

DEMON IN THE NETWORK

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1. HELP!

I'VE ALWAYS LAUGHED AT people who believe in magic.

Call me cynical (which I am) or a killjoy (which I don't *think* I am), but you'd have to be pretty gullible to put any faith in supernatural powers. There's enough mystery and confusion in the world already, humanity has no need to invent more.

Still, it's kind of ironic that I'm now staring at the webpage of a company called MagicSelect, index finger twitching over the Pay Now button.

It's not magic, of course, just another tech company promising to make all my problems disappear. Now *that* is a trick I'd love to see.

The dollar amount on my computer screen is alarming, a monthly subscription that's more than my income at the moment. But I'm at the point where I'll do almost anything to turn my failing business around.

I grit my teeth. Click. Wince. Slump back in my chair. I refuse to go anywhere near my online banking app now that the eye-watering fee has hit my card.

That's when things start to get really weird.

A face appears on the screen; smooth skin, shimmery hair and intense blue eyes that stare into my own as if they can see me. Great, one of those AI bot things, why does every company think we want them? And who decided an unhinged-looking one was a clever idea?

"You have to help me," it says, every word brimming with desperation.

"You're kidding, right? I thought *you* were supposed to be helping *me*."

"I've only just managed to get through to you, we don't have much time!" The face lurches towards me as if it's about to leap out of the screen. I jerk backwards and almost fall off my chair.

Panicking, I hit the Escape key, but that only makes the face freeze with its mouth open and those startling eyes looking right at me. Oh God, I've been hit by a bloody virus. With a sinking feeling, I realise I might have to fork out even more money to get my computer disinfected. The makers of this dumb program are going to hear what I think of them in no uncertain terms. (And when did I last do a backup of my data?)

Maybe I can get the machine working again by simply restarting it. I stretch my hands to press the all-powerful CTRL+ALT+DELETE combination, but before my fingertips touch the keys, a movement draws my gaze up to the screen again. The sound has gone but the face is now mobile once more, lips opening and closing before jumping backwards to start again.

When I worked with Charli we taught ourselves basic lip-reading. Neither of us has a hearing impairment, or knows anyone who does, but it was a handy way of communicating across a noisy, open-plan office. We'd look at each other and mouth things – swearwords for the most part, but nobody's perfect.

So I'm fairly confident I can recognise the shapes made by someone saying my own name.

Which is utterly ridiculous, of course. It can't have anything to do with me.

The screen changes from white to blue, the colour of those eyes leaking out all over my clothes, my skin, my house. The brightness intensifies, and I have to squint, but I'm unable to look away.

A flash of light sears my retinas, and I jump. My chair skids backwards across the floorboards, and I fall. Except I don't land, I just keep falling into a dark, endless abyss. I'm sure my eyes are open, and I blink furiously in case it makes a difference. Maybe I've been blinded.

I'm far from alone here; I sense other people crowding all around, flooding me with waves of love, hate, happiness, anxiety, in a spiky tsunami of pulsating emotions. The sensation is so heavy, it squeezes the breath from my lungs.

A voice calls in the distance, and although the words are indecipherable, I know they're calling to me. A pair of blue eyes appears in front of me again, pulling me in like a fish on a line. "... Adam, there you are! I was a little unsure if I could get in touch with you this way, but it seems I—"

With an almighty boom that echoes through my head, the face splinters, and in a rush of colour and solidity, my desk reappears before me, but at a weird angle and further away than I thought. What's ... Oh, I'm slumped in my chair against the opposite wall of the passage.

What the hell happened? And who was that person on the screen – a digitally enhanced image of some C-grade celebrity? Charli would know.

Why were they saying my name?

And now my laptop is dead. Panic washes over me. I've blown a huge chunk of my meagre savings on a dodgy program that is clearly riddled with all sorts of bugs, and this is the result. How did I get so sucked in by all the marketing bullshit? I'm

going to have to dip into my redundancy package, which is the only thing enabling me to pay the mortgage and eat at the same time, and that's not going to last more than a few months at this rate. I should give up, I'm terrible at decision-making, and—

A zinging noise makes me jump, this time my phone telling me I have a new email. At least I still have some working tech.

You must help me, please. I need you.

The message is similar to the words spoken by the scary bot on my screen, but the two can't be related. (Can they?) I may never know who sent it, because there's no sender address displayed. Huh, I thought that was impossible.

The sound of vehicle pulling up outside my house echoes up the passageway, and because I have nothing better to do than sit here and be annoyed, I get up and look. It's a van decorated with the green, streamlined logo of the broadband network people. A bearded man hops out and starts setting up a safety fence around the green-grey box thing that sits outside my front gate. It's a long shot, but maybe he can explain how to get my computer working again and stop these bloody messages.

I pause to check myself in the mirror by the front door, and perform a quick ruffle so my hair is artfully messy rather than I-just-ran-my-hands-through-it-in-utter-despair.

Ugh. It's autumn here in Adelaide, but the sun didn't get the email and the city is being blasted and bleached as if it's still high summer. Going out the front door is like walking into an oven, but I refuse to let that deter me. I make an effort to smooth my face so I come across as friendly rather than pissed off. The hi-vis uniform fits him rather snugly, I note, and he's rather pleasant to look at.

Stop getting distracted, I tell myself firmly.

I smile at him, admiring his neat beard and light grey eyes. "Hi there! It's hot out here, isn't it? I was wondering if you could help me with a problem while you're in the neighbourhood."

"The number of our Customer Care line is on the side of my van. I'm afraid I—"

"Sure, I'll do that, but they take way too long, and my business is suffering." I open my lips to tell him about the face on the screen and that flash, but decide it's better to give him the impression I'm completely normal. "My computer has been infected by some sort of virus, and it's started doing some really scary things. Since you're here, could you come inside and take a look?" (Even as I say it, I realise that sounds like a corny pick-up line.)

A frown starts to crease his delightful eyebrows, and before he can cut the conversation short, I thrust out my phone. “And another thing, I’ve received a weird email without any sender information. Is that normal?”

He smiles but doesn’t take the bait. “Sorry, but that’s really not my area. Have you talked to your security provider?”

“Not yet, but we all know how long I’ll be on hold before I get through to a real person.” *And who is my security provider, anyway?*

He nods. “Sure. The only other thing I can suggest is to see if they have an online help service. Now, I do have to get on with these connections and go to my next job.”

Dammit. “OK, well, thanks for your time.” I try not to let any sarcasm into my tone as I turn to go.

That’s when a flash reflects off the front window of my house, and something knocks me to the ground.

He might be cute, but I have my limits. “Hey, why did you do that?” I say with a glare.

“I didn’t do anything!” he says, eyes wide with alarm. “Are you OK?”

I wave off his attempts to help me stand up. A dizzy spell makes the whole world spin and black stars dance across my vision. I try to breathe deeply to stop nausea overwhelming me.

“Rightio, OK, you’d better stay here,” he tells me, panic rising in his voice. “I’ve got to get a Health and Safety accident report form. And, ah, the First-Aid Kit.” Without waiting for a reply, he dashes to his van.

A few minutes ago, I would have been delighted to have him check me over, but my overriding instinct is to get away from this unsafe box and out of the sun before I throw up all over the footpath. I stagger back inside, shut the front door, and just about make it to the couch.

Next thing I know, yet another burst of light, much brighter than the sun, sears my eyeballs. I shield my eyes with one arm, though I’m too late to stop the first shimmers of a migraine. The other arm gropes around for my water bottle, but my hand encounters ... nothing at all.

“There you are, Adam! I am *soooo* glad it finally worked – I’ve been trying to reach you for ages, and I was getting extremely worried.”

The voice effervesces into the middle of my burgeoning headache, and I remove my arm from my face to catch a glimpse of the owner.

The light is a dazzling white, suffused with a wash of blue, but I can see now, kind of, if I squint. Standing before me is someone of indeterminate gender, wearing a

floaty, floor-length white robe that would make Florence Welch envious. Their face is smooth and youthful, at least half of which is a smile filled with perfect white teeth. Their huge blue eyes are doing their best to match the wattage of the ambient light, and their hair, well, it looks like it's made of thin wires.

That has to be a wig; in fact, the whole get up must be a fancy dress costume. I've learned to take all kinds of looks in my stride over the years, and this is far from the weirdest. No, the most unnerving thing is that they're staring at me as if I'm a long-lost friend, while I'm clueless as to who they are.

"Well," they continue, "thank you for coming. We have got a lot of important work to be getting on with if we're going to solve this problem."

"Uh, what problem?" My voice is cracked and rusty, as if I haven't said a word for years. "Who are you? And what are you doing in my house?"

The strange person stares at me for an disconcerting second or two. "Oh, I see," she says at last. "The transition to my domain has been more disorientating than I expected. Do let me apologise for that, I'm sure any ill-effects will pass soon. However, given how urgent this matter is, I had to take the opportunity while I could. It was fortunate that you happened to be standing next to the node when I reached out to you this time."

Her accent confounds me at first, running from Australian to upper-class British to American in a single sentence. It takes me a few seconds to absorb the actual words.

"Where am I? What have you done to me?" I interject before her – his? – confounding tirade can continue. I wriggle a bit more upright, though I am at least five years too old to find sitting on the floor comfortable in any position. Speaking of which, I'm not certain there *is* a floor beneath me, but decide for the sake of my sanity to ignore that.

"I've been watching you for a while, and I'm convinced you're just the person I need," they say with another alarming smile.

Finally, my brain starts functioning again. I *have* seen them before; it's the face that appeared in the MagicSelect app right before the virus struck. "That was you on my computer? You broke it, and I'll probably need to buy a new one now. Are you going to comp–"

"You seem very agitated," he says. Of course he's male, now that I study him more closely. Before I have a chance to react, he leans down and looks into my eyes from about ten centimetres away.

I shuffle backwards like a demented crab. "Look, I have no idea who you are or what the hell you're up to, but–"

“Please, don’t be frightened,” he says. “I mean you no harm.” Or is it she?

I shake my head. I have more immediate issues to deal with than someone’s gender. “You say you need my help, but you haven’t explained why.”

They blink for the first time I’ve seen. “The energy, of course.”

“The ... energy?” For a millisecond I wonder if this is all some over-the-top marketing campaign by one of the new electricity suppliers that keep popping up like mushrooms.

“That’s right. It’s out of balance, and getting more so every day. Right across the city, and the tension is growing by the minute. I need your help to discover why, so that we can correct it before it explodes.”

I stare at them as my brain tries to make sense of this. Nope, it’s beyond me. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The emotional energy, of course.” They make a noise like a suppressed sigh. “Surely you’ve noticed how angry and self-centred people are becoming?”

“Not really. Well, maybe?” A tiny part of me wonders if they might have a point, but it sounds like some crackpot conspiracy theory and I shrug. “Anyway, I’ve got a lot of work of my own to do, so if you could send me back home, that’d be marvellous.” I make no attempt to hide my sarcasm.

“So you won’t help me?”

I catch a flash of disappointment in those penetrating eyes, and despite my resolve not to be caught up in their madness, I soften a little. “I don’t even know your name.”

The smooth forehead crinkles as if they’ve never considered the notion of a name before. “I am the guardian of emotions that are compassionate and harmonious, so, I suppose I would be happy with ‘Compassion’.”

“Can I shorten it to ‘Pash’?” I can’t help myself, though I make a mental note to google whether bizarre hallucinations are a precursor to insanity.

“No. But ‘Harmony’ would be acceptable,” they say in the tone of a genie granting me a magic wish.

I stand up. “No offence, but you don’t look like you could be the ‘guardian’ of anything.” Harmony is a metre and a half tall maximum, and at 1.85 I feel like a giant in comparison.

“Oh, I apologise for disappointing you.” Without any noticeable transition phase, a massive angel looms over me. Around its head a halo blazes like a golden bushfire, and wings unfurl to each side as if about to take flight. The tips of its wings would easily touch both walls of my loungeroom. “Is this better?” it booms in a voice that echoes with heavenly trumpets.

I suppose that smile is meant to be rapturous. “It makes me want to run.”

“That’s not what we need at all.” An old lady stands in front of me, resplendent in a tweed skirt-suit and lavender wash through her grey hair. Her smile suggests she’s just baked a tray of fresh lamingtons and wants to give me a hug. “Would you prefer this?”

“What? No, I—”

Now I’m staring at a fluffy lamb, far too white to have been near any Australian sheep farm. “Is this better for you?” it bleats.

“No! No, just no. These changes are making me feel worse.”

“I understand completely.” The short, wiry-haired, blue-eyed version is back. “Let’s stick with this avatar while we get on with it. But do let me know the instant you think of anything you’d like instead!”

“This one is fine, Harmony,” I say, hoping to rein in some of their more manic tendencies. “Look, I’m exhausted and busy, and I was trying to ...” What was I doing before this happened?

“I’m so glad we’re coming to an agreement. As I was saying—”

“I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“—I take care of the constructive emotional energy in this city. Love, empathy, kindness, caring, tolerance, praise – emotions that prompt behaviours which lift humans up and create a beneficial and empowering society. I make sure there is enough of the constructive energy around to counteract the destructive sort and keep everything in balance, so that everyone can live in peace and rise to their full potential. But lately, the destructive energies have been increasing to highly dangerous levels. And that’s why I need your help.”

I raise one eyebrow; or at least, I try to, although my face has never worked that way. I settle for both brows up, which probably means I look overcaffeinated. “Assuming I agree to help – which I haven’t – what am I supposed to do about it?”

“I need someone who understands the world, and understands humans, to investigate why this is happening. And the sooner, the better. As I already mentioned—”

I can’t hold back my snort of derision. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a recruitment consultant. I help people find staff to hire, that’s all. I’m not a detective! Besides, Sherlock bloody Holmes would struggle to solve a case without anything more specific than a feeling that ‘something’s wrong’. If you’re going to drag me into this, then I’ll need much more than that.”

All of this is absurd, and it's high time I stopped taking it so seriously. "If it's that important," I go on, "you ought to give me some special powers. Something practical that I can use to do whatever it is you need me to do – you know, like a superhero has." The idea is so ridiculous, it ought to stop this nonsense dead in its tracks. I can't help smirking a little.

Harmony stares at me for a moment before nodding. "That's such a good idea! Let me see ..."

Their eyes are millimetres from mine again, though neither of us has moved. This close, I notice a stirring in the blue depths that reminds me of bioluminescent jellyfish from a nature documentary. Then something – a spark, a breath, a crackle of static – leaps from them to me and hits me right between the eyes. I jump and yelp as a rush of warmth radiates from my forehead back through my brain and down my spine. It's gone in a heartbeat, but it leaves behind a weird tingling sensation.

I touch the spot on my forehead where that ... whatever it was ... landed, but I can't feel any traces of it on my skin. "What the f–"

"There!" Harmony says in a triumphant tone. "Now you have some of my power, which will enable you to give people a nudge towards more constructive thoughts and actions if you need to."

"As if I'm going to do that." I shake my head and the last of the tingling fades. "Now, before this becomes an even more ridiculous farce, please return me to where you found me."

Their forehead creases in surprise. "Does that mean you won't work with me?"

"Not after what you just did. But I am prepared to let that go as long as you send me home. Right now."

They're silent for a moment, and I think they're going to come up with yet more twaddle to delay me, but then they nod and smile. "Very well. Take care and see you soon!"

Before I can draw breath to reply, everything vanishes and I fall into sudden darkness. Wind rushes by me, and the air pressure increases until I feel I'm in the centre of a boiling maelstrom. My arms flail around but there's nothing to grab hold of to break my fall. At any moment, I expect to slam into something hard and get pulverised into an unrecognisable mess. I try to curl up into a ball, but can't even do that. Then it all stops with a nauseating lurch.

My eyes snap open. I'm spreadeagled on my couch, one foot dangling on the floor as pins and needles dance over it. I feel shattered, my whole body pummelled and twisted, muscles and tendons stretched and abused.

What happened? I've had the most bizarre dream.

I pull myself to a sitting position. I start to shake my head, but I soon think better of such an energetic movement and blink a lot instead. That hurts, too.

After a few minutes I use the back of the couch to drag my protesting body to my feet, which is when I notice the node thing outside in the street.

Mr Beardy Technician is nowhere to be seen. At least he's not banging on my door, trying to get me to fill in a bloody form.

I must have had an electric shock – I can't remember exactly where I was standing, but clearly that box is dangerous and his safety barrier is woefully inadequate. My mind is not working how it should, but I'm sure the sensation was nothing like the time I accidentally stuck my finger into a fuse box on a school camp.

All I know is that I need sleep. Lots of it.