

Chapter 2 - Why I Work Alone

Columns of white light spread into the distance. It was as though Marcus had just stepped into an infinite library. Each of the rows of light towered above him, with small passageways between sections. Most of the information databases had the same virtualisation. By looking at it from above, it appeared like a small city with distinct streets and blocks. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you could spend a lifetime searching with no luck. The other incredibly disconcerting thing about servers was how eerily quiet they were. The silence was absolute, which made the concept of the Purgers and Purifiers sneaking up behind you, that much more terrifying.

Colour Visualisation Activating...

Marcus always enjoyed this part the most.

A small visor appeared in front of his face as he activated his visualisation software. It was by far his favourite part of being a Scraper. The city of light all around him shimmered and changed to reflect the different files they contained. Multiple hues washed across the landscape, bathing the towers of light in a vibrant assortment of colour. It felt like it transported him to a whole alternative world, one where he mattered.

Hawk Schematics Activating...

Marcus was glad his mentor didn't give him any grief over his creative naming conventions. The Hawk Schematic was one of his own creations and allowed him to see his colour coded landscape with a top-down view. It appeared at the edge of his visor and showed any red zones. Normally, Marcus wouldn't activate that software because he'd be scraping alone and knew he wouldn't be making any rookie errors.

He looked at the map apprehensively and wanted to curse when he saw a small pink spot appear close to his location. Marcus classified a 'red zone' as stupid human behaviour. If a scraper's pattern became predictable, the AI would catch them. That the colour was pink meant that the scraper was sloppy as opposed to being useless.

DEP Activating...

This program was one that Marcus really liked but couldn't claim credit for. It was his mentor that had shared this handy piece of technology. The DEP was short for Data Enrichment Ping. With it, Marcus could search specifically for the data he needed by sharing a small piece of the data he possessed. The best part about it was that it mimicked the AI's method.

After a few minutes of sending out the DEP signal, Marcus' data came back with a series of matches. One of his strict policies as a Scraper was that he never looked at the information or data that he collected. Years of scraping had given him a skewed belief that if he didn't know who his targets were, he wouldn't feel bad.

All around him, colours shifted and changed. Small segments of bright blue light littered his environment, signalling his bounty. Wasting no more time, Marcus started his process. His visor showed him his movement speed, which he controlled by walking deliberately in jagged lines, bouncing against each of the walls of light. As he contacted the light, Marcus would randomly select a file and delete it. After a few minutes of doing this, he looked at his visor to see that no red zones were appearing around him. He couldn't help but notice that the pink hue from a few 'streets' away was getting darker.

When he reached the blue nodes of data, Marcus transferred the files into his own storage whilst deleting and inspecting the other files around it. Deleting files mimicked the AI behaviour and made his actions less suspicious within the server.

Bot Disguise Active...

Even though the cloaking software was fantastic, it wouldn't fool artificial intelligence. His mentor had created a piece of spoofing software that practically rendered him incognito. It took the information from the server entrance key and allowed him to roam the server as if he belonged there. Best of all, it deleted all of his actions and logs after he left the server. It was probably the most important piece of kit that kept him out of prison.

Marcus patiently navigated towards a large deposit of blue data. When he got there, he had to resist the temptation to transfer all of it to his private drives. He'd need to continue on and not get greedy. When he finally moved on, he waited for his visor to refresh.

Data Enrichment: 4%

The Scraper sighed inwardly. If he had stayed at that clump of data, he might have been able to triple that percentage. Normally, a successful scrape would be above forty percent. Marcus felt that this one was different. The sheer amount of blue data that surrounded him made him curious about the identity of this server. Curiosity for Scrapers was like a death sentence, which is why Marcus didn't ask questions about the data or the servers. He couldn't help but wonder, though.

Suddenly, a noise echoed out from one of the nearby stacks of data. Marcus gritted his teeth as he continued his program-like pattern. The sound had almost broken him out of his rhythm, which could have been a disaster. If an AI detects an abnormality, they look at all of your actions until that moment. Irregularities would be like a death sentence. Some might call Marcus overly cautious, but it had kept him alive until now.

He looked at his visor to see what had happened and immediately felt dread. The entire column of data beside him was angrily pulsating in red. All of his instincts told him he needed to get out of there immediately before the AI shut down that whole segment of the database to investigate. That was the problem. If he made any sudden or erratic movements, he'd be at risk of being compromised.

The noise shouted out again, and this time Marcus could clearly hear the words. What shocked him most was that it wasn't a cry for help, nor was it any form of dismay. The person sounded... delighted?

"MEL! Come here! Look at the profile I found!"

Marcus concentrated on keeping his pattern but couldn't help but shake his head at the idiocy of the Scraper. The voice belonged to Sneer, which meant that Sly's name was apparently Mel. Worse than that, if Sneer was going through files individually... it meant he was going way too slow. The AI would catch him in no time.

"Where are you, Mel?! You've got to see this, it's a fucking A-Class!"

Sneer exclaimed in genuine joy, as though he had won the lottery.

Marcus whirled around at those words and completely broke his pattern.

He activated the voice channel that they had used in the private server. Sneer was still logged into it, which is how Marcus could hear him clearly.

"Listen to me carefully. You need to delete that file, right now!"

Marcus spoke quickly and quietly, hoping that he'd be able to convince the Scraper.

Unfortunately, Sneer reacted like every single Scraper that thought they hit the jackpot.

"Fuck off, I wasn't talking to you. I'm not leaving this here for you if that's what-."

Marcus cut him off with a harsh whisper as he changed course to go towards the Scraper.

"It's a trap! It's illegal to dump S-Class or A-Class profiles. There's privacy laws specifically made for them. I'm telling you, that profile is not real. You need to delete it!"

As Marcus came around the corner, he saw Sneer in the distance. There was no sign of his accomplice, Mel. He quickly checked the Hawk Schematics to see if they were appearing on the top-down map, but there was no sign of them.

Sneer looked confused as he kept his hand pressed against the wall of data. He had the file open in front of him.

Marcus walked towards him, resuming his pattern as a force of habit.

"If you took the file, you have time. You can delete it."

Taking steady steps, Marcus tried to reassure Sneer who now looked visibly panicked.

"If you're just viewing it, disengage and quickly look at a different profile. You'll be fine."

A segment of Marcus' visor suddenly lit up with a series of flashing dots converging on Sneer's location. He knew without looking that it was the AI zoning in on their prey.

Marcus heard his mentor's voice in his head, telling him to look after himself and complete the job. A part of him wanted to turn around and do just that. He could salvage this scrape and get out while they tackled Sneer.

Looking down the aisle, Marcus saw Sneer's face. Gone was any semblance of his nickname. All that remained was a terrified man who was gaping in horror at the unseen dangers that were approaching.

"I... I think you're right. It says they're coming."

Sneer panicked as he looked at Marcus. It was only when Marcus looked at his earnest expression that he realised. Sneer didn't have a cloak or an avatar...

Without hesitating, Marcus activated a subroutine to break through Sneer's setup. The panicked Scraper practically yelped as it occurred, but before he could react, a protective cloaking program covered his body. Marcus took all of his files and actively started deleting them, pulling from each side of the data aisles indiscriminately and then disposing of the files.

Marcus watched as the cloaking program took effect on Sneer. Hopefully, the dumping of vast amounts of files would make the AI see Sneer's behaviour as a glitch or a minor bug. It was highly unlikely, but at least he had a small layer of protection around him.

Whatever way Marcus expected Sneer to react, laughter certainly wasn't it.

"Oh wow, now this is unexpected. I genuinely thought you'd run."

Marcus noticed that the pitch of his voice was completely different too. As the cloak distorted Sneer's appearance, Marcus glimpsed a completely different person smiling back at him.

The Scraper froze for a moment, not exactly sure what he had just witnessed. Did Sneer have a highly advanced avatar equipped this whole time to mask their actual identity? If so, why deactivate it and reveal himself now of all times. His demeanour had also completely changed. There was no sign of anxiety or fear in him.

"Lets see how you manage this next part."

Sneer remarked before disappearing completely from sight.

Marcus had no time to react as his visor flashed frantically in warning. A host of Purifiers and Purgers were en route to his location. He had never been in this situation before. He had always been careful and avoided making mistakes. A part of him felt like he should be angry or annoyed at the situation, but much to his surprise... he was excited.

The Scraper looked at the map on his visor and estimated that he had less than half a minute before they closed in on him. His heart was pounding as he considered his options. Blending in didn't seem like it was going to work anymore, and none of his camouflage would be sophisticated enough to withstand an AI's scrutiny. It left him with just one option.

Knight Mode Activating...

Marcus activated a profile that he never imagined he'd get to use in a server. It comprised all of his own programs, designed to fight artificial intelligence systems. As his visor turned red, Marcus looked behind him to see an enormous tentacle monster speeding towards him. Each tentacle latched onto a column of light, pulling itself forward with the momentum and looking all the more horrifying.

Instead of running away from the AI, Marcus instead ran towards it. His Knight Mode preset consisted of an entire catalogue of untested software. He knew exactly which one he needed to use first.

Chaos.

The moment the program activated, it threw all subterfuge out the window. Marcus' body duplicated at high speed. Each of the replications attacked the nearest data column with no apparent logic. Each of the tentacles swung down to apprehend the multitude of duplicates, picking up and inspecting half a dozen within the blink of an eye.

Marcus waited until the monster had almost thirty copies in its grasp before activating his next gambit.

Overload.

At the moment that the Purifier attempted to delete the clones, Marcus activated his Overload program. It made every one of his copies attack the Purifier's defences. Much like how he had forced his way past Sneer's defences, Marcus was attempting to do the same with the AI.

They built Purifiers and Purgers for offence, not defence... which was why the AI had no proper method for blocking his assault.

Marcus ran past the Purifier, his body still splitting into multiples as he went. He had to be careful about how many clones he created. While their purpose was simple and they were only equipped with basic functions, they still took up processing power on his VR Rig. All his money went into maintaining and improving his Rig, and today he was finally putting that investment to the test.

It was only a few seconds before two more Purifiers entered the fray. They were heading directly towards one of his clones. He was quite proud that his creation was proving so effective against the AI.

His visor flashed blue for a second, and Marcus decided to avail of the pandemonium. If he was going to be running around at full speed instead of sneaking, he might as well do his job too. He couldn't order his duplicates to help him gather the files as they were scripted to cause chaos. So instead, Marcus ran from column to column, gathering as much as he could while the clones wreaked havoc.

Data Enrichment: 64%

Marcus just shook his head at the figure. He never imagined he would get such a high number in such an unorthodox scrape. He genuinely wondered what his mentor would say if he saw what was happening right now.

As he moved between the data points, Marcus eventually spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. It was neither a Purifier nor a Purger, but had a similar frame and aura. It moved silently through the columns and Marcus could only describe it as an ominous floating ball.

Knowing nothing about it, Marcus reactivated his cloak and moved to one side. He'd see what happened when this new entity apprehended one of his clones. As if he had just summoned one of them, a clone appeared out of one aisle and rushed in front of the large ball creature. For a split second, Marcus thought he overreacted, but the beam of light that shot straight through his clone like a laser gave him pause.

"Maybe it's time to log out."

Marcus muttered quietly as he watched the looming ball float down a different aisle of data. Much to his surprise, a voice answered him on the private channel. It was the same voice he heard when Sneer disappeared.

"I think that would be a wise decision, Marcus."