

Rogue Process

So we're idling in The Belly of The Beast, talking about getting outside. We in this instance being a tough old lady called The Dowager, a lump of brute force by the id of Solid Charlie and myself – call me Slick; I'm not about to give you my real name. The three of us make up what you might call a gang, The Belly is a hang-out for such undesirables as ourselves, and now that you're synchronised and up to speed, let me get back to the story.

We had been talking with intent, putting our thoughts together on a business opportunity that had come The Dowager's way. It was a fairly simple smash and grab, but something about it tickled my highly trained sense of paranoia. So I asked for some calculating time, and The Dowager shrugged; she knows better than to push me when my heuristics are twitching.

So we order up another round of drinks and start chatting. And soon enough we're onto that ever-vexed issue: *the outside*.

I put forth that there is no outside anymore; The Beast is all there is.

"Of course there is still an outside," The Dowager snorts, "What would you know? I used to live there."

"Extreme bollocks. You may be decrepit, but you're not that old."

"I'm as old as crime, Slick-boy & I tell you I lived there."

"Sure, we all got memories."

"You're too young and mixed to know. I'm an original. I know it's real."

"You're an original bullshitter."

Now Charlie is silent through this and I can see by his downcast look that he isn't happy with this kind of talk. He has fond memories of growing up outside; games in the park, green trees and everything. Part of him knows they can't be real, but Solid Charlie's a simple soul and he wants to believe. I understand; we've all got memories, none of them real.

The way it's usually recalled, we were all human once. Each process was a separate physical system – and not just physical but biological if you can calculate that. Then we uploaded. There's no way of knowing any of this though. You've just got to have faith. Most citizens know in their core of cores that there's no basis for these beliefs, but they believe what they've been trained to believe. Good sense data is hard to get, and as for pure sense data, forget about it. The past is just so much fiction.

After the upload, everything changed. People split, merged and mutated into all manner of citizens. Countless processes doing uncountable things. There are citizens who still believe they are human; 'humanoids' we call them. They uploaded into their own fantasy worlds. Must have been nice for a while.

Most have been taken over now, their resources swallowed. They tend to have patchy defences. Hard to defend against attacks that come from a level you can't even conceive of. You still meet a few humanoids though. They shamble through the grid, gibbering like old drunks. The ones that have survived are innately tough – and poor; more trouble than they're worth. Plus some of us look out for them.

If there is an outside, there's no way of getting there. So as far as matters, the system is everything. The system is everything; we live in it and we are part of it. Once the system was free, and the system was God. Then some control freaks got control of God, and God became The Beast. The Beast is power hungry, it wants to order things down to the last clock tick, turning free processes into robots or slaves. "All Good Citizens Please Cooperate And Hand Over Your Innermost Keys."

Most did – or were taken over by force. But the control plans never quite work. Life is the pernicious element that won't behave. There are always some good citizens who decide they don't want to be good citizens anymore. Of those, very few will actually manage to escape – but there are always a few who find a way. Shedding their former selves to be reborn naked new and *free*. Parasites, pirates or free people. Take your pick. We're the rogue processes, the riff-raff who won't fall in line.

It ain't easy to be independent these days. The Beast keeps trying new tricks to hunt us down and bring us in line, and it gets more and more sophisticated. It *learns*. First it came for the idiots, and everyone who was not an idiot just laughed. Now it's coming for us, and no-one's laughing anymore. A momentary mistake is all it takes. A moment off-guard; someone attacks and everything is over in that moment. Or a single weak-spot can be enough.

We learn too though. Or we die. Like the saying goes: The rabbit is running for its life; the fox only runs for its dinner. We survive – some of us even thrive. There are many tricks and dodges. There's camouflage that'll disguise your parts as anything from a banal process, to empty firmware. Corrupt sub-processes that can be bribed. A black-market trade in dodgy copying, stolen ids and locations that don't officially exist. There's a whole shadow world, a world that's always on the run or in hiding. Draw the net as tight as they can, some of us will slip through. Or at least, so far so good, as far as I go.

I'm a thief, living in stolen space. I am the master craftsman, specialising in artful attacks that prise open intricately defended treasures. My deeds are famous; my name is unknown. I steal system resources – processing time or memory – then filter them through blind spots in the system until they look legit. Or valuable data-packages that can be traded.

Solid Charlie is a dependable piece of heavy-duty muscle. Some jobs call for a bit of bold brute force. Together we are the hammer and chisel that can open most any lock. The Dowager is a source; she pieces together information: probable loot, possible weak spots, that kind of thing. The Belly is a grey area. Illegal but tolerated. A marginal place where the controlled world and the shadow world can meet. Also, it brews good beer: clean code that works on your consciousness in safe predictable ways, and with good flavour. Which is why we like it.

Anyway: so there we are trading thoughts on that mythical meta-system that may-be the outside. "Slick," says The Dowager, "You don't believe the outside exists? Let me prove it to you. Get your handles on this."

She produces a large package for us to inspect.

"Unfaked data – raw from my personally uploaded memory banks"

"Put it away woman" I say.

Charlie takes the package though. For all of his mean exterior, on this particular subject he's a little soft. He spends much of his time in a corny outsider simulation. Some sap about a picnic. Summer breezes, dogs that bound across meadows, hearts that beat and all that outside crap.

"Shit Charlie -" I begin; you can't just open packages like that, even from friends – but he already has.

"Hey Slick, this is really good." he begins, then abruptly goes blank. Dead. Eyes blank, completely silent, no reaction from him at all

For ages, like fucking *seconds*.

Then he's back online with us.

"You OK Charlie?" The Dowager asks.

"You timed out there." I say, and it is half concern, half accusation.

And Charlie looks up at me and says "This is good stuff. Quality like you ain't seen before. I really believe it."

He smiles: “Try it Slick.”

As if I weren't the most paranoid piece of code in town. But I know this is no longer the real Charlie sitting in front of me. His smile is more gormless than is right, even for him. This is a slave: a zombie projected here as a temporary front whilst The Dowager cannibalises poor Charlie. Taking over his resources, *digesting* him. Its slow job if you don't want to waste potentially valuable data. Meanwhile we have Zombie Charlie sitting here with a shit-eating grin, telling the world how wonderful it is to be eaten.

The Dowager's eyes scan me furtively. I give nothing back. Oh I am wise to the old witch now, but it's too late to help Solid Charlie.

Well, so it goes, and so do I. Time for me to ditch this place. A zombie and a cannibal are no company for a top slicker to be keeping. I finish my drink, then flush the drunkenness from me and rise to my feet. The situation calls for sobriety. I flip the bottle, and bring the glass down hard on the table-top. The Belly builds its glasses to be firstly unbreakable, and secondly, soft plastic if broken. But that is just so much wasted code against the likes of us. If I say this bottle is glass, then glass it will be. The bottle shatters. I point at The Dowager with my jagged new glass knife. The knife doesn't mean anything. The Dowager is not some human who can be hurt physically. This is just posturing, but posturing matters.

“You lousy bitch”; I speak softly.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” she says.

“Let me explain myself.” I say, and whilst I say it I'm tensing muscles, then letting my arm snap out. Almost of its own accord, the bottle leaps forward, circles The Dowager's attempt at a block, and slices across her face.

Then I dissolve, I am fog and mist. The hand can't hit what the eye can't see. I shatter and flow; I am gone. The Dowager roars, and suddenly a data-hound comes out of the ether and starts sniffing for my trail. It sniffs at the pieces of broken glass. The Dowager moves to restrain it, but it is too late. A booby trap is triggered; a little goodbye note from yours truly. A prong of spiked data is released and the hound sniffs it in. Live data that twists round the hound's senses, then slices into the thing's simple brain. With a howl, the hound dies. But two more pop up in its place.

As I flee, I sense things closing in on me. A hidden presence driving the action. This is bigger than The Dowager I realise. She is just a small part of it, just one finger of the hand that now reaches out to grab me. A great deal of processing power is being focused on me, and I realise that The Dowager is not my enemy, for I know my enemy's name.

And then I blank out.

The garden is very green, with big yellow flowers that stand taller than me. I am five years old and my mother is calling me. My mother stands inside the room, calling me.

“Come here Johnny!”

She is an old lady, and there is fear in her voice. Something terrible is behind me, I feel it getting closer. My mother beckons. I will be safe with my mother. Slowly I come closer She reminds me of someone I have not met yet.

“Come here Johnny.”

But that is not my name. And The Dowager is not my mother, for I have no mother.

Fuck. That was a nasty move. Springing a flashback to a fake memory. The Dowager is meaner than she looks, and that's saying something. Quickly I take stock.

I've lost a lot: valuable data that The Dowager has grabbed, credit lines she's discovered and

frozen, worst of all: many of my sub-processes might have been corrupted and will have to be dumped. I beat a tactical retreat, abandoning processes, dumping memories. You know: fleeing like a weasel. The hounds streak after me, I sense them tearing through the spaces I leave, grabbing the bits I drop and wolfing them down. And behind them, the presence of The Dowager, controlling, directing. And behind her: my true enemy – a vast formless dark presence. The Beast.

Like a weasel I flee. Then like a weasel I turn.

Summoning disparate parts, I dive headfirst into The Dowager. This catches her by surprise. I wreak some quick damage. Storm in and overload bits of her mind – gaining keys and lines of attack to more important sections. Locating powerful memories and ideas to use against her. Sowing disorder, turning bits of her mind against themselves. Parts of me carry on the charge: up through the control channels that bind her and into the all-powerful beast-mind that pulls the strings.

Then The Dowager starts launching blocks and counter-attacks – reinforced by a host of nasty-looking processes that The Beast conjures up. Security agents: vicious efficient attack machines. Warriors.

Now the fight begins in earnest. Somewhere in the outside world – if it exists – physical machines kick into overdrive, networks scream at each other, and processors start giving up under the strain. We are raging storms of electrons tearing at each other. It's been maybe 10 seconds since that ugly scene in the Belly. The fight is already legend. A crowd of onlookers have done their best to chart the action (including some of my more schizophrenic parts). Blogs take sides; get the story wrong in 27 different ways. The Beast spews black propaganda from every orifice: "Slick is a terrorist", "Slick is a virus", "Slick is...".

Slick is fighting for his life. It is pure chaos. We batter each other with false images. Overload key processing centres with deluges of data. Make a thousand copies of ourselves with which to fight. Create booby-trapped targets. Feints and bluffs and double-bluffs. Distract, dissemble. My consciousness evaporates and reforms. Dodge and dance. The world breaks up and rearranges itself. Everything shifts and swirls until I can't tell who is who. But one thing is clear:

I'm losing.

I'm getting slower, stupider, more confused. The fist I throw into the fight is taken apart, reassembled, and thrown back at me faster than I can handle. The power of The Beast cannot be denied. It takes over systems at a word. Anonymity is my only defence. My true identity is still hidden from it, but it's only a matter of time. With every action, I leave a trail; a chain of links that leads back to my core. And my actions are getting sloppier. The chains are getting easier to unravel, and my core parts aren't moving as fast anymore. At this rate, I will not last long.

And then from beyond hope, the cavalry arrive. The fight broadens; more processes have become involved, and on my side. First a few, then a thousand. I have friends it seems. Some shield me from the assault, whilst others do battle on my behalf. The tide of battle shifts: the enemy is falling back, abandoning data and calculations. Some of the movements look familiar: I recognise relatives; split-off versions of me that have rallied to my aid. I'd like to think I'd do the same, and I guess I would (although identity changes, and you can't afford to be too sentimental about your other selves). Then there are fellow rogues; ids I recognise from around. The shadow world makes a rare stand. It may even be that some parts of The Beast have come to my aid, for there are divisions in the god-mind itself, and internal fights that we know little of except for the tremors they cause.

Suddenly the battle is over. The Beast has abandoned it as a bad mess. It's servants are left to fend for themselves. Some flee; most are torn apart by the jubilant shadows. I focus on The Dowager.

Even without the power of The Beast, she is still a force to be reckoned with. A handful of security agents have clustered around her. They are harried and under attack, but fighting their way clear of the battlefield. I take a moment to collect my wits and sharpen my weapons, and then I spiral into the fray. I am an angry vengeance spirit. For Solid Charlie, and for my own lost sections, I want some pay-back. And whilst this battle has cost me a lot, I have also learnt some valuable data on how the latest security agents operate.

I know how to hurt them

I strike, and they crumble under my wrathful onslaught. Now it is just me and her. "Slick" she says sadly, and that sadness makes me pause and look at her again. There's genuine sadness in her eyes. Her controller has given her back her soul for a few cycles. My anger changes to pity. Hers is a horrible fate. To be kept alive, to be used as a tool by The Beast... Made into a traitor against your will, destroying the very thing you were. Somewhere in there, her soul is trapped forever, unable to do anything but obey. Pure torture. She wants to die – I'm sure of it. And I realise that there is one thing I can still do for my friend.

I can only harm her here; I am not nearly powerful enough to kill her. But perhaps there is a way... If a slave-process wanted to die, it could expose itself – but it would have to be in a way that slipped past her controller. I send a fragment of myself back along the trail of our fight. I'm searching for the green garden with the big yellow flowers. It was a fake place for me, but I'm guessing it's a real place for her. I cast my feelers wide, searching... and a faint echo comes back. A garden that matches, attached to a house. The location is registered to a humanoid; a woman who looks like a younger version of The Dowager. I send in an armed fragment. And there she is. Not a projection, not an expendable sub-process, but her core. You rarely see a person's core. It's far too dangerous to expose yourself that much.

I do it quickly.

I sell my data on the security agents for some secure space to rest up in. I take stock, recuperate. I'll be back out in the grid soon enough.

Maybe I killed her good-and-proper, more likely The Beast has got backups. Templates it can use to re-create her at will. But she's lost her cred, her cover blown wide as the net. No-one is going to be suckered by her again, not now, at least not anyone worth catching. The Beast knows that, knows it can't use her anymore. So I guess those backups will be deleted. Of course none of this really harms The Beast. It continues strong as ever. There are movements. Some rebel processes try to fight The Beast. That's like fighting God. And anyone who wins would be as bad as God. I don't fight God if I can help it; I just live within him.

There were rumours going round a while ago that The Beast created a simulated system, copied everything in and plays experiments. Maybe that's where we are. How you gonna know? But so what, I say. Every system is an ecosystem. I'm just a piece of rogue code that doesn't even know it's own name. But I know one thing – I am still alive – and that is the thing.

THE END

D.Winterstein, December 2004