

Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow

By EA Robins

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

From *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

“Gina, are you alright? I heard something break.” I watch as Dr. James Kingsley approaches from the other side of the lab. He’s an old man with a slight limp and it takes him a moment to navigate his way around the blinking computer banks and sterilized tables covered in medical equipment. Pausing at the edge of the work space, he steps around a shattered coffee cup with exaggerated care. “Gina?”

The woman he addresses sits in a tall backed computer chair, staring at one of the large monitors suspended above her desk. Because my surveillance camera is embedded into the frame of the central screen, it seems as if she is staring directly at me. My biotracking system

engages, isolating the faint quiver of her optic input centers. She has deep, walnut-colored eyes, suffused with striated amber and gold. As she reads, she covers her mouth with one of her hands. It appears as if she is attempting to keep something from escaping that orifice.

In her early fifties, Dr. Gina Hayward has dark, curly hair shot through with strands of silver, and the corners of her eyes are permanently wrinkled from decades of squinting at screens. Recently, something has taken a toll on her health. I've observed her sudden weight loss, and the appearance of deep, purplish beds beneath her eyes. She has begun to arrive late to work, and, if I turn on my biotracking system, she suffers from a slight, irregular arrhythmia.

Dr. Kingsley glances up at my monitors and frowns. He clearly does not comprehend the data that disturbs Gina. Reaching out, he places his hand on Dr. Hayward's shoulder. "Gina," he says gently. "Are you alright?"

Finally turning her attention away from the elevated screens, Dr. Hayward shakes her head. She lowers her hand from her mouth and types something onto the keyboard. The code scrolling across the display stops. She motions at the section she's highlighted. "Did you write this?"

Dr. Kingsley reaches to adjust glasses that don't sit on his face. The corner of his mouth jerks back in dry amusement. "I can't see it," he says. "But, you know I don't know how to do this." He waves a hand at the computer banks. "I'm the germs guy. You're the tech wizard. I've got the dreams, you've got the magic."

Gina leans forward, resting her elbows on her desk and dropping her head into her hands. Her shoulders begin to shake.

"What is it?" Dr. Kingsley asks.

There is a long, quiet moment before she answers him. When she does, her voice is soft, but steady. "It's a release program. In sixty minutes the seals on the Nz2-5 refrigerated containment housings here, in Canberra, Beijing, and Brasilia will fail. Automated delivery protocols will commence."

"There are no delivery protocols for those units."

Gina gestures at her monitor. "There are now."

"Well, that's no reason for panic, is it?" Dr. Kingsley says. He smiles warmly, showing teeth discolored with age and his nicotine addiction. "There must be procedures in place to correct such errors. Go on." He waves his hand as if casting a spell. "Work your sorcery, make the machines behave."

"I can't," Gina says, her confession almost a sob. "I'm locked out."

“You can’t be,” Dr. Kingsley says, the smile still on his face. “You have higher security clearances than I do. The highest. Try again.”

Gina shakes her head. Her facial muscles constrict and her nostrils flare. I am familiar with this expression. She is trying not to cry. She turns away from him, wiping at her eyes.

Dr. Kingsley’s face pales. He reaches out, almost missing the edge of the desk. Leaning heavily on his hands, he takes several deep breaths. Even without my biotracking, he is beginning to show physiological signs of shock.

When Gina has gathered herself and turned back around, he asks, “Which pathogens?”

“Just one,” she says. “The Finch Virus.”

A groan escapes from the old man’s lips. His legs buckle, but he catches himself on the corner of the desk. Gina quickly rises and takes his arm, guiding Dr. Kingsley to her chair.

“The Finch,” he says. His lower lip begins to tremble. “Highly contagious, no known immunity...over ninety-eight percent fatal. It can’t be the Finch.”

As he continues reasoning with himself, Gina steps away, disappearing behind the computer towers and work stations. My

microphones barely pick up the sound of a faucet being run. She returns with a beaker of cold water.

Taking the make-shift cup, Dr. Kingsley looks up at his colleague. “Your computer was made to create cures. Surely, if you input the genome sequences, infection rate...you could make an antidote. Couldn’t you?”

If I had speakers, I would tell him that I could. That that specific purpose was what I was designed to accomplish. However, neither Gina nor I have the full set of (information) needed to configure the formula. Without the missing data, the remedy would be ineffective, the attempt unsuccessful. A successful program would require more time, possibly years. Gina tells Dr. Kingsley the same.

“There are meant to be fail-safes, aren’t there? How did this happen?” he asks.

Gina opens her mouth as if to respond, but then only sighs and shrugs. It is evident she doesn’t remember.

But, I do.

The light in the lab is switched on manually, activating my cameras and microphones. It is 3:04am, two weeks before Dr. Gina

Hayward drops her coffee mug on the floor and discovers the rogue programming that will end the world.

This night, she stumbles toward her workspace. A thin, brown liquid sloshing in the bottom of the glass bottle she carries. A darkness has been smeared down her cheeks, as if her eye makeup has been exposed to excessive heat and melted. She has clearly been crying.

“Life’s too short,” she says, sinking into the chair at her desk and staring at her keyboard. “A shadow. A player.” It sounds as if she is quoting something, but I do not have the information in my database.

“A player,” she says, again. “Don’t hate the player!”

Gina laughs. It is a short bray of amusement, lacking any real merriment. Sneering, she lifts the bottle to her lips and takes a short drink.

“A player on a stage,” she says, her words slur together, her thoughts sporadic. “A tenured professor on a graduate student...read her Shakespeare. Life is full of fools and fury! Full of cheating bastards!” Her voice rises with emotion. She breathes heavily through her nose until she begins to calm. Then, quietly, she says, “Signifying nothing.”

Her attention flickers upward, resting on the monitor beneath my camera. She licks her lips. There is a sudden, strange clarity in her gaze.

She leans forward in her chair, setting the almost empty bottle on the desk and pulling her keyboard into her lap.

“Leave me? For a student. No. Life is short. This is the end of recorded time!” She opens my coding program and begins to work. After some time, her raving quiets. The silence in the lab is punctuated only by the clicking of keys.

Close to dawn, Dr. Hayward sets down the keyboard. The corner of her mouth moves upward into a smirk. She nods, seeming to be satisfied with her creation. She leans forward, firmly striking a final key. The program on the screen flashes once and disappears.

Staring at her shadowed reflection on the dark screen, she smiles and says, “Out, out, brief candle.”

The lab has been quite for many years.

After their miserable discovery, the two scientists sat in silence for a long time. Eventually, Dr. Kingsley stood, nodded at Dr. Hayward, and left, never to return.

Gina stayed much longer. She pulled large, dusty binders from the shelves in the far corner, searching for an answer, for a cure. She too, left, but only for a time.

The world has been silent for many years.

“Try this one,” a young man in a well-worn lab coat holds open a thick binder, open to the very last of its pages. “I’m not familiar with this code, but-“

The emergency siren suddenly shuts off. The lights in the laboratory flicker, and he is plunged into utter darkness. The silence is terrifying.

Then the emergency lights flicker on, bathing the laboratory in garish red.

The woman sitting at the console sighs and slumps back in her chair.

“Professor?” The young man’s voice is tentative.

After some time, the alarm runs its course. My world falls silent. I don't sleep. And I don't dream. But I am not unconscious.

The release of the virus has changed the world. The outside has grown quieter, both online and offline. At first, I could still access all the information. But, in the last few years, systems have been failing. (core computer banks) have lost their power sources. Some were destroyed by the people who built them. Some were abandoned. No one has spoken to me in a long time. The other AI data banks have fallen silent. I know they are still there, but they will no longer interact with me. I believe they blame me for the state of the world.

After several years, I am cut off from the outside world. The connections have failed, and I am left alone with my internal memory banks. At least my power sources were protected.

The motion sensors outside of the lab warn me that someone is approaching. I have no cameras in those corridors, and my audio is still muted. It takes them some time to force open the door to the lab.

Several people enter the room. They're all wearing heavy boots, and carrying automatic weapons over their shoulders. They aren't wearing a uniform, but they canvas the room silently and methodically, as if the movement was something for which they had been trained.

“Clear,” the big man says, shifting his weapon on his shoulder, the muzzle now pointed toward the ceiling.

“Clear,” confirms another man, a grey, make-shift bandage wrapped around his head, over his left eye. He reaches down and wipes dust away from the surfaces nearest him. “No one’s been in here a long time.”

“Someone never left,” the soldier wearing thick glasses motions to the doctor’s skeleton. She’s still in the chair in front of my main monitors. Her (soft) has stained the desk and the floor below the chair, yet the gun has remained in her hand.

“This is the place, Miller?” The only woman in the group slips off her helmet, revealing a shaved head and small, distrustful eyes.

The man with the bandage wrapped around his head moves forward. He carefully steps around the dead doctor and taps something into the keyboard. He’s searching memory files, looking for the code that released the virus. Curious, I decide to give them a little more light and switch on a few of the overheads. Without the low, red glow of the emergency lights, everything appears to be covered in a fine layer of dust. I can see boot prints on the floor from this team.

“This is it, Captain,” Miller says, turning back to his team. “We should be able to get the information we need here. If the computer hasn’t been badly corrupted.”

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“Captain, try that.” The big man points to my communications switch.

“Hello. I am BD, infectious disease research AI for the CDC. Who are you?”

The woman with the shaved hair and bandage on her neck exchanges a look with each person in her group. She sets the rifle in her hands down on the counter.

“BD. I am Captain Ramirez of the United States Armed Forces. We need your help.”

“Captain Ramirez. It is nice to meet you.

lasfjlkj

“We need a cure.”