Reverse English

Keith Laumer

"For one million dollars in cold cash," Dyson said, "I'll save your necks."

"That's preposterous," the Chief of Staff said in a voice thick with panic. "I don't care what kind of reputation you have as a cybernetics Fixit man! What do you know of military computer theory? Particularly the theory of ATTAC II?"

Dyson lit a match with his thumbnail and smiled through the smoke.

"I know you've built the most powerful mechanical brain on Earth, and linked it to enough firepower to blow us all off the planet. And I know you've loused up the programming so she's ready to let it all rip if anybody says the wrong word in her hearing."

"I say evacuate the complex and pinpoint her with a megatonner," a white-faced Air Force general said in a voice that was clipped to the cuticle.

"Insanity," the Senior Cybernetician said. "She'd pick it up coming in and retaliate in the only way she knows."

"And we can't cut power to her; she won't let us—"

"Time's a-wasting, gentlemen," Dyson said casually. "What do your theories say about how long it will be before she takes umbrage at an off-course airliner or a high-flying goose and starts the H-heads streaking over the Pole?"

"How did you know—" the Chief of Staff started.

"Minutes," the Senior Cybernetician said. "And not many of them."

"The basic problem," Dyson said in a tone suddenly harsh, "is that ATTAC made a number of logical but unexpected correlations among the initial data you fed her, on the basis of which she now interprets any attempt to muzzle her as a hostile act, correct?"

"That's a gross oversimplification!"

"But essentially true," the SC said. "When I tried to cancel a section of her program, she almost called a Condition Red before I could abort."

"So the trick is," Dyson said, "to feed her an instruction that will disarm her at a stroke, before she can react, eh?"

"If we try—and *don't* pull her teeth—then we've had it," the British observer said. "She'll hit back with everything she has."

"And if we don't try, it's only a matter of time."

"We have just the one chance—but for God's sake, who's going to take the risk? Just one wrong word—"

"I will," Dyson said, relaxed again. "As soon as I see the million."

"What makes you think I'd let you try?" the Chief of Staff snapped.

"Do you want to try yourself, General?"

In the silence, the assembled heavyweights looked at each other.

"Let him try," the Chief of Staff said.

* * *

The corridor was as silent as Death Row, and with the same lighting. The Senior Cybernetician passed Dyson through the guard post, left him alone in the Programming Chamber. Dyson looked up at the high panels, lit like a city at night.

"Good morning, ATTAC II," he said. "I have an instruction for you."

"Ready to receive," ATTAC II said in a mellow contralto.

Dyson said six words. Lights winked across the panels, faster and faster. Red lights came on, flickering; green and amber blinked and winked in patterns like scurrying mice. The entire array blazed up simultaneously, and went out. A high, chattering whine came from behind the black plastic consoles, accompanied by a wisp of smoke.

Dyson let out a long breath and spoke into the hand phone:

"You can come in now. She's out like a light."

* * *

The man from Treasury handed over the long, green U.S. check.

"All right, no more stalling," the Chief of Staff said. "How did you do it?"

"You knew nothing about ATTAC's programming; you couldn't have!" the Senior Cybernetician said. "How in the name of Heaven did you know what to do?"

"Easy," Dyson said. "I presented her with a dilemma she couldn't solve."

"In six words? You, an amateur, broke down an intellect ten orders of magnitude above your own? How, man? How?"

"I said: 'Reverse all instructions—including this one.'"