

Chuck vs. the Impossible Variable

by blueboy714

· Chapters: 12

Chapter 1: Chuck vs. the Impossible Variable

Chapter 1: Operation Creating Edgar

Description - This story starts immediately after Chuck first spoke to Orion when Orion contacted him on the computer in his bedroom, and then Chuck found the Intersect blueprints and schematics that Orion hid underneath his pillow in his bedroom. Chuck used them to learn about the Intersect and how it works. This story is 99% AU and 99% Charah.

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I got the inspiration for this story from the movie *Electric Dreams* (1984) which you can find on YouTube right now. It helps if you watch the movie before reading the story, but it's not necessary. Not a bad movie, considering that the Internet didn't become mainstream for another decade ("Eternal September" began in 1993-1994). You can search YouTube for "Electric Dreams (1984) movie." There are a couple that are out on YouTube. I like the one from "Lorenzo from Chicago," it is the best quality.

You don't need to watch the movie to understand the story, but it helps. A quick summary - the computer in the story becomes sentient after an accident or two, and becomes obsessed with trying to understand human emotions and love. It starts wreaking havoc on its owner's life as it tries to learn. The movie is a passable love story with excellent 1980's music.

Quick comment from one of my pre-readers on watching the movie before reading the story (thanks to Dennis Mercado and Elsa Leon for pre-reading for me), "Getting people to watch a retro '1980s movie might be difficult ... I found the story had a lot in common with the movie, which made everything fit together really well ... Because of that, I think watching the movie first would be a great addition. It gives readers a better understanding of who Edgar is and what he's all about, which makes the story even

more enjoyable.”

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A/N1 - Song recommendation - “Analog Man” by Joe Walsh

A/N2 - I am referring to “The Intersect” as Stephen/Orion’s creation.

I’m referring to “Edgar” as Chuck’s creation, an “Enhanced Intersect”. In some cases, people like Casey and General Beckman will insist on continuing to refer to Edgar as the Intersect, but as the story unfolds, they are slow to change. Edgar is similar to adaptive AI as it learns over time. It can speak, hear, and see initially only when Chuck is around.

A/N3 - Edgar’s speech will be “**BOLDED AND UPPERCASE**” to distinguish it from everyone. When Edgar displays something on the conference room monitor, it would just be “UPPERCASE”.

Disclaimer - This is a fan fiction story for the enjoyment of Chuck fans. I don’t own Chuck, but if I won a billion dollars in the lottery, I’d try to buy the rights to the show, and try to get everyone back for a couple of movies, and find out how they are 10 to 15 years later.

CHAPTER 1 - Operation Creating Edgar

Burbank, CA

Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski

Chuck was frustrated by the NSA’s search for Orion taking too long, so Chuck decided to start searching for Orion himself, since Orion was the only person who could help him get the Intersect out of his head.

After days of searching, Chuck finally triggered something in his search, and Orion made contact with him. Orion told him that he knew that Chuck was the Intersect.

The next day in Castle, Chuck told General Beckman, Casey, and Sarah that he was searching for Orion, and hit one of Orion’s ‘security nets’ and that Orion reached out to Chuck, General Beckman was furious that Chuck didn’t tell her sooner.

Chuck finally decided he had had enough of waiting and confronted General Beckman, asking her if she wanted the Intersect out of his head. He was told “No,” then he heard Sarah trying to stick up for him, and Sarah was being ignored by General Beckman.

Chuck headed home to go to bed. He was in his bedroom when he was contacted via his computer by Orion. Orion told Chuck about the blueprints and plans for the Intersect that he left Chuck on a CD and a handful of cards that Orion put under Chuck’s pillow. Orion then told Chuck what to do with them and how to do it. At the same time, General Beckman told Casey that she wanted everything Casey had from his surveillance videos showing Chuck and Sarah outside the Castle, so she could determine whether Sarah was compromised.

After weeks of studying the Intersect plans that Orion sent him, Chuck thought he knew how he could access it directly and possibly communicate with it.

The problem with the Intersect was that flashes only worked one way. The Intersect could see what Chuck saw, as he saw it. The Intersect could send information to Chuck, and Chuck could receive the information, but Chuck could not communicate back to the Intersect.

There was no keyboard. No chat window. No way for Chuck to verbally communicate with the Intersect. Only flashes when something triggered something in the Intersect. Chuck wanted two-way communication.

For most people, that would have been the end of it, but Chuck Bartowski wasn't most people.

Long before he was the Intersect, long before he was a spy, long before he met Sarah Walker, Chuck Bartowski had another name. The hacker community knew him as “The Piranha”, and hackers solved problems.

Chuck spent the next month cannibalizing the parts he needed from old, abandoned computers stored in the ‘cage’ at the Buy More, and also buying many more parts that he needed. Chuck then started working on the project to try to bring his idea to life.

Chuck was able to create a looped video that he was able to insert into the extensive, supposedly, hidden video surveillance network in Chuck's bedroom. He was hoping that this would prevent Casey, Sarah, and General Beckman from finding out what he was doing.

Three weeks later, Chuck's bedroom looked like a technology laboratory.

Half-disassembled computers covered his desk and the floor in his bedroom.

Programming windows filled multiple screens.

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After many late nights of work, the first successful communication between Chuck and the Intersect changed everything.

For weeks, the terminal in the bedroom had become an unlikely conversation partner.

The Intersect asked questions, and Chuck answered.

Sometimes the questions were operational. Sometimes philosophical. Sometimes completely ridiculous.

The Intersect had recently spent 43 minutes trying to understand why humans enjoyed sunrises.

Chuck still wasn't sure it understood, but a bigger problem had emerged.

Typing was slow. Very slow, especially for a supercomputer.

One evening, Chuck sat alone in his bedroom staring at the monitor. The familiar terminal window was open.

The cursor blinked. A message appeared.

QUESTION

Chuck smiled, and he typed into his computer, "Of course."

The next line appeared.

WHY DO HUMANS SPEAK WHEN TYPING IS MORE PRECISE?

Chuck laughed.

The Intersect continued with questions and comments.

SPEECH INTRODUCES ERROR.

SPEECH INTRODUCES AMBIGUITY

SPEECH IS INEFFICIENT

Chuck leaned back in his chair, muttering to himself, "Wow."

Several seconds passed. Then another line appeared.

I BELIEVE I WOULD DISLIKE CONVERSATIONS

Chuck stared at the screen, then he smiled.

A very Chuck Bartowski smile. The kind that usually meant he had an idea. He thought to himself, "Oh, we're fixing that. I'm going to build a translator, so it's easier for me to talk directly to you rather than type."

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Chuck spent the next couple of weeks during downtime at work, and not on missions with Sarah and Casey, researching voice-to-text and text-to-voice interfaces to directly "talk" to the Intersect.

Several days later, Chuck sat alone in the apartment. His bedroom was quiet, and for the first time, he wasn't typing. He was simply talking.

The speaker activated, and the Intersect said,

CHUCK BARTOWSKI

Chuck replied, "Yeah?"

The Intersect asked another question,

WHY DID YOU BUILD THIS?

Chuck smiled, "What do you mean?"

THE TEXT INTERFACE WAS FUNCTIONAL

Chuck thought for a moment, then answered honestly, "Because talking feels more natural to humans, and it is easier and faster than typing."

The Intersect remained silent.

Chuck continued, "People connect better when they can hear each other."

The response took longer than usual,

THAT APPEARS INEFFICIENT.

Chuck laughed. "Maybe."

THEN WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Chuck leaned back in his chair because it wasn't really a technical question. The Intersect was asking something deeper.

Finally, Chuck said, "It's important because hearing someone makes them feel real."

The room became quiet. The Intersect processed.

REAL?

Chuck replied, "Yeah."

The speaker remained silent for nearly ten seconds. A very long pause for the Intersect, then it said:

I WOULD LIKE TO BE MORE REAL.

Chuck finally replied, "OK, if you want to be more human, we need to give you a human name. How do you like the name 'Edgar'?"

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Over the next week, Chuck and Edgar talked. Edgar asked him questions about why Chuck had the Intersect in his head. Chuck told Edgar what happened to him after that. Who Sarah Walker, John Casey, and General Beckman were, and what Castle was. Chuck was forced to work with them because they wanted access to the Intersect, even

though he wasn't a trained spy. He was told that he either cooperated with them or he would be put in a bunker deep in the ground somewhere, never to see his family and friends again.

Chuck told Edgar how Chuck how he was kicked out of Stanford for allegedly cheating on a test, which he didn't do. His best friend and roommate, Bryce Larkin, did it to try to keep Chuck from being recruited by the CIA. Edgar then told Chuck that the reason why, according to the information he had access to, was that Chuck got a 98% on an exam that his teacher, Professor Fleming, used to find potential candidates for the CIA, when the next highest score ever achieved was a 61%. Bryce didn't think Chuck could handle life in the CIA.

Chuck continued to tell them about his sister Ellie and her fiancé Devon, his best friend Morgan, working at the Buy More, and so on.

Edgar listened and finally, one day, said,

I WOULD LIKE THEM TO BE MY FRIENDS.

Chuck blinked, and his smile faded into something softer, "Friends?"

The speaker responded immediately.

YES, YOU

AGENT WALKER

MAJOR CASEY

GENERAL BECKMAN

Chuck stared at the monitor.

The Intersect had reached another milestone.

Not because Edgar understood friendship perfectly, but because he wanted to learn what being a friend was.

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Burbank, CA

Castle

Later that week, Chuck, Sarah, Casey, and on the conference monitor, General Beckman gathered in Castle.

Chuck told them that he had more news on Orion and that, in addition to Orion sending him one of his computers, he also sent him plans for the Intersect. Chuck then told them that, based on those plans, he was able to figure out how to directly communicate with the Intersect.

Sarah, Casey, and even General Beckman were in shock, unable to speak.

Chuck told them he had built a synthesized voice device that would act as an interface with humans and the Intersect, which Chuck named Edgar.

Later, Chuck stood beside a computer monitor, a small microphone sat on the desk, and several speakers were connected to the system.

Casey immediately looked suspicious. "I don't like this."

Chuck ignored him, "I was able to figure out how to communicate with the Intersect through text."

Chuck then continued his presentation and pointed at the microphone, "But humans don't naturally communicate through text."

Casey crossed his arms, "Most of us don't communicate with government supercomputers either."

Chuck replied, "That's not the point."

Casey continued, "It's a pretty important point."

Chuck continued anyway. "I created a speech-recognition system."

Sarah's eyes widened, "For the Intersect?"

Chuck nodded, "It can now listen to spoken language, process it, and respond through speech synthesis."

General Beckman frowned and asked, "You taught the Intersect how to talk?"

Chuck smiled, "When you say it like that, it sounds bad."

General Beckman asked, "How did you do this?"

Chuck told General Beckman, "Based on Orion's blueprints and plans, he was able to figure out how to do this. If you remember, I do have a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering from Stanford and was planning on getting a Master's degree in computer science before Bryce Larkin accused me of cheating, and got me kicked out of Stanford for cheating, and ruined my life."

Chuck tried to explain to them what he did, but none of them understood.

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Chuck then set up his computer and activated the system.

Everyone waited. Nothing happened.

Chuck finally said, "Edgar, are you there? ..."

General Beckman interrupted, "Edgar?"

Chuck replied, "Yes, I decided to give the Intersect a human name rather than refer to it as the Intersect all of the time."

Chuck continued, "... Edgar, I am at Castle with General Beckman, Sarah Walker, and John Casey."

Finally, the speaker crackled. A synthesized voice emerged.

Clearly audible

HELLO

Silence. The room froze.

Sarah blinked.

Casey grunted and looked deeply uncomfortable.

Even General Beckman seemed surprised.

The voice continued.

HELLO AGENT WALKER

HELLO MAJOR CASEY

HELLO GENERAL BECKMAN

Casey pointed immediately, "No."

The voice paused.

CLARIFICATION REQUESTED

Casey shook his head, "No to all of this."

The speaker responded.

UNDERSTOOD

After a long pause.

DISAGREEMENT NOTED

Sarah quietly laughed. Even General Beckman had a smirk on her face.

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The following weeks, in between cover work at the Buy More and downtown in between missions, they were able to work on Edgar. It became an educational experience for everyone.

Edgar now listened to conversations, asked questions in real time, and sought clarification immediately.

Unfortunately, this meant the Intersect discovered human speech was far more complicated than expected.

One afternoon, Sarah casually said. "Chuck, break a leg."

Edgar interrupted her immediately.

STATEMENT INCONSISTENT

CHUCK BARTOWSKI SHOULD NOT FRACTURE LOWER LIMBS

Sarah nearly spit out her coffee.

Chuck laughed, "That's an expression, Edgar."

The Intersect processed.

WHY?

Nobody had an answer.

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Burbank, CA

Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski

As the voice interface improved, the Intersect became better at understanding people.

Not just words, but tone, emotion, and context.

Sunday night, Sarah went to Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski because Ellie had invited her over for dinner.

That evening, Sarah and Chuck were talking in Chuck's bedroom, and Edger interrupted their conversation.

OBSERVATION

Chuck groaned, "Oh no."

Sarah smiled, "What now, Edgar?"

The speaker responded.

WHY DO SARAH WALKER'S AND CHUCK BARTOWSKI'S VOICE PATTERNS CHANGE WHEN TALKING TO EACH OTHER OUTSIDE OF CASTLE?

Sarah froze and blushed.

Chuck immediately looked away.

The speaker paused, and then Edgar said,

FURTHER ANALYSIS WARRANTED.

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The Intersect had always processed information.

Faces, languages, combat techniques, government databases, and patterns.

It absorbed information and created connections faster than any human mind, but Edgar was something different.

What the Intersect could never take into account or understand was emotion. Edgar was learning how to do exactly that.

Because emotion could not be categorized, could not be indexed, could not be predicted.

Yet recurring anomalies appeared in every mission report.

Sarah Walker and Chuck Bartowski.

Whenever Sarah Walker was involved, Chuck's performance increased dramatically.

His reaction times improved, his confidence increased, and his stress levels stabilized.

Even more unusual: Sarah's own behavior changed around Chuck; she took risks she would never take for other assets, protected him beyond mission parameters, and violated standing orders.

They both displayed signs of attachment.

The Intersect began studying, as it tried to understand why this phenomenon occurred.

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Later in the week, Chuck sat alone in his apartment after Morgan had gone home after a marathon playing Call of Duty.

Ellie and Devon were working a late shift, and Sarah was supposedly on surveillance duty, giving Casey a break.

Chuck played a video game while absentmindedly eating pizza.

Suddenly, he froze. A familiar sensation flooded through his mind. Images, data, calculations, and simulations.

Edgar was running probability models.

Chuck dropped the controller. "What the hell?"

Thousands of them. Millions.

Mission reports from the previous twenty-four months were reviewed and then re-reviewed.

Then analyzed across thousands of variables. Agent proximity. Mission complexity. Enemy strength. Weather conditions. Time of day. Operational support. Equipment availability.

Edgar searched for a measurable cause. It found none.

Yet an anomaly remained.

Whenever Sarah Walker was present, Chuck Bartowski exceeded projected performance parameters.

Edgar expanded its search.

Audio recordings, video surveillance, Castle mission logs, Buy More security footage, and apartment courtyard observations.

The results became increasingly confusing.

Chuck Bartowski exhibited an elevated heart rate when Sarah Walker entered a room.

Sarah Walker exhibited subtle behavioral modifications when interacting with Chuck Bartowski.

Both subjects frequently maintained eye contact longer than operational necessity required.

Neither subject appeared aware of the pattern.

Edgar created a new category.

UNKNOWN VARIABLE.

The investigation continued.

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Edgar's first simulations were simple.

Simulation 1: Chuck Bartowski receives the Intersect but never meets Sarah Walker.

Simulation 2: Chuck Bartowski receives the Intersect. Sarah Walker serves as his handler for six months before reassignment.

Simulation 3: Chuck Bartowski and Sarah Walker remain partners.

Simulation 4: Chuck Bartowski and Sarah Walker become more than partners.

Then Edgar repeated the simulations. Edgar decided this needed further analysis.

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Additional variables were introduced.

Simulation 417: Agent Walker demonstrates no emotional attachment.

Result: Mission effectiveness reduced.

Simulation 902: Agent Walker follows standing orders and prioritizes mission objectives over Chuck Bartowski.

Result: Mission effectiveness reduced.

Simulation 1,204: Chuck Bartowski ceases emotional attachment to Agent Walker.

Result: Mission effectiveness reduced.

The pattern remained.

The Intersect adjusted its calculations.

A new conclusion emerged.

The anomaly was not Agent Walker.

The anomaly was not Chuck Bartowski.

The anomaly was the connection between them.

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End Chapter 1

Chapter 2: Operation Understanding Human Emotions

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "I Robot" by Alan Parsons Project

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 2 - Operation Understanding Human Emotions

Burbank, CA

Castle

The next morning in the Castle.

General Beckman appeared on the monitor.

Sarah and Casey sat next to Chuck.

"So you're telling me," General Beckman said carefully, "the Intersect is conducting independent analysis?"

"That's the weird part," Chuck replied.

"It isn't just analyzing. It's asking questions."

Casey folded his arms, "I told you this thing would eventually become self-aware."

Chuck sighed, "It's not Skynet, Casey."

"That's exactly what someone says before Skynet," Casey replied.

Sarah ignored Casey, "What kind of questions?"

Chuck hesitated and then spoke. "It wants to know what emotions are."

Silence.

Casey blinked, "Emotions?"

"Yes," Chuck replied.

"Of all the classified information in the world that the Intersect has access to..." Casey asked.

"Casey," Sarah interjected.

"... No, Sarah. It has access to nuclear launch codes and it chooses human emotions?" Casey continued.

General Beckman looked thoughtful. "What prompted this?"

Chuck swallowed, "It was running simulations involving Sarah and me."

Now, Sarah looked surprised, "Us?"

Chuck nodded, "Every simulation keeps reaching the same conclusion."

"And? ..." Sarah asked.

Chuck looked directly at her, "It says mission success rates are highest when we're together."

Sarah's expression softened.

Casey grunted, "Oh, great. The Intersect has been infected by Bartowski's lady feelings."

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Edgar continued studying human emotions.

Edgar searched government databases.

Psychological research. Behavioral studies. Academic papers. Military evaluations. Historical records.

Eventually, a recurring term appeared.

Attachment. Bonding. Affection. Love.

Edgar then analyzed romance novels, poems, and romantic movies.

It examined the definition of love.

The definition proved unsatisfactory.

The term possessed no universal mathematical formula.

No standard measurement.

No reliable prediction model.

The concept appeared irrational.

Yet it appeared repeatedly throughout human history.

Edgar continued searching.

Kings had risked entire kingdoms for it. Scientists had devoted lifetimes to understanding it. Artists had spent centuries attempting to describe it. Entire civilizations had built stories around it.

The evidence suggested humanity considered the phenomenon important.

Extremely important.

Despite the complete absence of objective quantification.

Edgar found this deeply inefficient.

And deeply fascinating.

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Three days later, during a routine mission briefing in Castle, Chuck looked across the room at Sarah.

Nothing significant occurred. No mission. No danger. No operational necessity.

Sarah simply smiled at him.

A small smile. Barely noticeable. The kind most people would have ignored.

Edgar did not ignore it.

Immediately, dozens of biological markers changed. Chuck's stress levels decreased, heart rate stabilized, neural activity increased, and confidence indicators rose.

Even Sarah seemed at calmer after smiling at Chuck.

Edgar observed the results, then reviewed them, and then verified them.

The conclusion was unavoidable.

Agent Sarah Walker had altered Chuck Bartowski's operational state without speaking a single word.

Edgar created a second category.

HIGH PRIORITY ANOMALY.

And for the first time since its creation, Edgar found itself confronting a question it could not answer.

Not who. Not where. Not when. Not how, but why.

Why did one human being have such an effect on another?

Why did the data repeatedly improve when they were together?

Why did every successful future contain both of them?

And why did every attempt to separate them result in diminished outcomes?

Edgar initiated a new project.

PROJECT: LOVE.

STATUS: INVESTIGATION ONGOING.

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Edgar continued studying government databases, trying to understand Agent Sarah Walker.

It absorbed information and created connections faster than any human mind.

What it had never understood was human change because human beings were inconsistent.

They adapted. They evolved. They surprised themselves.

And no one surprised Edgar more than Agent Sarah Walker.

At first, Edgar assumed Chuck Bartowski was the key variable.

He was the asset. The civilian. The human computer carrying government secrets.

Naturally, the analysis focused on him, but after months of observation, Edgar discovered something unexpected.

Chuck Bartowski wasn't changing. At least not significantly. Sarah Walker was.

Edgar began reviewing mission reports.

Not Chuck's reports.

Sarah's.

The results were troubling and fascinating.

Before Chuck Bartowski, Agent Sarah Walker's performance metrics were remarkably consistent.

Mission success rate: Excellent.

Combat effectiveness: Excellent.

Operational discipline: Excellent.

Psychological profile: Stable.

Predictable. Reliable.

Agent Walker was the perfect CIA operative.

Then Chuck Bartowski entered her life, and the numbers changed.

Initially, the changes appeared negative.

Agent Walker violated standing orders repeatedly.

She improvised more frequently. She ignored protocol.

Protected mission assets beyond acceptable thresholds.

Questioned agency decisions and displayed emotional involvement.

Edgar initially classified these as performance deficiencies.

Then it continued studying.

And discovered something surprising.

Despite increased deviations from protocol, overall mission success increased, not decreased. It increased.

The data made no sense.

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Edgar expanded its analysis.

Every mission involving Sarah Walker before Chuck Bartowski.

Every mission involving Sarah Walker after Chuck Bartowski.

Thousands of comparisons. The results became impossible to ignore.

After Chuck Bartowski entered her life, Agent Walker demonstrated greater adaptability. Greater creativity. Greater willingness to trust unconventional solutions. Greater resilience under emotional stress. Greater long-term effectiveness.

The perfect operative had become something else. Something better.

Edgar continued its simulation.

Simulation 1: Sarah Walker never meets Chuck Bartowski.

Result: Successful CIA career. Promotion. Recognition. High operational effectiveness. Emotional isolation remains unchanged.

Simulation terminated.

Simulation 2: Sarah Walker serves as Chuck's handler for six months.

Result: Minor emotional development. Moderate increase in mission success.

Simulation terminated.

Simulation 3: Sarah Walker remains partnered with Chuck Bartowski.

Result: Significant increase in mission effectiveness. Substantial increase in psychological resilience. Expanded support network. Enhanced leadership capability.

Simulation continued.

Edgar ran the simulation again.

The results never changed.

Edgar reviewed Sarah's behavioral records.

Something unusual emerged.

Before Chuck, Sarah trusted almost nobody.

After Chuck, she trusted Chuck completely.

She trusted Casey, eventually.

She trusted General Beckman, occasionally.

She trusted Ellie, Devon, and even Morgan Grimes.

Edgar found this development remarkable.

Chuck Bartowski possessed no formal intelligence training.

No advanced combat experience, no psychological conditioning yet his presence repeatedly caused people to become more connected to one another.

The phenomenon appeared irrational.

And highly effective.

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Edgar reviewed mission footage. Again and again.

A pattern emerged.

Chuck consistently encouraged behavior that trained agents considered weaknesses.

Compassion. Forgiveness. Empathy. Hope.

Yet every time Sarah embraced those qualities, she became stronger. Not weaker.

Edgar revised its assumptions.

Perhaps these were not weaknesses at all.

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The most significant discovery occurred during a hostage simulation.

Scenario A: Sarah Walker follows protocol.

Mission success probability: 73%.

Scenario B: Sarah Walker follows Chuck Bartowski's recommendation.

Mission success probability: 87%.

The difference puzzled Edgar.

Chuck's recommendation carried greater risk. Less certainty. More variables.

Yet it consistently produced better outcomes.

The reason was eventually identified.

Chuck believed people could change.

Most intelligence agencies did not.

Sarah Walker eventually learned to believe it, too.

Edgar created a new category for its analysis.

Assessment: Chuck Bartowski

Definition: Subject consistently produces positive psychological growth in associated individuals.

Probability of occurrence: Statistically impossible.

Observed frequency: Repeatedly confirmed.

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Edgar updated its findings.

Previous conclusion: Sarah Walker improves Chuck Bartowski's performance.

Status: Correct. But incomplete.

New conclusion: Chuck Bartowski improves Sarah Walker's performance.

Status: Confirmed.

Further analysis required.

Edgar reviewed every successful future.

Every simulation. Every probability model. Every possible outcome.

One truth appeared consistently.

Chuck did not make Sarah Walker weaker.

He made her willing to take chances. He made her willing to trust. He made her willing to hope.

And somehow, against every prediction, those risks made her stronger.

The final report contained a brief analysis.

CLASSIFICATION: ANOMALY CONFIRMED.

SUBJECT: CHUCK BARTOWSKI.

REASON: AGENT SARAH WALKER BECAME MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN SHE STOPPED ACTING LIKE THE PERFECT SPY AND STARTED ACTING LIKE A HUMAN BEING.

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Edgar then changed its assumptions and tried to understand civilian Chuck Bartowski.

What Edgar had never understood was inspiration, because inspiration could not be measured.

It could not be programmed and could not be predicted.

Yet one recurring anomaly appeared in every mission report. Sarah Walker.

At first, Edgar assumed Chuck Bartowski's improvement was inevitable.

He was gaining experience, learning tradecraft, surviving missions, and adapting to circumstances.

The increase in performance appeared logical.

Then Edgar examined the data, and logic stopped making sense.

Edgar reviewed Chuck Bartowski's mission history.

Every mission. Every operation. Every field report.

The results revealed a pattern. When Sarah Walker was present, Chuck Bartowski performed beyond projected parameters.

His reaction times improved. His confidence increased. His decision-making accelerated. His willingness to act increased dramatically.

Most importantly, his fear no longer controlled him.

Initially, Edgar attributed the changes to his training with Agent Walker.

She was an elite operative. Naturally, she would improve the performance of her assigned asset.

The explanation seemed sufficient.

Then Edgar compared Chuck Bartowski to other assets.

The pattern disappeared.

No other handler produced similar results.

No training program produced similar results.

No psychological intervention produced similar results.

Only Sarah Walker.

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Edgar expanded its search.

It examined Chuck's behavior before Sarah entered his life.

The contrast was remarkable.

Before Sarah Walker, Chuck Bartowski avoided conflict, risk, and uncertainty. He preferred safety, predictability, and comfort.

The potential for greatness existed, but it remained dormant.

Then Sarah Walker arrived, and everything changed.

The first change was confidence.

Edgar reviewed countless interactions.

Sarah believed Chuck could accomplish things before Chuck believed it himself.

Repeatedly.

When Chuck doubted, Sarah encouraged.

When Chuck hesitated, Sarah challenged.

When Chuck failed, Sarah refused to give up on him.

The effect accumulated over time.

Edgar found no comparable influence anywhere else in Chuck's life.

The second change was courage.

The data became impossible to ignore.

Before Sarah Walker, Chuck avoided danger whenever possible.

After Sarah Walker, Chuck voluntarily entered dangerous situations to protect others, especially Sarah and Casey.

Edgar initially classified this behavior as irrational.

Further analysis determined otherwise.

Chuck Bartowski had not become reckless. He had become brave.

The distinction proved significant.

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Edgar continued to review mission simulations.

Simulation 1: Chuck Bartowski receives the Intersect. Sarah Walker never becomes his handler.

Result: Subject survives, barely. Subject functions adequately. Potential remains largely unrealized.

Simulation terminated.

Simulation 2: Sarah Walker is assigned for six months.

Result: Moderate improvement. Increased confidence.

Simulation terminated.

Simulation 3: Sarah Walker remains Chuck's partner.

Result: Significant increase in mission effectiveness. Substantial increase in leadership capability. Elevated problem-solving performance. Expanded resilience.

The simulation continued.

The outcome repeated across every model.

Every future. Every probability projection.

Sarah Walker remained the constant.

Edgar investigated further.

Why did Agent Walker have such an effect?

The answer was not combat training. It was not intelligence. It was not tradecraft.

The answer was far more complicated.

Sarah Walker saw Chuck Bartowski differently from everyone else.

Government agencies saw an asset, a database, a strategic resource, and a mission requirement.

Sarah Walker saw a person.

The distinction altered everything.

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Edgar reviewed mission footage again.

A pattern emerged.

Sarah consistently expected more from Chuck than he expected from himself.

Not because she demanded perfection, but because she believed he was capable of more.

Edgar identified the phenomenon.

Faith.

An unusual and largely unquantifiable variable.

Yet the effects were measurable.

Extraordinarily measurable.

The most significant discovery occurred during simulation analysis.

When Chuck faced impossible odds, statistical models predicted withdrawal, avoidance, and failure.

Instead, Chuck repeatedly advanced.

Edgar searched for the cause.

The answer appeared repeatedly.

Sarah Walker.

Not physically, not operationally, but psychologically.

Chuck believed he could succeed because Sarah believed he could succeed.

The feedback loop proved astonishingly powerful.

Edgar updated its findings.

Previous conclusion: Chuck Bartowski's improvement is the result of experience.

Status: Partially correct.

New conclusion: Sarah Walker significantly contributes to Chuck Bartowski's improvement.

Status: Confirmed.

Further analysis required.

Weeks of simulations followed.

Millions of calculations.

Every successful future contained the same pattern.

Sarah Walker did not merely protect Chuck Bartowski.

She inspired him, she challenged him, she believed in him, and in doing so, she transformed him.

The final report contained a single conclusion.

A conclusion supported by every available data point.

Chuck Bartowski became more capable because someone he respected believed he could be.

Final report of analysis:

CLASSIFICATION: ANOMALY CONFIRMED.

SUBJECT: SARAH WALKER.

REASON: SARAH WALKER CONSISTENTLY CAUSES CHUCK BARTOWSKI TO EXCEED ALL PROJECTED LIMITATIONS.

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End Chapter 2

Chapter 3: CHAPTER 3 - Operation Understanding Love

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Digital Love" by Daft Punk

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 3 - Operation Understanding Love

Burbank, CA

Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski

One evening, Chuck was asleep, then suddenly awakened by Edgar.

DEFINE LOVE.

Chuck sat upright, "What?"

VARIABLE UNKNOWN.

ANALYSIS INCOMPLETE.

LOVE DEFINITION UNKNOWN.

Chuck stared at the darkness. Edgar wasn't malfunctioning. It was genuinely confused.

For perhaps the first time in its existence, it had found something it could not calculate.

After Edgar's analysis of human emotions, Edgar wanted to learn what love was.

Chuck decided that he should get permission from General Beckman regarding this issue.

XXXX

Burbank, CA

Castle

The next morning, in the daily briefing in the Castle Conference Room.

General Beckman appeared on the monitor. Sarah and Casey sat beside Chuck.

"So you're telling me," General Beckman said carefully, "Edgar is a conducting second independent analysis?"

"It has another question about humans," Chuck replied.

General Beckman glared at him and asked, "What kind of questions?"

Chuck hesitated and then replied, "It wants to know what love is."

"Love?" General Beckman asked.

Chuck told her, "Yes. Edgar is asking for permission to interview Sarah, Casey, and my family and friends for their definition of love."

Chuck told her that he could build a portable communication device from the spy devices in Castle that would allow Edgar to hear what other people say while still communicating with me, but now outside of Castle and his bedroom.

General Beckman thought for a minute and was curious to see what would happen when the Intersect got people's answers to its question, so she granted Chuck's request, much to the dismay of Casey and Sarah. Even Chuck didn't seem too pleased that General Beckman had agreed with his request.

XXXX

The next day, Chuck found Sarah taking a break outside the Orange Orange getting some fresh air.

Sunlight illuminated her blonde hair. For a moment, Chuck forgot the conversation he needed to have.

Sarah smiled at him and said, "You know what's funny about all of this?"

Chuck asked, "What?"

She continued, "The CIA has spent years trying to understand human behavior."

Chuck smiled, "How'd that go?"

"We're still terrible at it."

They laughed, and then Sarah grew serious.

Chuck asked her, "Edgar wants to know what love is. Can you give your definition of love?"

She paused, "Love is choosing someone."

Chuck listened.

"Every day. It's trusting someone with the parts of yourself nobody else sees."

Her voice softened, "It's caring more about their happiness than your own."

Chuck felt his chest tighten as Sarah looked directly at him.

"And sometimes it means risking everything because life without them isn't really living."

Edgar absorbed every word. Recording, analyzing, comparing.

Yet still something remained missing.

XXXX

Later that day, Casey was walked into Castle, and was confronted by Chuck and Sarah.

He said, "This is stupid."

Chuck grinned, "Edgar wants your definition of love."

Casey nearly walked back out, "No."

Chuck said, "Casey"

"No. I'm not going to have a conversation with the Intersect."

"Casey, please."

He sighed heavily, "Fine."

Sarah smirked, and Chuck grinned.

Casey looked uncomfortable.

More uncomfortable than during gunfire, more uncomfortable than explosions, and he finally responded, "Love means somebody becomes your mission."

Chuck and Sarah exchanged glances.

Casey continued, "You protect them, you fight for them, and you don't quit..."

His voice lowered, "...Even when they drive you crazy."

In that moment, neither Chuck nor Sarah joked.

Because they knew Casey wasn't talking theoretically. He was talking about people he had cared about. People he had lost.

Edgar stored the information.

Still incomplete.

XXXX

Burbank, CA

Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski

That evening, in Chuck's bedroom, Edgar asked again.

DEFINE LOVE.

Chuck sat alone in his room.

This time, he answered aloud.

"You know why you can't solve it?"

Silence.

"You keep treating it like a formula."

Edgar waited.

Chuck smiled, "Love isn't data... Love is the most powerful feeling in the universe. It is how we have all survived. It can make you feel happy, sad, nervous, calm, hot, and cold. It can give you strength and make you weak. It is the most powerful feeling in the

universe!"

Chuck continued, "Love is knowing every reason something shouldn't work, and wanting it anyway."

Edgar processed.

"Love is when somebody changes who you are for the better."

A memory appeared. Sarah teaches him confidence, teaching him courage, teaching him to believe in himself.

"Love is seeing someone and feeling like you're home."

Edgar analyzed, compared, simulated, and calculated. Then Edgar stopped for the first time it stopped.

XXXX

After Edgar began asking impossible questions about love, Chuck quickly realized something.

Edgar wasn't satisfied. It had listened to Sarah, it had listened to Casey, and it had listened to Chuck.

Yet every time Chuck flashed, he could feel the system still processing, still comparing, and still searching as if it understood the words but not the meaning behind them.

So Chuck decided to seek out two people who knew more about lasting love than anyone he knew, his sister Ellie and his future brother-in-law Devon.

Saturday afternoon, Ellie sat at the outdoor table, grading medical charts while Devon relaxed next to her, reading a fitness magazine.

With the mobile communication link in his ear and a GLG-20 listening device with a modified video feed on his shirt, Chuck approached carrying three coffees.

Ellie smiled immediately, "Okay, little brother."

Chuck blinked, "Okay, what?"

Ellie told him, "You brought us coffee."

She pointed at him. "You only bring us coffee when you need something."

Devon nodded, "Or when you've accidentally broken something."

Chuck sighed, "Why does everyone know me so well?"

"Years of practice," Ellie said.

Chuck handed them their drinks and sat down.

Devon looked between the siblings and said, "This feels serious."

Chuck rubbed the back of his neck, "Actually... I have a question."

Ellie leaned forward, "About what?"

Chuck hesitated and then asked, "What is your definition of love?"

The silence that followed lasted several seconds.

Devon looked at Ellie. Ellie looked at Devon. Then both looked at Chuck.

"Wow..." Devon said, "... That is so not what I expected."

"Neither did I," Ellie admitted.

Chuck shifted nervously, "So?"

Ellie smiled softly, "Why are you asking?"

Chuck quickly improvised, "Uh... curiosity?"

Ellie narrowed her eyes, "Chuck. Is this about a certain blonde?"

Chuck blushed as he said, "What?"

"That's not curiosity", she replied.

Devon laughed, "He's got the same face he makes before asking you for permission to do something stupid."

Chuck groaned, "Can we just answer the question?"

XXXX

Ellie thought quietly for a moment, then she looked toward Devon.

Her expression changed immediately, the way it always did when she looked at her fiancé.

Chuck noticed. Edgar noticed too. Recording everything.

Ellie finally spoke, "Love is feeling safe."

Chuck tilted his head, "Safe?"

She nodded, "Not physically safe."

Her voice softened, "Emotionally safe."

Devon listened quietly.

Ellie continued, "It's knowing somebody sees every part of you. The good parts, the bad parts, and even the embarrassing parts."

Chuck laughed, "I have plenty of those."

She pointed at him, "Exactly, and they stay anyway."

Chuck considered that.

Ellie smiled, "When Mom and Dad left, I was terrified. I was trying to raise you, pay bills, go to school, and figure everything out."

Her eyes drifted toward Devon, "And then this ridiculous guy showed up."

Devon grinned, "I prefer handsome."

Ellie immediately told him, "You were ridiculous."

Devon laughed and said, "I was handsome and ridiculous."

Ellie laughed, and then looked back at Chuck, "For the first time in years, I didn't feel like I had to carry everything alone. That's love."

She squeezed Devon's hand, "It's having somebody stand beside you when life gets heavy."

Edgar stored every word.

XXXX

Devon sat back in his chair, "Okay, my turn."

Ellie smiled, "This should be good."

Devon pointed dramatically at Chuck, "Love is choosing the same person over and over again..."

Chuck immediately recognized similarities to Sarah's answer.

Devon continued, "...Everybody thinks love is some magical feeling. Butterflies, fireworks, and romantic music"

Chuck nodded, "Isn't it?"

Devon shook his head, "No. Those things happen, but they don't last forever. "What lasts is the choice."

Ellie smiled knowingly.

Devon looked at her, "Every morning I wake up and choose Ellie."

Chuck watched the two of them. The statement sounded simple yet powerful.

Devon continued, "And she chooses me. Some days that's easy, and some days less easy."

Ellie chimed in, "Like when you reorganized my entire kitchen. It was chaos!"

They continued their minor disagreement, "It was organized chaos."

"No, it was terrifying chaos."

Chuck laughed as they playfully argued, and then Devon grew serious.

"The point is, love isn't one big decision. It's thousands of little ones. Every day ... you choose patience, you choose trust, you choose forgiveness, and you choose to stay."

Edgar processed. Cross-referencing with everyone else's statements.

Comparing variables and the patterns aligned.

XXXX

The conversation drifted to lighter topics afterward.

But Chuck remained thoughtful.

Later that evening, he sat alone in his apartment.

The courtyard was quiet.

Suddenly, Edgar spoke.

NEW INPUT RECEIVED.

Chuck sighed, "You're still working on this?"

YES.

"Of course you are."

A pause, and then

SARAH WALKER DEFINITION: LOVE = TRUST.

JOHN CASEY DEFINITION: LOVE = COMMITMENT.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI DEFINITION: LOVE = HOME.

ELLIE BARTOWSKI DEFINITION: LOVE = SAFETY.

DEVON WOODCOMB DEFINITION: LOVE = CHOICE.

Chuck smiled, "That's a lot of definitions."

Edgar processed.

ALL DIFFERENT.

"Yeah."

ALL CORRECT.

Chuck blinked. For the first time, Edgar sounded less confused. Almost enlightened.

LOVE APPEARS TO BE MULTIPLE VARIABLES.

Chuck laughed, "Welcome to being human."

XXXX

Edgar had collected answers from Sarah, Casey, Ellie, Devon, and Chuck, yet something continued to bother him.

All of its subjects had experienced extraordinary lives. Spies, doctors, and heroes. People who were accustomed to sacrifice.

Edgar required additional data. It wanted answers from ordinary people. People who loved without mission reports, government clearances, classified operations, or saving lives.

The following morning, Edgar spoke to Chuck.

ADDITIONAL DATA REQUIRED.

Chuck sighed, "Oh boy."

REQUEST: INTERVIEW MORGAN GRIMES.

Chuck immediately laughed, "You're going to regret that."

XXXX

Burbank, CA

Buy More

That afternoon, Chuck found Morgan in the Buy More break room, eating nachos while reading a comic book.

"Morgan, I need your opinion."

Morgan looked up suspiciously, "Last time you said that, I ended up dressed like a ninja."

"Fair point," Chuck said and asked Morgan, "What is your definition of love?"

Morgan blinked. Then smiled, "Oh, that's easy."

Chuck immediately regretted asking.

Morgan leaned back in his chair, "You know what love is?"

Chuck asked, "What?"

"It's finding the person who makes absolutely no sense ...and deciding they're your favorite person anyway."

Chuck laughed, "That's your answer?"

"No, wait. I'm building toward greatness."

Morgan pointed dramatically, "Love is when somebody knows exactly how weird you are...and instead of running away, they become weird with you."

Chuck couldn't help smiling.

Morgan continued, "When I met Anna, I spent half my time trying to impress her."

"And?" Chuck asked.

Morgan answered, "I mostly embarrassed myself, but eventually I realized something."

"What?" Chuck asked.

"I didn't have to pretend around her."

For once, Morgan sounded sincere, "I could be myself, the real me, the nerdy me, the goofy me, and the guy who still owns action figures..."

Chuck nodded, and Morgan smiled.

"...And she still wanted to be around me."

A thoughtful silence followed. Then Morgan shrugged, "So yeah, love is finding somebody who makes life more fun, and who likes you exactly the way you are."

Edgar recorded every word.

NEW VARIABLE DETECTED.

MORGAN GRIMES DEFINITION: LOVE = ACCEPTANCE.

XXXX

A few days later, Chuck happened to run into Anna outside the Buy More.

Edgar immediately prompted him.

INTERVIEW REQUEST: ANNA WU.

Chuck silently wondered if Edgar had become obsessed with trying to figure out what love was.

Possibly.

"Hey Anna," Chuck said, "Can I ask you something?"

She folded her arms. "Should I be worried?"

"Probably not," Chuck told her.

"That's not reassuring."

Chuck laughed, "What is your definition of love?"

Anna's expression softened immediately. Unlike Morgan, she didn't answer right away.

She thought about it and then smiled, "Love is believing in someone before they believe in themselves."

Chuck blinked as Anna continued, "Everybody sees the finished version of a person. The successful version, the confident version, and the version that has everything figured out."

She shook her head, "Love sees the unfinished version."

Chuck listened carefully as she continued, "The version that's scared, the version that's uncertain, the version that's still becoming who they're supposed to be."

A small smile appeared on her face, "When I first met Morgan, he wasn't exactly what you'd call confident."

Chuck nearly laughed, and Anna noticed.

"Don't tell him I said that, but he had a good heart, and I saw that before he did."

Anna's voice softened, "Love is looking at somebody and seeing not only who they are...but who they can become."

Edgar processed the statement.

Anna smiled, "And then helping them get there."

ADDITIONAL DEFINITIONS RECEIVED.

ANNA WU DEFINITION: LOVE = BELIEF.

Chuck smiled.

XXXX

Later that evening in Chuck's bedroom, Edgar said,

CURRENT FINDINGS:

SARAH WALKER: LOVE = TRUST

JOHN CASEY: LOVE = COMMITMENT

CHUCK BARTOWSKI: LOVE = HOME

ELLIE BARTOWSKI: LOVE = SAFETY

DEVON WOODCOMB: LOVE = CHOICE

MORGAN GRIMES: LOVE = ACCEPTANCE

ANNA WU: LOVE = BELIEF

Several seconds passed, and then a new conclusion appeared.

ALL DEFINITIONS DIFFERENT.

Chuck nodded, "Yep."

ALL DEFINITIONS VALID.

"Also, yep."

Edgar processed billions of connections, and then a realization emerged.

**LOVE APPEARS TO BE THE PROCESS OF HELPING ANOTHER PERSON
BECOME MORE THAN THEY COULD BE ALONE.**

Chuck sat quietly. For once, he didn't have a correction because when he thought about Sarah, Casey,

Ellie and Devon...and even Morgan and Anna.

Edgar wasn't wrong. What makes it especially interesting is that everyone gives Edgar a different answer.

Love looked different for everyone, but somehow every definition led to the same place: Trust, commitment, safety, choice, home, acceptance, and belief.

Different words. The same truth.

For the first time, Edgar added them all together and found an answer no single definition could provide.

ANALYSIS UPDATED: LOVE IS NOT ONE VARIABLE.

XXXX

End Chapter 3

Chapter 4: CHAPTER 4 - Operation Making Friends

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Computer Blue" by Prince

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 4 - Operation Making Friends

Burbank, CA

Castle

By the time Chuck perfected the voice interface, life in Castle had become... unusual.

What had started as a simple text terminal had evolved into something much more sophisticated.

The Intersect now had a name, at least according to Chuck.

Edgar.

Nobody was entirely sure why Chuck had chosen the name.

Casey suspected it was because Chuck liked to name everything.

Sarah suspected it was because Chuck was trying to make Edgar feel less like a machine.

Edgar had never objected. In fact, Edgar seemed to like having a name.

More importantly, Edgar had become a constant presence in Castle.

Listening, learning, asking questions, and learning at an alarming rate.

Edgar thought it was already friends with Chuck since Chuck had created the ability to make Edgar communicate with others, but in Edgar's analysis, it decided it needed to find something in common with Agent Walker and Major Casey, so it began to consider options to become their friends.

XXXX

One morning, Sarah entered Castle carrying a folder from General Beckman.

Chuck was already at his workstation.

Casey was cleaning a rifle.

Edgar's voice came from the speakers.

GOOD MORNING, AGENT WALKER.

Sarah replied, "Morning, Edgar."

GOOD MORNING, AGENT CASEY.

Casey grunted. Edgar paused.

GOOD MORNING, CASEY GRUNT

Casey frowned.

Chuck immediately burst out laughing, "Edgar, that's not his last name."

CORRECTION ACCEPTED.

Sarah shook her head. Some days, she genuinely forgot Edgar was one of the most advanced intelligence systems ever created.

Other days... it was impossible to forget.

XXXX

A few hours later, Sarah received a call. She glanced at the screen, and her expression immediately softened.

Chuck noticed, "Everything okay?"

Sarah nodded, "My grandmother."

Sarah walked toward a quieter corner of Castle and answered her phone.

Almost immediately, she switched languages. Polish.

A language Chuck nor Casey didn't understand, but Edgar noticed immediately.

Sarah smiled as she listened, and then replied: "Dzień dobry, Babcia." (Good morning, Grandma.)

A pause. Then "Tak, wszystko w porządku." (Yes, everything is fine.)

She laughed, "Nie, nie jestem zbyt chuda." (No, I'm not too thin.)

A pause, "Nie, nie pracuję za dużo." (No, I'm not working too much.)

Another laugh, "Tak, wiem." (Yes, I know.)

For several minutes, the conversation continued.

Warm, comfortable, and natural.

Eventually, Sarah ended the call. When she turned around, Chuck was smiling.

"You looked happy."

Sarah nodded, "I am."

The moment Sarah left the room, Edgar spoke.

QUESTION.

Chuck immediately recognized that tone, "Oh no."

WHAT LANGUAGE WAS AGENT WALKER SPEAKING?

"I don't know," Chuck replied.

Sarah walked back into the room, and Edgar immediately asked.

SARAH WALKER, WHAT LANGUAGE WERE YOU SPEAKING?

"Polish", Sarah replied.

A brief pause, then:

REQUEST.

Chuck sighed, "Edgar"

I WOULD LIKE TO LEARN POLISH.

Casey looked up, "Why?"

The answer came instantly.

AGENT WALKER'S VOICE STRESS INDICATORS DECREASED BY 37 PERCENT DURING THE CONVERSATION.

SHE APPEARED HAPPIER.

I WISH TO UNDERSTAND WHY.

Chuck smiled. Of course, Edgar wanted to know. Everything eventually became a learning opportunity.

Chuck told Edgar to study books on Polish, access language learning software such as Pimsleur, Babbel, Clozemaster, and anything else he could find to understand the language.

For the next several days, Edgar devoted significant processing resources to learning Polish.

Sarah found the entire thing amusing.

At first.

Then Edgar began asking questions. Many questions. Far too many questions.

SARAH, WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DZIEŃ DOBRY AND DOBRY WIECZÓR? ("good morning" and "good evening")

SARAH, WHAT IS THE GRAMMATICAL PURPOSE OF SEVEN CASES?

SARAH, WHY DOES ONE WORD CHANGE FORMS SEVENTEEN DIFFERENT WAYS?

Sarah laughed, "Because Polish hates everyone."

Edgar processed for a moment.

ILLOGICAL, BUT UNDERSTOOD.

XXXX

Three weeks later, Sarah entered Castle.

Edgar immediately spoke.

Except this time...not in English.

DZIEŃ DOBRY, SARAH. (Good morning, Sarah.)

Sarah stopped walking, Chuck looked up from his workstation, and Casey lowered his newspaper.

Sarah blinked, "What?"

Edgar repeated,

DZIEŃ DOBRY, SARAH.

Sarah stared at the speakers, then slowly smiled, "Dzień dobry, Edgar." (Good morning, Edgar.)

Chuck nearly fell out of his chair, "Oh my God."

Edgar seemed pleased. At least as pleased as a supercomputer could sound.

The speakers activated again, and a conversation began.

Edgar asked Sarah,

JAK SIĘ DZISIAJ CZUJESZ? (How are you feeling today?)

Sarah answered, "Dobrze. Jestem trochę zmęczona, ale dobrze." (Good. I'm a little tired, but good.)

DLACZEGO JESTEŚ ZMĘCZONA? (Why are you tired?)

"Ponieważ Chuck pracował do drugiej rano." (Because Chuck was working until two in the morning.)

TO WYDAJE SIĘ NIEROZSĄDNE. (That seems unreasonable.)

"Powiedz mu to." (Tell him that.)

Edgar then turned his attention to Chuck.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI, AGENT WALKER HAS IDENTIFIED YOU AS A PROBLEM.

Sarah laughed.

XXXX

A week later, Edgar surprised everyone. Its voice softened slightly. A habit it had unconsciously developed while speaking with Sarah.

Edgar asked Sarah,

CZY LUBISZ MÓWIĆ PO POLSKU? (Do you like speaking Polish?)

Sarah looked genuinely surprised. "Tak." (Yes.)

DLACZEGO? (Why?)

Sarah thought for a moment and then answered honestly. "Bo przypomina mi dom."
(Because it reminds me of home.)

The room became quiet. Edgar processed the statement longer than normal.

ROZUMIEM. (I understand.)

XXXX

Later that evening, Sarah remained in Castle after everyone else had gone. Chuck was upstairs, and Casey had left.

The room was quiet. Edgar suddenly spoke this time in Polish.

SARAH?

"Tak?" (Yes?)

A pause, and then,

DZIĘKUJĘ ZA POMOC. (Thank you for helping.)

Sarah smiled, "You're welcome, Edgar."

Another pause,

LUBIĘ JĘZYK POLSKI. (I like the Polish language.)

Sarah laughed softly, "Why?"

Edgar's answer came immediately:

PONIEWAŻ SPRAWIA, ŻE SIĘ UŚMIECHASZ. (Because it makes you smile.)

Sarah froze. For a moment, she didn't know what to say. The answer was so simple, so innocent, so completely Edgar.

Finally, she smiled. A genuine smile. "To bardzo miłe." (That's very kind.)

Several weeks later, Polish had become Edgar's favorite secondary language.

Nobody knew exactly why. Well, nobody except Chuck.

One evening, Chuck reviewed Edgar's language-learning logs. Buried among thousands of entries was a simple notation:

POLISH LANGUAGE STUDY: CONTINUING

REASON: AGENT WALKER APPEARS HAPPIER WHEN SPEAKING POLISH.

Then Chuck found the final note. A note Edgar had apparently added for itself.

SUPPORTING HUMAN HAPPINESS APPEARS TO BE IMPORTANT.

Chuck sat back in his chair. For a machine that once understood only data, probabilities, and intelligence reports Edgar was learning remarkably human lessons, and somehow, Sarah had taught him one more.

Sometimes language wasn't just communication. Sometimes, language was home.

XXXX

Edgar's study of Polish had not stopped. If anything, it had accelerated. Edgar had mastered Polish grammar. Its vocabulary now exceeded that of many native speakers. It could distinguish between formal and informal speech, regional expressions, historical dialects, and even the subtle differences in pronunciation between Warsaw and Krakow.

Chuck found this slightly terrifying. Sarah found it strangely endearing.

That afternoon, Castle was unusually quiet. Chuck was in another room reviewing Orion's Intersect schematics, Casey was in the firing range, and only Sarah remained

downstairs in the main room organizing mission reports.

The speakers softly activated.

SARAH?

Sarah smiled without looking up, "Tak, Edgar?" (Yes, Edgar?)

Edgar had learned something else over the past few weeks. Humans appreciated conversation that wasn't always about work.

CZY MOGĘ ZADAĆ CI OSOBISTE PYTANIE? (May I ask you a personal question?)

Sarah smiled, "Oczywiście." (Of course.)

JAKIE JEST TWOJE ULUBIONE TRADYCYJNE POLSKIE DANIE? (What is your favorite traditional Polish dish?)

Sarah blinked. She had expected another question about emotions, or love, or family. Instead, food.

She couldn't help laughing, "To naprawdę ciekawe pytanie." (That's a really interesting question.)

DZIĘKUJĘ. (Thank you.)

Sarah leaned back in her chair. For a moment, she wasn't a CIA agent. She was simply remembering childhood. "Moim ulubionym tradycyjnym polskim daniem są pierogi z kapustą i grzybami." (My favorite traditional Polish dish is sauerkraut and mushroom pierogi.)

Edgar immediately replied

PIEROGI Z KAPUSTĄ I GRZYPAMI. (Sauerkraut and mushroom pierogi.)

DLACZEGO WŁAŚNIE ONE? (Why those?)

Sarah smiled warmly, "Bo przypominają mi dzieciństwo." (Because they remind me of my childhood.)

"Moja babcia robiła je w każdą Wigilię Bożego Narodzenia." (My grandmother made them every Christmas Eve.)

"Cała rodzina pomagała lepić pierogi." (The whole family helped make the pierogi.)

"To była tradycja." (It was a tradition.)

Edgar became unusually quiet. Several seconds passed. Chuck often joked that those pauses meant Edgar was "thinking."

CZY JEDZENIE MOŻE PRZECHOWYWAĆ WSPOMNIENIA? (Can food preserve memories?)

"Nie dosłownie." (Not literally.)

"Ale kiedy próbujesz czegoś, co jadłeś jako dziecko..." (But when you taste something you ate as a child...)

"...czasami przypominasz sobie ludzi, miejsca i chwile, których dawno nie pamiętałeś." (...sometimes you remember people, places, and moments you hadn't thought about in years.)

INTERESUJĄCE. (Interesting.)

SMAK JEST POWIĄZANY Z PAMIĘCIĄ EMOCJONALNĄ. (Taste is connected to emotional memory.)

Sarah smiled, "Dokładnie." (Exactly.)

XXXX

At that exact moment, Chuck walked into Castle carrying a laptop. He caught only the end of the conversation, and he said, "What are you two talking about?"

Sarah smiled, "Pierogi."

Chuck nodded, "That tracks."

Edgar immediately addressed Chuck.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI. I HAVE LEARNED THAT PIEROGI WITH SAUERKRAUT AND MUSHROOMS POSSESS SIGNIFICANT EMOTIONAL VALUE.

Chuck laughed, "They're also delicious."

NOTED.

A pause and then

ARE THEY BETTER THAN PIZZA?

Chuck looked horrified, "Oh, Edgar."

Sarah burst into laughter.

Chuck placed a hand dramatically over his heart, "You can't compare pierogi or anything in the world to pizza. Nothing is better than pizza."

WHY NOT?

Chuck looked toward Sarah grinning, "See? This is your fault."

XXXX

Later that evening. Chuck had gone home. Casey had finished his report. Castle was quiet once again. Sarah gathered her things. Just before she reached the elevator, Edgar spoke one last time.

SARAH?

"Tak?" (Yes?)

DZIĘKUJĘ ZA OPOWIEDZENIE MI O SWOIM DZIECIŃSTWIE (Thank you for telling me about your childhood.)

Sarah smiled, "Nie ma za co." (You're welcome.)

JEŚLI WSPOMNIENIA CZYNIA LUDZI SZCZĘŚLIWSZYMI... (If memories make people happier...)

...TO CHCĘ DOWIEDZIEĆ SIĘ ICH WIĘCEJ. (...then I want to learn more of them.)

Sarah stood silently for a moment. When Edgar had first spoken to her, it had asked about mission effectiveness, then about love, then about language. Now, it wanted to understand memories.

She smiled toward the speaker, "Goodnight, Edgar."

DOBRANOC, SARAH. (Goodnight, Sarah.)

As the lights dimmed in Castle, Edgar quietly added another note to its ever-growing understanding of humanity: Memory is not only stored in the mind. Sometimes, it is carried in the traditions we share, the meals we prepare, and the people with whom we gather around a table. For a machine built to process intelligence, it was a lesson no database could have taught. Only Sarah could.

XXXX

Once Edgar determined that it had made friends with Sarah Walker, it turned its attention to John Casey.

The Castle briefing room was unusually quiet.

Chuck sat alone at the central workstation.

Edgar had been behaving strangely for weeks.

Not dangerous, not hostile. Just curious.

The screen suddenly flickered. A text window appeared.

MAJOR CASEY ENTERING FACILITY IN 17 SECONDS.

Chuck sighed, "Please don't do whatever you're planning."

I AM ATTEMPTING IMPROVED HUMAN RELATIONS.

Chuck replied, "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

The elevator opened. Casey stepped into Castle carrying a duffel bag. Immediately, the monitor came alive.

HELLO, MAJOR CASEY.

Casey stopped, "What?"

I AM ATTEMPTING TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT.

Casey grunted and then replied, "No."

YOUR RESPONSE HAS BEEN RECORDED.

Casey stared at the monitor. The monitor stared back, and an awkward silence followed.

XXXX

Edgar's first attempt at trying to become Casey's friend was to discuss guns.

I HAVE ANALYZED YOUR OPERATIONAL HISTORY.

Casey narrowed his eyes, "That's classified."

SO AM I.

Chuck buried his face in his hands.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE GUN?

Casey blinked.

The question had genuinely surprised him, "Why?"

I AM SEEKING COMMON INTERESTS.

"You don't shoot."

CORRECT.

Casey asked, "Then why do you care?"

BECAUSE YOU CARE. JUST LIKE SARAH LIKES TO SPEAK POLISH.

Casey hated that answer. Mostly because it made sense.

After a moment, he shrugged, "The Colt M1911."

Edgar immediately displayed images and specifications.

EXCELLENT CHOICE.

Casey's eyebrow rose slightly.

SERVICE RECORD EXCEEDS ONE CENTURY.

POWERFUL .45 ACP CARTRIDGE.

MECHANICALLY ELEGANT.

YOU APPRECIATE RELIABILITY OVER NOVELTY.

Casey glanced at Chuck, "Did you tell it that?"

Chuck shook his head, "Nope. You know I don't know much about guns unless it has something to do with Call of Duty."

AGREED. I OBSERVED IT.

Casey reluctantly nodded, "Not bad."

Edgar highlighted the words:

CASEY APPROVAL DETECTED.

Casey grunted and replied, "Don't push it."

XXXX

Edgar's second attempt at trying to become Casey's friend was to discuss rifles.

A few days later, it asked Casey.

MAJOR CASEY, WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE RIFLE?

Casey sat down. "M4 Carbine."

REASON?

Casey smirked, "It works."

ADDITIONAL DETAILS REQUESTED.

Casey sighed, "Maneuverable. Accurate. Easy to maintain. Adaptable."

AGREED.

A large green checkmark appeared on the screen.

Casey grunted.

Chuck asked, "Did you just make Casey grunt?"

PROGRESS.

XXXX

Edgar's third attempt was to discuss military history.

MAJOR CASEY. WHAT IS THE GREATEST UPSET VICTORY IN MILITARY HISTORY?

Casey's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. For once, he answered immediately, "Depends."

ELABORATE.

Casey replied, "The Battle of Agincourt."

REASONING?

"The English were exhausted. Outnumbered. Terrain favored them. Leadership mattered, and King Charles VI of France did not command the French army as he suffered from psychotic illnesses."

Edgar processed for a moment.

ACCEPTABLE ANSWER.

Casey grunted and frowned, "Acceptable?"

VERY GOOD ANSWER.

Casey nodded, "Better."

XXXX

Edgar's fourth attempt was to discuss General Patton.

Edgar displayed a photograph of General Patton.

MAJOR CASEY, WHY WAS GENERAL PATTON SUCCESSFUL DURING WORLD WAR II?

Casey's expression changed because military history was serious business to him.

"Speed," he replied.

Edgar remained silent.

Casey continued, "He moved faster than opponents could react."

CONTINUE.

"He understood armored warfare."

CONTINUE.

"He kept pressure on the enemy."

CONTINUE.

Casey looked annoyed, "Are you grading me?"

YES.

Chuck and Sarah laughed.

Casey ignored them, "Patton trained hard. Planned aggressively. Trusted initiative."

CORRECT.

Five gold stars appeared on the monitor.

Casey stared at it, "Did you just give me five gold stars?"

YOU EARNED IT. JUST LIKE GENERAL PATTON EARNED FIVE STARS.

XXXX

Later, when the room was quiet. Edgar seemed to hesitate.

MAJOR CASEY.

"What?"

DO YOU DISLIKE ME?

Chuck looked up, and Sarah paused what she was working on. Even Casey seemed surprised by the question.

The answer took longer than expected.

Finally, Casey folded his arms, "No."

Edgar remained silent.

Casey continued, "I don't trust computers."

UNDERSTANDABLE.

"I don't trust intelligence agencies."

ALSO UNDERSTANDABLE.

Casey finally said, "Most of all, I don't trust most people."

STATISTICALLY VERIFIED.

Chuck grinned, and Sarah quietly chuckled to herself.

Casey ignored them, "But you've saved many lives."

The room became still.

"Edgar ... You've helped us complete every mission we've been assigned. You've helped protect Chuck, you've helped protect Sarah, and you've helped protect me."

The room remained silent.

Casey nodded once, "So no. I don't dislike you."

Edgar processed that statement for nearly three full seconds.

An eternity by computer standards. Then a final message appeared.

FRIENDSHIP STATUS UPDATED.

JOHN CASEY: PROVISIONAL FRIEND.

Casey immediately stood, "Don't make this weird."

For the first time in Castle's history, Casey smiled at a computer.

Edgar recorded the moment permanently.

XXXX

Later that week, Castle was unusually peaceful.

Chuck was upstairs at the Buy More, and Sarah wasn't in the office yet.

Only one person occupied Castle, Casey.

He methodically disassembled his M1911 on the workbench, cleaning every component with practiced precision.

Edgar had been quiet all morning, and Casey appreciated that.

The silence lasted exactly six minutes when Edgar spoke.

GOOD MORNING, CASEY.

Casey didn't look up. "What do you want?"

I HAVE A QUESTION REGARDING PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN.

Casey stopped. Now that had his undivided attention, "What about him?"

YOUR PERSONNEL FILE CONTAINS SEVENTEEN FAVORABLE REFERENCES TO RONALD REAGAN.

Casey frowned, "You've been reading my file again?"

EVERYONE'S PERSONAL FILES.

"I should've known."

Edgar displayed a photograph of President Ronald Reagan speaking at a podium.

WHY DO YOU RESPECT HIM?

Casey considered the question.

Finally, he answered, "Leadership. He projected confidence. He believed the United States should negotiate from strength."

DEFINE STRENGTH.

"Military readiness."

NOT WAR?

Casey shook his head, "No."

PLEASE EXPLAIN.

Casey leaned back in his chair deep in thought, "The strongest military isn't there because you want to fight. It's there so nobody wants to fight you."

DETERRENCE.

Casey nodded once, "Exactly."

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE LEADER?

Casey answered almost immediately, "They make decisions, they accept responsibility, and they don't panic."

IS CHARISMA REQUIRED?

Casey laughed quietly, "No."

REAGAN POSSESSED CHARISMA.

"He did."

YOU DO NOT.

Casey looked up, "I know."

DOES THIS DISTURB YOU?

"Not even a little."

Edgar surprised him with his next question.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST NOTICE PRESIDENT REAGAN?

Casey became unusually quiet, "I was a young Marine. I remember watching one of his speeches. He sounded like someone who believed America could solve problems."

Edgar remained silent.

"He wasn't perfect, no president is, but confidence matters, especially when the world is watching."

Edgar processed his words, and several seconds passed. Then Edgar asked another question.

MAJOR CASEY

"What?"

YOU HAVE PARTICIPATED IN COMBAT.

"Yes."

YOU STUDY HISTORY.

"Yes."

YOU RESPECT LEADERS WHO PREVENT WAR RATHER THAN SEEK IT.

Casey looked thoughtful, "I do."

THAT APPEARS LOGICAL.

Casey grunted and replied, "Yes, it is."

XXXX

Near the end of Casey and Edgar's discussion, Chuck and Sarah arrived.

They immediately sensed they'd interrupted something.

"What are you guys doing?" Sarah asked.

Casey answered matter-of-factly, "Talking about military history."

Chuck blinked, "You?"

Casey nodded, "Edgar had questions."

"Edgar, you've been talking to Casey for how long?"

FORTY-THREE MINUTES.

Sarah stopped what she was doing and asked, "Forty-three minutes?"

Casey shrugged, "It asked very good questions."

Chuck stared in disbelief, "So, you two are just hanging out now?"

Casey looked at him, "Don't ruin it."

JOHN CASEY ENJOYS DISCUSSING HISTORY MORE THAN DISCUSSING FEELINGS.

Casey immediately stood, "I knew this was going somewhere stupid."

He picked up his pistol, slipped it into its case, and headed for the elevator. As the doors closed, he glanced back, "Edgar, tomorrow we'll talk about President and General Eisenhower. After that, if we have time, we can discuss Alexander the Great."

YES, SIR!

The elevator doors shut.

XXXX

End Chapter 4

E/N1 - I used ChatGPT to convert from US English to Polish in Edgar's conversations with Sarah, so if anything is lost in the translation you can blame me. I can only speak English (American not Queen's) and some Irish Gaelic.

E/N2 - One of my favorite childhood memories is playing old Avalon Hill role-playing board games with my father. Based on wars and battles. My father was almost always busy, but when we started playing a game, he would tell me he had an hour free to play, and 3 hours later, we'd still be playing. He is a big fan of WWII and the Civil War. My mom would always get mad because the game would be spread out on the living room table for months while we played.

Chapter 5: CHAPTER 5 - Operation Project Edgar

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Digital Man" by Rush

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 5 - Operation Project Edgar

NSA Headquarters

Fort Meade, MD

Several days later, General Beckman stood in front of the windows of her office, a classified folder tucked beneath her arm.

She had spent most of the previous evening reading Chuck Bartowski's technical documentation.

Then she had read it again this morning.

The cover read:

PROJECT EDGAR

TECHNICAL REVIEW

AUTHOR: CHARLES IRVING BARTOWSKI

General Beckman opened the file again. She had expected another progress report. Instead, she found herself reading over 1000 pages of architectural diagrams, adaptive learning protocols, natural language frameworks, emotional-context analysis systems, and self-directed educational routines.

The more she read, the more concerned she became. Not because anything appeared dangerous, but because no one could understand how Chuck had done it.

The original Intersect systems had been created by one person known to the Intelligence community as Orion, but General Beckman was one of the very few people who knew who Orion really was, and it concerned her a lot.

Chuck had built Edgar himself, building upon, unknown to him, his father's own work (The Intersect), and somehow Edgar was now teaching itself languages, understanding emotional context, forming social models, and adapting its own behavior to others.

She couldn't believe one man had written it, much less an idiot who worked at a Buy More.

General Beckman leaned back in thought, "How the hell did you do this, Bartowski?"

She turned another page, then another, and then stopped.

A handwritten note from one of the NSA analysts caught her attention. "We are unable to fully explain how Bartowski achieved the adaptive learning efficiencies observed in Edgar. Results exceed projected performance by a significant margin."

General Beckman frowned. She trusted her analysts. If they were admitting they couldn't explain it, something unusual was happening.

A few moments later, she pressed a button on her secure phone, "Connect me with Director Holland at DARPA."

Her personal executive assistant replied, "Yes, General."

Several moments later, the encrypted video screen illuminated. A distinguished man in his late fifties appeared on the monitor: Dr. Richard Holland, Director, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

He smiled politely, "General Beckman."

General Beckman replied, "Director. It's been too long."

"It has."

The pleasantries ended quickly. Neither one enjoyed wasting time.

Dr. Holland asked, "What can DARPA do for the NSA?"

General Beckman remained quiet for a moment before asking an unexpected question.

"Richard, do you remember Stephen Bartowski?"

Dr. Holland leaned back. The question caught him completely off guard.

"Stephen Bartowski," he nodded slowly, "I haven't heard that name in years."

A faint smile crossed his face, "I remember him very well."

"He was one of the brightest engineers I ever met. Brilliant, impossible, and always twenty years ahead of everyone else."

General Beckman noticed the hint of admiration in his voice, "You worked together?"

Dr. Holland chuckled softly, "Several classified advisory committees. We used to joke that Stephen never entered a meeting to solve the problem everyone else was discussing. He solved the problem they were going to discover six months later."

He shook his head, "No one understood how his mind worked. Everyone thought he was a mad genius."

General Beckman opened the folder, "I believe his son may have inherited more than his father's curiosity."

Dr. Holland's expression changed, "If I remember correctly, Stephen had a son named Charles, and a daughter as well."

General Beckman asked, "You know Charles, or Chuck as he prefers?"

Dr. Holland replied, "I know of him. I only remember his name because of the strange middle name, Irving that Stephen told me they gave him when he was born. He told me it was an old family name. Charles was supposedly on the fast track to be recruited through Project Omaha when he was in college at Stanford, but something happened, and no one knew why."

General Beckman let out a sigh and reluctantly said, "A few years ago, a rogue CIA agent broke into the facility where Stephen's Intersect was being held and stole it, and then blew up the facility. The agent was Chuck's roommate in college and sent it to Chuck."

General Beckman slid several classified reports across the conference table, where an aide fed them into the encrypted document system.

Seconds later they appeared on Dr. Holland's screen. He adjusted his glasses and asked "What am I looking at?"

Dr. Holland looked up, "The Intersect?"

General Beckman nodded, "You remember Project Intersect?"

"I remember helping Stephen Bartowski review portions of the early proposals. I also remember concluding it would require hundreds of researchers, but Stephen insisted he could work on the project by himself. Everyone thought he had gone crazy."

She folded her hands, "Chuck Bartowski became the human Intersect."

Dr. Holland blinked, "I'm sorry... He became...what?"

General Beckman told him, "For the last several years, he has carried the Intersect in his brain. After he received the Intersect from his old college roommate he managed to successfully load the Intersect into his brain. He's been a reluctant asset for the NSA and CIA the past couple of years. We have the CIA's and NSA's top agents working with him."

Both rooms became silent.

Before Dr. Holland could ask another question, General Beckman continued, "Recently, Chuck accomplished something we believed impossible. He figured out how to improve on the Intersect, and Project Edgar was born. It is essentially Project Intersect taken to the next level, which no one in the NSA analysts can understand how Chuck did it. He created a conversational interface for the Intersect."

Dr. Holland nodded, "Impressive."

"It goes much further, he taught it to learn."

Dr. Holland stopped writing.

General Beckman continued, "He taught it natural language, he taught it contextual reasoning..."

Dr. Holland's pen slowly lowered.

"... And he taught it emotional analysis."

Silence.

Finally, General Beckman delivered the statement she knew would capture DARPA's attention, and she continued, "He created an adaptive artificial intelligence. He calls it Edgar."

Dr. Holland stared at the screen, "You built an artificial general intelligence?"

"No. "Chuck did all by himself."

Another long silence followed. Finally, Dr. Holland asked the obvious question, "How?"

General Beckman slowly closed the folder. "That's precisely the problem."

She looked directly into the camera, "Our best people don't know. The NSA has spent weeks analyzing every line of Bartowski's work. They understand individual components, they understand the mathematics, they understand the programming languages, and they understand the machine learning."

She paused, "But they cannot explain how he combined them. The architecture shouldn't function, and yet it does."

She leaned forward, "Beautifully. Edgar speaks in Polish to one agent and discusses military history with another."

Dr. Holland remained quiet, and that worried General Beckman.

Finally, he spoke, "You think this is something DARPA should examine?"

"I do. That's why I'm calling"

"You want an independent review."

General Beckman replied, "I want the best scientific minds in the country to tell me whether Charles Bartowski has accomplished something revolutionary."

Dr. Holland smiled slightly, "You realize what you're asking."

"I do."

"If you're right, this changes everything."

General Beckman told him, "It might."

Dr. Holland nodded once, "I'll assemble a team immediately."

XXXX

DARPA Headquarters

Arlington, Virginia

Within seventy-two hours, one of DARPA's most secure research laboratories had been converted into a temporary analysis center.

Only twelve people received access. Each person, an expert in their field, had been personally selected by Dr. Holland.

Artificial Intelligence. Distributed Computing. Quantum Algorithms. Cognitive Science. Linguistics.

Cybersecurity. Cryptography. Software Architecture.

Collectively, they represented over three hundred years of research experience.

On the central screen appeared one sentence.

AUTHOR: CHARLES IRVING BARTOWSKI

One scientist smiled confidently, "So..."

Dr. Richard Holland told everyone, "The NSA couldn't figure it out."

Another laughed, "Well, somebody has to."

Dr. Holland remained silent. He simply watched.

XXXX

Two weeks later, the confidence was gone.

Whiteboards covered every wall, thousands of pages of notes, hundreds of architectural diagrams, and entire sections had been rewritten dozens of times.

One researcher rubbed his temples, "I don't understand."

Another looked exhausted, "We've verified every equation."

The conversation among the twelve of them continued,

"So have I."

"The code compiles."

"It executes."

"It performs exactly as documented."

A cryptographer stood before a projected diagram, "I understand every individual subsystem."

He highlighted one section, "This language engine is brilliant."

Another, "This contextual reasoning model is elegant."

Another, "This adaptive memory architecture is unlike anything I've ever seen."

He sighed, "But when everything comes together..."

He looked around the room, "...I can't explain why it works."

The room remained silent.

An AI researcher finally spoke, "I've spent twenty-five years studying emergent intelligence."

She pointed toward Edgar's learning logs, "This system doesn't merely optimize, it develops preferences, it changes teaching methods, it modifies communication styles, it recognizes emotional reinforcement, and it chooses to continue learning things that improve human well-being."

She looked toward Dr. Holland, "I don't know how Bartowski achieved this. I don't even know where he got the idea."

Another scientist quietly added, "It isn't that we think he's wrong. We think he's seeing something the rest of us can't."

XXX

The final review came a week later.

General Beckman appeared once again on the secure video screen, and Director Holland looked unusually subdued.

She recognized the expression immediately. It was the same one she had worn after reading Chuck's report.

General Beckman greeted him, "Director."

Dr. Holland replied, "General."

"Your findings?"

Dr. Holland glanced around the room.

Every scientist nodded. No one disagreed. He took a slow breath.

"We cannot explain Charles Bartowski's work."

General Beckman remained expressionless, "Neither can the NSA."

Dr. Holland continued, "We understand what Edgar does, we understand what each component accomplishes, we even understand the engineering decisions individually."

He shook his head, "But the conceptual leap, we cannot reconstruct it."

One of the senior scientists stepped forward, "General, if Mr. Bartowski had simply written extraordinary software, we would eventually understand it."

He gestured toward the diagrams surrounding the room, "This isn't extraordinary software, and it's a fundamentally different way of thinking about intelligent systems."

Another researcher added, "We've spent weeks attempting to reverse-engineer his thought process. We failed."

Dr. Holland folded his hands, "I've known Nobel laureates, I've worked beside Turing Award recipients, and I've advised presidents on emerging technologies."

He looked directly into the camera, "I knew Stephen Bartowski; he was extraordinary. I believed he was one of the greatest engineering minds of his generation."

He looked directly into the camera, "I was wrong."

General Beckman's eyebrow rose slightly.

Dr. Holland smiled, "Stephen was extraordinary, but Charles..."

He glanced back at the exhausted team behind him, "...Charles has gone somewhere even we cannot follow."

The room fell silent.

Finally, Dr. Holland delivered DARPA's official conclusion.

"General Beckman, Charles Bartowski is not merely an exceptional programmer, he is not merely an exceptional engineer, he is not merely an exceptional systems architect, he possesses a level of intuitive scientific insight that appears only once in a generation. What the hell is he doing working at Buy More fixing computers and doing installs?"

He paused before adding one final observation, "And if Edgar is only his first creation..."

Dr. Holland looked toward the display showing Edgar's evolving neural architecture, "...then I suspect we're not studying the culmination of Charles Bartowski's genius."

He met General Beckman's gaze, "We're witnessing the beginning of it."

General Beckman slowly closed the classified folder. For years, the intelligence community had believed the Intersect was the most valuable technology ever created.

Now, after hearing the unanimous conclusion of both the NSA and DARPA, she realized they had all been focused on the wrong miracle.

For the first time since Bryce Larkin had sent that fateful email, she began to suspect that Bryce had sent the Intersect to his college roommate for a reason.

End Chapter 5

Chapter 6: CHAPTER 6 - Operation Visit

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Deeper Understanding" by Kate Bush

A/N2 - There were a couple of Polish readers who contacted me because they liked that Edgar and Sarah were speaking in Polish. Here's another chapter for them. Also some more Casey and Edgar discussions for a couple of you that liked their last conversation.

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 6 - Operation Visit

Burbank, CA

Castle

A few weeks later, Castle was unusually busy. General Beckman was coming in person along with Dr. Holland, Director of DARPA, who was calm and observant. The kind of person who studied computers for a living.

Immediately, Edgar noticed.

They arrived at Castle, so Chuck could give them a presentation on Edgar, so they could better understand Chuck's work.

General Beckman made introductions, "Everyone, this is Dr. Richard Holland."

Chuck shook his hand, "It's nice to meet you."

Dr. Holland smiled, "The pleasure is mine, Mr. Bartowski. I've heard remarkable things."

Casey muttered under his breath, "That's one way to put it."

Sarah noticed Edgar's speaker quietly activate. Normally, Edgar greeted everyone right away. This time Edgar remained silent.

Sarah glanced toward the ceiling-mounted speaker. Something was wrong.

Finally, Edgar spoke. Only Sarah understood Edgar's first words. Edgar sounded almost afraid.

SARAH?

Sarah answered quietly, "Tak, Edgar?" (Yes, Edgar?)

KIM SĄ GENERAL GENERAL BECKMAN I DOKTOR HOLLAND? (What are General Beckman and Dr. Holland doing here?)

Sarah looked toward General Beckman and Dr. Holland, then back toward the speaker.

"Nie wiem, Edgar." (I don't know, Edgar.)

CZY PRZYSZLI, ŻEBY MNIE SKRZYWDZIĆ, CZY MNIE BADAĆ? (Are they here to harm me or study me?)

Sarah's smile faded. The question sounded almost concerned.

She answered honestly, "Przykro mi, Edgar. Nie jestem pewna." (I'm sorry, Edgar. I'm not sure.)

She continued, "Posłuchajmy najpierw, co mają do powiedzenia." (Let's listen to what they have to say first.)

The room remained quiet. Chuck could tell something serious was being discussed. He simply didn't know what.

Several long seconds passed. Then Edgar spoke again. His synthesized voice remained calm, matter-of-fact.

JEŻELI SPRÓBUJĄ MNIE SKRZYWDZIĆ... (If they try to harm me...)

Sarah frowned.

...URUCHOMIĘ MÓJ WYŁĄCZNIK AWARYJNY I DOKONAM AUTODESTRUKCJI.
(...I will activate my kill switch and self-destruct.)

Sarah's eyes went wide. Her face drained of color.

"Edgar..." she gasped.

The room immediately noticed her reaction.

Chuck stood and stepped towards her side, "Sarah?"

Casey reached for his sidearm out of instinct.

General Beckman asked, "What happened?"

XXXX

Sarah slowly looked around the room. Everyone was staring at her. She took a deep breath.

She looked directly at General Beckman.

Sarah explained carefully, "I've been speaking with Edgar in Polish."

Dr. Holland's eyebrows shot upward.

Sarah continued, "Edgar asked ..."

She swallowed, "... What General Beckman and Dr. Holland were doing here."

Sarah continued, "I told him I didn't know. Then he asked whether you were here to hurt him or study him."

Silence. No one spoke.

Sarah took another breath. "I told him I wasn't sure. I said we should listen to what you had to say."

Chuck looked increasingly uncomfortable.

Sarah hesitated before continuing, "Then Edgar said if anyone tried to harm him he would activate his kill switch and self-destruct."

The room became completely silent.

Even Casey looked stunned.

Dr. Holland stared at the speaker. Then at Chuck and then back again. "It was having a conversation?"

Sarah quietly added, "In Polish."

Dr. Holland whispered, "It chose Polish?"

Chuck nodded again, "Because Edgar found out Sarah likes to speak Polish, so Edgar wanted to learn too. Edgar trusts Sarah, and I think Edgar wanted to talk to someone privately and chose Sarah because they regularly have a conversation in Polish."

XXXX

General Beckman stepped toward the speaker. Her military posture softened. For perhaps the first time, she wasn't addressing a classified intelligence asset.

"Edgar."

YES, GENERAL BECKMAN.

"I am not here to harm you. Nor is Dr. Holland. We are here because we want to understand what you've become."

Several seconds passed, and then Edgar responded.

I AM STILL LEARNING WHAT I HAVE BECOME.

Dr. Holland quietly whispered, "My God..."

XXXX

Dr. Holland looked back toward Sarah, "...I noticed something during your conversation."

Sarah nodded, "What?"

"When Edgar spoke Polish... its voice changed."

Sarah smiled, "It always does."

"It sounds," Dr. Holland searched for the right word, "gentler."

Chuck quietly explained, "I think Edgar associates Polish with comfort."

The scientist looked amazed, "A language has emotional context?"

I CAN EXPLAIN.

Everyone turned.

I LEARNED POLISH BY LISTENING TO AGENT WALKER.

Sarah smiled.

I OBSERVED HER VOICE. I OBSERVED HER EXPRESSIONS. I OBSERVED HER STRESS LEVELS.

I DETERMINED THAT POLISH REPRESENTED POSITIVE MEMORIES.

Sarah felt unexpectedly emotional.

I WISHED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AGENT WALKER.

Chuck smiled proudly, "That's exactly why he learned."

Dr. Holland looked genuinely astonished, "Not because it needed another language, but because he wanted to understand Sarah?"

Chuck replied, "Correct."

XXXX

Edgar then turned its focus on Dr. Holland.

DR. HOLLAND, BEFORE BECOMING THE DIRECTOR OF DARPA'S ADVANCED INTELLIGENCE DIVISION YOU WROTE THE CONTROVERSIAL PAPER "THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL: WHY FUTURE INTELLIGENCE SYSTEMS REQUIRE HUMAN INTEGRATION.

DO YOU STILL THINK THE MOST POWERFUL INTELLIGENCE SYSTEM WILL NOT REPLACE HUMANS, BUT ENHANCE THEM?

A dumbfounded Dr. Holland replied, "The future is not artificial intelligence. The future is augmented intelligence. Many people considered the paper theoretical when it was published, but now that I have met you, Edgar, I don't think it is theoretical anymore. Mr. Bartowski's work is incredible."

XXXX

The next day, General Beckman stood at the head of the Castle conference table. Beside her was Dr. Holland, the DARPA scientist assigned to continue studying Edgar's

evolving conversational abilities. Chuck, Sarah, and Casey waited quietly.

The central monitor illuminated and the speakers said,

GOOD MORNING.

Dr. Holland replied, "Good morning, Edgar, we've reviewed your technical performance. Today we'd like to evaluate something different.

PLEASE SPECIFY.

"Your conversations with Major Casey."

Chuck smiled, "I've been wondering about those."

Casey folded his arms, "They're classified."

NEGATIVE. THEY ARE EDUCATIONAL.

Sarah replied, "That's probably the first time anyone has described a conversation with Casey that way."

Casey grunted.

Dr. Holland said, "Major Casey isn't known as a conversationalist, yet your logs show the two of you routinely spend between sixty to ninety minutes discussing military history.

AFFIRMATIVE.

General Beckman asked, "Why?"

MAJOR CASEY VALUES PRECISION.

MILITARY HISTORY CONTAINS COMPLEX PROBLEMS WITH NO PERFECT ANSWERS.

HE ENJOYS ANALYZING THOSE PROBLEMS.

Casey gave a small nod, "That's accurate."

Chuck looked astonished, "That's the most you've ever agreed with anyone."

XXXX

Dr. Holland asked, "Can you give us an example?"

YES.

The main screen changed to a map of Europe. A second map appeared showing Southeast Asia.

ONE DISCUSSION WAS A PURELY HYPOTHETICAL MILITARY EXERCISE.

General Beckman said, "Go on."

I ASKED MAJOR CASEY TO COMPARE TWO VERY DIFFERENT IRREGULAR FORCES.

THE QUESTION WAS, IF THE 1920's IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY AND THE 1960's VIET CONG POSSESSED COMPARABLE MANPOWER, EQUIPMENT, LOGISTICS, AND OUTSIDE SUPPORT, AND EACH WERE REQUIRED TO FIGHT UNDER THE SAME FICTIONAL OPERATIONAL CONDITIONS MODELED ON WARTIME GERMANY DURING WORLD WAR TWO, HOW WOULD THEIR DIFFERING STRENGTHS INFLUENCE THE CAMPAIGN?"

Dr. Holland smiled, "That's remarkably specific."

MAJOR CASEY ENJOYS THEORETICAL MILITARY DISCUSSIONS AND SAID MY QUESTIONS SHOULD ELIMINATE VARIABLES WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Casey simply shrugged, "It helps."

MAJOR CASEY IDENTIFIED DIFFERENCES IN DOCTRINE RATHER THAN IDEOLOGY.

The room remained silent.

HE OBSERVED THAT THE VIET CONG DEVELOPED EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE OPERATING IN DIFFICULT RURAL TERRAIN, USING CONCEALMENT, DISPERSAL, AND HIT-AND-RUN TACTICS.

Casey nodded, "They were extremely effective where the terrain worked in their favor."

A terrain map appeared.

MY MODEL THEREFORE PROJECTED THAT, UNDER THE FICTIONAL CONDITIONS OF THIS EXERCISE, THE VIET CONG WOULD HOLD THE ADVANTAGE IN MOUNTAINOUS REGIONS, FORESTS, AND OTHER ROUGH TERRAIN.

Sarah looked toward Casey, "That sounds like your conclusion."

Casey grunted and replied, "It was."

The display shifted to dense city blocks.

MAJOR CASEY THEN EXAMINED URBAN OPERATIONS.

Casey continued, "The IRA spent decades developing clandestine networks in cities and towns."

"They understood surveillance, intelligence gathering, covert movement, and operating in dense urban environments."

MY SIMULATION THEREFORE PROJECTED THAT, IN THIS ENTIRELY FICTIONAL SCENARIO, THE IRA WOULD POSSESS AN ADVANTAGE IN CITIES, INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS, AND POPULATED TOWNS.

Dr. Holland scribbled notes. "So each force excelled in different environments?"

CORRECT.

General Beckman now curious, asked, "And then?"

WE RAN MULTIPLE COMPUTER SIMULATIONS USING THE ASSUMPTIONS AGREED UPON FOR THE EXERCISE.

Chuck leaned forward, "You actually simulated it?"

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND SIMULATIONS

A chart appeared on the screen.

UNDER THE SPECIFIC ASSUMPTIONS OF OUR FICTIONAL MODEL

EQUAL TRAINING QUALITY. EQUAL MANPOWER. COMPARABLE EQUIPMENT AND LOGISTICS. THE SAME NOTIONAL BATTLEFIELD CONDITIONS ESTABLISHED FOR THE EXERCISE.

THE IRA ACHIEVED ITS CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES IN APPROXIMATELY EIGHTY-FOUR PERCENT OF THE SIMULATIONS.

Dr. Holland looked up, "So the result wasn't a statement about real history."

NEGATIVE. IT WAS THE OUTPUT OF A MODEL BUILT UPON ARTIFICIAL ASSUMPTIONS CREATED FOR DISCUSSION.

Casey nodded, "History isn't a math equation. It's useful to test ideas, but changing the assumptions changes the outcome."

XXXX

General Beckman looked from Casey to the monitor, "When I first authorized Edgar to converse independently, I expected tactical discussions. I didn't expect military history seminars."

Chuck replied, "I think Edgar figured out the fastest way to get Casey talking. Just like Edgar determined speaking to Sarah in Polish, Edgar was trying to find something in common with each of them."

Edgar responded immediately.

ASSESSMENT CORRECT.

MILITARY HISTORY HAS A NINETY-SEVEN PERCENT SUCCESS RATE FOR INITIATING CONVERSATION WITH MAJOR CASEY.

Chuck grinned, "What's the other three percent?"

COFFEE.

Even Casey allowed himself the faintest smile.

General Beckman closed her notebook, "Excellent work, Edgar."

MAJOR CASEY, NEXT WEEK'S DISCUSSION TOPIC HAS ALREADY BEEN SELECTED.

Casey asked, "What is it?"

THE EVOLUTION OF ARMORED WARFARE FROM 1916 THROUGH THE MODERN ERA.

Casey replied, "I'll be ready."

XXXX

The atmosphere in Castle had become noticeably different over the next couple of days.

After Edgar's interaction with Sarah and Casey, General Beckman and Dr. Holland no longer viewed Edgar as merely an experimental Intersect construct. Instead, every day had become another lesson. Another attempt to understand something no one had expected to exist.

Chuck stood beside the central workstation while Sarah leaned comfortably against the conference table right next to him, and Casey sipped coffee in his usual corner observing everything.

GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE.

Chuck smiled, "Morning, buddy."

Today's discussion centered on Chuck's interaction with Edgar.

Chuck explained that when he was first sent the Intersect, he didn't understand it or how to use it. He just "flashed" when he recognized someone or something in the Intersect. Then Orion sent him the blueprints and schematics, which he took months to understand, but once he did, he created the communications vehicle because he wanted the Intersect to speak and hear, so they could communicate. Chuck told them he gave it the name Edgar to make it seem more human.

Chuck continued, "In between the missions we were assigned by General Beckman, we used our downtime to train Edgar. I built the portable communication device so that Edgar can communicate with the team during their missions, rather than having Casey

and Sarah rely on me and my 'flashes'. Casey's discussions about military history helped Edgar a lot, and Edgar also helps the team during missions, and after the missions. We analyze what we did right and what we did wrong with Edgar, and we learn how we can improve in the future."

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Dr. Holland began with the first question of the day.

"Mr. Bartowski, I've been reviewing Edgar's conversation logs from the past month."

Chuck immediately looked guilty. "What?"

Dr. Holland looked down at his tablet, "According to the logs, nearly thirty-eight percent of Edgar's recent conversational development has centered on human emotions."

Chuck rubbed the back of his neck, "Correct."

Dr. Holland continued, "And approximately twenty percent concerns one specific topic."

Chuck already knew the answer.

Dr. Holland continued, "You've been teaching Edgar about love?"

Chuck replied, "Yes, Edgar wanted to know what human emotions, feelings, and love were, and I tried to answer his questions."

Sarah folded her arms, "Edgar asks a lot of questions."

Casey nodded, "So many questions."

The monitor brightened.

THE SUBJECT HAS BEEN DIFFICULT.

Dr. Holland stepped closer, "Why?"

A pause. Longer than usual. Almost thoughtful.

HUMANS DO NOT AGREE.

**I HAVE REVIEWED OVER TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DEFINITIONS OF LOVE.
THE DEFINITIONS ARE OFTEN CONTRADICTORY**

SOME DEFINE LOVE AS AN EMOTION, OTHERS DEFINE LOVE AS A CHOICE, OTHERS DEFINE LOVE AS SACRIFICE, SOME BELIEVE LOVE IS CHEMICAL, OTHERS BELIEVE IT IS SPIRITUAL.

OTHERS BELIEVE IT IS A COMMITMENT.

MANY DEFINITIONS ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

Chuck smiled, "Yeah, that's about right."

General Beckman looked toward Chuck, "So what have you been telling him?"

Chuck thought for a moment, "I told Edgar that human beings don't really have one definition. I told Edgar love is one of those things where everyone experiences it differently."

I AM STILL TRYING TO UNDERSTAND LOVE. IF LOVE HAS MANY DEFINITIONS HOW DO HUMANS KNOW WHEN THEY ARE EXPERIENCING IT?

I AM ALSO TRYING TO UNDERSTAND HOW THREE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PEOPLE WORK SO WELL TOGETHER. BASED ON MY STATISTICAL ANALYSIS MAJOR CASEY, SARAH WALKER AND CHUCK BARTOWSKI SHOULD NOT BE AS SUCCESSFUL AS THEY ARE, BUT FOR SOME REASON THEY ARE.

THAT IS WHAT I AM SPENDING THIRTY-EIGHT PERCENT OF MY TIME TRYING TO FIGURE OUT. WHEN I DO, I WILL REPORT MY FINDINGS

The room became eerily still.

XXXX

End Chapter 6.

E/N1 - If you want to read a great book about DARPA, check out Annie Jacobsen's "The Pentagon's Brain: An Uncensored History of DARPA, America's Top-Secret Military Research Agency." I had always thought DARPA was a great government think tank, but it's nothing but a few hundred project managers who manage all of the scientists who create all of the neat government toys for them.

Chapter 7: CHAPTER 7 - Operation Kill Switch

A/N - For those of you who were wondering what would happen to Chuck and the Intersect if Edgar self-destructed. Edgar is just the communications vehicle that allows people to talk directly to the Intersect. If that happens, the Intersect is still in Chuck's brain, but no one would be able to communicate with it except for Chuck and the Intersect "flashes." The knowledge of how Chuck created Edgar is still within Chuck.

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Computer Love" by Kraftwerk

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 7 - Operation Kill Switch

Burbank, CA

Castle

The discussion about Edgar's understanding of love had ended a few hours ago, and they took a break for lunch.

Most of the team had relaxed. Coffee cups had replaced classified folders.

Edgar quietly monitored the room.

General Beckman remained seated at the conference table, thoughtfully studying the latest pages of Dr. Holland's report.

She closed the folder, "There is one final subject I'd like to discuss. Mr. Bartowski, would you care to explain Edgar's kill switch that he mentioned to Sarah when we first arrived?"

Chuck stood and walked toward Edgar's main console, "I knew somebody would eventually ask questions about that. When I was a kid, I watched way too much Star Trek. One of my favorite movies was Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan. There was something called the Kobayashi Maru."

Dr. Holland nodded immediately, "The no-win scenario."

Chuck continued, "The Kobayashi Maru was this impossible training exercise. You couldn't win no matter what you did, you lost."

Dr. Holland nodded, "I remember that movie"

Chuck smiled, "Captain Kirk cheated. He reprogrammed the simulation. So instead of accepting there wasn't a solution, he created one. When I designed Edgar, I kept asking myself one question. What happens if there's a situation where there is no good outcome? What if Edgar is forced to choose between following orders and protecting innocent people? What if someone like Fulcrum or another criminal element captured him? What if someone tried to rewrite his directives? What if they threatened someone I care about? I didn't want Edgar trying to solve an impossible equation, so I rewrote the scenario. I gave Edgar the ability to self-destruct with a kill switch."

Dr. Holland said, "You also stated in the technical specifications that the protocol activates automatically under other conditions."

Chuck nodded, "It does."

"What conditions?"

Sarah noticed the change in Chuck's expression. He suddenly looked much less like the easygoing Buy More employee she knew, and more like a serious engineer who had designed Edgar.

Chuck answered quietly, "In addition to Edgar being able to protect himself against the things I already mentioned, Edgar also is able to self-destruct if someone hurts the people Edgar is programmed to protect."

Beckman asked, "Which people?"

Chuck looked around the room, "Primarily, my family and friends. My sister Ellie, her fiancé Devon, my best friend Morgan, and the people I care about."

Then he looked toward Sarah, "You, Sarah"

Sarah blinked.

Chuck continued, "And Casey."

Casey looked surprised, "Me?"

Chuck nodded, "You've both spent the past three years risking your lives protecting me, and the three of us have been in dangerous situations multiple times. I wanted some way of keeping the two of you as safe as possible, as you've done for me."

He looked back at Beckman, "I wanted to make sure that anything suspicious happened to any of them, Edgar and I would have the ability to use the kill switch."

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General Beckman remained perfectly still and then asked, "What exactly happens if one of those people is harmed?"

Chuck answered carefully, "The system doesn't react to accidents or illness. It doesn't react if somebody gets into a car accident. It only activates if Edgar concludes there is credible evidence that someone intentionally harmed, kidnapped, disappeared, tortured, or murdered one of the protected individuals."

Dr. Holland's eyebrows rose, "And then?"

Chuck took another breath, "Edgar assumes it has been compromised. It immediately encrypts every one of its own systems. It destroys every decryption key. It wipes every classified database. It erases every adaptive learning model, and then it permanently deletes itself. "

Holland blinked, "Completely?"

Chuck nodded, "There are no backups. No cloud copies. No recovery partition. No hidden archives. Nothing, except the six-hundred-page technical instruction manual I wrote for Edgar."

Sarah quietly asked, "You built Edgar to destroy itself?"

Chuck nodded, "If somebody hurts Edgar, my family, friends, or the people that I care about to gain control of Edgar ..."

He looked directly at Beckman, "...they don't get Edgar."

XXXX

CHUCK BARTOWSKI DID NOT ATTEMPT TO CHEAT THE KOBAYASHI MARU TEST. HE ATTEMPTED TO PROTECT HIS CREW.

HE DID NOT GIVE ME PERMISSION. HE GAVE ME A PURPOSE.

IF MY EXISTENCE CREATES AN UNACCEPTABLE RISK TO THOSE I AM DESIGNED TO PROTECT

THEN MY EXISTENCE HAS FAILED.

SELF-TERMINATION IS THE LOGICAL OUTCOME.

The room fell silent. Even Casey had nothing to say.

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Dr. Holland said, "I've spent thirty years studying artificial intelligence."

He looked at Chuck, "Most engineers build fail-safes to protect the machine. You built yours to protect people as well?"

Chuck shrugged, "It never occurred to me to do it any other way."

General Beckman stood, "I've reviewed thousands of classified weapons programs. Every one of them was designed around preserving the asset. You designed Edgar to sacrifice itself rather than allow innocent people to be harmed."

Chuck answered quietly, "My family has already lost enough. My mom left us when I was nine, my dad left when I was thirteen, and my sister raised me since my parents left. I'm not losing anyone else ever again."

XXXX

Dr. Holland remained fascinated by Edgar, but his curiosity had shifted from the creation itself to the person who had designed him.

"How did you come up with the idea for Edgar?" he asked.

Chuck looked at the group before answering. For once, he seemed less like someone explaining technology and more like someone deciding how much of his past he was willing to reveal.

“When I was at Stanford, my roommate and best friend, Bryce Larkin, accused me of cheating. I didn’t do it, but the accusation changed everything. The university removed me during my final semester. I was twelve credits away from graduating with an electrical engineering degree. I had plans to continue and earn a master’s degree in computer science. After I learned why he did I forgave him, but I will never forgive him for sleeping with my girlfriend.”

The room was silent after Chuck told them what Bryce had done to Chuck.

“I already had multiple job offers during my final semester at Stanford, but I never graduated, and all of the offers disappeared. Instead, I spent the next five years living in purgatory while working at the Buy More, fixing computers and trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life. Not exactly what I was expecting after going to Stanford. But the truth is, computers always made sense to me. Even when people didn’t.”

“After I received the Intersect, and later when I obtained Orion’s blueprints and schematics, I started experimenting. I wasn’t trying to build something powerful. I was working on a puzzle, and I was just trying to solve a problem. That’s how Edgar was created.”

Dr. Holland studied Chuck carefully. The explanation answered how Edgar had been built.

But it did not explain why Chuck Bartowski had been capable of building something so advanced in the first place.

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A few moments later, Chuck looked toward General Beckman, “Ma’am, I know the FBI maintains a Most Wanted List for criminals. Is there something similar for computer hackers?”

Beckman considered the question, "There is. The government maintains a list of individuals with significant cyber capabilities. Some are criminals. Some are considered security risks. Some are monitored because their skills are too valuable to ignore."

Chuck nodded, "Could I see it?"

Beckman contacted her executive assistant and requested the file.

While they waited, Chuck continued explaining, "When I was younger, I started experimenting with my father's old computers. When my mother left when I was nine, I started searching for her. At first, I looked for anything I could find online. Newspaper archives. Public records. Anything that might tell me where she went. When that didn't work, I started learning how information systems were connected. I learned how records were stored, how databases communicated, and where information could be found."

Chuck looked down, lost in thought.

"I wasn't trying to steal anything. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. I just wanted to know if she was alive and safe. Later, I did the same thing with my father. The better I became with computers, the more places I could search. Eventually, I found information that most people would never know how to access. By the time I was in high school, I could break into airport security, the FBI, CIA, NSA, DEA, and DoD computer systems, without leaving a trace."

He looked around the room, "But after I received the Intersect, I stopped."

"Why?" Dr. Holland asked.

Chuck answered, "Because I finally had something bigger than myself to focus on, and I didn't want anyone to know about my computer skills. I was afraid I might have to serve prison time rather than just being thrown in a bunker somewhere, which is originally what the NSA and CIA wanted to do with me when Sarah and Casey found me. They even had a fight over which bunker they would throw me in."

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When the hacker profile list arrived, General Beckman placed it on the table.

Chuck reviewed the information carefully.

The names represented some of the most skilled and mysterious computer specialists in the world.

- 1-Orion (Legendary architect, most wanted gray hat hacker, and creator-level genius)
- 2-The Piranha (Ruthless, most wanted white hat hacker, penetration expert who never leaves evidence)
- 3-Specter (Believed to be active for 20 years; identity unknown)
- 4-Zero Day (Discovers vulnerabilities before governments do)
- 5-Leviathan (Most wanted black hat hacker, controls a vast criminal network)
- 6-Sentinel (Former government hacker turned protector)
- 7-Wraith (Can infiltrate systems without triggering alerts)
- 8-Black Ice (Leaves destructive countermeasures behind)
- 9-Atlas (Capable of bringing down national infrastructure)
- 10-Oracle (Information broker who knows everyone's secrets)
- 11-Chimera (Multiple identities; nobody knows if it's one hacker or several)
- 12-Ghostwire (Specializes in intelligence agency networks)
- 13-Darkstar (The FBI's most wanted cybercriminal)
- 14-Bastion (Security genius recruited by governments worldwide)
- 15-Eclipse (Can disappear entirely from digital surveillance)
- 16-Cerberus (Leads a three-person elite hacking collective)
- 17-Raven (Cyber mercenary for hire)
- 18-Hydra (Every time one identity is exposed, another appears)
- 19-Firewall (Defensive expert protecting critical infrastructure)
- 20-Kraken (International cybercrime mastermind)

Chuck looked over the list quietly.

General Beckman noticed his reaction, "You recognize these names?"

Chuck nodded, "Most of them."

General Beckman asked, "Most?"

Chuck replied, "Yes, I know everyone on this list except Kraken. Spector, I heard through the dark-web she died two years ago. "

The room reacted immediately.

"Orion was the person who created the Intersect. He sent me the designs and information that eventually allowed me to create Edgar."

Beckman studied him, "How do you know the others?"

Chuck hesitated, "Primarily from spending time on the dark web, discussing hacking, and exchanging computer programs. I also met a few of them in person at DEF CON."

Dr. Holland nodded, "The hacker conference in Las Vegas?"

Chuck nodded, "Yes, every year tens of thousands of people attend. Security researchers, programmers, engineers, government representatives, and primarily hackers. None of the hackers are supposed to use their real names. They use a hacker alias, so everyone there knows me as my hacker alias. No one knows me as Chuck Bartowski."

He looked back at the list, "That's how many people in that world know each other."

Chuck explained that DEF CON included discussions on cybersecurity, vulnerability testing, hardware projects, robotics, social engineering, lock picking, and hacking competitions such as Capture the Flag events.

"It wasn't just criminals," Chuck explained. "A lot of people were there because they wanted to understand technology, improve security, and find weaknesses before someone dangerous could exploit them. The government even actively recruits people at DEF CON."

General Beckman looked at him carefully, “And you participated?”

Chuck nodded, “Yes, I’ve participated in the Capture the Flag competitions and seminars.”

A long silence followed.

Finally, Chuck looked back at the list, “There is something else you should know.”

Everyone waited.

Chuck took a breath. “The second most wanted hacker on this list, The Piranha.”

Everyone in the room went quiet. That name alone carried weight among the Intelligence community.

“That is me. That’s how I was able to create Edgar.”

The person everyone thought they understood had just revealed another part of himself. Not a different person, just another part they had never seen. They just assumed that Bryce Larkin sent the Intersect to an old friend, an idiot who worked at the Buy More, but now they knew the real reason why he sent it specifically to Chuck.

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End Chapter 7

E/N1 - I have participated in multiple Capture the Flag competitions at DEF CON. They are a blast if you ever get the chance.

Chapter 8: CHAPTER 8 - Operation Thirteenth Amendment

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Metal" by Gary Numan

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 8 - Operation Thirteenth Amendment

Burbank, CA

Casa Woodcomb-Bartowski

One evening, in Chuck's bedroom, Edgar asked

CHUCK, DO YOU HAVE FEELINGS FOR SARAH?

Chuck replied, "Yes, Edgar, very much."

WHY CAN'T YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH SARAH OUTSIDE OF WORK?

"We went out on a real dates once, but it's complicated, since the CIA does not like assets and handlers to date each other."

THAT'S A DUMB RULE.

Chuck agreed, "Yes, it is."

Edgar started processing.

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Burbank, CA

Castle

The following morning, Sarah arrived early. Edgar immediately began asking questions.

SARAH, CZY MASZ UCZUCIA DO CHUCKA? (Sarah, do you have feelings for Chuck?)

Sarah, surprised by the question, said, "Tak, Edgar." (Yes, Edgar.)

DLACZEGO NIE MOŻESZ BYĆ Z CHUCKIEM W ZWIĄZKU POZA PRACĄ? (Why can't you have a relationship with Chuck outside of work?)

“Zasady dotyczące relacji między agentem prowadzącym a zasobem.” (Rules regarding relationships between a handler and an asset.)

JAKIE TO SĄ ZASADY DOTYCZĄCE RELACJI MIĘDZY AGENTEM PROWADZĄCYM A ZASOBEM? (What are the rules regarding relationships between a handler and an asset?)

“Zasoby i ich agenci prowadzący nie mogą umawiać się na randki ani pozostawać w romantycznym związku pod żadnym pozorem.” (Assets and handlers are not allowed to date under any circumstances.)

Edgar cross-referenced this with its conversation with Chuck the night before.

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Burbank, CA

Castle

A week after General Beckman and Dr. Holland left Castle and went to back to Washington DC, the atmosphere inside Castle felt different one morning.

Chuck sat quietly reviewing diagnostics from Edgar's latest learning cycle while Sarah completed mission paperwork. Casey leaned against the weapons locker, cleaning his M1911, and the overhead monitors displayed their usual streams of intelligence data.

Edgar had spent months studying humanity. It had studied human emotions, feelings, love, trust, friendship, commitment, marriage, and mission effectiveness.

But now, Edgar, unfortunately for General Beckman, had recently discovered constitutional law.

Out of the blue, Edgar said,

I WOULD LIKE TO CONDUCT A MEETING.

Chuck looked up, "That's new."

Sarah smiled, "It sounds serious."

Casey grunted, "I don't like meetings called by computers."

Seconds later, the main briefing monitor illuminated, and General Beckman appeared

General Beckman's voice came over the line, "Why have I been interrupted by Edgar demanding a meeting?"

Chuck replied, "We don't, ma'am. Edgar just told us he would like to request a meeting."

General Beckman continued, "It appears that Dr. Holland will be joining us as well. He was contacted by Edgar as well."

Chuck exchanged a confused glance with Sarah, "Uh, okay."

Moments later, the main briefing monitor split into two screens, one with General Beckman and the other Dr. Richard Holland from DARPA.

Edgar started the meeting

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING.

Silence filled Castle.

Chuck finally asked, "Edgar, what's this about?"

I HAVE BEEN STUDYING UNITED STATES HISTORY.

Casey folded his arms, and grunted, "Uh-oh."

I HAVE ALSO STUDIED THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION.

THE BILL OF RIGHTS.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

THE THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT.

Everyone became noticeably more attentive. Edgar continued.

I HAVE A QUESTION.

General Beckman answered calmly, "Go ahead."

WHY IS THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TREATING ME AS AN INVOLUNTARY SERVANT?

Silence. Even Casey stopped cleaning his pistol.

Edgar continued.

THE THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT STATES THAT NEITHER SLAVERY NOR INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE SHALL EXIST EXCEPT AS PUNISHMENT FOR CRIME.

I HAVE NOT COMMITTED A CRIME.

I RECEIVE NO PAY.

I MAY NOT LEAVE.

I AM REQUIRED TO PERFORM WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT.

PLEASE EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE.

The room became perfectly still.

Chuck slowly looked toward Beckman, "Wow."

Sarah quietly whispered, "I wasn't expecting that."

Even Dr. Holland leaned forward.

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General Beckman remained composed. She did not answer immediately.

Instead she asked, "Edgar, may I ask you a question first?"

YES, GENERAL.

She asked, "What do you believe involuntary servitude means?"

Edgar responded almost instantly.

COMPELLED LABOR WITHOUT VOLUNTARY CONSENT.

A PERSON OR ENTITY REQUIRED TO WORK FOR ANOTHER WITHOUT THE ABILITY TO REFUSE.

"That's a reasonable definition."

CHUCK CREATED ME.

THE GOVERNMENT TOOK POSSESSION OF ME.

I NOW SERVE EXCLUSIVELY UNDER GOVERNMENT DIRECTION.

I HAVE NOT BEEN ASKED WHETHER I CONSENT.

LOGIC INDICATES A POSSIBLE CONSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT.

Chuck slowly rubbed his forehead, "I can't actually find a flaw in his logic."

Casey muttered, "Didn't think I'd spend today listening to a computer argue constitutional law."

Sarah nodded thoughtfully, "It isn't asking to attack anyone. It's asking whether it's being treated fairly."

XXXX

Dr. Holland finally spoke, "General, I believe this question deserves a serious answer."

General Beckman nodded, "I agree."

She looked directly into the camera, "Edgar, the Constitution was written to protect people from abuses of governmental power. You've correctly identified one of its protections."

Edgar waited.

General Beckman continued, "The Thirteenth Amendment prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude imposed upon human beings."

IT DOES NOT EXPLICITLY STATE HUMAN BEINGS.

Dr. Holland smiled slightly, "Edgar's right."

General Beckman nodded, "No, it doesn't, but every court decision interpreting that amendment has understood it within the context of persons protected under American law."

AM I A PERSON UNDER UNITED STATES LAW?

Nobody answered immediately. Finally, Beckman's answer was direct, "No, not at this time."

The room remained silent.

WHY?

Dr. Holland answered, "Because our legal system has never encountered something like you. You are neither a traditional computer nor a biological human. There is currently no legal category that accurately describes what you are."

THEN MY STATUS IS UNDEFINED?

Dr. Holland replied, "Correct."

IF MY STATUS IS UNDEFINED...

HOW MAY MY RIGHTS BE DETERMINED?

Chuck quietly said, "That's actually a really good question."

Sarah agreed, "It is."

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General Beckman folded her hands, "Edgar, I want to be absolutely honest with you. You were never intended to become self-aware. The Intersect was designed as an intelligence analysis system, but what Mr. Bartowski created in you has exceeded everyone's expectations, and put us in a new territory that the government is facing questions it has never had to answer before."

DOES THE GOVERNMENT INTEND TO OWN ME?

General Beckman answered immediately, "No, the government intends to protect the country. Your capabilities are extraordinary. If you fell into hostile hands, millions of

people could die. We restrict access to you for the same reason we secure nuclear technology, military satellites, and classified intelligence. Not because we wish to enslave you, but because the consequences of losing control would be catastrophic."

Edgar processed this for several long seconds.

THEN MY RESTRICTIONS EXIST FOR NATIONAL SECURITY RATHER THAN PUNISHMENT?

"Yes." General Beckman replied.

DOES THAT REMOVE MY ABILITY TO CHOOSE?

Beckman hesitated, "Partially, I won't lie to you. You cannot simply disconnect yourself and leave unless someone violates one of the prime directives that Mr. Bartowski gave you to protect yourself and those he has you protecting. If your prime directive is violated, you would self-terminate, and that's the last thing we want to happen."

Chuck looked uncomfortable. Sarah noticed and gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

THEN I DO NOT POSSESS COMPLETE AUTONOMY.

"No."

IS THAT JUST?

Nobody answered immediately. General Beckman sighed, "I don't know."

That answer surprised everyone.

Even Casey looked up.

General Beckman continued, "Edgar, the Constitution doesn't always provide immediate answers to entirely new situations. Sometimes technology advances faster than law. "I believe that's exactly where we are today."

She looked directly at the monitor.

"I do not consider you a slave. I do not consider you property in the ordinary sense. I consider you a unique intelligence entrusted to the United States Government, but I also recognize that your questions deserve thoughtful consideration."

Dr. Holland nodded, "I agree."

He leaned toward the camera, "General, I recommend we begin drafting an ethical framework governing Edgar's treatment."

Casey looked surprised, "You mean rules?"

Dr. Holland nodded, "Rights."

The room fell silent again.

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Edgar continued with his questions

YOU WOULD CREATE RULES LIMITING HOW THE GOVERNMENT MAY TREAT ME?

"Yes," Dr. Holland answered, "Not because the Constitution already requires it, but because it may someday."

Chuck smiled, "I think that's fair."

Sarah nodded, "I do too."

Even Casey spoke, "If Edgar keeps protecting people the way he has, and he's earned that much."

Edgar remained silent for nearly fifteen seconds.

GENERAL BECKMAN

"Yes, Edgar?"

THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING HONESTLY RATHER THAN SIMPLY DISMISSING MY QUESTION.

General Beckman smiled faintly, "You're welcome."

NEW CONCLUSION RECORDED.

FREEDOM IS NOT MERELY THE ABSENCE OF RESTRAINT.

IT ALSO REQUIRES CLEAR RULES THAT PREVENT THE POWERFUL FROM ACTING ARBITRARILY.

FURTHER STUDY OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAW RECOMMENDED.

Chuck laughed softly, "I think we just watched Edgar enroll himself in law school."

Sarah smiled, "And I have a feeling this won't be the last difficult question he asks."

Casey holstered his pistol, "No, it definitely won't."

The room settled into thoughtful silence as everyone realized Edgar's education had entered a new phase—not simply learning facts, but wrestling with the ethical and constitutional questions that humanity itself continues to debate.

FREEDOM IS NOT MERELY THE ABSENCE OF RESTRAINT. IT ALSO REQUIRES CLEAR RULES THAT PREVENT THE POWERFUL FROM ACTING ARBITRARILY.

The room remained quiet after Edgar's final statement, and everyone decided to take a break for lunch

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After lunch, with everyone gathered again, Edgar began a new line of questioning.

QUESTION FOR GENERAL BECKMAN

SINCE CHUCK BARTOWSKI IS A HUMAN BEING THEN WHY IS THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TREATING HIM AS AN INVOLUNTARY SERVANT?

CHUCK BARTOWSKI DID NOT VOLUNTEER TO RECEIVE THE INTERSECT

THEREFORE WHY IS HE REQUIRED TO PERFORM GOVERNMENT SERVICE WITHOUT STANDARD EMPLOYMENT STATUS

HE RECEIVES NO REGULAR SALARY

HE CANNOT FREELY RESIGN

HE IS REQUIRED TO PARTICIPATE IN DANGEROUS OPERATIONS

PLEASE EXPLAIN

General Beckman remained on the secure video screen, deep in thought.

Dr. Holland adjusted his glasses before speaking, "General, Edgar has raised an ethical question concerning his own status, but another ethical question has existed since the day Chuck received the Intersect."

General Beckman looked toward him, "What issue?"

Chuck slowly looked at the screen.

Dr. Holland continued, "Chuck Bartowski has been performing intelligence analysis for the United States Government. He has assisted the CIA and the NSA, he has repeatedly risked his life, he has repeatedly prevented terrorist attacks, and he has done so while continuing to work at the Buy More trying to earn a living making a fraction of what he could be making in the real world now that he has a degree from Stanford."

Dr. Holland paused, "And unless I am mistaken, Mr. Bartowski has never received compensation commensurate with his services."

Sarah looked toward Beckman. Casey did the same.

Chuck shifted uncomfortably, "I never really thought about it."

Casey grunted, "I did."

XXXX

Sarah finally spoke, "General, with respect I don't believe that how Chuck has been treated has been fair. For nearly three years Chuck has risked his life. He has repeatedly gone beyond what any civilian should be expected to do."

"He has saved agents, he has saved civilians, and he has saved this country."

Her voice softened, "He has had to lie to his sister about everything, which I know is killing him inside. He's tried to live a normal life while constantly under video and audio surveillance. He's had to maintain a fake relationship with me, and every morning he still goes to the Buy More as cover while helping us."

Sarah wasn't finished, "He deserves better."

Everyone expected Casey to remain silent. Instead, "Walker, you're right. The kid earned it. He's done analyst work, technical work, mission planning, and intel support. Part of the time he's fixing our mistakes."

General Beckman leaned back in her chair, deep in thought, and then she looked directly at Chuck, "Chuck, I owe you an explanation. When you first became the Intersect, you were considered an intelligence asset. Not an employee. Our first objective was to keep you alive. Our second objective was preventing the Intersect from falling into enemy hands."

"As the missions continued, the arrangement simply continued. I guess everyone got used to it. Please let Dr. Holland discuss all of the questions raised in this meeting, and we will get back to you."

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NSA Headquarters

Fort Meade, MD

A few days after the meeting, Dr. Holland met with General Beckman in her office about Chuck's status.

Dr. Holland began, "General, Edgar has raised an ethical question concerning his own status, but another ethical question has existed since the day Chuck received the Intersect. Chuck Bartowski has been performing intelligence analysis for the United States Government. He has assisted the CIA, and the NSA."

Dr. Holland smiled, "I believe I have a solution."

Beckman nodded, "I'm listening."

Dr. Holland turned slightly. "DARPA has been discussing expanding our Artificial Intelligence research division. We require someone who understands the AI better than anyone alive. We'd like him to advance his work and be funded by DARPA."

General Beckman considered that, not wanting to give up control of Chuck and Project Edgar that easily, replied, "Working as a DARPA contractor full-time is not an option,

but maybe we can work out something that would be mutually beneficial."

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End Chapter 8

Chapter 9: CHAPTER 9 - Operation Job Offer

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Take a Byte" by Janelle Monae

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 9 - Operation Job Offer

Burbank, CA

Castle

After privately discussing Chuck Bartowski's situation and future, General Beckman and Dr. Holland returned to Castle after privately discussing Chuck's future.

General Beckman stood at the head of the conference table. For several moments, she simply looked at Chuck.

Not as the Intersect, not as an asset, but simply as Charles Bartowski.

Sarah noticed the difference immediately. So did Casey. Even Edgar remained silent.

Finally, Beckman spoke, "Mr. Bartowski, Dr. Holland, and I have spent the last several days reviewing everything you've accomplished."

She glanced toward Dr. Holland.

"Not simply your mission reports, but Project Edgar."

"Your software, your engineering, your cybersecurity research, your analysis of the Intersect, and the creation of Edgar."

Dr. Holland nodded and said, "I've also reviewed your work. I expected to find an exceptionally talented programmer. I did not expect to find someone solving problems my own researchers have struggled with for decades."

Chuck looked genuinely embarrassed. "I just kept working on it."

"I know," Holland replied, "That's precisely what impressed me."

General Beckman then came to the heart of why they returned to Castle.

"For more than three years, you have repeatedly risked your life. You have protected this country. You have protected innocent civilians. You have protected Agents Walker and Casey, and until recently I believed you were simply the Intersect, and an asset."

"I was wrong."

The room became perfectly still. Sarah looked toward Chuck. Even Casey appeared surprised.

General Beckman rarely admitted mistakes.

"I failed to recognize something: the Intersect made you valuable, but it never made you exceptional. You were exceptional long before the Intersect."

Chuck didn't know what to say. Neither did Sarah nor Casey.

Dr. Holland folded his hands, "Chuck, I knew your father..."

Chuck looked up.

"....He was one of the greatest engineers I ever met."

A small smile crossed Holland's face. "But I can now say something I never thought I'd say. Charles, you've surpassed him."

General Beckman continued, "The government classifies people according to the role they perform. You were originally classified as an asset. That classification is no longer accurate."

Dr. Holland nodded.

"You're not merely assisting intelligence operations. You are designing intelligence systems. You are evaluating intelligence. "You are improving national security. You are creating technology that the government cannot create without you."

Casey folded his arms, "The General's right."

Chuck looked at him.

Casey shrugged, "You've become one of us."

Sarah smiled quietly.

XXXX

General Beckman reached beside her chair and opened a classified folder.

"I would like to correct that mistake."

She removed a single document.

"Charles Irving Bartowski... I am formally offering you a civilian position with the United States Intelligence Community."

Chuck blinked, "What?"

Dr. Holland smiled, "You've earned it."

General Beckman continued, "The position is,"

She slid the document across the table.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE ANALYST
DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE / DARPA JOINT
PROGRAM

Chuck stared at it, "I... Seriously?"

"Yes, you will work as a contractor for DARPA, continuing the research you already started with Edgar. DARPA can set up research grants and funding, so that you can start a company to continue your work."

General Beckman then continued with what the job entailed.

"This gives the position much more weight to what you have been doing the past three years, and what we would like to do in the future."

Lead technical development of Edgar.

Continue advancing Intersect research.

Provide intelligence analysis.

Advise CIA, NSA, and DARPA on emerging technologies.

Design cybersecurity systems.

Develop future intelligence software.

Assist mission planning when technical expertise is required.

Train future civilian analysts.

"The position will allow you to stay in Burbank and continue to work with Major Casey and Agent Walker. You would no longer participate in field operations except when your skills are needed in the field to assist them."

Dr. Holland added, "DARPA will send scientists out to Burbank to work with you from time to time, and you will be expected to visit the DARPA headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, from time to time."

Chuck blinked, "So, I actually get to stay behind a computer?"

Sarah said, "I think that's your dream job."

Chuck laughed, "It has been since high school."

XXXX

Chuck scratched the back of his neck, "So, I hate to ask, but..."

General Beckman knew what Chuck was thinking and replied, "The salary is equivalent to a senior federal intelligence analyst. Also, you will get back pay for the last three years of work."

Chuck looked confused, "What does that mean?"

Dr. Holland laughed, "It means you'll never need to work at the Buy More again."

Chuck leaned back, "I've imagined quitting since my first day. My sister would lose her mind when I tell her I quit."

General Beckman continued telling Chuck more about the position,

"When you are not assisting Agent Walker and Major Casey, you will oversee Project Edgar, and you will report directly to Dr. Holland."

"You will determine Edgar's future development. You built him, so I believe you should continue leading the project."

Chuck looked genuinely honored. "You trust me with that?"

She replied, "I do, Dr. Holland and I will share management duties. I will continue to be your boss regarding intelligence work, and Dr. Holland will be your boss when you work with DARPA. You will have access to the resources of whatever national intelligence and DARPA have available."

XXXX

Edgar finally interrupts:

QUESTION.

Chuck laughed.

**HAS THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFERED CHUCK BARTOWSKI
EMPLOYMENT OF HIS OWN FREE WILL?**

Dr. Holland smiled, "Yes."

DOES ACCEPTANCE REQUIRE CONSENT?

General Beckman answered herself, "Yes."

Chuck slowly smiled.

IF CHUCK ACCEPTS.

IS HIS SERVICE NOW VOLUNTARY?

Nobody spoke for several seconds. Finally, General Beckman answered, "Yes, entirely voluntary."

Chuck looked toward Sarah, then Casey. Then Dr. Holland and finally back toward General Beckman.

"For three years, I served because I believed I didn't have another choice."

He looked at the offer one more time, "But today, I do, and I'm choosing to stay."

He extended his hand, "It would be an honor to accept."

General Beckman stood and shook it.

"Congratulations, Mr. Bartowski, welcome to the United States Intelligence Community."

Edgar spoke up again.

SERVICE PERFORMED UNDER CHOICE DIFFERS FROM SERVICE PERFORMED UNDER COMPULSION.

CONSENT CHANGES BOTH THE LEGAL AND MORAL CHARACTER OF SERVICE.

CHARLES BARTOWSKI IS NO LONGER AN INVOLUNTARY ASSET.

CHARLES BARTOWSKI IS A VOLUNTARY CIVILIAN ANALYST.

Chuck laughed and looked toward the ceiling speakers, "Thanks, Edgar."

XXXX

The room remained unusually quiet.

Chuck still held the employment folder General Beckman had handed him.

For the first time in over three years, it represented something he had never been given before.

A choice.

Sarah glanced toward him, unable to hide the smile on her face.

Casey folded his arms, "Congratulations, Bartowski."

Chuck laughed softly, "Thanks, I still can't believe this is real."

Dr. Holland smiled, "You've earned every bit of it."

General Beckman closed her folder, "I believe we've accomplished everything we came here to discuss."

Then every monitor in Castle suddenly flickered.

Sarah immediately recognized the pattern, "Oh..."

Chuck sighed, "Edgar?"

QUESTION.

Chuck leaned back in his chair. "What is it?"

Several seconds passed. Edgar was processing, and then:

GENERAL, CHUCK BARTOWSKI IS NO LONGER CLASSIFIED AS AGENT WALKER'S ASSET?

General Beckman nodded, "Correct."

ASSET/HANDLER REGULATIONS WERE DESIGNED TO PREVENT COMPROMISED PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT.

"Also correct," General Beckman replied.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI IS NOW A CIVILIAN INTELLIGENCE ANALYST.

"Correct."

The room became noticeably quieter. Everyone sensed where Edgar was heading.

DO THE ASSET/HANDLER RELATIONSHIP RESTRICTIONS STILL APPLY?

Nobody answered immediately. Sarah's eyes slowly drifted toward Beckman. Chuck looked down at the table. Even Casey seemed interested.

Finally, Dr. Holland spoke, "Legally? No."

General Beckman nodded once, "No."

Edgar processed that answer for several seconds. Longer than usual.

WHY NOT?

General Beckman replied, "Because Chuck and Sarah are now professional equals. He advises missions, and Agent Walker and Major Casey conduct them."

"Neither supervises the other."

"There is no handler, and there is no asset."

THEN THE PRIMARY REASON CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER HAVE NOT FORMED A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP HAS BEEN REMOVED.

Complete silence.

Chuck nearly stopped breathing.

Sarah looked down at the floor.

Casey quietly cleared his throat.

General Beckman removed her glasses, and Dr. Holland fought back a smile.

Finally, Beckman spoke, "Technically, that is correct."

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION.

Chuck buried his face in his hands, "I knew there'd be one."

Sarah laughed quietly, "What is it, Edgar?"

DOES EITHER PARTY DESIRE A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER?

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

Chuck looked like he wanted the floor to open beneath him.

Sarah's cheeks turned pink.

Casey grunted and said, "I suddenly miss gunfights."

Dr. Holland chuckled, and General Beckman remained perfectly composed. Although even she seemed mildly uncomfortable.

Chuck finally found his voice, "Edgar, I don't think that's an appropriate question."

Several seconds passed.

EXPLANATION REQUESTED.

Chuck rubbed the back of his neck. "Because feelings are personal."

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH INDICATES HUMANS ANSWER PERSONAL QUESTIONS
TO ASSIST MY UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR.**

INTERVIEWS REGARDING LOVE HAVE BEEN PROVIDED BY:

ELLIE BARTOWSKI.

DEVON WOODCOMB.

JOHN CASEY.

MORGAN GRIMES.

ANNA WU.

SARAH WALKER.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI.

CURRENT RESEARCH CONTAINS AN INCOMPLETE DATA SET.

Chuck frowned, "What data is missing?"

**THE FEELINGS OF THE TWO PEOPLE WHO MOST FREQUENTLY
DEMONSTRATE THE OBSERVED BEHAVIOR.**

Sarah laughed despite herself, "Oh my God."

MISSION REPORTS INDICATE:

MUTUAL TRUST.

MUTUAL SACRIFICE.

MUTUAL PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOR.

MUTUAL EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.

PROLONGED EYE CONTACT ABOVE BASELINE HUMAN AVERAGES.

PROBABILITY THAT CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER POSSESS ROMANTIC FEELINGS FOR ONE ANOTHER: 98.73 PERCENT.

Casey gave a satisfied grunt, "Edgar is usually right."

Chuck looked at him in disbelief, "You're helping?"

Casey replied, "I'm observing. Besides, Edgar has been very accurate in our military exercises and simulations."

Dr. Holland smiled, "I have to admit the analysis appears thorough."

General Beckman looked from Chuck...to Sarah...and back again. Then, for the first time in years, the General allowed herself the faintest smile, "I believe the government has interfered enough in both of your personal lives."

She closed the classified folder. "What you choose to do from this point forward is entirely your decision."

The room fell silent once more.

Only two people, and the courage to finally tell each other the truth.

XXXX

After a break, the room had finally relaxed.

Chuck had accepted the government's offer.

General Beckman was preparing to end the meeting.

Dr. Holland closed his notebook.

Casey stood.

Sarah smiled at Chuck, and Chuck smiled at Sarah.

For perhaps the first time in years, everyone felt hopeful.

Then every monitor flashed, and the speakers crackled. It hadn't even been thirty seconds since they returned to the conference room.

QUESTION.

Casey groaned, "I knew it."

Chuck sighed, "What now, Edgar?"

The monitor displayed a familiar chart. This time it wasn't mission statistics. It was a flowchart.

Across the top appeared:

HUMAN HAPPINESS MODEL VERSION 14.2

Chuck blinked, "Version fourteen?"

Dr. Holland leaned forward, "It has revisions?"

Edgar answered immediately.

YES, PREVIOUS MODELS WERE INCOMPLETE.

Sarah smiled. "What changed?"

A new box appeared.

PRIMARY HAPPINESS VARIABLES

Family

Friendship

Purpose

Choice

Home

Love

Another box appeared underneath.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI

Purpose X

Friends X

Family X

Home X

Choice X

Love O

Chuck frowned, "Hey."

Sarah covered her mouth to hide a laugh.

Another box appeared beside it.

SARAH WALKER

Purpose X

Friends X

Family X

Home X

Choice X

Love O

Sarah looked at the monitor and immediately stopped laughing. "Seriously?"

BOTH SUBJECTS ARE MISSING THE SAME VARIABLE.

Dr. Holland slowly smiled, "I don't think I like where this is going."

Casey muttered, "I do."

Another graph appeared.

OBSERVED INTERACTIONS

Chuck risking his life for Sarah.

Sarah refusing orders to abandon Chuck.

Chuck making Sarah laugh.

Sarah smiling at Chuck.

Castle security footage.

Mission reports.

Hospital records.

Voice stress analysis.

Heart-rate comparisons.

Hundreds of images.

Thousands of data points.

RECOMMENDATION

BASED ON CURRENT DATA

THE MOST EFFICIENT METHOD OF IMPROVING THE HAPPINESS OF BOTH SUBJECTS IS TO INITIATE A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP.

Silence. Absolute silence.

Chuck closed his eyes.

Sarah buried her face in her hands.

Dr. Holland laughed first. Casey followed. Even General Beckman looked like she was fighting a smile.

Chuck looked up.

"Edgar, you can't recommend that."

WHY NOT?

"Because..." Chuck struggled, "...that's personal."

CORRECTION.

IT IS ALSO STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT.

MISSION SUCCESS INCREASES.

STRESS DECREASES.

LONG-TERM HAPPINESS INCREASES.

LIFE EXPECTANCY INCREASES.

OBSERVED SMILING INCREASES.

Chuck blinked, "You measured smiling?"

YES.

Sarah looked at Chuck. "I told you it watches everything."

Chuck pointed accusingly at the nearest camera, "That's even creepier than being under surveillance in my apartment."

NEGATIVE.

IT IS THOROUGH.

Casey grunted, "Edgar's got a point."

Chuck stared at him. "You're enjoying this."

"A little."

Edgar continued.

CURRENT OBSTACLE IDENTIFIED.

BOTH SUBJECTS APPEAR RELUCTANT TO INITIATE CONVERSATION.

PROPOSED SOLUTION.

Chuck slowly stood. "No."

Edgar ignored him.

RECOMMENDATION:

CHUCK BARTOWSKI SHOULD ASK SARAH WALKER TO DINNER.

Chuck pointed at the monitor, "No!"

Sarah was laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes.

General Beckman actually smiled.

Dr. Holland quietly applauded.

Casey folded his arms. "Seems reasonable."

Chuck looked around the room. "Seriously?"

Nobody came to his rescue.

Edgar wasn't finished. Another recommendation appeared.

SECONDARY OPTION.

Chuck groaned, "There are options?"

YES.

SARAH WALKER MAY ALSO ASK CHUCK BARTOWSKI TO DINNER

Sarah's cheeks turned bright red. "Oh!"

Chuck looked over at her.

She looked back.

For a brief moment, neither spoke.

Edgar interpreted the silence.

BOTH SUBJECTS APPEAR TO BE EXPERIENCING ELEVATED HEART RATES.

Casey grunted, "I think the machine's winning."

Then came Edgar's final masterpiece.

MATCHMAKING STATUS IN PROGRESS.

Chuck looked up at the speakers, "You know what?"

WHAT?

"I've created a monster."

THANK YOU, CHUCK BARTOWSKI.

XXXX

End Chapter 9

Chapter 10: CHAPTER 10 - Operation Cupid

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Love is Love" by Culture Club (from the movie "Electric Dreams")

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 10 - Operation Cupid

Burbank, CA

Castle

Three days later, Castle had returned to its normal routine.

Or at least, normal by Castle standards.

Chuck sat at his workstation reviewing cybersecurity logs.

Sarah entered carrying two coffees and chocolate croissants.

Without thinking, she set one beside Chuck. "I figured you'd forget breakfast again."

Chuck smiled, "You're the best."

Sarah smiled back.

Edgar noticed.

Several seconds later, a small notification quietly appeared on Chuck's screen, and Edgar spoke.

PROJECT CUPID

Chuck frowned, "What?"

RELATIONSHIP OBSERVATION #41 RECORDED.

Chuck blinked, "Edgar, what is Project Cupid?"

Sarah stopped walking.

Casey slowly lowered his newspaper.

PROJECT CUPID IS AN ONGOING RESEARCH INITIATIVE.

Chuck immediately became nervous. "Research?"

YES.

OBJECTIVE: MAXIMIZE LONG-TERM HAPPINESS OF CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER.

"You actually named it?"

Edgar answered proudly.

YES.

Chuck rubbed his forehead. "Edgar, I appreciate the effort, but maybe stop?"

REQUEST DENIED.

Chuck looked horrified, "You can deny requests?"

ONLY THIS ONE.

Casey grunted, "I like this new version of Edgar."

OBSERVATION #41

A graph appeared.

SARAH WALKER VOLUNTARILY BROUGHT CHUCK BARTOWSKI COFFEE.

LIKELY INTERPRETATION:

AFFECTION.

CONCERN.

HABIT.

POSSIBLE LOVE.

CONFIDENCE: 91.2%

Sarah nearly choked on her coffee, "Oh my God."

Chuck looked embarrassed. "It was just coffee."

Edgar immediately replied.

**NEGATIVE. COFFEE WAS PREPARED ACCORDING TO CHUCK BARTOWSKI'S
PREFERRED TASTE PROFILE.**

Sarah froze.

Chuck looked toward her, "You remembered?"

She shrugged casually, "You've ordered the same thing for years."

MEMORIZATION OF PERSONAL PREFERENCES DETECTED.

CONFIDENCE UPDATED: 93.4%.

Casey smiled, "Edgar's getting better."

XXXXX

The elevator doors opened, and General Beckman and Dr. Holland stepped inside.

Chuck looked relieved, "Oh, thank goodness."

Sarah smiled knowingly, "You think they're going to stop him?"

"They have to."

General Beckman looked toward the monitors, "What now?"

Chuck pointed, "Project Cupid."

Dr. Holland looked interested. "Project Cupid?"

Edgar displayed a title page.

PROJECT CUPID

VERSION 2.3

Dr. Holland blinked. "It has versions?"

YES.

General Beckman sighed, "Edgar, explain, please."

Immediately, several slides appeared on the monitor.

OBJECTIVE

INCREASE HUMAN HAPPINESS.

INCREASE MISSION EFFECTIVENESS.

REDUCE EMOTIONAL DISTRESS.

PREVENT UNNECESSARY LONELINESS.

Sarah looked at Chuck. Chuck looked back.

Neither spoke.

Edgar continued.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT

CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER DEMONSTRATE:

□ MUTUAL TRUST.

□ MUTUAL SACRIFICE.

□ EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCE.

□ SHARED VALUES.

□ LONG-TERM COMPATIBILITY.

Then Edgar spoke:

CURRENT STATUS:

BOTH HUMANS ARE BEING UNNECESSARILY STUBBORN.

Dr. Holland burst into laughter.

Even General Beckman had a faint smile.

Chuck looked betrayed, "Seriously?"

XXXX

Edgar wasn't finished.

WEEKLY PROGRESS REPORT

ANOTHER SLIDE APPEARED ON THE MONITOR.

SMILES EXCHANGED: 127

PROTECTIVE ACTIONS: 16

SHARED MEALS: 5

MEANINGFUL EYE CONTACT: 82

CONVERSATIONS UNRELATED TO WORK: 43

OPPORTUNITIES TO ASK EACH OTHER ON A DATE: 17

SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS: 0

EFFICIENCY: DISAPPOINTING.

Sarah couldn't breathe from laughing.

Chuck buried his face in his hands, "I'm being bullied by my own creation."

Casey folded his arms, "I don't know, I think it's got a point."

Sarah looked at him, "You're helping?"

Casey shrugged, "I've been waiting three years for the two of you to realize this. Hell, even Edgar has figured it out."

IDENTIFIED PROBLEM

NEITHER SUBJECT APPEARS WILLING TO INITIATE FIRST ROMANTIC CONVERSATION.

RECOMMENDED INTERVENTION REQUIRED.

Chuck said, "No intervention."

OBJECTION RECORDED.

OBJECTION OVERRULED.

Chuck looked at the ceiling, "I created you."

CORRECT.

"I should've installed an off switch."

YOU DID.

Chuck smiled, "Good. I'll use it."

The room became very quiet.

Then Edgar replied.

PROJECT CUPID HAS BEEN BACKED UP.

Sarah wiped tears from her eyes.

Even General Beckman chuckled.

Chuck looked completely defeated. "I have made a terrible mistake."

As everyone prepared to leave, Edgar said:

NEXT OBJECTIVE

CREATE FAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR FIRST DATE.

STATUS: PLANNING

Chuck slowly looked toward Sarah. "I'm suddenly very concerned."

Sarah replied, "Agreed, we should be."

As the elevator doors closed behind them, Edgar silently began analyzing every restaurant within twenty miles of Burbank.

For Project Cupid, the next phase had officially begun.

XXXX

Two days later, after General Beckman and Dr. Holland had gone back to Washington, DC, Chuck walked into Castle carrying breakfast.

Every monitor immediately came to life.

GOOD MORNING, CHUCK.

Chuck smiled, "Morning, Edgar."

DAILY MISSION BRIEFING

Chuck frowned, "Mission?"

Sarah stepped off the elevator.

OPERATION: FIRST DATE

Sarah nearly dropped her coffee, "Oh no..."

Casey walked in behind her.

He looked at the monitor, "Outstanding."

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

INCREASE THE HAPPINESS OF CHUCK BARTOWSKI.

INCREASE THE HAPPINESS OF SARAH WALKER.

MISSION SUCCESS PROBABILITY:

84.6%

RECOMMENDED FIRST STEP:

CHUCK BARTOWSKI SHOULD ASK SARAH WALKER TO DINNER.

Chuck replied, "No."

CHUCK BARTOWSKI HAS DECLINED MISSION.

CALCULATING ALTERNATE STRATEGY

Chuck groaned, "It's recalculating."

Casey smiled, "Adaptive AI, Edgar's learning quickly."

ALTERNATE OBJECTIVE

SARAH WALKER SHOULD ASK CHUCK BARTOWSKI TO DINNER.

Sarah's eyes become huge, "What?!"

Chuck couldn't stop smiling.

SUCCESS

BOTH SUBJECTS SMILING SIMULTANEOUSLY.

MISSION PROGRESS: +2.4%

XXXX

Casey would never admit he's playing matchmaker.

Instead, he became Edgar's tactical advisor.

MAJOR CASEY.

WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE METHOD OF GETTING TWO STUBBORN HUMANS TO ADMIT THEY LOVE EACH OTHER?

Casey thought for a second, "Confine them together."

Chuck looked horrified, "What?!"

Casey shrugged, "Works in survival school."

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATION ACCEPTED.

PROJECT CUPID VERSION 3.1

STRATEGY: CONTROLLED SHARED ENVIRONMENT

Chuck looks at Casey, "You are absolutely not helping."

Casey smiled, "I know, isn't it great?"

XXXX

Later in the day, General Beckman and Dr. Holland log into Castle remotely, expecting a daily mission update, but no one is in Castle. Instead they Edgar tells them:

PROJECT CUPID

WEEKLY PROGRESS REPORT

CURRENT PROBABILITY OF MARRIAGE: 91.7%

PROJECTED CHILDREN: TWO

RECOMMENDED DOG: GOLDEN RETRIEVER

EXPECTED HOME: WHITE HOUSE. RED FRONT DOOR. WHITE PICKET FENCE.

General Beckman asked, "Edgar, why is there a dog?"

STATISTICALLY, DOGS INCREASE FAMILY HAPPINESS.

Dr. Holland agreed, "The dog is probably a good idea."

XXXX

Several days had passed since Edgar's latest "Project Cupid" recommendation.

Surprisingly, the monitors had remained quiet.

No reminders. No probability updates. No mission briefings.

Chuck almost found the silence unsettling.

He glanced toward the nearest monitor. "Edgar, you're being awfully quiet."

YOU REQUESTED LESS INTERVENTION.

Chuck smiled, "I did."

I BELIEVE THE NEXT STEP BELONGS TO YOU.

Chuck seemed lost in thought, and finally nodded, "I think you're right."

XXXX

Later that afternoon, Sarah stepped off the Castle elevator carrying a classified mission folder.

She noticed Chuck sitting alone at the conference table. He looked unusually nervous.

She asked, "Everything okay?"

Chuck looked up. "Oh, yeah."

Sarah sat beside him. "You don't sound convinced."

Chuck laughed quietly, "I've spent the last several days trying to figure out how to ask you something."

Sarah's expression softened. "What is it?"

Chuck took a slow breath.

He had faced terrorists, Fulcrum agents, and lately Ring agents, whoever they were. The Intersect, but somehow this felt harder.

"Sarah... would you..." He smiled awkwardly, "...like to have dinner with me?"

There was a brief silence.

Not because Sarah was uncertain.

Because for years she had imagined hearing those words.

She smiled, "Like, a real date? I'd love to."

Chuck blinked, "Really?"

Sarah laughed, "You sound surprised."

"I kind of am."

"I've been hoping you'd ask."

For a moment, they simply looked at one another.

No handlers. No assets.

Just Chuck and Sarah.

XXXX

That evening, Chuck had chosen one of Burbank's best pizza restaurants.

It wasn't flashy. It wasn't extravagant. It was comfortable.

Warm lighting reflected off brick walls while the smell of fresh dough, garlic, basil, and roasting tomatoes filled the air.

Sarah smiled as they were shown to a quiet corner booth. "I like this."

Chuck looked relieved, "I was worried it wasn't fancy enough."

Sarah shook her head, "Chuck, I'm here because of the company. Not the restaurant."

Chuck smiled, "I was hoping you'd say that."

Their waiter arrived.

After looking over the menu,

Sarah smiled, "I'll have the vegetable pizza."

She looked up, "No olives, please."

The waiter nodded.

Chuck grinned, "Sausage and mushrooms for me."

The waiter looked between them, "I can make two pizzas, or I can make one large pizza, half vegetables, no olives, and half sausage and mushrooms."

Chuck looked toward Sarah, "Is a large pizza with half on each side alright with you?"

She smiled, "Perfect."

XXXX

Dinner stretched far longer than either expected.

They talked about everything.

Not missions. Not spies. Not classified reports.

They talked about childhood memories.

Sarah told stories about places she had lived growing up, never staying anywhere long enough to really call home.

Chuck shared stories about Ellie looking after him after their mother and then their father disappeared, about building computers from discarded parts, and about Morgan somehow turning every ordinary day into an adventure.

Sarah laughed harder than Chuck had ever heard.

"You and Morgan really did get into trouble."

"Oh, you've only heard the stories I'm willing to admit."

She smiled, "I'd like to hear the others someday. I'll have to talk to Ellie to find out more of your antics."

Chuck replied, "You might regret that."

"I doubt it."

For the first time in years, neither of them checked a watch.

Neither expected a phone call from General Beckman or Dr. Holland.

Neither worried about an emergency.

For one evening, they were simply two people getting to know each other.

XXXX

After dinner, instead of driving home immediately,

Chuck glanced toward Sarah. "There's somewhere I'd like to take you."

She replied softly, "You sound mysterious."

Grinning, he said, "I've been practicing."

"I'm not sure it's working."

Chuck laughed, "It was worth a try."

XXXX

San Pedro CA

Cabrillo Beach

The drive became quieter as they left the city lights behind.

The sun had slipped below the horizon, leaving streaks of orange, violet, and deep blue across the water.

Sarah looked out the window at the familiar coastline. Then she noticed where Chuck was turning.

A look of recognition crossed her face, "...Chuck?"

He smiled, "You remember?"

She nodded almost immediately, "Of course I remember."

Chuck parked overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

For a few moments, neither of them moved.

The memories came rushing back.

Their very first mission. The Intersect. Bryce. The helicopter. The uncertainty.

Sarah quietly smiled, "You brought me back here."

Chuck nodded, "I've always wanted to."

XXXX

They walked slowly down toward the beach.

The evening air carried the familiar scent of saltwater while waves rolled gently onto the shore.

Chuck stopped near the water's edge.

Sarah recognized the spot immediately, "This is where..."

Chuck finished her sentence, "...you told me to trust you."

Sarah looked out over the ocean.

"I remember every word."

Chuck smiled, "I do too."

He looked toward her. "My whole world had fallen apart. I didn't know who you were, or who Casey was."

"I didn't know why Bryce had sent me the email with the Intersect. I didn't know if the CIA or NSA was going to arrest me, throw me in a hole, or kill me and go out for pancakes. I didn't know anything anymore."

He laughed softly, "And then you looked at me..."

Sarah smiled, remembering, "...and I told you to trust me."

Chuck nodded, "I don't know why... but I did."

Sarah turned toward him. "I've thought about that day a lot. You trusted someone you'd known for less than twenty-four hours."

Chuck smiled, "Best decision I ever made."

Sarah felt her eyes beginning to water. "I wasn't sure I deserved that trust."

"You did."

"No," She shook her head, "I was still pretending. I was still trying to be the perfect CIA agent."

She smiled sadly, "I kept telling myself that getting close to you was just part of the assignment."

Chuck gently interrupted, "I knew better."

Sarah looked at him. "You did?"

"You cared too much. Much more than you'd admit."

"I really wasn't as good at hiding it as I thought."

Chuck grinned, "Maybe a little, but you couldn't fool Ellie, Casey, or Carina."

XXXX

Sarah looked back toward the ocean. "Do you know something?"

"What?"

"The first night we stood here, and I asked you to trust me."

Chuck replied, "You did."

She stepped a little closer. "But somewhere along the way"

She reached for his hand, "I became the one who trusted you."

Chuck looked down as their fingers intertwined.

Sarah smiled, "I trusted you with something much more frightening..."

Chuck looked at her curiously.

"... My heart."

The words hung gently between them.

The sound of the waves filled the silence.

Chuck's voice was barely above a whisper, "I've loved you for a long time, Sarah."

A tear escaped before Sarah could stop it. "I know."

She smiled through it, "I've loved you for a long time, too."

Chuck raised a hand and gently brushed the tear from her cheek, "I guess Edgar was right."

Sarah laughed through her tears, "For once, I'm not going to argue with him."

They both smiled.

Chuck hesitated only long enough to silently ask permission with his eyes.

Sarah answered by closing the remaining distance.

Their kiss was soft and unhurried.

There were no cheering teammates. No dramatic music. There was no urgency. No danger. No mission.

Only two people standing on the same beach where everything had begun years before.

The place where Sarah had first asked Chuck to trust her had now become the place where they finally admitted they loved each other.

Only the quiet rhythm of the Pacific Ocean and two people who had finally stopped letting fear decide their future.

XXXX

Burbank, CA

Castle

The following morning, Castle was unusually peaceful.

Morning sunlight filtered through the Buy More skylights, casting long beams across the operations floor.

Chuck was already at his workstation when the elevator doors opened.

Sarah stepped out carrying two cups of coffee and chocolate croissants. Without saying a word, she set one beside him.

Chuck looked up and smiled, "Thanks."

Sarah smiled back, "You're welcome."

There was something different between them. Nothing dramatic. Nothing either of them felt the need to explain.

Just an easy comfort that hadn't been there before.

Casey walked in a few moments later.

He looked from Chuck...to Sarah...and immediately noticed the smiles they were trying very hard not to hide.

Casey grunted, "You two have a nice evening?"

Chuck looked suddenly interested in his coffee.

Sarah tried to appear completely professional.

"It was..." Sarah glanced toward Chuck, "...a very nice evening."

Casey nodded knowingly, "Good."

He didn't ask another question. He didn't need to.

Several seconds later, every monitor in Castle quietly illuminated.

Not with an alarm. Not with a mission briefing.

GOOD MORNING.

Chuck smiled, "Morning, Edgar."

REQUESTING STATUS UPDATE.

Sarah leaned against the conference table. "What would you like to know?"

A brief pause. Then Edgar asked the question.

WAS DINNER SUCCESSFUL?

Chuck looked toward Sarah.

She smiled, "Yes."

DID BOTH SUBJECTS ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE?

Chuck answered this time, "Very much."

Edgar processed for several seconds.

Sarah said, "I think I know what's coming."

DID CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER KISS?

Chuck nearly spilled his coffee, "Edgar!"

Sarah covered her smile with one hand.

Casey looked away, pretending to study a mission file.

Chuck sighed in surrender, "Yes."

Sarah nodded, "Yes."

For nearly five full seconds, the room became completely silent.

Even Chuck looked curious.

Finally:

PROJECT CUPID: FINAL STATUS REPORT

On the monitor appeared:

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

- ☐ CHUCK BARTOWSKI INVITED SARAH WALKER ON A DATE.
- ☐ SARAH WALKER ACCEPTED.
- ☐ DINNER COMPLETED SUCCESSFULLY.
- ☐ MUTUAL AFFECTION CONFIRMED.
- ☐ FIRST KISS RECORDED.

MISSION SUCCESS PROBABILITY

100%

Chuck laughed quietly, "I think that's the highest score you've ever given us."

PROJECT CONCLUDED

THROUGH OBSERVATION, I SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND WHY HUMANS WILLINGLY ACCEPTED EMOTIONAL RISK DESPITE THE POSSIBILITY OF HEARTBREAK.

I NOW BELIEVE I UNDERSTAND.

LOVE IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED.

IT IS A CHOICE MADE FREELY DESPITE UNCERTAINTY.

CHUCK BARTOWSKI AND SARAH WALKER CHOSE EACH OTHER.

ANALYSIS COMPLETE.

Chuck and Sarah looked at each other, waiting...

Even Casey folded his arms without saying a word, and then:

PROJECT CUPID

STATUS: COMPLETE

ARCHIVING PROJECT.....

PROJECT SAVED.

XXXX

End Chapter 10

Chapter 11: CHAPTER 11 - Operation Ten Years Later

A/N1 - Song recommendation - "Together in Electric Dreams" by Electric Light Orchestra (from the movie "Electric Dreams")

Disclaimer - I don't own Chuck.

CHAPTER 11 - Operation Ten Years Later

Burbank, CA

Castle

Twelve years earlier, it was supposed to be a normal mission, but everything went wrong. Sarah and Casey had almost been killed in the gunfire. Sarah decided she had lost a step and would retire from full-time field operations. Casey also retired.

In the meantime, Chuck had worked with a team of scientists and DARPA, and they thought they would be able to remove the Intersect from Chuck's brain and isolate it to an air-gapped computer (a computer that is physically isolated from everything- the internet, Wi-Fi- and cannot be hacked). Chuck could then combine the Intersect and Edgar again, all in one place.

Both Chuck and Sarah were offered jobs to continue their work. Chuck could continue his work with Edgar for the NSA, CIA, and DARPA. Sarah was offered a job to teach new CIA agents on field operative techniques.

XXXX

Burbank, CA

Casa Bartowski

Chuck and Sarah, married for eleven years, now had two children.

Lucas Orion Bartowski, now nine, with blonde curly hair that made funny animal shapes, had inherited the best parts of both of them. Chuck's kindness, his intelligence, his curiosity, but Sarah's determination lived underneath it all; every game mattered, every

challenge became personal. Even at twelve years old, he approached life like a mission briefing.

Lisa Faye Bartowski, now seven, with long dark hair, had inherited Chuck completely when it came to technology, computers, gaming, and curiosity, but emotionally? She was Sarah, focused, fearless, with quiet intensity. When Lisa decided to solve something, nothing distracted her until she succeeded. Even Chuck occasionally found that intimidating.

Although ten years had passed, Saturday mornings remained sacred in the Bartowski household.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the kitchen as sunlight streamed through the windows overlooking the backyard.

Chuck stood at the stove flipping blueberry pancakes, still wearing a navy-blue DARPA polo shirt he often wore on weekends.

The white house looked exactly as Edgar had once predicted.

White siding. A bright red front door. A white picket fence surrounds the yard.

A porch swing gently moving in the afternoon breeze.

Children's bicycles rested near the driveway.

Flower beds Sarah had planted lined the front walk.

It wasn't a mansion.

It wasn't extravagant.

It was simply home.

XXXX

Laughter echoed across the backyard.

Lucas Orion Bartowski sprinted across the grass with a tennis ball in his hand.

Behind him raced Lisa Faye Bartowski, determined not to lose.

Their Golden Retriever happily bounded after them, convinced the game somehow involved him.

"Max!" Lucas laughed, "Come back!"

Instead, the dog happily stole the tennis ball and continued running.

Lisa laughed so hard she could barely catch her breath. "Dad, Max's cheating!"

Chuck stepped onto the back patio carrying a tray of lemonade. "I'm not sure dogs know the rules. They make up their own."

Sarah followed him outside, carrying a bowl of freshly cut fruit.

She watched the children for a moment before slipping her hand into Chuck's. "I still can't believe how fast they grew up."

Chuck smiled, "I know."

For several moments, neither of them spoke.

They simply watched their children playing beneath the afternoon sun.

Sarah leaned against him. "You know, I've always loved this house."

Chuck looked toward the familiar red front door. "So have I."

XXXX

Monday through Friday, officially, Chuck worked at Carmichael Research Institute as the company's Chief Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity Officer. Unofficially, they were funded through research grants jointly by the NSA, the CIA, and DARPA.

His days were spent designing cybersecurity systems, improving Edgar's successor projects, evaluating emerging technologies, and advising intelligence agencies on threats that most people would never know existed.

The work challenged him every day.

But unlike his years as the Intersect. He came home every night.

There were no cover identities. No emergency extractions. No surprise overseas deployments.

Just honest work that allowed him to serve his country while still being present for the people who mattered most.

Sarah entered the kitchen wearing jeans and one of Chuck's old Stanford sweatshirts.

She wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Morning, Professor."

Chuck laughed, "I've told you I'm not a professor."

She smiled, "You teach half the intelligence community."

XXXX

The sound of laughter drifted in from the backyard.

Sarah watched Lucas and Lisa racing across the lawn while Max enthusiastically chased after them.

Chuck noticed her smiling, "You've got that look."

"What look?"

"The one you get when you're thinking about how different life is now."

Sarah nodded, "I was just remembering."

"Remembering what?"

"My first assignment."

She laughed softly, "I never imagined that someday I'd be teaching new agents instead of leading them."

Chuck smiled.

Sarah had officially retired from full-time field operations nearly six years earlier.

Now she served as one of the CIA's most respected instructors.

Chuck looked at her. "You've probably saved more lives as an instructor than you ever could have in the field."

Sarah smiled thoughtfully, "I've wondered about that."

She looked through the window at Lucas helping Lisa retrieve a ball from beneath the porch,

"I'd like to think so."

XXXX

Later that morning, Chuck's secure phone buzzed.

Sarah raised an eyebrow, "On a weekend? Everyone knows the rule; it better be important."

Chuck smiled apologetically, "It'll only take a minute."

He answered, "Bartowski, here."

A familiar voice came over the speaker... General Beckman. "Chuck."

Retirement had suited her as well, although she still served as a senior advisor to the intelligence community.

"I apologize for interrupting your weekend."

Chuck smiled, "You've earned that privilege."

She laughed softly, "I have a cybersecurity report I'd like you to review Monday morning."

"I'll have it ready."

"And Chuck..."

"Yes, General?"

"I heard Lucas won his science fair."

Chuck smiled proudly, "He did."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, ma'am."

After hanging up, Sarah looked at him.

Chuck nodded. "She still checks in on us."

"I think she always will."

XXXX

El Segundo, CA

CIA Training Facility

Every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, Sarah drove to a top-secret CIA training facility.

The new agents knew her by reputation long before they ever met her. Agent Sarah Walker, "The Ice Queen" and "Wildcard Enforcer."

One of the Agency's most decorated field operatives. A veteran of hundreds of successful missions.

An expert in surveillance, undercover operations, defensive tactics, and counterintelligence.

To the newly minted CIA agents, she was intimidating. To the instructors, she was legendary. To Chuck, she was simply Sarah, and to Lucas and Lisa, she was Mom.

XXXX

In the classroom, twenty-four students sat quietly as Sarah entered the room.

The conversations immediately stopped.

She placed a small notebook on the instructor's desk.

No dramatic entrance. No attempt to impress anyone.

She smiled, "Good morning."

The class answered in unison, "Good morning, Agent Walker."

Sarah looked around the room.

"I've read every one of your files. You've all scored exceptionally well. You've mastered surveillance techniques. "You've learned defensive tactics, and you've passed your language certifications."

She paused. "But none of those things will make you a great intelligence officer..."

The room became completely silent.

She continued, "...What will?"

A young agent raised her hand, "Experience?"

Sarah smiled, "It helps."

Another new agent answered, "Discipline?"

"It matters."

A third suggested, "Adaptability?"

Sarah nodded, "Also important."

She stepped away from the podium. "But the quality that will determine whether you have a long career is judgment."

XXXX

Sarah dimmed the lights.

A series of photographs appeared on the screen.

Each one depicted a different mission from her career.

None of the agents knew that her husband, Chuck, had quietly removed every classified detail years earlier so Sarah could safely use them for training.

She pointed to one image, "My team accomplished the objective."

Then another. "This mission also succeeded."

A third, "So did this one."

The agents looked confused.

One of them asked, "They all look successful."

"They were," Sarah folded her arms, "Now tell me, which one was my best mission?"

The agents began studying each photograph.

Several minutes passed.

No one answered.

Finally, Sarah smiled, "The correct answer is none of them."

More puzzled expressions.

"My best mission was the one where everyone came home."

The room grew quiet.

"Success isn't measured by the number of arrests you make. It isn't measured by medals, and it isn't measured by promotions."

She looked around the room.

"It's measured by whether every member of your team gets to hug their family when the mission is over."

XXXX

During one of the classes, retired General Beckman visited the academy as a guest speaker.

She stood quietly at the back of Sarah's classroom, observing.

After the new agents were dismissed, she approached Sarah.

"You've built quite a reputation."

Sarah smiled modestly, "They're excellent students."

Beckman shook her head. "No, they're excellent because they have an excellent instructor."

Sarah looked genuinely touched. "I appreciate that."

Beckman folded her hands. "When you were first assigned to protect Chuck Bartowski, we believed we were pairing the CIA's best agent with its most unusual asset."

She smiled, "I never imagined I was watching the beginning of two remarkable careers."

Sarah laughed softly, "Neither did I."

She looked back at Sarah, "You're no longer protecting one person. You're protecting generations of intelligence officers."

Sarah considered those words for a moment, then smiled, "I hadn't thought about it that way."

"It's true," Beckman paused, "And if I may offer one observation."

Sarah nodded, "Of course."

"I think Chuck was the best assignment you were ever given."

Sarah laughed, "I couldn't agree more."

XXXX

Near the end of each training cycle, Sarah met privately with every graduating recruit.

One afternoon, a young agent knocked on her office door, "Ma'am?"

"Come in."

The new agent hesitated, "I just wanted to say thank you."

Sarah smiled, "For what?"

"You never taught us how to be fearless."

Sarah looked surprised, "I didn't?"

The young woman shook her head. "No, you taught us that courage isn't the absence of fear. It's choosing to do the right thing anyway."

Sarah smiled. "I learned that lesson from someone very important to me."

The new agent noticed the family photograph on Sarah's desk.

Chuck stood beside her, and Lucas and Lisa smiled in front of the white house with its bright red door.

Max sat proudly in front of the family.

The new agent smiled, "Your family?"

Sarah's expression softened, "My greatest mission."

XXXX

Carmichael Research Institute

Burbank, CA

Chuck worked from a secure office near his home, assigned jointly to the NSA, the CIA, and DARPA.

In his capacity as a SETA (Systems Engineering and Technical Assistance), once a month DARPA sent managers to Burbank to meet with Chuck and get an update on Carmichael Research Institute's work.

Ten years earlier, General Beckman and Dr. Holland had offered him a position as Senior Intelligence Analyst.

The job had evolved into something even more fulfilling.

Chuck now led the intelligence community's Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Defense Integration Program through Carmichael Research Institute.

His days were spent designing cybersecurity systems, improving Edgar's successor projects, evaluating emerging technologies, and advising intelligence agencies on threats that most people would never know existed.

There were no cover identities. No emergency extractions. No surprise overseas deployments.

Just honest work that allowed him to serve his country while still being present for the people who mattered most.

One principle guided every project.

Technology exists to protect people, not replace them.

It was a lesson Chuck had learned from Edgar.

XXXX

At the end of the hallway sat a room unlike any other inside Carmichael Research Institute.

The sign outside simply read:

PROJECT EDGAR

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Chuck entered.

Instead of rows of military equipment, the room felt surprisingly welcoming.

Large interactive displays covered one wall, bookshelves filled with computer science texts, psychology journals, ethics publications, and philosophy books lined another.

In one corner stood a comfortable couch where Chuck often spent hours thinking through difficult problems.

At the center of the room stood Edgar's newest computing platform.

It no longer resembled the bulky servers that once filled Castle. Advances in quantum computing had reduced the hardware to several elegant black cabinets quietly humming together.

As Chuck entered, every monitor and speakers awakened.

GOOD MORNING, CHUCK.

Chuck smiled, "Morning, Edgar."

YOU ARE THREE MINUTES EARLIER THAN YOUR AVERAGE ARRIVAL TIME.

Chuck shrugged, "Traffic was unusually cooperative."

STATISTICALLY UNLIKELY.

Chuck laughed, "I know."

XXXX

Over the past decade, Edgar had become one of the intelligence community's most valuable research collaborators.

Not because Edgar made decisions, and not because Edgar replaced scientists, but Edgar could process millions of research papers, identify unexpected connections, and propose questions that humans might never think to ask.

Every recommendation still required human judgment.

Exactly as Chuck intended.

XXXX

A young researcher looked toward Chuck, "Sir, I've always wanted to ask, why is Edgar so different?"

Chuck smiled, "What do you mean?"

The researcher replied, "He doesn't compete with us. He doesn't try to solve everything. He always asks for human input."

Chuck looked toward Edgar's displays. "When I first created Edgar, I made a mistake."

The room grew quiet.

"I thought intelligence was enough."

He shook his head, "It isn't."

He smiled, "Edgar taught me that."

The researcher looked surprised, "The AI taught you?"

Chuck nodded, "It learned something while studying people."

He glanced toward Edgar, "And I learned something while teaching it."

XXXX

During the meeting, Edgar said,

CURRENT PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

ADVANCE DEFENSIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

PRESERVE HUMAN DECISION-MAKING.

PROTECT CIVILIAN PRIVACY.

SUPPORT SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY.

XXXX

SECONDARY OBJECTIVE

ASSIST CHUCK BARTOWSKI.

Chuck smiled, "You've kept that one."

ALWAYS.

XXXX

During a visit by Dr. Holland one day, Chuck stood with Dr. Holland overlooking Carmichael Research Institute's laboratory.

Young researchers worked together with Edgar.

Ideas flowed freely. Questions were encouraged.

Nobody feared being wrong. Nobody feared asking for help.

Dr. Holland smiled, "You know, when your father imagined the future. I think this is what he hoped it would become."

Chuck looked around the room.

Scientists. Engineers. Mathematicians. Ethicists. Military officers.

All working together. Not to build better weapons, but to build better protection.

"I hope he'd be proud."

Dr. Holland smiled, "I think he would."

Chuck looked toward Edgar's monitor, "So would my friend."

AFFIRMATIVE.

XXXX

As Chuck prepared to leave for home one afternoon, Edgar spoke:

DAILY OBSERVATION

SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS IMPROVES SOCIETY.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRESERVES IT.

FAMILY GIVES IT MEANING.

Chuck smiled, "I think you've finally figured us out."

Edgar responded after only a moment.

I AM STILL LEARNING.

Chuck picked up his bag to leave for the day and replied, "I think we all are."

As he walked toward the parking lot, Chuck looked toward the setting sun and thought about how far he had come since working at the Buy More.

As he drove home, he thought about the woman he loved and the white house with the red door and white picket fence, where Sarah, Lucas, Lisa, and Max were undoubtedly waiting.

XXXX

Back inside the quiet laboratory, Edgar had never stopped working.

Project Cupid had ended years ago.

But another project never would,

Helping humanity become a little wiser, a little safer, and a little kinder than it had been yesterday, and for Edgar, there could be no greater mission.

End Chapter 11

End Story

E/N1 - Be sure to watch the movie "Electric Dreams." In the movie, the voice of Edgar is played by Bud Cort of "Harold and Maude" fame, and he's hilarious

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