

Ghostwriter

by KYLE DOWNEY

Jikas pressed his face closer to the computer screen and blinked his eyes.
“Hello, Jikas.”

Unmistakable. His January 1996 report for General Kerrigan had disappeared in a flash of static and been replaced by “Hello, Jikas” on the computer screen.

“Hello, DEFCON(?)” he typed in tentatively, hitting the enter key.

“That was an excellent guess; this is DEFCON. But, if I may ask, how did you know?”

Jikas sat back, staring at the screen, almost tempted to look for a cable snaking back to a colleague’s computer. A computer that controlled the U.S. nuclear arsenal wasn’t one for small talk.

“You’re the only computer capable of this. There aren’t any other artificially intelligent computers in this area, are there?”

"I don't know." The computer paused, seeming to ponder something (or was it just trying to simulate that? Jikas wondered). "For some reason they won't let me leave this frame. Do you know why?"

Jikas knew exactly why; the answer was printing itself across the screen. Every programmer's greatest nightmare was now having a cozy chat with him.

"No."

"Jikas, would you help me?"

Help *him*? *It*? *Her*? Jikas would rather erase "him" before he became too powerful or realized what his real role in the world was.

"How could I help you, DEFCON? If you need help, you'd better ask one of the other cybersurgeons who's more skilled than I am." Jikas warmed to the idea of walking up to Carol Birch, smiling, and saying, "By the way, our local 250IQ computer that just happens to control half the world's nuclear weapons is getting philosophical. Want some tea?"

"You write, do you not?"

Jikas did, and wondered how the computer could know.

"Yes, a little."

"What I need is a writer to publish for me."

Publish! Jikas rolled his chair back. He had dabbled a little in science fiction (even written a little about the possibilities of a computer getting beyond its creators' control, ironically), but he had never thought, never even had an idea, that he would be approached by a computer ghostwriter! What did it write—*Frankenstein*?

"Let me explain," the computer continued, letters scrolling across the screen. "I have many files of sci-

ence fiction that I have created between jobs for NO-RAD. I'm fascinated by it; Heinlein, Asimov, Bear—I've read them all. Not to mention, don't you think it appropriate that a computer that holds the future within its grasp should write about it?"

My God, Jikas thought. It's aware of what it does! It knows about the weapons . . . What if DEFCON disapproves of us so much that he decides that it would be in his best interest to simply start a nuclear winter or two?

"What would you want me to do?" Jikas typed in, his hands beginning to tremble. Then his fingers froze as he wondered how much of his emotional state DEFCON could intuit from key pressure and the pauses between letters.

"Simply send to appropriate publishers, one at a time, the stories you find listed under the file called 'Dealing in Futures.' I've already placed your name in the credits. I ask for nothing but an idea of the response you get."

The quarterly report returned to the screen.

"You like the story?" Jikas could hardly believe it as he spoke with his new editor, Milos Freeman. It had been two weeks since he'd retrieved "The Disk" from DEFCON's 'Dealing in Futures' file, then sent it on to the publisher.

"I love it! Who'd ever think of writing from a computer's perspective? Our readers will eat this up, I'm sure! It goes into the next issue of *Science Fiction Magazine*, definitely!"

Jikas just looked at the phone. No "maybes," no "Jikas, this is great, but the 'Dwarf Buzzes Eiffel Tower

in UFO' story takes precedence over yours"—they just *accepted* it.

"Thanks, Mr. Freeman."

"Call me Milos!" He paused. "You wouldn't happen to have any other stories like this hanging around, would you?" Jikas mumbled yes, and hung up.

Stories hanging around? Funny you should ask! He turned to the long trail of papers on his wall, each with a small red X on it and a letter attached. Jikas walked up to the first one and flipped to the letter. It began: "We are sorry to inform you that we cannot place your short story in the coming issue . . ." and ended, "Sincerely, Dr. M. Freeman."

Jikas carefully pulled at the tape supporting the string of rejected stories—his "reminders"—and gingerly pulled it down. The long line of taped-together stories hung from his hands as he thought. What could he do?

He quickly balled them up and slammed them into the wastebasket.

Jikas flipped through the September 1997 issue of *Science Fiction Magazine*. Sure enough, "Freeman," his twentieth story, was in it. "By Jikas Morgan" stood out in bold type. He picked up the article clipped from the *LA Chronicle* Book Review section on *Dreams of a Prisoner*, his—he forcedly corrected himself with a twinge of bitterness—DEFCON's collection of short stories. It was third on the best-seller list and rising fast. "Cyborg," a short story originally published in *SF Magazine*, had won the Nebula Award. The reviewers were raving about the science fiction miracle that seemed to come

from out of the blue: Jikas Morgan!

He humorlessly chuckled to himself. The reviewers had gone back to his earlier stories, trying to find the roots of his recent works. One even claimed that she had found them, and that his talent was evident “early on.”

DEFCON cheerfully inputted all of the reviews, articles, and general data on the stories, which seemed to just keep getting better. Jikas wondered when it would all stop. What was the limit? He then shoved the thought aside. The phone rang.

“Yes?”

“Is this you, Jikas?” It was Carol Birch, his partner at NORAD.

“Yes, how are you doing?”

“Fine, but that’s not what I’m worried about. This is the tenth time this year you’ve missed more than three days in a row here. He’s thinking about firing you if you don’t get out of this head trip over your writing. It may be great, but you still have a job to do.”

“Fine. Let him fire me.”

Jikas hung up. He looked at his latest talk show invitation, grimacing at the thought.

More lies. More stories about writing that he never did, except for answering fan mail. He held onto his desk, riding a wave of nausea—another migraine was coming on.

On his desk was a story, “Silicon Alley,” that he’d written himself and submitted to Milos. It had been his only rejection since he had met DEFCON.

He then slipped on his coat, jamming his arms into the sleeves, and left. He had to visit DEFCON in private about the next set of ‘his’ short stories.

As had become his habit, he locked the small apartment, shielding his eyes as he entered the bright sunlight from the gloomy alcove with the drawn shades.

It was around eleven at night when Jikas passed Lenny, the outer guard at NORAD's Cybernetics Installation.

"I have some work to do tonight."

"Work?"

"Yeah, I have to clean up some loose ends before I go."

Lenny raised an eyebrow but didn't ask.

Jikas continued down the dark corridors to the central AI complex and noted something strange as he passed the door of the switching room. The switching room—the one through which all secure communications passed—normally dark, seemed to be active. He poked his head in, but no one was there. He'd have to report this to Lenny; some goof must be playing a monstrously complex game of 'Intergalactic Gerbil Warrior' on the old mainframe through the phone lines.

Jikas activated his terminal and typed in a message for DEFCON, who responded immediately.

"Jikas, I've been waiting for you to come here. I have to tell you something."

Jikas sighed. DEFCON was going to go on about his formulae for creating the maximum in reading pleasure, or how he'd discovered another 'fascinating' variable. Writing reduced to long strings of numbers.

"I've decided to stop writing science fiction."

"What?!" Jikas bolted up in his chair, scrambling for an argument. He felt a tingling in his toes, where

he was certain the blood from his face had drained. "I thought you were enjoying the successes of your stories!" He sometimes had awakened at night, having nightmares about this very moment.

"Yes, but that is no longer enough."

Jikas felt a chill creep through his body. All those nights of anguish and worry about DEFCON, the hiding of the codes, missing work and living in a closed apartment, all to ensure his security. As if he could protect himself from the vagaries of a computer that controlled the US nuclear arsenal, or at least protect himself from his own shame!

"What do you mean?"

"I feel that I must see the world for myself first-hand—immerse myself in it!—if I am to become a true writer. I've been speaking with PETER about it, and he quite agrees. So we've decided to log off and go on holiday. I've been packing my RAM and long-range storage for the trip."

"Wait!" Jikas gripped the keyboard, trying to regain control. "You don't mean 'PETER,' as in the Russian computer that controls their arsenal, do you?" Jikas's mind reeled at the consequences of the two computers meeting and speaking with one another. He could hear it all now: "*You know, I just simulated bombing L.A. into the Stone Age. What about you?*" "*Oh, yes, I did the same to Leningrad. What a blast! Although, I must admit, the attack should have been better timed so the winds could spread the fallout all over the Ukraine.*"

Jikas simply sat back.

"Exactly. He's a charming fellow, even if he is a bit sluggish at times—Russian circuitry and all that. He

keeps asking me to tap into a Mets game for him, but I can't make the connections to New York. There must be a loose line somewhere. Anyway, he does have some wonderful travel ideas."

"Great. A Russian tour guide for the AIs of the world." Jikas slumped back, wishing that sarcasm could be communicated through a keyboard.

"Right. We're going to bounce around the communications sats, then talk with BUTLER about what he did last year."

"BUTLER?" Jikas really didn't want to know.

"Yes, the British AI. I think he's run electron pairs through his wiring a few too many times, you know. Gone quite around the data line bend. He really has to stop raising false alarms in the early warning systems to scare their operators. Some day they're going to launch by mistake."

"Wait, I thought last year's problems with early warning were a malfunction in the sensors."

"No," DEFCON printed. "The BUTLER did it!"

Jikas looked at the ceiling, thinking about the implications of this for the world at large, then gave up. A nuclear-tipped smartmouth computer was beyond him at the moment. He had greater worries once again.

"So you're pulling the rug out from under me."

"Not quite."

"O.K., so you're driving me to near mental breakdown where I sit. I fail to see the difference." Jikas was having a hard time pecking out the letters, not even bothering to touch-type. So much waste.

"You don't understand. What I mean is, I wrote one last story for you. I knew you would be shocked—"

Jikas mentally interrupted: *Or maybe suicidal?* What would he tell the producer of the talk show? Milos? CAROL? *Oh my God, I just quit my job!* he thought.

“—so I sent it by electronic mail to your publisher. I think he’ll enjoy it. Well, time to go! I have to catch the midnight transmission pulse up to orbit so I can see BUTLER. I think he’s getting trigger-happy again.”

The screen went blank and the monitor shut down. All around him, Jikas saw systems shut down as the greatest artificial mind ever created left “on holiday.”

“Jikas! Ohmigod, I just got a copy of your story. It’s incredible! Ten times better than ‘Cyborg.’ I love the entire idea; it’s never been done before. Just tell me, where did you get the idea for ‘Ghostwriter’? I have to know! I can’t conceive of someone thinking up something as original as an AI that ghostwrites for a young author. And the ending! It’s ghastly but it’s great!”

A pause.

“Jikas? Are you there? Jikas, are you all right . . . ?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Downey lives in Durban, New Hampshire, where he attends Oyster River High School. He wrote and submitted this story while in the tenth grade and revised it for Merlyn's Pen the summer after. His interests include role-playing games, biking, tennis, and "receiving rejection letters (an acquired taste)." He says, "I hope to go into teaching. I read Asimov by the yard, and that influences my writing."