise a threat with a virus like the last time?"

"It's just-"

"You're having strange doubts for a Rebooter. The nation's hope of restoring their access to limitless information rests on your shoulders, and you're having doubts about the programme?"

"You didn't watch that city being vaporized, knowing that you had lost everyone you loved."

"We all found it hard, Tom," said Patrick.

"You have no idea," spat Tom. "And this whole rebooting venture has nothing but capitalistic aims at heart. I don't trust the board, I don't trust the technology and I don't trust that it won't let another demon out of its cage."

"Wrong," said Patrick. "It's impossible for another AI to gain sentience, we're watching. And no system has access to the nukes. We've learned. Evolved. That's why we're top dog on this planet." Patrick now stood square to Tom, thrusting his chest. Alpha male behaviour. "It's time to end the charade Tom. Time to retire." Patrick smiled, his hand reaching slowly into the inside of his jacket. Suddenly Tom was scared.

"Screw you," said Tom and he pushed Patrick, who stumbled backwards. Tom grabbed the nearby qubit box and swung it hard at Patrick's head. Patrick fell heavily to the floor, head smashing against the casing, crumpling into an unconscious heap, a gash spurting blood.

"I can't forget what happened," said Tom.

#

Tom sat, staring at a photograph that was worn at the edges. A woman, with arms around a young boy and girl.

He glanced across at an unconscious Patrick, waiting for a sign of life. Gaffer tape around Patrick⬛fs arms and legs held him to a chair, tape over his mouth prevented any sound. Slowly Patrick opened his eyes.

"You could help me," said Tom. "With two of us together we can ensure that the programme doesn't succeed."

Patrick shook his head.

Tom frowned. He put the photo carefully back into his jacket pocket.

"I'll take the tape off your mouth if you promise not to shout."

Patrick nodded, so Tom reached forward and slowly peeled the black tape away from Patrick's mouth.

"I don't need to shout," said Patrick. "By now they'll know that something is wrong. I didn't call in."

"What?"

"Don't you think that we suspected you? Of course we did. I'm here to watch you. Your last psych profile was irregular and your reboot rate had too many failures. We knew that you were sabotaging the programme." Patrick sighed. "They won't hesitate to take you out, Tom. The nation needs Rebooter heroes, not questions and worries. This is a time for optimism, not doubt."

"The good of our nation is not the driving force behind the programme, Patrick, and you know it."

"If you give yourself up they'll go easier on you."

"I don't believe you," said Tom, pacing.

"Otherwise they'll kill you, Tom."

"No," said Tom shaking his head, "I'm not going to let it happen again."

#

"Hello, Tom, this is Wayne Grange from Channel One." The voice was deep and rich, with none of its potency lost down the telephone.

"Hello."

"We're here as requested."

Tom flicked through the dozen vidcam viewers that were open on his laptop. Each was tied to the local building's network and allowed a view of the outside. Media, police and curious onlookers surrounded the building.

"They're going to try and kill me, Wayne, keep your cameras rolling."

"Whatever you say, Tom."

"I'd also like everyone to know that I have the building rigged with explosives, and the explosives have a dead man's trigger."

"Okay, Tom."

Patrick sat next to Tom, still bound, and gagged once again. He rolled his eyes as Tom spoke and started to shout around the constraint of his gagged mouth.

"What do you want, Tom?" said Wayne.

"I want the reboot programme to stop. I want the public to know that the risks are still there. It could all happen again."

"I see," said Wayne. "So what has brought you to these conclusions?"

"I've seen it, the precautions are minimal. The drive is to meet targets. This programme is not thinking about the disaster behind us, but the profits ahead."

"We have the director of the programme here with us, Tom."

Tom stood up sharply and fought hard the urge to look out of the nearest window. Instead he reined in his breathing and searched for a good picture on the cameras. He found the perfect shot, the director standing defiantly in front of the media as they fought each other to get the best position. Wayne Grange stood next to the director, microphone in hand, looking serious and respectable.

"So what do you have to say to Tom, Mister Director?" Tom watched the lips of the interviewer move, delayed slightly from the words that he heard.

"Tom clearly has issues. That's unfortunate. As for the programme, well. It remains humanity's most important quest, not only to return access to the net for citizens, but also to prove that we *can* do it. To prove that machines can't beat us."

"Tom, are you hearing this? Do you have anything to say to the director?"

"I heard," said Tom.

"You're a terrorist, Tom," said the director, "and a Luddite, willing to hold back the world on a whim."

"Trying to stop another incident is not whim. I'm sure anyone who lost friends and family will relate to me."

"No one relates to you Tom. The people want net access, and it's liberals like you who are holding us back. I'm not going to give his publicity oxygen," said the director, "instead I'm going to give him sixty seconds to surrender before we end this with extreme force."

"You don't have the guts," said Tom. "You think that you can kill me and all this will go away? The public is watching this. They're not fools."

"You're right Tom," said the director. "They are not fools. They'll see you for what you are. They'll see that we shall not pander to terrorists. Time's up."

Tom turned to look at Patrick, whose eyes were wide with fear, shaking his head. A noise caught Tom's attention, an explosion, then thundering boots.

Tom knew that he couldn't run.

"It doesn't matter," said Tom, gulping down air and trying to suppress the fear. "I connected infected machines to the net. You'll have to start again."

Then he sat, and waited for the tactical response team to burst into the room. And as he waited he thought about his wife and son and daughter, and thought about how he missed them, and he cried.

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