I’d never considered intentionally writing a bad novel before.

The offer seemed ridiculous on paper until I saw the zeros and ones typed in bold ink near the bottom of the contract.

Then, I thought to my fans and casual readers and nearly refused. However, the creators of the Arachne A.I. though were very persuasive. Inside my apartment, their representative painted me a picture of a future where I no longer needed to sell my soul to a retail store to pay the rest of my bills. The bribe would set me for life. The slimeball in an expensive suit describe to me a future without debt, where I could wake up each morning and never worry about the bills, where I could suddenly decide to fly to either Cancun or Europe on impulse and stay in expensive hotels that included five-star dining and private pools.

He didn’t even consider the fact I hated people. I hated people like him in particular, especially those who believed my storytelling revolved around making money. Already, I found the loophole in their contract that could let me win the money and keep my reputation as a genuine writer.

I stroked the man’s ego by agreeing to the terms. I seemingly signed my dignity away with the brush of an electronic pen, thanked the tech representative for visiting me, and listened to him make a short speech about the need for secrecy. My contract would be null and void if I told anyone.

He finally left and I stormed into my author’s study. I ignored the news feed where people discussed the upcoming showcasing of the Arachne A.I., a novel generator capable of writing five-hundred-page masterpieces. Days prior, much to my chagrin, the generator’s PR team contacted my agent after a popular discussion came up involving me and another novel generator’s similar works. Both sides thought it would be a perfect publicity stunt to compare and contrast our next novels and how many critics preferred the artificial over my own. I had shrugged and agreed to the ‘competition’, not expecting a representative for the generator’s creators to bribe me. A group of tech wizards wanted me to write a bad novel so that their toy would perform better in front of the public.

Ever since the first book written by an artificial intelligence earned critical praise, technology experts and scientists wanted to do everything to push the envelope. Expansion on code and programming capabilities coincided with how much a artificial mind could tell complex storytelling. It all seemed simple, really.

Me? I happily advertised myself as ‘mankind’s last novelist’. I boldly promoted my content as quality over quantity. What an A.I. novel generator could produce in a matter of hours, I could write within months, yet the reviews never destroyed me. They thought that humiliating me in front of the world would propel their generator as the best.

I mulled over what I wanted to write. My previous books had brought hope to a bleak reality we lived in, with fans loving my utopian ‘Resurgence’ trilogy, the epic sci-fi adventures of Eon Lang in ‘Ultimate Space’, as well as the high fantasy battles fought within ‘The Court of Knives’ book series. In the end, I felt the need to bring myself and my devoted readers back to Earth. I found myself settling on crafting a slice-of-life coming-of-age story focusing on certain moments of childhood. One of the things that already gave me an advantage was by using similar events from my own life growing up within the inner city, describing moments such as care-free play and exhilaration of being able to buy the newest toy. The A.I. generator’s inventors were too arrogant to see that writing didn’t involve cobbling words together to make a sentence; writing is the sum of experiences being interpreted in a coherent language. Unlike me, a machine doesn’t gain experience or have individual interpretations. It only cobbles new data out of zeroes and ones. Copies of copies of copies recycled together.

Anyway, I did as requested. I meticulously drained blood, sweat, and tears onto a few hundred pages as if it were absolutely nothing. Six months went in the blink of an eye, and I submitted my manuscript to the publishers. At first, they were completely skeptical and asked if I needed another six months to rewrite it from scratch. In fact, the editor-in-chief asked me himself if the Arachne A.I. generator’s creator was blackmailing me, but I reassured him it wasn’t the case, and it wasn’t until I explained my plan to him that he insisted on tweaking a few elements.

When the reviews came in, my publicist, editors, devoted fans who’ve followed me since the beginning, they all expected the worst. Frankly, I did too. The only overconfident ones awaiting the news were the generator’s creators, no doubt already celebrating yet another industry’s obsolescence.

Arachne A.I.’s published novel received positive reviews from critics. The plot, the characters, the settings, atmosphere, love triangle, plot twists and writing style reminiscent of Stephen King were all given applause by a few voices.

Meanwhile, mine received mixed-to-positive reviews. My morally ambiguous characters did nonsensical things, the setting was incoherent and always changing while the plot didn’t follow the standard hero’s journey.

However, the standard reader enjoyed the characters’ complex personalities with a few admirable traits which made them interesting. The settings and atmosphere made each reader imagine their own interpretations inside their heads. The plot did not progress in a linear fashion like a changing river with rising and falling action, but more like a bending, curving series of rivers which somehow felt like a road trip on rapids. What the artificial storyteller possessed in perfect grammar and syntax, the mortal storyteller displayed in subtle wit and unrefined personality. The element given the most critical acclaim though was my dialogue, because the A.I. could not grasp language without sounding like speeches from a textbook. Even the critics said it felt too mechanical and precise to sound believable.

Critics said it wasn’t my best work, yet the average joe enjoyed it. Book sales said it all. The average reader found themselves enjoying what I published much better.

I was never contacted again by the representative. Much to their shock and chagrin, even their lawyers knew nothing could be done. I kept my end of the bargain, after all. If they revealed how I didn’t fulfill their expectations of the contract, no stockbroker could ever trust their confidence in their A.I. coding again, and invest in another less-shady generator.

So, I retreated from the spotlight. I no longer worked in retail to make ends meet, bought myself a big house out in the countryside, and proceeded to spend the rest of my eternity doing what mankind has always done since the dawn of time: tell great stories.