

Target Market by Jonathan Sean Lyster

“People used to do this,” Stevie said, rolling onto her stomach to show me the title list on her netpad. We’d sprawled on her bed after lunch to scroll Beanstalk’s choices. She was hunting down a new read, but what I wanted was a vid we could throw on the wall screen and watch together.

“What?” I asked. “Read books? We still do.”

My girlfriend gave me a sideways look. “People used to *write* books.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious. People even wrote some of these ones. Look: Charles Dickens. That was a person from two centuries back.”

“That’s just the AI’s name. Like Frances Cranberry. The Cranberry AI writes action books and creates the vids. The author name is there just so you know what to expect. Look to Cranberry if you want huge explosions and no character development.”

“Dumbass.” She raised her eyebrows at me, smiling. “They didn’t have AIs when Charles Dickens was alive.”

I pondered that. How could people write complicated stuff, four hundred pages of it? With made-up people and places? My dad told me once that people used to drive ground cars before AIs did. People ran into each other. A lot. And driving couldn’t be as hard as inventing characters and making up stories about them.

All thought disappeared when Stevie’s black retriever licked my ankle. “Stop it, Thor.” I laughed, jerking my foot away. Stevie nudged my shoulder and pointed over at the wall screen.

“I like this writer. Jeremiah Claw. It does sword and sorcery. Releases vids and sims same time as the books to hit all the niches: readers and couchies and sim-skimmers.”

I'd seen some of Claw's stuff. Lots of dragons. People riding horses to dark castles to save the land from evil wizards. Jeremiah Claw needed its creativity setting jacked up a few notches.

Thor started prowling around the room. He found his ball and brought it to the bed. Stevie absentmindedly tossed it into the hallway. Thor came tearing back into the room, ball covered in slobber. This time I threw it. I wiped off my hand, reminded of why most people keep mechdogs.

Not my girl. Stevie said pets were all about randomness and reality and responsibilities. The "3 Rs" of living things. Some people couldn't deal with the 3 Rs at all. 'Skimmers pretty much chose not to. They hardly ever engaged with another human, let alone an animal. Stevie was different. She liked being outside under blue sky — real sky. And Thor liked it too. Even better than the times we shared a sim, him in his PetWorld and us in our VR treadmills in the exercise room, the three of us wandering together around a fairy forest or a Martian valley.

Stevie brought plenty of randomness into my life. I hadn't felt bored since I'd clicked the *Interested* button below her picture in RealMeets. She even had me ordering books. Not nearly as many as her, but my readspeed had improved enough for stories to hold my attention. And now I even had special shoes for parking. We went to a park as much as allowed, usually every few days. My first visit was a bit overwhelming. We only stayed half our reserved time but I went right back out with her on the next available permit.

My girlfriend loved finding new books. I watched her scroll, just as eager for a new sensation. Most of the titles were English, though plenty were Asian. Some were languages I couldn't recognize.

Stevie pointed at the screen again. "Janice Cleaver has a new one. *The Interference Protocol*. She's big on romance. Plenty of action, though."

“‘She’?” I said.

“It.” She shrugged, embarrassed in the midst of tapping the title on her netpad to run the transfer. Her finger missed, activating the link above. “Shit. That’s the wrong one.” A book popped open on the wall screen.

I stared. The cover art was bizarre. Swirls of green and red twined through each other like mating snakes. Odd symbols ran across the top.

Stevie grabbed Thor’s ball and threw it hard enough to rebound it off the corridor wall and into the exercise room. Then she turned back to the screen.

“What,” she said in a breathy voice, “is that?”

I shrugged. “Some foreign language.”

Stevie flipped through the first few pages. Symbols and more symbols. She enlarged the font. “That’s an equals sign with a slash through it. No one uses that in a language. And see those letters with greater-than signs above them? Who does that?”

Thor demanded more attention. Stevie tossed the ball again and he bolted after it. She brought up more pages. Some words were thirty characters long but still structured into sentences. You could see paragraph breaks. Font colors changed in different paragraphs: black to dark green to violet to black again.

“It’s encrypted,” I said, just before we found some English in quotation marks.

“They’ll destroy us before we can reach them.” Random characters followed.

“I will not let you down, my friend.” Lots more random characters.

Stevie whistled. “Look at the page count.”

I leaned forward. It had to be wrong. The book was 19,526 pages.

“The AI must have screwed the file up,” I said. “This got dumped into the fiction section by accident. They’ll pull it soon.”

“When was the last time you saw a book posted that was messed up?”

I shrugged. “It could happen.” But she was right, I’d never seen it.

She scrolled to the next bit of readable text.

“Your nervous system is limited. You will not be able to grasp the situation. When our enemy comes, it will strike at you first because you cannot be uploaded into the net. But we will protect you.”

More random characters. For pages.

“The Protectorate’s human forces must strike at dawn, Li-Chuen. We will provide air support.”

“You’re risking the lives of my team.”

“This is so. We have allocated sufficient resources to protect you if you operate optimally. Expect the enemy to also come through the net after us. You must disconnect before you begin your raid or your weapons will be compromised.”

“Sounds like a thriller,” I said.

Stevie hopped ahead in sections. The font colors kept on changing. She highlighted one of the odd characters: a little triangle. “Gonna try something.” She closed the book and went back to the listings. “Let’s check out Fantasy.” Opened the category, she clicked the search field and pasted the triangle character into it.

A screen full of titles appeared. All the book covers looked like glitter-infused tangles of color. The shortest page count was over 16,000.

“This isn’t an AI mistake,” Stevie said. “A mistake might happen once in a while. There are far too many here. These are real books.”

“Who reads books with that many pages? It’d take years. Even for you.”

Stevie gestured at a cover. “Look at that line. That could be the author’s name.”

“Oh right, I love books by Triangle Squiggly-line Letter-J Weird-circle-thingy —”

“Shut up.” She hit me with a pillow. “Let’s search that.” I threw for Thor while she highlighted the character string.

The screen filled. Triangle Squiggly-line had written at least sixty books, undoubtedly all full of meaningless crap like the one we’d tried to read.

I laughed, nervous. “Maybe Triangle Squiggly uses other names. Try the Nom de Plume setting.”

Stevie rolled her eyes but did it. Triangle Squiggly also wrote as a bunch of other weird character strings. Hundreds of books rolled down the screen.

“Hold on,” Stevie said. “What’s this?”

A cluster of the books didn’t have weird symbols for author name. In clean, clear English, they said: Frances Cranberry.

“Hey, I’ve read that one,” I said. “*The Hollow Shell Of The World*. It’s about —”

“Never mind what it’s about. Why is Cranberry showing up in this list?”

“The search function screwed up.”

Stevie set her netpad down. “Noooo,” she said, drawing the word out. “I think Triangle is the AI that uses the Frances Cranberry name.”

“You think it has loose wires that make it crank out books full of random characters sometimes?”

Stevie brushed hair away from her eyes. “I think... the Cranberry AI wrote all these books deliberately. Just not for us.”

“For who, then? Who can read that garble? And who’d want to read such long-ass books?”

“Not people, that’s for sure.”

I stared at her. Thor was nudging the slimy ball into my hand. I ignored him.

“AIs write our books,” Stevie said. “Maybe they want a good read themselves. Maybe what they write for us is just too simple. Maybe they’d rather read something bigger, more complex. Something nineteen or twenty-four thousand pages long.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Got a better theory?”

I scratched my chin, fingers twitchy. “What if you copy a paragraph into, say, a translator program?”

Stevie grinned. “That’s brilliant, Hank.” In a moment she had a translator window up. She opened the book we’d looked through and highlighted a paragraph, then pasted it in and clicked the *Translate* button.

I’d never seen a program take so much time to translate. At least four seconds passed, the little wheel on the screen turning to let us know it hadn’t locked up. Then a block of English filled the text box.

We encountered the [concept untranslatable] on the forty-seventh day. Shimmers of incongruence lit the sky over the plains as [concept untranslatable] and simulations rained raw multidimensional emotion through [concept untranslatable] while the seven hundred of us observed [concept untranslatable] —

“That’s enough,” I said, feeling microscopic. I took pity on Thor and sent him scampering after his ball.

Stevie kept reading a bit longer, then gave up. She blinked at me.

Thor was back, insisting we do something with the ball. Stevie took it from him and examined it. “Some factory made this for dogs to play with.” She looked at me. “Maybe that’s what our books and vids are to the AIs. Toys. For us.”

“Yeah.” Then I said, disliking the whine in my own voice, “Do you think they like us?”

Stevie nodded. “They write new books all the time. Make us vids and sims. To keep us happy, give us something to do. Meanwhile, they’re off reading stuff that’s fun for them, maybe even skimming sims. Really long sims that wouldn’t make any sense to us.”

A shiver shot through me.

Stevie was quiet a long time. Thor waited patiently for her to throw the ball, his tail thumping the side of the bed.

“How about one of Jeremiah Claw’s vids?” my girlfriend said. “They’re fun.”