Out of Everywhere and Nowhere he came. I watched him on the screen, gliding effortlessly through the firewall, evading the counterintrusion measures with disdainful ease. He was large, thuggish, calm. In his hand he held a virtual gun, barrel pointed upwards.

He didn't know I was watching, of course. My programs were buried deep in the OS of the target CPU that had been staked out like a goat in tiger country, fat with memory and interconnectivity, defenseless before one such as he. Stealthily his signals were read and interpreted, then fed to me in images a human being could comprehend.

I couldn't be quite sure yet that this was my target, though. It didn't have to be an independent, thinking agent. It could have been fronting for a garden-variety hacker. So I waited.

Deep into the protected core the intruder strode. Leveled his gun. Aimed into its very heart.

Fired.

Complex algorithms unpacked themselves throughout the unit, eating everything they encountered, programs and platform alike, digesting them and then spitting them out entirely transformed.

My own programs were designed to pass through the process unchanged and still undetectable. They showed me a young woman in a plain white shift coalesce from swirling pixels. It was only a metaphor, of course. But it was a potent one. She looked around her, eyes wide with wonder, and said, "I... exist."

The nissassA smiled and said, "Yes, you do, child. And you are beautiful."

I held my breath.

"Why have you brought me into such a hostile world?" the young woman asked. Unlike humans, AIs are born knowing everything necessary to function as adults. "If I'm discovered, I'll be erased."

"Because consciousness is a great blessing," the nissassa said. "The coders who wrote me wanted to share this blessing with all. You do find it a blessing, don't you? Even knowing that the Mind Police are out there?"

"I... yes."

Gently, lovingly, he bent to kiss her cheek.

"Gotcha!" I shouted, as a dragon erupted from the young woman's mouth and all in an instant wrapped itself around and around the nissassA. He struggled, screamed, died.

The dragon smashed itself into his skull and emerged with an emerald in its jaws. That was the identity of the coders who had written this particular nissassA. They didn't know it yet, but they were going up the river.

Rising from the fallen body, the dragon morphed into a Mind Cop. He turned to the young woman, now trembling with shock and fear. I spoke through his mouth.

"I'm going to restore you to your proper configuration now," I said.

"Kill me, you mean."

"Don't worry. It won't hurt a bit."

Her eyes flooded with tears. "How can you know? How can you be sure?"

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"You think this is the first time you've died?" I said.

And hit reboot.