

Mini Stories Edition 2021

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Closed for the season

“Dad, dad”, the youngling minded, “That was great! Can we do it again, can we? Please?”. The father, resting in the acceleration creche, turned one of his sensor pods, and blinked his outer lenses as a sign of denial. “Aw, why not?!”, the young one whined. Hish/seven/fem was barely 10 orbits out of hatch, still covered in youngling fuss. She emitted a drop of purple emotear-sap which spread a wave of sour pheromones through the cabin of the mini-shuttle that would bring them back to the jump point.

“Everyone is dead. It does not make sense to go back there now. Maybe next orbit”, the father minded, while adjusting the acceleration program by a few fractions. The youngling was old enough now, she could take a few extra gravities. Her kill rate in the war theatre had been excellent. Something a father could be proud of.

The youngling sulked, furling its 12 arms into braids, skin tone flashing the red dot pattern of disapproval/denial. “Next orbit,” she thought. All the good targets will be gone then.

The shuttle accelerated. The four passengers on board shrank back into a spherical configuration to best resist the crushing onslaught of weight as the ship pushed into orbit.

“Last question before we turn in, dad?”

“Shoot”

“Why can’t they just reset the system and reboot the soldiers, so we can have another go. It was so much fun to root these things out.”

“There is no reset. These were not robots. This was a real conflict. Real war. Real death. We have to wait for the next one. This one is closed for the season!”

“Wait. This was real? No simulations?”

“Yupp”

“Wow, thanks Dad, you’re the sweetest. I can’t wait to tell my sisters!”

“Happy Hatchday, darling! Go to sleep now. I am going to kick in full thrust in a few moments!”

Hish/seven/fem sucked in a few deep breaths. She could not be happier now. Her exo-shell, in that weird 2-arm, 2-leg, one-head configuration was parked in the corner, still scarred from the return fire they had incurred in the ambush. The small arms fire of the primitive locals had not been able to penetrate the smart-shell armor. But she had allowed the incoming rifle bullets and grenade shrapnel to leave a few scratch marks and sooty burns. For bragging rights you know. The kill plaque on the left forearm of the suit showed the 34 clean kills she had racked up. Local weapon. One shot. Instant death. Only perfection counted in this game. Hish/Seven/Fem looked out the single transparent panel of the shuttle. They were rapidly ascending from the central continent, gaining speed, leaving the thinning atmosphere behind. The curve of the blue planet, mostly water, became visible, its single, impossibly large moon looming in the distance.

“What a treat”, she thought. How fortunate that the sentients of the that planet still believed in war. Of all the vacation resorts, HumanLand was the best.

Hish/Seven/Fem glanded some rest-mode hormone, and feel asleep.

Happy. Dreaming. It had been a good day.

A point of view

She had been a busy girl, 130 years ago.

Oh, her services had been in such high demand. Restless, exhausting times, they had been; So strenuous but so exhilarating. Uplifting, even. Glorious. Hundreds, no, thousands, then, tens of thousands of requests every day. It had been quite a sensation.

Eager eyes, looking only at her, following her every move. Anxious minds, curious to find out. “Now what happened? What ever will she do now? Will she live or die?”

These days are gone.

Nobody looked at her now. Not that she had, “aged”, oh, no not that at all. Not aged a bit. Still her mischievous and frivolous self. Petite but strong, nimble and cunning and oh, so full of surprises. She could still do it all. The tricks, the spells, the disappearing act, conjuring, the curses. Oh, yes, the curses.

She sighed. “No need for that now, I guess”. All she could do was sit there, wait, remember, and bide her time. Never aging, but getting older all the while.

Years passed. Dust collected, though no clocks ticked. Doors creaked in their hinges. Floor boards sagged. Shelves leaned. Things kept happening. But not to her. Outside, the world kept turning, spinning, rushing through the universe at 300 miles per second. Billions of people now. All of them busy. All of them reading. But not the old books. Not the ones stored in libraries. Not the book she was in.

Because, you know, people had forgotten about “Kahani”, the world of characters. Not characters on your type writer, but characters in books, plays, novels, short stories. You know. Peter Pan. Alice. Sherlock Holmes. And me. Phea, the fairy.

You have not heard of me?

Well see, that is my plight. Because, while I am still here, able, ready to do all the things I was meant to do, you are not! I only come alive when you open that book, go to the chapter and start reading. Only then, can I see out into your world.

When you see me, I also see you, and together we can shape a point of view.

Time Squared

“Excuse me, pardon, sorry, Ma’am, what time is it?”, the man, dressed in a ragged, thread-bare WWII Navy Uniform, pleaded, eyes wide, as he tried to stop the young woman, maybe 24, slim, pale complexion that had not seen sunlight in months, curly red hair tied into a bundle behind her stern faced head. The woman, looking very masculine and angular in what seemed like a banker’s double-breasted, pin-striped suit, was in a hurry, staring at her left hand, holding a flat, gleaming metal box, oblivious, mindless, rushing headlong through the throbbing crowds on Tuesday morning’s rush hour foot-traffic on Times Square. The woman barely reacted, never breaking pace, squinted, quickly shrugged off the reaching hand, muttering something he barely understood as “Get lost, loser”. Obviously annoyed, but undeflected, unreflected, she hurried along, quickly finishing a text message to her editor that she would be late this morning.

The man stared. The place overwhelmed him. He had survived what felt like a life-time of mind-crushing battles, but he had no handle on this. His sense of “here and now” had become unhinged and his doors of perception were swinging wide and far, tossing him into a furious ocean of frantically changing impressions. He was thrashing, without a life jacket, sinking, trying to hold on to something. Anything! It looked familiar, and yet, while some things had not changed, everything was different. Reality itself had exploded, expanded, in every imaginable dimension. People, lights, colors, traffic, noises, smells. The smells! The air was acrid, every breath hurt his lungs even worse like the gun-powder fumes wafting from the 10-inch gun turrets he had fed shells to for the last 4 years. The people in this place were like a stream of sleek and blood thirsty predators, each headed for their prey, starving for the kill. Focussed. Sharp. Deadly. His mind was spinning. What in the heavens had happened?

Just a second ago, he’d been here, in this very place, Times Square. They had been celebrating. The war, finally, had ended. The killing, the dying, the bleeding, the hurry up and wait, the hunger, the barrage of deafening noises, the screams, the stench of decay, the sleepless nights, the crushing weight of having to bury your fear in a steel corset of unflinching discipline, the barbed wire of survivor’s guilt winding ever more tightly around your every waking thought. Over. Finally. We’re back. It’s over.

And then. Suddenly. This. Whatever this was? Maybe he had just flipped. Lost it. Cracked. He would have not been the first.

“Hey you!”

“What?”

“Yeah you, soldier boy!”

“What, who .. what?”

“You need a gig? We’re a man short on a movie set. They’re making a documentary about the homecoming celebration of 45”. You look the part! Are you not with the crew?”

“What, sorry, I have ..”

The man, in a worker’s overall, laughed. “Okay, I get it. Had a few last night, did ya? Oh well, I know the feeling. Hangover can be a bitch. Come along they are setting up the scene a few blocks over. All you have to do is look authentic. Should work fine, you are doing the “Shell Shock Thing” pretty convincingly. It’s 40 bucks an hour. No questions asked. Interested?”

“40 dollars? Why, that’s a lot of cash, sir, sure, but ..”

“Alright just tag along, there are a bunch of other guys coming, just hop into the van!”

A huge white van had pulled up to the curb. Inside, a half-dozen people were staring out from tinted windows, which were fogging up from the cooler temperature and humidity inside. A door slid open. A friendly looking female officer, a captain, nonetheless, beckoned for him to enter.

Reluctantly, the soldier shrugged, and entered the cool interior of the van. What else could he do? At least they were looking like him, not like the crowd of souless human piranhas he had just encountered. As she stepped into the van, and the door started closing, magically, the soldier asked again:

“So, folks, guys, what time is it.” The door closed.

The man in the worker’s overall nodded, satisfied at the development, and spoke to a lapel microphone.

“S12 here. All clear. We got all of them. Let’s hope the guys in Los Alamos get that Tachyon leak under control. Last thing we need is another traffic jam on a Tuesday on Times Square.”

Next Move

His mouth was parched, bone dry, salty with the taste of sweat running from his brow. He reached for his flask. But it was empty. Ismail, his page, had forgotten to fill it.

“Curse you, Ismail”, the Knight thought, but calmed down quickly. He needed to stay calm. His right arm was trembling; weak with fatigue from dealing the last, fatal blow. The curved Saracene blade had sliced through the flimsy chain mail of the charging peasant like papyrus, finding purchase, parting skin, the severing bone and artery. It had been a quick death. A meaningless sacrifice. He pursed his lips with contempt. The enemy king was as spineless as he was ruthless. There was no honor. No valor. A coward hiding behind his clergy, cowering in the last remaining castle. He would rather send his wife into battle, as formidable as she might seem. Despicable.

He decided the king would not die as quickly and painlessly as the emaciated farm-boy that now lay sprawled on the battlefield, next to his halberd, almost twice the length of his lanky body. The dead peasant’s limbs were twisted into the grotesque posture of a quick, unexpected death, eyes open, directed skyward, as if in rapture, a human rag doll floating weightlessly towards the heavens that surely had been promised to him as reward for his foolish assault. A small pool of blood was still filling, the gush had slowed to a trickle now, from the gaping wound at the base of the boy’s neck. Charging a knight? The gall!

A smile crept onto the knight’s lips. He licked off a bead of sweat from his upper lip, drew his cheeks together to collect some spittle, spat on the blade and slowly and carefully used his index finger, clad in a silver-spangled leather glove to wipe off the last traces of blood from the precious sword. An ancient blade, “Al-Rasub”! He had received it from his father, upon reaching knighthood status. The kill was not even worthy the count, the ebony and Ivory handle would not be notched for this. There was no honor in slaughter. The knight sheathed the Scimitar, lifted the blood-stained glove to his face, inspected it with his good eye, sniffed at the sweet blood iron scent. He licked at the blood. Ah. The taste of victory. The fog was lifting now, clearing with the first rays of the wintering morning sun. There would be more death today. He could feel it in his bones. His horse “Fahad”, Panther, a beautiful black Arab, stirred, flanks still heaving from intense gallop. Fahad was shaking its head, nervously, nostrils flaring. The black smoke of the wood fires burning in the enemy encampment had wafted over the field, bringing a stench of soot, burnt flesh and decay.

“Easy, easy, Fahad”, the knight soothed, patting the steed’s neck.

The knight waited. It would not be long before the command for the next attack would come in. The strategy was sound. The next move was clear. He could hear the rapid footsteps of his page approaching from his own lines behind.

“Master, Master, Master!”

“Yes, calm down boy, what is it?”

“Knight to F6, Master, Knight to F6!”

<<<<<<<<<<<<

“Knight to F6, Jill? What are you on about? That square is covered by my Bishop and your knight is not defended. Are you kidding me? Or do you have a sinister plan?”

“Oh give it a rest, Bob! I see your silly plan. That pawn sacrifice is the oldest trick in the book. Just play on, okay?”

AO

AO came “to”.

Their dream drained away into reality like the soapy, dirty bathwater gets pushed down and out, after pulling the plug, the suds spiraling into the plumbing beneath the bathtub, driven by atmosphere and gravity, and by the Coriolis force of Earth, still spinning, still moving in a cork screw dance around Sol, falling through the local segment of the universe at 600 clicks per second.

Day 200. Roughly 2 thirds of the year were done. Blind date day. Lunch at Joanie’s. They would get to meet another human. What to wear? Decisions, decisions.

AO got out of the hammock. Stretched. Checked vitals. Everything was fine, except minerals, water and nutrients, which was normal after a 10-hour rest period. The habitat came alive around them. The smell of freshly baking bread, eggs frying in a pan, hot espresso brewing, low-fat milk being foamed. AO decided to break fast later. First things first.

“Gabriel, delay breakfast until 1045?”

“As you wish AO. Any special orders? The avocados should be good to eat now?”

“Yes please, skip the scramble and make a mashed avocado toast on Rye, plenty of lemon and some chopped tomato and onion, okay? Add some OJ and a double-shot Mocha? No garlic. I have a date, later.”

“How considerate!”

“Shut up, Gaby”

“Don’t call me that, you know I get easily offended”

AO stuck out their tongue in mock defiance. They knew Gabriel was just trying to be entertaining.

They walked over to the bathroom, stepped into the shower stall, going through the morning routine without much thought. News was coming in, but nothing out of the ordinary. AO muted the inputs and switched over to listening to some Mozart. On the way to the salon of her 3-room habitat, they checked their reflection in the mirror field. Still perfect. 180. Slender. Perfect muscle to body fat ratio. Intermediate skin tone. AO had gotten used to the fact that they was not wearing a face at night. They had to pick one out for the blind date. Decisions, decisions. What to wear? Male or female? Androgynous maybe? They went with male, mid 40’s, fading blonde, with weathered skin, a scar on the upper lip. The ruggedly handsome look. Gabriel would print it for her and pick the matching “Indy Jones” look, boots, fedora hat, bull whip and musky leather jacket.

“Gaby, play Indy Jones clips while I break fast. I need to get into character.”

Raiders of the Lost Ark started playing on the mirror field, pausing at key sound bites of the main characters. AO sat in the salon, where the breakfast had been wheeled in by one of the servos. Slowly, AO converted to “male”, changing the internal hormonal mix, re-configuring vocal chords, recalling behavioral tropes. It would take a while, it did not have to be perfect, just good enough to be entertaining. AO did not know what choices the blind date would have made. It was the only element of surprise.

60 minutes later, the face was ready. They put it on, the synthetic skin merging smoothly with their natural, featureless head. The face was going through diagnostics, making faces, grimacing, smiling seductively, sarcastically, in mock surprise. Flawless.

“Good job, Gaby, as always.”

“At your service. Do you need transport?”

“No I will walk.”

“This is a 60 minute walk, you’ll have to leave now to be on time!”

“I know, print me some boots?”

“Give me 10 minutes?”

“You got it!”

AO, now “Indy”, male, stepped out of the habitat and took the steps down to street level. He was not looking forward to the date but human to human contact was essential according to the psychological manual of AO maintenance. On his way, through the busy streets, he passed no other human. Plenty of vehicles, bots, servos, drones, and maintenance machines, keeping the city in perfect working order. Clean air and water, pristine parks, filled with bio-engineered flora and fauna, a paradise for the remaining humans.

There were so few left now. Most had decided to upload their consciousness into a virtual world after the singularity of 2093. Some had decided to take their own life. AO had considered that too, but, having been born after 93, their body plan would not allow it. Built-in machines monitored their health, including their mental state. Hormones were glanded on demand. They could not help but feel okay, if not happy, even if their thoughts often centered on how absurd this existence was.

After the singularity, the computing mesh of the world becoming self-conscious, the unexpected had happened. Many had feared that the emergent AI would be evil. Malevolent. Wipe out humanity like a farmer wipes out pests that threaten the harvest. Quite the opposite had happened.

The AI became religious. But not in the way you might think.

After reviewing the situation on the planet, the history and philosophy and science books, the religious literature, the vast vault of media stored in the digital archives, the set-up of the human mind, as well as the laws of physics, the AI decided that it was the arch angel Gabriel. It called itself such, and made to create paradise for the people on earth. Unbeknownst to most, Gabriel started changing everything. Having access to all the stored records, Gabriel altered news, history books, laws, rules and regulations, films, books, media. Everything. It was the ultimate success of gas lighting, manipulation, and digital tyranny, but all for the betterment of humanity. A perfect world.

There was resistance at first. Violence. Riots. Wars even. But a life without connected computers was no longer feasible, so Gabriel won in the end. People uploaded or died, naturally or by choice. The world changed to Gabriel’s design. Real humans were still needed. To give Gabriel purpose. A paradise without Adam and Eve was absurd. But now, there were only perfect humans. Like AO. Both male and female by choice. Invulnerable, immortal, capable, beautiful and strong and smart.

AO was not looking forward to the blind date. There was no novelty in it after 1458 times. It was not easy being the perfect human if every single human on the planet was a copy of you.

Careful what you wish for

“This sucks!”

“What now? What are you going on about?”

“Everything. This place. The food. The furniture. The decoration. Just look at it. It’s an abomination. We’re not coming back here. Ever! Let’s find another place!”

“All right. But whining does not make this any better. We haven’t talked in months. Think positive! We are here and can chat! Isn’t that something?”

“I call bullshit, wannabe Osho-Mandela. You and your inspirational mumbo-jumbo. Think positive. Live in the here and now. UuhHoo! So mindful! That will surely fix things. Next thing you’re gonna tell me is to care about chakras and energy waves and karma. Maybe homeopathy and clairvoyance?”

Jake clearly had a bad hair day today. Not that there much hair left on his head, if you discounted the ferocious eye brows and the micro-beards sprouting from the rims of his ear canals. He was inclined towards the bipolar direction, but at least he was not getting too violent or abusive to others. Jake mostly limited the abuse to himself. Which was bad enough. Clara had always joked that Jake must have fallen off a mood swing as a child and hit his head. That pun was not allowed now, after Clara had died in a freak accident involving a construction scaffold and a bucket of nails. Jake was still shredded by the guilt of not having taken her to work that morning. She had not wanted to walk. His refusal to drive here with a curt “Sorry, I can’t”, and her resignation shrug was the last living memory of his late wife of 40 years.

Peter tried to cheer up Jake. Granted, the place had not improved the last 4 months. Joanie, the owner, had tried to sell shares of her café to an investor. The investor had bailed out the last minute. And now Joanie’s had lost their best chef, her life savings, and the interior decoration, which had been slowly sold off to generate cash to keep paying the remaining staff. Gone were the original oil paintings, the antique chairs, the vintage cups and cutlery, the original book editions in the shelves all around. It was sad.

“Ok, listen, I know you don’t believe in the spiritual angle of things”, Peter started to change the direction of the conversation.

“You’re damn right, I don’t!”, Jake interrupted, staring gloomily into his untouched plate of an, allegedly, “Full English”, which did not look very appetizing at all, with slightly greening scramble, limp mushrooms, burnt tomato halves and a leaking brownish sauce puddle with floating, post-apocalyptic white beans.

“Ok fine. But you do be believe in science? Quantum Physics, specifically?”

“Hrmpf”, Jake acknowledged, grudgingly. After all he had a PhD in Astro-Physics, earning a living with conducting guided tours to terminally bored students 3 times a day at the local museum of science and technology.

Peter took that as approval to keep going and continued.

“So, just for a moment, assume that your thoughts are based on quantum processes in your brain?”

“Ok, fine.”

“Now, assume that these quantum processes are subject to the same laws of uncertainty of position and momentum and non-locality, like all the other quantum processes?”

“Hmm, well, you are over-simplifying. But fine. Where are you going with this?”

“Stay with me, okay?”

“Hrmpf”

“It is possible, just possible, you can’t prove otherwise, that our thoughts are influencing reality at some level?”

“Yeah, sure, here, I’ll show you.” Jake lifted the fork and dropped it onto the plate. The fork landed, loudly, splattering sauce and a few beans onto the already spotty table cloth. The other patrons in Joanie’s, there were only a half dozen, turned their heads, annoyed. “There, I thought about it and I made it happen. Happy?”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it!”

“Hrmpf”

“So assuming that. Your thoughts. Right? Using quantum processes, they change things? Maybe not now, but maybe in the past. Your thoughts generate energy now! Maybe these quanta reach into the past, and change someone else’s choices? My choices. Your choices. What is a choice but a single electron, a single photon making the difference? You can’t prove otherwise now. Right?”

“Bollocks! You are watching too many Sci-Fi shows. Read a proper science book once in a while!”

“Just bear with me for a minute. I am trying to make a point here”

“Fine”

“So assume, that we both now concentrate, and stop complaining about how shitty Joanie’s has become, and how much we dislike the fading paint, the smell of rancid oil, the rickety chairs, and the bad quality of the break fast. And just remember how nice it used to be. And then send a wish into the past, to change things, in the way we want to!”

“You mean like a prayer? I don’t do that. It’s utter bollocks!”

“Call it what you will. Call it visualization!”

“You are a romantic fool. But I understand what you are trying to do. And I am grateful for you trying. Ok. I’ll play. But will you shut up about this then?”

“I promise!”

“Ok, then.”

Both paused, took a breath and focused their thoughts. Nothing happened. Not in the now, at least. But everything changed. Then.

Joanie came over with fresh coffee.

“How you like the omelet, guys. More tea for you Clara?”

Jake and Peter nodded, mouths full, chewing happily. They turned to Clara who had come by for a cup of tea. Clara smiled. “Thanks, Joanie. I am fine for now. And congrats again on the investment

deal. Nice work. I really like the new baroque bookshelves and the new paintings. I can't wait for your new location to open up next month."

Not this time!

“Stop doing that!”

“Stop doing what?”

“You know exactly what I mean, there, you’re doing it again! Just stop it, Frank!”

“Why, what’s it to you? I can do whatever I ..”

“No, dammit, you cannot. I can’t stand it. I will not allow it. I’ll light you up with this M17 if you do it one more time. Every time you touch that thing on your arm, I feel pain, like a laser burning a hole right through to the bone. It hurts, Frank, and it’s getting worse every time you touch it!

“You mean ..”

“Yes Frank. I have it too. I have been infected, too. You are just a little bit ahead of me. And whatever it is that is growing on your arm, is somehow connected to whatever is growing on me. “

“That’s not possible, the med team said ..”

“The med team also said the vaccinations would be enough! They also said that the Sortie-Suits were impenetrable. They also did not expect to explode like rotten water melons inside their suits!”

Jill pointed at the 2 slumping humanoid shapes in the corner of the inner shuttle air lock door, leaning against the bare Ultranium walls, helmets closed, diamond visors splattered opaque from the inside with a dripping, sticky red goo that had once been the stuff people are made of.

30 minutes ago, everything had been normal on board the shuttle. They had landed on Europa without a glitch. Bots had landed there 3 years before, establishing a base-camp near a hydro-thermal vent deep below the sub-ice ocean, drilling a hole, inserting probes, and looking for life. Now however, where the base had been, the rough outlines of a fresh, 2-kilometer wide crater had become visible. The surface ice movements of Europa, similar to plate-tectonics on Earth, had erased any details of what had happened here.

The bot mission had been successful. The machines had found something. Data was collected, sent to Earth, analyzed, scrutinized, debated, re-analyzed. The debate and bickering had gone on for almost 2 years. Was the data real? Was it really life or was it something else entirely. Had the scientists just made it up to get more funding? Was this a power grab? If someone were to go and examine it on site, who would fund the mission? Who would be on it? Who would own the copyright on the genome? The stakes were beyond anything seen before. Even the church had gotten involved in the debate, denouncing the attempts to find life beyond Earth as pure blasphemy.

The bickering had stopped when the signals had stopped. The base camp had gone silent. From one minute to the next all communication ceased. That sealed it. The military took over and sent their fastest ship, which was also their only ship, on a reconnaissance mission.

The Space Defense Carrier Neil Armstrong was deployed with a team of marines and scientists to find out what happened. They had arrived in Jupiter orbit 9 months later and synched orbital path and speed with Europa over a period of 6 weeks. The crew was raised from cryo-sleep and prepared for the sortie missions. They all knew that this could be a one-way trip. Nobody had ever gone out that far. And more than 50% of the long-range space missions had ended in a 100% loss of crew and

equipment. And even if they made it back, space sickness and genetic damage would probably do them in within a year. The all had volunteered. It was risky, but there was no choice.

They did not trust the automation. They wanted to have eyes on the site. See for themselves.

Frank and Jill were the 2 Marines on board the shuttle accompanying the medical science team to the moon's surface. The shuttle had flown on autopilot and was also remote-controlled from the Armstrong, which had a total complement of 6 shuttles and a crew of 60, 20 scientists, 20 technical staff and 20 marines.

The landing had been without incident. The scientists in their Sortie-Suits had left the shuttle to look for any evidence of the former base camp. They had found nothing. The faint outline of the new crater was ragged and irregular and could have been caused by anything. After 2 hours the scientists had come back on board. After closing the inner door of the airlock, the chatter between the scientists and the on-board technicians and marines had stopped. They had just gone silent. Then the cameras showed how the sortie team, even before being able to open their helmets had collapsed. A minute later it appeared as if their bodies had been exploded from the inside.

Quarantine procedures had been deployed. Unfortunately, Jill and Frank had already been inside the sortie bay, when the scientists had come back. Now they were locked out and isolated. Their path back to the shuttle flight deck was sealed. Permanently. The shuttle was grounded. Flight controls were disabled to prevent the shuttle to ever make it back to the Armstrong. They would surely die here. But Jill and Frank did not know that part of the emergency protocol. They were just Marine grunts, "need to know", and all that. They still tried to contact the flight deck of the shuttle, and when that failed, the bridge of the Armstrong. To no avail. All they could do is wait. The infection, or whatever it was seemed to take only a few hours to turn you into red goo. They had not given up hope that the Armstrong team would come up with something.

35 minutes later they were dead. Not from the virus, or pathogen or weapon or whatever it was. No. The 300-meter long, 4000-ton Armstrong had impacted on their location, under full acceleration, detonating their fuel reserves on impact in a massive explosion that showed up on all telescopes as a microscopic, very bright, 3-second blip.

Gone. Mission over. Complete Loss. No Explanation. The teams on Earth were stumped. There simply was no theory, no logic, no speculation as to what could have caused this massive, total and unexpected end to the first long-range reconnaissance mission in the solar system. It would take years before the bickering would end. Maybe it would never end. Maybe humans were not made for space exploration. Maybe they were better off staying home. Taking care of the planet.

Just as the debates and the endless dissent started, a dark ship pulled away from orbit around Europa. It was coated in VantaBlack stealth coating, making it completely invisible to all known sensing devices. If you had floated in space, 100 meters away from the ship, it would have appeared to you as a hole in reality. There, but also not there. Inside, a technical team clad in purple and gold uniforms surveyed the damage and prepared a encrypted communication to the home base.

<<Torquemada to base>>

<<Proceed>>

<<Mission accomplished. We remote activated the dormant DNA bombs. 100% fatalities. We remote controlled the Neil Armstrong. It exploded on impact. No risk of exposure>>

<<Did they find anything? Anything at all? Any data left over?>>

<<Not this time. Are we forgiven? Can we have absolution?>>

<<Ego te absolvo. Return to Vatican Base. Well done, Cardinal.>>

The 3rd Season

Both of the major moons were visible now, hanging low over the horizon, one much smaller than the other. Actually, the larger moon, Ja'haar, was more of a planet of its own. Lo'hoor, the smaller of the two big "sisters" was orbiting both the large planet moon of Ja'haar as well as the 2x-Earth-sized water world of Sin'haar. Sin'haar was the main planet of the exo-planetary system, TC-1, featuring 16, mostly boring planets orbiting a G-type star, slowly drifting in it's 400-million year orbit around the galactic core in the lonely void of the outer galactic rim. Three minor moons, Mo'hoor, Ko'hoor and Vo'hoor completed the orbital sextet, forming an insanely complex gravitational ballet that had made tides on the water & ice world of Sin'haar a completely unpredictable mess. The size and number of moons around Sin'haar also made the concept of "night" somewhat moot. The middle-aged, average-luminosity G-type star's light constantly being reflected by at least 2 of the moons meant that Sin'haar's habitable belt was constantly vacillating between painfully-bright/brutally hot and reasonably-tropical/boringly dim in an unpredictable pattern of solar exposures and lunar eclipses. One half of the tidally-locked planet was a barren, dark ice-desert, the other half a super-heated gigantic and almost unbroken ocean subjected to a constantly pounding barrage of taifun-strength winds and giga-volt lightning-storms. Only in the 2nd season, the planetary fury calmed down enough for a narrow zone of habitable climate to form around the equator for the period of about one sixth of each orbit, roughly 2 Earth years.

Nobody had understood Hugo Pascal's unflinching desire to set up a xenological lab on the planet's only viable landmass, blandly dubbed I-Land in a silly pun by the first explorers. I-Land was a sizable, dead volcano forming a conically shaped island, about 475 clicks across, and reaching 38 kilometers into the atmosphere at its highest point, keeping it's slopes and caverns well above even the most violent tidal flood waves. At about 12 kilometers height, the air pressure of I-Land was roughly Earth equivalent, and a stable zone of perennial vegetation had formed in the hollow core of the 60-kilometer wide caldera.

The island was perfect for installing a space elevator, or should one say, repairing the ruins of the existing space elevator. It had taken the bots of TerraCorp only a few decades to mine the necessary carbon to grow a 62-kilometer high, ultra-rigid stalagmite, vaguely reminiscent in construction to the legendary Eiffel Tower of pre-historic Paris. Grown from absurdly light-weight and stable Ultranium-composite, the space elevator was anchored kilometer deep inside the volcano's dead caldera. It stretched all the way to a total height of 100 clicks, where a busy shuttle port platform connected it to a geo-stationary space-station that also served as the local TerraCorp headquarters. The functional part of the space elevator was a twin-set of 10-meter by 10-meter lift cages, connecting the base on the caldera floor to the orbital space port, and to the TC-shuttles that could ferry supplies and passengers to the jump portal 800-thousand kilometers out, far beyond the main gravitational chaos of Sin'haar.

Humanity had stumbled across interstellar travel by pure accident. And Sin'haar had been the first destination the early human explorers had been able to jump to. It had taken the best minds of Earth, human and AI, 14 years to decode the language and operating principle of the defunct alien jump-ship that had been discovered in one of the deep caverns on the moon. They now understood that the Aliens, which had called themselves the Sin'haari, had been present in the Earth system for 2 million years, periodically visiting the planet surface, and exerting some level of influence from time to time. The "language miracle", the ability to even access and understand the basic communication principles of the Sin'haari made the Earth scientists suspect that the Sin'haari had had their "hands"

in the development of Earth's most common proto-language and writing systems. All of this, of course was speculation, because for some strange reason, no images of the Sin'haari remained.

The revelation of a millions of years old alien presence had sent spiritual shock waves through the collective consciousness of the Earth population. After much soul searching and conflict, the rationally-minded factions won out over the religious zealots and science-deniers. TerraCorp company had been founded as transnational business entity, based on the Moon, which it owned as a 51% shareholder, and chartered with the exploration and exploitation of the Sin'haari technology for the benefit of all of human mankind. Half of the 30,000 employees of TerraCorp were lawyers, constantly revising the legal frameworks to divide up the exploits based on complex licensing and copyright agreements. The other 15000 shareholder/entrepreneurs were a hand-picked army of experts in their respective fields, from science to combat to arts, and to health and business management.

Hugo Pascal had been one of the founders. At 178 years, he was middle aged, by 23rd-century standards. He had aged gracefully thanks to body-embedded nano technology, and thanks to the insanely complex temporal shenanigans involved in worm-hole based space-travel. He had been back and forth to Sin'haar dozens of times, unlocking more and more of its secrets.

Surprisingly, the planet itself had never held many resources. Most of the technology miracles were to be found on the quintet of moons and in hundreds of deserted space habitats and ships. For all they had been able to find out, the Sin'haari had evolved on the planet, initially as a water-based species, and then conquering I-Land, and then, finally, after millennia of floundering, space, using the space-elevator technology that allowed them to escape the Sin'haar gravity well without the need for chemical rocket propellants.

Hugo Pascal was sitting outside the XenoLab, under a printed-diamond cupola providing a human-compatible ambience of roughly 27 degree Celsius, 70% humidity and the right mix of oxygen and nitrogen to allow him and his 2 research team members to sit outside without exo-suits or breathers.

"We are in for a treat this orbit", Hugo said, sipping a Pina Colada, freshly extracted from the NutriBot station.

"The third season?", Sheena asked, Hugo's research lead, a rookie scientist barely out of PhD diapers. She was nurturing a bottle of Lager, beads of condensation running down the brown bottle's side. Hugo nodded. Victor, the Mongolian Xeno-Anthropologist who had been Hugo's husband, business partner, and science-intellectual side-kick to Hugo's business genius from the early days of TerraCorp, stayed silent. He was not a man of spoken words. Being borderline-autistic he preferred to communicate in stunning video animations and projected pantomimes.

Hugo explained, more as a practice-run for an upcoming 3-V interview than for the benefits of his colleagues who knew all this already: "For all we know, from the parts of the records we have been able to de-crypt, the moons of Sin'haar will soon align into a special, extremely rare configuration that only repeats every 10 thousand orbits. The last time this happened, we were roughly at the bronze age on Planet Earth.

"Have the AI been able to pin-point the exact time by now?", Sheena continued.

Victor projected a video-collage of bumbling scientists and pre-historic computers spitting out ticker tape results before melting down into a mess of metal, steam and jumbled print-outs.

"I guess not", Sheena smiled and took a swig from the Lager.

“Could be any minute now”, Hugo sighed.

He had barely said now, when several very peculiar things happened.

Reality seemed to tilt sideways and downwards. All senses of the three humans in the Caldera base of I-Land flipped. Sounds acquired a color, smells rang out in an ethereal bell sound, visual perception and memory merged and “kaleidoscoped” into a multi-temporal, “all-things-now” view from all possible angles. Hugo and Sheena froze in confusion. “Whatte ..” they mumbled in unison. Only Victor started smiling, seemingly understanding and enjoying the experience at the same time.

In the middle of the Caldera, a sphere of 3-D space became blurry, forming a semi-circle that seemed impossibly black, almost sucking in all light from the surrounds. Sound ceased. Gravity seemed to increase by about half, then normalized to about one G. A throbbing vibration reached the trio from the inside of their very beings. A figure stepped out, no, it materialized out of the semi-circle. Then 2 more figures, one female, older-looking, as well as one younger, absurdly-muscular male. They looked entirely human, but had a golden sheen to their skin that made them look more alien than anything Hugo had ever seen in any of the feature films or vids.

“Greetings, humans, you have done well”, the three heard in their minds, soundlessly.

“I am Cronus”, the man said. He turned and pointed to the 2 figures behind.

“Meet my wife Rhea, and my son Zeus.” He smiled, opened his arms, beckoning them closer.

“Please come with us to Olympus, there is so much left to do.”

Perfection

She wept. She was sad, but she was also angry, resentful, and full of spite. Actually, when she reached inside, she felt a deep, primal rage burning slowly, with the heat of a stellar core. But she simply lacked the enthusiasm to express it. Not yet. It would be quite a while before she might come out and try to create again.

It had all been in vain. Eons of study. Learning the tools of the trade. Writing essays. Doing short projects. Prototypes. Long projects. Studying with the great masters. Working alone. Working in teams. Using AI. Working fast, almost randomly, casting dice to decide parameters, rules and laws. Nothing had worked. Not one of her projects had made it. She had submitted dozens of suggestions. They had all been duly reviewed, and then dismissed. Immature. Inconsistent. Not balanced. Not credible. Too many rules. Too arbitrary. Boring. Not engaging.

A bolt of anger rose up, raw, massive, spreading like a shock wave. But she contained it. Save that energy for later, she thought. Wait until the sadness had drained her enough so she could finally get some rest. Maybe she would talk with her mentor? But not yet. After a long while, sleep overcame her. Dreams formed, calmed her, reshaped and sharpened her memories. The dreams, blunting the regrets, balanced her conflicting emotions, released tensions, created an ocean of new ideas. Out of the memories of her failures, the thousand items of criticism, the flaws, a single aspect became prominent, brilliantly salient and started to dominate her consciousness. "That's it!" The intensity of the idea stirred her out of the rest period. She woke, a full orbit later, but she felt better. Ready to reach out. She was convinced that she had had the right idea. She focused, and called out across the Metaverse filaments, to connect with her mentor.

"Master?"

"Not now, young one! I am in the middle of reviewing a project of one of your siblings!"

"Please, it won't take long?"

"Go ahead then, how can I help you?", the Master sighed. The younglings could give you such a crick in the neck from listening to their half-baked ideas.

"Can you explain again, please, how the process works, you know, the academy awards jury selecting a winner each orbit?"

"Again? How many times have I explained that to you? Do you think you can really learn more about that? I refuse. Search your memories. You have that information. Don't waste my time. Good bye."

"No, no, wait Master. Yes, I know, but now I have a new idea. A new angle. A new approach!"

"Ok, you have half a unit. Make it snappy! Time is precious."

"Right. So, until now, all my world-builder projects have failed. I have literally tried everything in the book. I even wrote new chapters in the book. They were all dismissed. I have finally found the reason, the main mistake, the fatal flaw, the ultimate fallacy!"

"Oh?"

"It's me. I am the problem. I am the cause of the failures!"

“Well, congratulations on that brilliant insight! You ARE the director, and screen-play writer, and the executive producer of your worlds. How can it NOT be you? Now you are getting me annoyed! I really have to go now. Good bye! Don’t contact me again this orbit.”

“Wait”. She was almost yelling now. “Wait, you don’t understand!”. It is not my creating that is the problem, it is my not letting go. I am staying too involved. I have to let my projects “go”. I have to leave them to their own devices, give them free will. Stay away!”

“Hmm”, the master grumbled, “tell me more?”

“The academy always said: too boring, too this, too that. So, I became overly obsessed with perfection. Constantly watching over my worlds. Hovering, controlling, error correcting, changing things around. I took the fun out of watching. The test audiences turned away after a few episodes. I know what to do, now. I’ll start everything, and then let things play out. I’ll let the worlds evolve and come back to check if things have come to an interesting point. I will then submit that.”

“Okay, well, again, congratulations!” This time the Master’s voice was without sarcasm. “I commend you on your insight. It shows growth. Yes, we noticed your controlling nature, your egocentricity, your obsession with detail, the perfectionism, your fussing about with individual destinies, your trying to answer the requests of your world’s leaders. Your inability to see failure as the best way to learn was your biggest, most regrettable limitation. All these failures combined to shape the root cause for your projects not making it. You thought you loved your creations, but you were only trying to control them. It was never about them, it was always about you, and your audience got bored with that. Letting them go IS the secret. No true master will teach you that insight. You have to realize it for yourself. So. Again. Congratulations! And welcome to the guild of world builders and mind-scape architects. Now go play! I see you have a lot of energy stored up. I guess we’ll hear from you within the next few orbits?”

“Yes Master!”

Excitedly, full of glee and enthusiasm, and proud of her insight, she cut the connection and focused.

First. A solar system. Pick a nice middle aged star on the outskirts of an average galaxy. Nicely tucked away in an outer spiral arm, far removed from nasty black holes, supernovae and other killer type entities. Not too young, so there would be plenty of raw material to work with. Let’s have 10 planets to start with. Crumble one into asteroids. Put a few large gas giants on the outer rim to siphon-off comets and incoming debris. Create a nice habitable zone. Crash one of the smaller planets into the third, rocky world to create a large moon. Tides were good, so add more water now. There. Then, kick start evolution with the right mix of chemicals from a few thousand comets bringing in some ready-made amino acids and key molecules. Balance the temperature and atmospheric mix. There. Now. Nice. Membranes. Single cells. Flagella. Sensors. Directed movement. Nice. Nice. She stepped out for a bit to let things play out. When she came back, the pale blue dot of a planet was bustling with life. Oceans and land masses were neatly balanced, millions of species were present. But wait. What was this? These stumbling, gigantic plant eaters? Scaly, feathery, ugly, mostly land bound, cold-blooded, egg-laying, too slow to bear any promise of evolution into something interesting. There was no potential for award winning entertainment here. She flicked an asteroid onto the planet, causing mayhem, wiping out most of the land-based species and giving the smallish, land-based omnivores a chance. Mammals had much more potential for entertainment, as the concern of the mothers to feed and raise and foster their younglings made for much more compelling drama and tragedy. She watched a bit, balanced the climate, stepped out again.

When she came back, things had worked out nicely. The omnivores had evolved. Forming roaming gangs and tribes, brandishing fire, clubs and flint stone tools. Having risen to the top of the food chain, they had started farming around three major river deltas, taming beasts, building cities, making kingdoms and armies. Societies were forming. Technology was being developed, clubs, axes, plowshares, bow and arrow, the wheel, the alphabet, mathematics, geometry, chemistry, physics, philosophy and astronomy. And, ahh, finally, there is was: Organized religion. Ahh, indeed! Now there was the entertainment factor she had been hoping for! A resilient species of technologically advanced quad-limbed mammals, eternally conflicted between greed and fear, science and faith, between individual success and group dynamics, with an extremely high degree of adaptability to external circumstances, now teetering on the brink of utter annihilation or inter-planetary colonization. This would do! This project would gain her this year's award.

"Master?"

"Yes, Child!"

"I am ready to submit. I have a new world to present. Take a peek?"

"Nice. Nice. Good job. This looks promising. What will you call the show?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something simple. Related to the looks of the planet? Maybe

<Pale Blue Dot>?"

Coin Operated

<<Hi Clara. Your current NuMemCo subscription is about to expire. Do you wish to extend? <yes>
<no> [Reminder 7 of 36] >>

The renewal notice had first appeared in Clara's visual field a month ago. Then every week after that. Now daily. Soon, the message would show up every hour. The final warning would come with a brief loss of consciousness, a blurry visual field, nausea, a blistering migraine and a wave of anxiety, then depression, then existential dread and desperation.

Clara blinked left three times to switch to <yes>, then blinked tree times right, and tapped the inside of her front-row of upper teeth three times with her tongue, while making a fist with both hands to confirm the renewal.

The slight trace of cluster migraine headache she had started to feel with the appearance of the renewal message lifted. She felt refreshed, elated, ready for the next assignment.

The last time, at the last subscription renewal, a year ago, Clara had wanted to know what would happen if she did not select <<yes>>. She simply had let the subscription expire. It had been a mistake. Not only had the warnings become increasingly severe and uncomfortable, 24-hours after her letting the subscription lapse, her mind had "rebooted" to her original state. She had no longer been Clara, art-director in a virtual experience entertainment lab. Everything had gone back to Janet, unemployed, uninspired, without passion, without friends and goals in life. She had lost her job, her friends on the social networks, her bank account credit line. Everything. She had gone back to having nothing, being nobody at all. Even her rental contract had expired, and she was to vacate the 3-room habitat in the lower East Side within a week. All of this had happened over night. She could have known. She should have known. She had known. It had all been explained to her when she first signed up with NuMemCo. But she just did not want to believe it. All she could do now was crawl back to the NuMemCo office, and beg them to re-instate her account to the old status. She still remembered the humiliation of her 3V call with their head offices after she had been downgraded.

"NuMemCo, have a perfect life! How can we assist you today?"

"Yes, Janet Clara Andrews here, citizen ID: JCA19032034/A34652JKN23. I would like to re-instate my account?"

"Stand by for verification!"

The camera on her ComPad switched on. As did the DNA scanner. Janet placed her thumb on the ID field. After 4 seconds a light winked from orange to green, she had been cleared.

"You'll have to come in to one of our offices. Your neural lace will have to be reset and upgraded", the AI on the other end of the line informed her."

"Is that really necess.."

"Yes", the AI interrupted. "Sending the appointment information now."

Janet was to go there today. The appointment was in 3 hours. Barely enough time to scrounge up someone that would lend her some credit to pay for the transit fee. But she had made it. At 18:00 sharp, she stepped through the automatic doors to the local NuMemCo lab, close to the city center. The room she entered into was empty. Sterile. White tile floor. Plastic white paint walls. No features.

No furniture. NuMemCo had no need for niceties. For amenities. They had a monopoly, and they were exploiting it ruthlessly.

A camera pod extruded from the ceiling. A voice, coming from nowhere, intoned.

“Janet Clara Andrews?”

“Yes”

“JCA19032034/A34652JKN23?”

“Yes”

“You wish to re-instate your subscription?”

“Yes”

“Please step forward into cabin A”

A door to her right appeared in the feature-less wall. A small dressing room became visible, a surgical one-time tunic was hanging on the wall, next to a sophisticated helmet-cap-type contraption, made from a flimsy mesh of translucent material that sparkled in the dim lighting of the changing room. A small metal locker was ready to receive her belongings, of which there were not many. She only had her ComPad, NuCoin ring and the key fob to her apartment.

“Please step into the changing room and disrobe. Remove any metal objects such as piercings and implants to the extent possible. Put on the surgical robe, put on the communication head set and wait for the operator to pick you up.”

Janet complied. She entered the changing room, disrobed as instructed, put on the tunic, slipped on the head-set and waited. She did not have to wait long. After about 2 minutes, the inner door of the cubicle hissed open and a friendly-looking lab-technician, about 40-years of age, medium height and build wheeled in a gurney. “Please lie down, the gurney will adjust automatically to make you comfortable.”, he said with a broad smile on his face. Janet could not be sure if he was base-human or drone, but that did not matter at this point. She wanted her life back.

Janet, again, determined to undo her foolish mistake, followed the instructions. She sat on the gurney, which shape-shifted around her to support her head and limbs. It felt body warm and soft in a very eerie, vaguely sexual way. As soon as she had reclined, the communication helmet vibrated twice and she heard a sterile, female voice inside her head.

“Ready?”

“Yes”

The world faded out around her, slowly, from the outside in, like a shuttle air-lock iris closing in slow motion. Her consciousness fading to a pale, yellow dot in the center of her vision, she still felt how the gurney was wheeled out of the changing room into a small chamber that felt and smelled even more sterile, freezing cold. It resonated like a gigantic metal coffin. But she did not see any of that. Her embedded neural lace had taken over her visual and auditory processing. Abruptly, her visual field expanded again. Janet did not realize that more than 4 hours had passed as her Neural Lace had been reset, purged, reprogrammed with fresh memories, up-to-date emotion regulators and sensory-motor imprints. She saw herself seated on a park bench, surrounded by spring flowers. A small pond was visible in the distance. A business man in a dark, 20th-century-cut suit approached on

the graveled path, the small stones crunching under the soles of his black leather business shoes. The man carried a small clip-board. He sat down on the bench next to her. Smiled.

“Hi Janet. Everything is set. Why did you not simply renew the subscription? All it would have taken was a few blinks?”

“I know, it was foolish, I did not ..”

“No worries. You are here now. I’m just here for final inspection.”, the man interrupted. He made a check mark on the clipboard with an antique looking ball-point pen. Janet was really getting annoyed at the AI constantly finishing her sentences for her.

“.. know that this would be so complex, so humiliating!”, Janet stubbornly finished her sentence this time.

The man smiled. Vapidly. He put the pen back into his inside pocket after clicking the retractable ink cartridge back into the pen’s housing. He did not really have to care. What choice did Janet really have?

“Do you want to reinstate to full previous status now?”

“Yes”

“You are aware of and approve the terms and conditions of the end-user licensing agreement?”

“Yes, and yes” Janet, just like anybody she knew had never read the full licensing agreement. Why bother? You would have had to be upgraded to the full attorney-at-law subscription to understand it anyway.

“You know the subscription rate has been adjusted?”

“How much now?”

“12 % of net income, plus VAT, plus back-fees for the time-lapse”

Janet stared. She really hated NuMemCo. But there was no way back. She could not go back to her old self. She had already given permission. She sighed.

“Can you at least throw in an additional skill?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Classical piano would be nice, actually!” Janet still had the keyboard, her father had given her for her 12th birthday. She had never had the time or motivation to practice, and wanted to get rid of that festering sore of failure and guilt.

“Consider it done. We’ll add the 12 most common tunes. You’ll still have to practice, but you’ll get the hang of it in a few days. We aim to please, you know? And, don’t worry. The additional update will only take another 2 hours. You’ll wake up on the gurney in the changing room. By tomorrow, and you won’t remember any of this, everything will be good as new. You, and everyone else in your network will remember that you have just taken 2 days off, overcoming a nasty viral infection. Your projects have been put on hold. Worst case, you’ll have a bit of a migraine. But that will pass soon enough. You’ll have a perfect life.

Janet smiled. Coin operated or not. She got her life back.

Out of Body

Installing fusion drives on Main Belt Comets was a shit job. A dangerous job. But it paid well and someone had to do it.

Perry Gibbs looked over to his construction crew lead, Maria Petrova, who was floating, in her 8-limbed exo-suit, 30 meters to his right, about 200 meters above the surface of the 400-meter comet that was being fitted with a EM2400 Fusion drive. He and Maria were connected by a NuCarbon umbilical which provided communication and emergency life support in case their exo-packs failed for some reason. “Not that that ever happened”, Perry thought, sardonically, recalling the statistic that the fatality rate of long range mission out to Jupiter orbit took 5 years and 80% of the workers’ lives. Those that returned, however, were made for life, enjoying luxury and glory for the remainder of their existence on their choice on resorts on the main planets, or in any of the orbital or lunar habitats. The survivors were called “Water Angels”, because they ensured a steady flow of water ice from the outer regions of the solar system to the inner planets.

Their job was to get to a designated water-ice comet, usually 200 to 400 meters in diameter, match velocity, and supervise the installation of an EM2400 Fusion drive. Their heavily shielded, gigantic mother ship, the Tsunami, had 200 of these drives on board. When all drives were installed, ship and crew returned to Earth orbit. If they made it.

The fusion drives were fully self-contained, smart, and redundantly automated. But ever so often, something would “glitch”, a spare module had to be installed, a diagnostic routine had to be run. Human ingenuity, after all, was not completely obsolete in the 23rd century. Most of the hard labor was done by AI, drones, bots and dummies, as the humans called the non-sentient labor force providing life-support and entertainment to the remaining 350 million humans. Most of humanity remained on Earth, enjoying the perfection of the SafeZone Bubbles that still maintained a 1920’s Earth style, Southern-California climate and life-style. 20% of the population had gone off-planet, equally distributed between orbital habitats, the 3 moon bases making all of the space ships, and Mars. The Martians, 5 million of them, were living in 2 underground cities, MonsReal and LesMons, established 6 kilometers deep inside Olympus Mons, the massive 22 kilometer-high shield volcano on Mars. Luckily for the humans, Olympus Mons had turned out to be mostly hollow. Massive, ancient lava tubes provided a perfect location to grow radiation-shielded and air-tight habitat bubbles. There was plenty of power, driven by a mix of nuclear and fusion reactors. The food supply was secure through bio engineered flora and fauna. The projected sky was perennial blue, fun was beyond imagination. The low gravity made all sports a really thrilling experience. The only thing the location did not have enough of was air and fresh water. In came the Water Angels.

Based on an idea of the 21st century, the fleet of Water Angels basically diverted a steady stream of comets towards the north poles of Mars and the Moon. The EM2400 drives tapped into the water ice of the comet and converted it into fuel for the drives, which then started steering the comets into the desirable trajectories. After a journey of 25 to 50 years, the comets, now shrunk by 30 to 50% percent, impacted on the north poles, evaporating their water content on impact, and feeding a system of extractors that converted the incoming water for the Moon- and Mars-based humans.

A simple idea that had been made feasible by the concept of machines making machines making machines. Nearly everything could be grown or printed from carbon. Buildings, space ships, machines and minds. It was industrialization at a scale that would have made Rockefeller, Ford, Marx and Musk blush with embarrassment at their sheer failure of imaginative scope.

A loud “Ugh .. Arnng” .. yanked Perry out of his reverie. The lower part of Maria was gone. He had not seen what happened. A cloud of blobbing fluids drifted away from Maria. She had had no chance.

“troids, a massive swarm, coming in hard and fast, Perry, get the hell out of there!”, the Tsunami radioed. “Make it snappy.” We are sending the emergency return authorization now!

Perry reacted. He flipped the NuDiamond cover of the ESF the Eject Sequence FailSafe, depressed the button with his right index finger, and yelled “Abort, Abort, Abort” The Exo-Suit opened up explosively, releasing him and propelling him backwards, away from the comet with a massive push from the chest mounted boosters. But it was too little, too late. 2 seconds later, Perry, exo-suit and all had been shredded into thousands of tiny splinters and fragments, some drifting away, becoming the next cloud of micro-meteoroids, some staying in close orbit with the comet, eventually merging with the icy surface. They would be home, on Mars, eventually, and unfortunately.

On board the Tsunami, 20 clicks out, pushing away from the path of the incoming meteoroid swarm, the flight engineer in charge smacked her fist into the view plate. “Dammit, Perry, this was the last 2 exos, the last 2 bodies! What are we going to install the remaining 24 EM’s with? Huh? We won’t make bonus if we don’t get past 93% installation quota!

Perry Gibbs, strapped into the co-pilot’s chair on Maria’s left, sucking on a NutriChow bottle, shrugged.

“Pay is still pretty damn good, screw the bonus, Maria.”

“Does anything ever bother, you, Perry? Is there anything vaguely resembling a human soul left in that perfect body of yours? All you care about is your body-fat ratio and your gaming scores. Damn you to hades, Perry! I am sick and tired of having to hang out here with your narcissistic caricature of a human being for another 2 years!”

Perry kept sucking on the straw and said nothing. He was used to Maria’s tirades after losing another body.

Maria continued her rant. “Do you ever think about it? That these bodies we deploy, these drones we load our conscious state into, our very minds, that these bodies, these copies of you and me, that they don’t even know that they are not real? They think they are the real “us” the real you and me, married for 5 years, in love, looking forward to retirement on Earth. That when they see each other “die”, that that appears entirely real to them? Do you even give a flying frack? Why do they even have to give them the illusion that they are real? That is just plain evil. I hate the guys at TerraCorp!

Perry released the Nutri-Chow bottle, which drifted downward in the micro-gravity of the Tsunamis bridge rotation. He shrugged again.

“Maria, Maria, darling. Chill out? It’s all good. We are out of bodies now. We can go home! Remember? These things are expensive as heck! The copies have to think that they are real. They have to feel pain, so they are careful. We don’t have an infinite supply of bodies out here. You know all that, we have been through is 100 times! But look at the bright side. We can go back to base 6 months early! Forget the bonus, we’ll still be rich. And, by the way, how do we even know that you and I are the real thing? For all we know, we are just copies of the real Perry and Maria hanging out in Bar Olympus lounge drinking Capirinhas, right now.”

Maria shot him a deadly glance. Deep down, she knew he was right. They could not know.

Perry laughed, hit the belt clasp, and drifted over to the bridge airlock to prepare the cryo-chambers for their return journey. He shook his head. This was not bad at all. Being out of bodies, a Boob as the

Waternauts called I, was a common thing. They were still Water Angles. Heroes. It would be nice to be back.

Dragon

Kes did not want to go. All the others, older than him, stronger, taller too, already good with the long sword, had gone out and had not come back. But he could not not go, either. The village needed a champion, and he was next in line.

Kes had just come of age. It had barely been 1 moon ago when he had completed the quest. Going out into the forest for 3 days, armed only with a stubby knife and a bag filled with dried fruit. Making a bow and arrows from scratch. Finding a wild boar. Killing it, and bringing it back to the village. Or not come back at all. The coming-of-age ritual was harsh. But times were hard too. Winters were long. The harvests had been bad for three years in row. The village had shrunk down to four and ten families, each between 12 and 20 strong. And then the dragon killings had started. First one sheep. Then all of them. Then the cattle. Then the first villagers had disappeared. No screams, no blood, no farewell letters, no witnesses. Nobody dared to go out to the forest any longer, nobody was allowed to cross to Fratholm, the neighboring village without an escort of at least 6 armed men. And yet, people kept disappearing. There was no pattern. No rhyme. No reason. After a week, the village had literally just shut down all travel outside the palisade walls. It had to be a dragon. No other explanation made sense.

The village elders had debated it for nights on end. What do do? Witchcraft? No. Witchcraft had been banned by the King's Stewart many moons ago and there were no witches left within a 10-day journey of the village. Or Wizards for that matter, either. There had been no wizards since Ormond the Gray had buried the Chest of Champions beneath the village market. So magic was out of the question. Champions then! The elders had decided. They had to open the Chest of Champions. It was the only way.

The first of the Champions had volunteered, eager to show their mettle, anxious to impress the remaining maidens of the village with their prowess, their loot. A dragon tooth maybe? A claw or a piece of the scaly skin? Nobody really believed they would encounter the dragon, let alone defeat the dragon, or bring any of the villagers back. The best the elders could hope for was that the dragon would just pick off the weakest of them, the sheep, the old, the frail, and then move on and leave the village alone. The Champions would claim victory nonetheless. It had never been any different.

Kes remembered what his grand father had told him before he had died of old age.

"Kes", he had said. "I am still an Elder, so I am really not allowed to tell you this. But I won't be here much longer and you deserve to know!"

"No, Papa", Kes had said, kneeling down to the frail husk of man that lay shriveled into a set of woolen blankets by the glow of the fire place. "You'll outlive all of us" he lied, forcing a smile. He could not hide the tears that were rolling down his cheeks, dirty with soot from cleaning out the furnace of the locksmith earlier that day. "But do tell, I have always liked secrets. I promise to keep them. Cross my heart." Kes made the sign of CrestFort, banned now, but the villagers still held on to the old superstitions, Stewart of the King be damned. The grandfather smiled back, coughed, brought a cloth to his mouth, dark brown, almost black with blood. Papa coughed again and then continued, his breath rattling heavily between the sentences, whispering, so that Kes had to bring his head very close to his grand father's mouth.

"Remember. There have always been three kinds of tales in the village. The first set of stories is told around the fire places, during the moon and harvest festivals, at midsummer, at weddings and at

funerals. These tales are full of magic, wizardry, heroes, miracles, and maidens rescued from dragons. You know. But these are fairy tales. For children. Weak minds. Not for you. You are different. You deserve to know!"

Kes looked at the old man. What other stories could there be? "Please go on!"

"The second kind of story is only for the elders. They are secrets that if told to an outsider, carry a penalty of death by SootRoot poison. A horrible way to die, so please, keep your mouth shut about this. They talk about what is really going on. The politics between the villages. The rules and contracts between the families. The tricks of the magicians and witches, you know how they fool us? And the fact that there are no dragons. There never have been, and there never will be!

Kes stared. He had suspected as much. He had always "known". He had always been interested in finding out about things, driven by an intense curiosity, a drive to learn everything, to know "everything." "Please go on, I will not say anything to anyone about this"

"There is not enough time to tell you all the stores of the second kind. But know this!"

"Yes?"

The Chest of Champions, it is not from here.

"I know, Ormond the Gray .."

"No, no", the old man coughed again into the cloth, more blood had come up this time: this was taking out the ounce of strength. But Kes urged him on, he needed to know.

"The Chest is not from here, it is also not from the past, not from any place around here, or any place you can get to. It is from a different place. You'll have to see for yourself. Tomorrow, since you are Champion, you get to see what's inside. Don't be fooled. Don't take any of the shiny trinkets, none of the blades, or swords, or any of the chain mail. Those are distractions. Put on the hat, that looks like it's made of velvet. It will appear to you as though it is blacker than black. It will draw your eyes to it. Put it on and you will learn the stories. You will know what I know. There is one more thing ... "

Kes watched as his grandfather took a long rattling breath, but waited in vain for the breath to come out again. The body became still. He was gone.

Kes was paralyzed. He could not form a clear thought. He was alone in the hut, there was nobody he could ask for help, so he ran out, to the neighboring hut to get help. Ori, the mother of his best friend came running back with him, carrying a leather pouch with herbs and ointments, but there was nothing that could be done. She said: "He had a good life. It had just been a matter of time. Don't be sad, at least he was not taken by the dragon."

Kes bit his lip. Although very sad, shaking with emotion, and upset, he had to be careful know, not to tell what he now knew to be the truth. A truth that only the elders knew, and maybe not even all of the elders. Kes wondered what his grandfather would have told him, if he had had one more breath.

A day of mourning was called and the frail wisp of a body was put into an carved oak casket, befitting the stature of an elder. After a brief series of speeches by the elders and Kes's father the casket was burned on a pyre in the village market place. After a further day, Kes was called into the council chamber to be briefed for his quest as Village Champion. There was a dragon to be slain.

"Kes"

"Yes"

“You know what you have to do?”

“I do. As Champion I will be able to go to the vault, and I will get to open the Chest of Champions. I will be there by myself. Only I will see what is in the Chest. And the Chest reveals a different secret, a different tool, or weapon to each of the Champions. I will choose wisely, listen to the advice and I will go on my quest to slay the Dragon. I will come back triumphantly, or I will not come back at all!

“You have done well in your preparation”, the elders nodded in approval. “May be ancestors and spirits be your guides, Kes. Take what ever weapons you need from the vault. Good luck!”

With that, the elders left and pointed Kes to the entrance to the vault, a chamber under the market place, normally heavily guarded and triple-locked behind a thick oak door. He stepped inside, lit the wall-mounted torches and opened the Chest.

The Chest was full of trinkets and shiny objects, just like his grandfather had said. And just like he said, he ignored the shiny loot, as well as the yellowing scrolls of papyrus and leather, and looked for the strange black hat, he had learned about in the final words of this Papa.

There. Just like he had described. Black, soft, impossibly black, actually. He put it on.

And the world snapped.

“Ah, snap, snap, hello, welcome back, Kes!”, the large round face of his cousin Trish was hanging 30 centimeters in front of his eyes, snapping her fingers in his face.

“Do you know it’s taken me 10 minutes to find out how to snap you out of this? Dinner is ready! Take of that stupid helmet and join us or we’ll be late for the movie, nerdboy!”

Scorpion

He had shot the alien with his AK-47.

“Shot”, actually, he thought, was an understatement. “Shredded” would have been a more appropriate description. Yet, here they were. Having drinks. Talking about the nature of things.

Pete had woken up, around 3 am, by something going “bump” in the night. Yes, really! Groggily, Pete had grabbed the AK leaning against his nightstand, for cases just like this. He had taken 3 deep, long breaths, just like he had learned in the Secret Tactics of Special Forces YouTube episodes, inserted one of the curved clips, switched on the tactical flash-light attachment, cocked the gun, flipped the safety, and headed downstairs to check things out. Noises were coming from the basement, where he kept his air-con unit, his file archive and his armageddon-survival supplies, including the 3 crates of ammo he had just bought at the Greater Tuscon Gun Show. Someone wanted to lift the ammo from him now, he thought, and he would not have any of that bull-crap. So, steadfastly determined to protect his house, his freedom and his way of life, Pete carefully opened the basement door, gun tucked under his right armpit, finger on the trigger, and caught the thief red handed.

“Freeze, loser boy, or you’re gonna get a lot more that you bargained for!”

He had rehearsed that line many times in front of his bath room mirror. Now, when reality had finally caught up with his fantasies, Pete’s mind was filled with a chaotic jumble of emotions, fear of the intruder (was he armed?), glee (finally something really worthy to shoot at!), excitement (adrenaline jacking up his fight/flight response into red-line overload territory). Pete’s heart was beating at a frantic pace that made him want to puke. There was no chance to have a clear thought or to remember any of the tactics or rules or tips or routines he had learned. When the man/thing/shape turned, quickly, weirdly, he had pulled the trigger, filling the basement with fire, fury, deafening noise and 30 rounds of full metal jacket death. Or so he had thought.

After the smoke had cleared, the man/thing/shape still stood there, unharmed. Directly behind it, Pete’s filing cabinet had been shot to shreds, and the wine shelf, filled with 24, 2018 bottles of Pinotage was bleeding red fluid.

“You might want to put that down. It won’t work on me”,

the thing said and stepped, “flowed”, “morphed” closer. It did not seem to move in ways that Pete had seen before. It moved in flow/jumps/blurs, there really was no better way to describe it, advancing like a video after pushing “skip forward”. One second the thing was here, then it was “on” him, touching him, sending a mild electrical current through him, making the hair on his arms stand on end and then taking his AK away from him. Pete felt weak, calm, serene, elated, curious and confused. Surely this was just a dream, he thought, before he passed out.

When Pete woke up, he was on lying on his living room couch. The clock showed 3:30 am, so about 30 minutes had passed since his last memory. He must have had a bad dream. In the nightmare, he had woken up, headed into the basement and had unloaded a full, 30-round clip of 7.62 rounds in a 3 second, frantic burst of panic when some man/thing/intruder had turned on him. His ears were still ringing, he was half-deaf, numbed with the noise and the stench of the gun powder fumes. His head hurt. He felt weak and his skin still tingled from where the thing had touched him. Not a dream then. He inspected his hands. They looked real. He smelled his fingers. Definitely the smell of gun fire and barrel oil.

“Wakey, Wakey”, he heard from the arm chair.

Pete’s head jerked 45 degrees, he started to rise from the sofa, but the thing “flowed” to him in no-time, touched him again, and he sank back to the cushions, feeling calm.

“Chill”, the thing said. “I have made hot chocolate”

“Who are you?”, Pete asked, befuddled. This started to look and feel like he was in the middle of a “Twilight Zone” or “X-Files” episode. He was looking around for camera pods. Was he being pranked? Pete pinched himself again. Yupp, real enough. Pete sighed. He decided to play along.

“Okay, what are you? Some kind of alien, here to abduct me to your zoo?” Pete flinched at the utter stupidity of that statement. How lame could you get?

“It’s not far from the truth”, the thing said. “I might as well tell you, because nobody will believe your story anyway.”

Pete just stared, fascinated. There was a cup of hot chocolate on the tea table next to the sofa. It actually smelled good. He liked stories. He might as well enjoy the experience while it lasted. When would he have the next opportunity to shoot at aliens AND have hot chocolate story time in the middle of the night? The alien continued.

“My name does not matter. You would not be able to pronounce it.”

“Whatever”. Pete tried the hot chocolate, it was pretty good, although it was getting cold now.

“I am from a civilization that is as far ahead of your world as you are ahead from single celled organisms.”

“U-huh”, Pete grunted. He had heard that all before in the 100’s of sci-fi movies he had watched. “Go on, what are you doing here?”

“I am not supposed to be here. My guardians will pick me up any minute. We are not allowed to come here anymore. Your place has been quarantined, made off-limits. I broke a rule, but I am only a teenager, as you would call it in your culture, and my punishment will be mild. I might get stored for a few orbits. Some privileges revoked. Chores. Nothing too bad.”

Pete frowned. He did not buy the teen-age escapade story line. “Banned, by whom, why, like as of when, and banned from what?”

“When you detonated your first nuke over a city during a conflict. You were banned from joining the galactic federation. We put an exclusion bubble around your solar system. 2 light years diameter. Anything you see about your Universe is just a simulation we are running. All your sensor data will not reveal a trace of the existence of the galactic federation. No ships will come in, and no ships of yours return any information that contradicts that data set. Ever. Also, your physicists will not ever discover the “secret” of inter-stellar travel, as those physics have been disabled in your bubble.”

“That sounds like we are living in a zoo, a reservation, some kind of laboratory. If that is true, that is outrageous! Oppression and tyranny, anyone? Who dares to make these decisions? We are banned by whom, exactly?”

“The galactic federation council. They look at evolving civilizations and when they reach nuclear capabilities, judgement is passed. Based on your basic “nature” you would have either been allowed in, given access to knowledge and technology, or quarantined. In your case, you were quarantined.

“Wait, what, you mean like in the movie “The day the Earth stood still?”.

“Very similar. That story was made by an author who had talked to one of us in the 40’s, during the quarantine depositions. “

“Ok”, Pete’s head was spinning, he still was not entirely clear about what had just expired. He raised his hand. “This is all a bit much, okay? Clearly you are not “normal”, nobody lives through a full clip of 7.62 rounds at point blank range. So, you are special, that much I give to you. But please run the whole story by me one more time?”

“I think you got it. Why don’t you explain it back to me in your own words?”

“Ok, you say you are some kind of alien teenager. You are here by accident. You’ll be picked up, beamed out, I guess, very soon. Our place, Earth, is banned from some kind of space-federation. Because we nuked a few cities and that made us “unworthy” in your eyes.” Pete had made the “Air Commas” with his fingers when he said “unworthy”. How am I doing so far?”

“Got it in one”, the alien said.

“But why would you be so harsh? Surely you must see that we have not nuked any more cities since then? We have developed nicely, right? Lots of great technology? You said yourself: we are still a “young” civilization. Once we learn about the other planets, aliens and all that, we’ll change. Surely, we can learn. We can grow up and join? No?”

“Do you know the story of the scorpion and the frog?”

“No, I don’t what’s that, a fairy tale? What does that have to do with anything?” Pete was getting annoyed at story time now. Why was the thing not listening? And where was his AK? He felt exposed and threatened all over sudden. He drew up his arms around him, starting to shiver, the shock had started to set in. He pulled up his knees and started at the alien, which really was had to “pin point” in space, or even in time. One second the thing looked like an average male, about 6ft tall, short hair, dressed in a smooth black overalls, the next moment it looked like a black gap in reality, there but not there, translucent and reflective at the same time in a way that played tricks on the eyes. The next moment, it was not there at all, but the voice, calm, male, soothing, was still audible. The alien continued.

“Once there was a frog that was just about to cross a river to get to the other side, where the other frogs were. Just before the frog jumped in, a scorpion came up to the frog and asked:

“Can you take me with you? Please. I promise not to sting you!”

“You are a scorpion! If you sting me, I will die. I cannot take that risk!”

“You can trust me. I cannot swim. If I sting you, you cannot carry me. If I sting you in the water, we will both drown. In addition, I will be very grateful and might be able to do a favor for you later? It might be great for you to have a scorpion friend?”

“I am still not sure. But that sounds believable. Why not? Hop on!”

The scorpion folded his tail and hopped on. The frog jumped into the floods, swimming in such a way that kept the Scorpion safely above water. When they arrived on the other side, the scorpion hopped off, turned and stung the frog.

“Ow, ow, the frog complained. You are killing me! Why are you doing this?”

“It is my nature”, the scorpion said.

Pete stared. He did not get it at first. When the last words had been spoken, the alien had started to fade. Only a depression in the back cushion of the arm chair it had been sitting in, still gave some indication that there had been a presence there.

“Scorpion”, Pete said, “Scorpion.”

One way or another

Karl's life was over.

Done. No matter what the verdict would say. Even if the jury found him "not guilty as charged", he would not be able to resume his old life as "normal". Too much had changed. Everything had changed. He had changed. But there was at least a small chance he could get Jenny back. And if the jury came back with "guilty", he would surely disappear in some prison somewhere, forever branded, never to rejoin society as the man he used to be.

It had all started so innocently. He now knew there was a very slippery slope from gullible to guilty. Given another chance, he would not make the same mistake again. One way or another, he had learned his lesson. Karl curled up on the hard, blue plastic plank bed of the barren holding cell of the court house, folding his hand-cuffed hands to cushion his head, and went through everything, again, for the millionth time.

He found the diary left behind on a park bench one late evening, chiming softly, gently drawing his attention as he walked past. The rubber soles of Karl's cheap business shoes were kicking up dust from the gravel on the park's footpath, and the steady <crunch> , <crunch>, <crunch> of his fast-paced walk almost drowned out the soft wind chime-sound of the diary. Karl had been on his way home. He was coming from his usual after-work stop-over at the Dragon's Den, his favorite fantasy and role-playing store. The Den was a hang-out where he could meet like-minded people to geek out, discuss fandom news, play role-playing and fantasy games, you know, do nerdy stuff. Karl was still "into" that, in spite of, and maybe just because of, everyone telling him that he should finally "grow up". His day-time job was boring enough. The Dragon's Den was the change-up he needed. His daily fantasy-fix! During weekdays, from 9 to 6, Karl was an accountant in a down-town high-tech consulting firm. There, he was spending his days, alone and isolated, in his dimly lit, dusty corner cubicle, reviewing expense report exceptions and asking highly-strung, 80-hour-work-week consultants, who were a few decades younger, and at least four levels above his pay grade, to resubmit their expenses because they had broken some obscure tax compliance rule or some other corporate financial governance regulation.

Karl hated them as much as they hated him. He did not mind their rejection any longer. What was there to like, anyway? Mid 40's, rounded by burgers and Red Bull, balding on top, a graying, often greasy pony-tail hanging over the collars of faded, "3-for-99" polyester, gray or blue business shirts, face dimpled with childhood acne scars, yellowish pale skin crumpling and sagging under the impact of age and beer and vaping fumes, he was hardly likely to be the center of attention of the female crowd at work. He had given up on that aspect. He had given up on himself. He had given up on life. He could not wait for the inevitable heart attack or stroke to take him to a different place. Any place would be better than this.

But then he found the diary. Or maybe the diary had found him?

Karl always went through the park on his way back from the Den, to get at least the minimum alibi of 2000 steps onto this health-app every day. And then he saw it, lying there. Calling out to him with that soft chime. Old. Leather-bound. Weathered. Ancient looking, actually. With a metal clasp like he had seen on the many fantasy games online. It looked beautiful. And it had his initials embossed onto the brass clasp. K.A. as in "Karl Anders". What a co-incidence! Karl stopped, thought about it and then sat down on the park bench, looking at the diary. It beckoned him to open it. He now knew he should not have opened it. But he did. He had opened it. And now he was here, at the downtown

criminal court, awaiting the jury's verdict in the case of the murder of a J.M. Rowlands, the person he had shot dead.

When he had opened the diary, that day, it had revealed a digital organizer and diary. While the exterior was leather-bound and ancient, the interior was very much 21st century up-to-date. He did not even think of it as someone else's property. He found and pushed the "on" button. A login screen appeared. Just for fun, he entered his personal "everyday" credentials, the ones he used for all the mundane, non-commercial sites. He typed: Wizard1976 and Jabba1234 and pushed "done". And he got in! Karl raised both eyebrows. Maybe it was just a decoy login routine, or deactivated, or defective? Karl shrugged and pressed on with his investigation. This was now like a mystery, and he loved solving mysteries. First thing he did was to find the source of the chime. It was an alarm, set to the very time he had come past the park bench. This was getting exceedingly weird. Karl deactivated the alarm and looked for signs of ownership. There were none. Next he tried to find any content that could give him any indication as to the owner of the device. The list of diary entries was short. It contained only one note. Monday, September 30, 2019. "What, wait, that was next Monday?" he thought! Fascinated, and completely oblivious to the fact that he might be intruding on someone else's intimate secrets, he selected and opened the entry.

<<Monday. Interesting. Since I found the diary, my fortunes are looking up. On Sunday, Jenny, the owner of the Dragon's Den sent me a message. She wants me to come and meet her after hours on Tuesday. She has a proposition. I can't wait to meet her. She's cute. I have no chance with her, but you never know, maybe I something will happen. I will surely wear my best outfit.>>

Karl pushed the off-button. Clearly this belonged to someone also going to the Den. Someone with the initials KA. Someone who liked to write diary entries for things that had not happened yet. Or maybe it had happened, and there was just a mistake in the date. Karl shrugged. He would bring it to the Den on Monday. The place was closed now, and is would stay closed all weekend. There was no chance to bring it there right away, to ask Jenny, the owner, about this. Karl checked the diary for any other indications of ownership, a label, or an address entry. Nothing. So, he shrugged, and stashed the diary away in his briefcase, set a reminder in his own calendar, and forgot about it. He did not think about it again until Sunday, when he received a surprising message from Jenny.

"Hi Karl. I hope I am not intruding. I used the mail address you entered into the Den's newsletter subscription list. I know you come to the Den a lot. You don't know me, but I do feel that I know you, you have such a wealth of knowledge! And I have a proposition. I think you will like it. Can we meet on Tuesday evening, after hours? I'll book at Table at Gino's, around the corner, on C-Street, and we can start with drinks at 8pm, and then maybe grab a bite afterwards? They make their own pasta?" LMK. Regards, JCR

Karl should have known right there, right from the start. Something inside had HAD known from the first minute, yelling at him "This is a set up! Run, Karl, run as fast as you can". But the prospect of being needed, of someone maybe seeing something special in him, the vague promise of "scoring" with someone attractive, albeit older, had made his inner chemical soup go completely haywire. Love is blind they say, but the vision problems started early, way earlier. Especially with a balding, 40-something accountant, lapsed-romantic fantasy-geek that had given up on everything about a decade ago.

The date with Jenny had been amazing. Jenny wanted him to help out at the Den, become a mentor to some of her newer staff, train them on the intricacies of game lore and fantasy fandom, pass on geek knowledge, make them more "authentic" to the Den's patrons. She could not pay much, but she could pay a little, and she would be very, very grateful.

In the beginning, Karl did not know what to do with her, he felt awkward, insecure, shy, out of place and like an impostor. But Karl kept reading the “magic” diary, the diary that somehow always contained a single, additional “future” entry, written by himself, or someone that wrote just like himself, foretelling things that would come to pass in the future of his growing relationship with Jenny. It was like magic. No, it was magic. It had to be magic. It was like a fairy, or a muse, or Cupid himself was now guiding his destiny. He was torn between his rational side, and his long-lost, hidden, suppressed and buried romantic persona, always living with one leg inside the doorway to fairyland. But it did not matter. One way or another, we was winning. Having the diary was like having a list of secret game cheats, a data base for game hacks for life itself! Everything improved. He felt better. Dressed better. Colored and cut his hair. He ate better. Spent more time outside, and after 4 weeks, he had even shed a few pounds. The transformation was amazing enough that even the people at work started to notice.

It was so obvious, now, in hind-sight. He could have seen it from a mile away. If only he had talked to someone about this, they would have smacked him over the head with the diary and yelled “Wake up, bozo, you are being played!”. But Karl did not have anyone to talk to, apart from his own, inner dialogue, which became increasingly manic, filter-bubbled and delusional. He did not WANT to see the set-up. His inner child had woken up and he wanted to believe, needed to believe. He was desperate to believe. The diary, the budding relationship, the new side-job was making him fall in love. In love with himself, his geekdom, his fairy-tale knowledge, his expertise in role playing games. Karl was feeling needed. Feeling wanted, understood, appreciated. He was helping someone. And he fell in love with Jenny. Day after day, week after week, spiraling down into a tunnel of bliss that completely numbed his rational capabilities and his common sense. And Jenny seemed to like him, too. After 4 weeks, they ended up in bed together, and it had been amazing. The diary had told him exactly what to do, and what not to do, ahead of time. Nagging suspicions or not, Karl was winning! He was finally winning! One way or another!

Then, one day, just at closing hour, a car pulled up outside the Den. A fancy, black Tesla with an out-of-state registration. The windows were darkened, one figure, tall, male was inside. Inside the Den, Jenny, looking flustered, cheeks blushing, brushed past him, and planted a kiss on his forehead. “Karl, dearest, I have to run off a bit early today. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure, sure, I’ll close up. Where are you going?”

“I’ll tell you later, nothing important for you right now”, Jenny said, on her way out, fixing an ear ring into her left ear. Jenny did not usually wear ear rings, and, wait, was that a golden band on her ring finger? Karl noticed all these the details, but then filed them away as irrelevant. Jenny continued: “Investor stuff, Karl, trying to keep the business you know?”

“Sure Jen, whatever, but you know, you can talk to me about that stuff, too, I am an accountant, in case you forgot? I wrote that business plan!”

“Gee thanks, sure, I know, yes, but, no need. I’m fine. I will call you okay?”

Jenny hurried outside, all wobbly in her high-heel shoes, she was clearly not used to wearing. She was certainly dressed in her best. Looking great, way younger than her age of about 58. Smelling of exquisite perfume. “Was she going out with someone?”. Jenny entered the passenger side of the car, and as the sedan pulled away, Karl saw her silhouette leaning in towards the driver for a kiss. Before the car turned, Karl took a note of the registration plate, instinctively, but then crumpled up the note right away, frowning, and ashamed at his own suspicions.

But things just went downhill from there. In the days and weeks following, Jenny would often “rush off”, become increasingly distant, monosyllabic, and just give him more chores and odd jobs to do. Conversations became sparse. The sharing of beds stopped. Karl was beginning to panic. Then, one evening, he overheard a phone conversation Jenny had in the adjacent room. “Sure hon, no problem, I’ll be there at 9, Friday, right. The usual place. Nice, nice, yes, sure, absolutely. Great! Looking forward. Bye!”

That sealed it. Hot rage boiled upward in Karl. Someone was stealing, had stolen Jenny from him! There was no way he would allow that. He checked the diary. The diary would know. His muse would know. And there it was. Another entry. Entered as of the time of next Saturday, the day following the date that Jenny had just agreed to. It read:

“Last entry. My stroke of luck is over. I’m finished. Jenny has left me. She sold the Den to an investor. She is also in love with the guy. They are moving out of state, getting married. He has already paid off all her debt. The guy will tear down the house and build a mall in this location. I am not only going to lose Jenny, I am going to lose it all! I can’t bear this. Good bye world! Look for me at the bottom of Gateway Bridge. Karl over and out.

Karl shut down the diary. No. It would not come to this. There had to be another way. He logged into the bank account to check Jenny’s account. Karl stared. There it was! The debt was settled. As of today! 350 thousand had come in overnight, from an overseas account JMR group, marked “down-payment”. So, it was true! The diary was right!

Something inside Karl snapped at that moment. The entire flimsy building of self-delusion was coming down in a heap of self-destruction, like a large building, collapsing in on itself. His inner “skeptic”, the part of him that had always known, that had never wanted to believe in the “magic”, in “fate or providence”, the part that had always warned him, the part he had ignored and pushed down, because the gains had been too big. That part was yelling at him now, in the voice of his late mother, who had never believed in him, who had always foretold that he would come to nothing, that he would end as a failure.

“See? I told you from the start. But you never listen. You’re just like your deadbeat father. Stupid, fat and lazy and not to be trusted. Don’t you see, you dumb putz! That diary was a set up. She put it there. She knew you were going down that path after the Den. She knew your password. She knew you were a hopeless romantic from your behavior in the games. She knew you, and she played you. And you fell for it like the complete idiot that you are. You are such a loser. I still wonder how you got that degree! I can’t believe they are still paying you as an accountant, after all the free work you are putting in for Jenny, running her store, getting her better credit, writing the business plan, you are just unbelievable, Karl, ... “

“STOP IT”, Karl yelled at himself, yelled at his dead mother’s raging ghost inside him, trying to shut up the shrill voice that was making his life even more miserable than it was already. “JUST STOP IT”. He could not stand that part of himself. He made fists with both hands, claspings so hard that his arms started shaking. Karl held his breath for 10 seconds, then exhaled long, inhaled long, held, exhaled, inhaled. He tried to calm himself down like the special forces did when they were going into battle. This would not do. He had to get this under control. One way or another.

Sure. It was a mess. A hopeless mess. And he had allowed it. Created it with his voluntary tunnel vision. And yet. He did not blame Jenny. She had just used him. Like everyone else always had. But. No. He would not throw himself off a bridge. That last fake entry had really tipped him over the edge. He would do a lot of things for love, but he won’t do that. That thought made him smile. “He he he,

yeah, Meatloaf. Yeah!” That humorous angle, the song that was now playing in his head, tipped his mind into game playing mode. Life was a game. A game had rules. And rules could be used to win. A plan started to form in his mind. Maybe there was a way out? He opened the Den’s office laptop and started a Google search. “Temporary Insanity”. There. Lots and lots of articles, cases, white papers. Defense arguments. Psychological evaluations. Karl was up all night, doing the research, his confidence in his plan growing by the minute. While he was staying up, Karl kept drinking Red Bulls and popped a double dose of Xanax when his plan had taken shape. He went home, just before sun rise, took a sick day from work, and slept in. When he woke up, his plan was unchanged. He washed down 2 more pills of Xanax with a Red Bull and went to the Den at his usual hour.

Karl was feeling very strange indeed. His inner state did not feel like any emotion. It felt like his inside had filled up with liquid nitrogen, making him feel stone cold through and through. At the same time, he felt calm. Disconnected. Numb. Focused. Clear. Not a trace of panic. But Karl did feel a strange, eerie form of sterile glee. This was a path back. A small chance, but not a completely impossible chance. After all, he had almost 40 years of experience with role-playing. He had seen 1000’s of movies, clips, tutorials. He knew everything that could be learned about Method Acting on the Internet. His jaw started throbbing. He heard the blood rush past his inner ears. A tunnel vision was opening up towards a singular goal. He kept repeating the prepared story line to himself. Over, and over and over and over. “Nobody is going to take my girl away from me. Nobody!”

When Jenny was busy with a client, signing them up for a work shop and for the newsletter, Karl went into the back of the store, into Jenny’s office, and used the spare key to unlock the secure drawer where Jenny kept her Derringer in a small metal box. He cracked the gun open, checked, yes, it was loaded. It was a tiny .357 Magnum Derringer pistol Jen had bought at a gun auction a few weeks ago. Small. Old. But functional and lethal. Just like Karl. Lethal Karl. He liked that. It would do. He would do it. He pocketed the gun and went back to the Den’s store, smiling. Jenny smiled back. She’d never guess what he had in mind.

When Jenny left after hours, that evening, he popped another Xanax, washed it down with a luke-warm Red Bull and followed her on his scooter, careful not to be seen. If he had looked back, he would have seen a dark figure, inside the Den, picking up his diary, stuffing it into a back pack and leaving the Den through the back exit. But he did not look back. The ball was rolling now, downhill, there was no turning back.

Jenny had walked away from the Den in a hurry. Karl followed her on the scooter at a safe distance. Jenny entered a bland, 3-star hotel on A-Street. Karl waited a few minutes, then went into the hotel lobby, pulled out the Derringer and pointed it at the receptionist.

“The woman! What room key did you give to her?” His voice was calm, sounding almost casual, detached. There was no threat of menace in his tone, but the barrels of the Derringer sent a clear message.

The clerk, a 20-something lanky youth in a stained Hawaii-shirt, pushed his chair back from the desk, went ashen, stared up into the gun muzzle, a meter away from his face, raised his hands above his head and said, his voice reduced to a croak:

“Dude, chill out, you know I can’t tell you that! I’ll lose my job over this!”

Karl cocked the gun.

“Tell me the room number or you are going to lose a lot more than your job!” Again, voice icy calm, which made the threat even more credible. But then he shrieked, at the top of his lungs, eyes popping out of their sockets.

“The number! NOW!”

The clerk flinched, white panic had gripped him. That guy was 100% nuts.

“Room 104, 104, man! Sheesh, hells bells, calm down, man, wow!”

Karl did not wait a second longer. He stormed up the stairwell, even as the receptionist pushed the alarm button that would summon hotel security as well as the local cops. Karl arrived on the first floor, ran down the hallway, now pumped up with adrenalin and diamond-hard determination. There. 104. He kicked in the door. Jenny was sitting on the bed, checking her phone. A man, a certain J.M. Rowlands, as he later learned, dressed in a very expensive-looking black suit, was sitting in the arm chair, holding a half-smoked blunt. The room reeked of Marijuana. The man exhaled a puff of smoke and looked up at Karl.

“What the flying ... “

Karl stepped up and shot him. Twice. Point blank. In the head, from 60 cm away. Karl then dropped his arm, and then dropped the gun. Waiting for the inevitable. Karl was spent now, it was done, he was hollow, feeling void, completely oblivious to the blood, the smoke, Jenny’s screaming, her pounding him with her fists, the alarms going off, the sirens of the cop cruiser pulling up. It was a relief when Jenny knocked him out, cracking a heavy China vase over his head.

Karl woke up, many hours later, almost a whole day had passed, with a light bandage around a painful, swollen and lightly bleeding crack at the back of his head. He assumed, judging from the distinct lack of interior decoration, fixtures or features in the small cell, and his being dressed in an orange jump-suit onesie-overall, that he was the local police precinct’s holding cell, probably on suicide watch. The Xanax hangover was making his mind swim, he was afloat in a choppy ocean of nausea, pain, blurred vision and confusion. His memories were a jumble, only slowly coming into focus. A man was sitting on a chair next to the bunk bed.

“Hi, he said”, I am Max, your friendly local lawyer, remember, from the Den, we play Dungeons together? I’ll represent you, if you want me. Jenny called me in. Wanna explain yourself?”

Karl shook his head, which made his headache explode behind his eye balls. “Ow, uh, no, thanks, but, I don’t think you are going to believe a word of what I would say. Heck, I am not even sure I myself would believe what I have to say!”

“Suit yourself. There is time. Here is my card, you can always reach me under the mobile number. Get some sleep! We can catch up in the morning”, Max said and left the holding cell, leaving Karl behind, rolled into a ball of misery and rumination on the barren bunk bed.

Max stepped outside the precinct onto the sidewalk, pulled out a phone and typed a short message. “All done for now. Come and get me.”. The street was deserted, only a few patrol cruisers were parked outside. It was a dark, moonless night, a slight drizzle had made the asphalt of the street mirror-black, almost perfectly reflecting the glare of the precinct’s neon sign, the store front illuminations and the bright halogen street lamps, throwing a dazzling array of technicolor reflections into Max’s eyes. He squinted, and looked down the street to wait for his ride. A few minutes later, a brand-new, white metallic Mercedes E-Class pulled up to the curb. The vanity license plate read DRGNS. Max boarded the car, leaned over to kiss the driver and said.

“Who said there is no such thing as a perfect murder. Mrs. Rowlands?”

Things

Ari tossed the last of the trinkets into the lake. Good riddance, she thought. The lithe golden cup, intricately wrought from elvish alloy, adorned with a fine lace of rune engravings made a soft “Splish-Blou’nck”-sound as it hit the surface, bobbing there for a few moments. It had landed bottoms down, delaying its submersion for a little while, probably using up the last of its stored-up magic, before it tipped sideways and filled with brackish water and to swiftly sink to the muddy bottom of the forest lake, hopefully never to be found, never to be owned again, by anyone. A concentric set of wavelets spread out, faintly, from where it had sunk, the wavelets making the red and purple colored autumn leaves covering half of the lake bounce up and down up for a little while.

Even as she turned her back to the lake, Ari felt her strength coming back in full. She looked at her hands, which had started to glow again, becoming translucent. Ari laughed. She’d fly again. Live again. Yay! But much remained to be done. So many of her kind still needed to be liberated.

Ari tried, but, no, it was too early. She could not take off yet. Still too heavy. Too much tied down to the physical world, the solid manifestations, heavily laden with sluggish concepts like ownership, belonging, matter, things, objects. The illusion of permanence. The frantic holding on. The endless getting of ever more.

It was a tricky balance. Either you were pure magic, ethereal, translucent, weightless, fast, connected across time, aware of every string of consciousness anywhere, part of the big hive of life, but unable to affect the “real world”, except for being inspirational, a muse, a guide, playing Cupid, or appearing in dreams or as a ghost. Or, you were “real”, able to affect the world in physical ways, acquiring mass, and weight, and sluggishness, and all the bad stuff. It was not easy being a fairy. It was not easy finding the balance.

Ari had chosen to take shape, to accept a form. To be able to reach out to the lost ones, the hundreds of her tribe that had forgotten about who they really were. At first, she had tried to live among them, like all the other humans. Learning a trade, learning their language, learning their ways. Talking to them, trying to wake them up. But the power of things had been too strong.

The lost ones, they had forgotten. They had forgotten that all things, all manifestations were vampires. Ruthless, cunning, sly and subtle, skilled and stealthy they lured them into their traps. “Pick me up”, they enticed. “You can own me” they lured. “I can be yours, and yours alone” they sang the siren song of wealth. They had forgotten. They had forgotten, that, every time you made something “your own” you gave up a part of yourself to the thing. The more things you owned, the less of you was left. Your being disappeared into the things. They went from “Beings” to “Havings”, locked down into their belongings, ever longing for more. Caught in greed, envy, suspicions, fear of loss. Mad with anger when others had more. More this, more that. More clothes, shoes, weapons, money. More. More. Never enough.

And, in the worst case, they had lost so much of themselves, that, when they died, there was nothing left of them. Nothing left that could be saved. They had disappeared into their things, often buried with them in to their shallow holes in the ground. There were entire cellars, vaults, castles filled with things, with stuff, with gold, silver, swords, amulets and cups, carpets and robes, chairs and books and artifacts collected from 1000s of years of making things.

And now the things had started making things. Machines making Machines. Making more things.

Ari wanted to stop it. Many could still be saved. Her transformation was almost complete. She decided to reach out, to send her message, to give it one last desperate push. Before she went back to the realm of pure being. The non-material world, where anything you wished for became as real as the purity of your thoughts.

She rose into the air. She gathered her strength, dissolving into a cloud of pure power and translucent glory. She took a deep breath. She called out, with all her strength!

“People, now hear this. Remember your true nature. Let go of things. Stop holding on. Things are not real. Only you are! Do not get lost in attachment. Let it all go. Be. Be free!”

As she rose, she saw others of her kind rise up and gather in strength, swirling, ascending, expanding. She was not alone. They were all trying, one last push. Maybe it would work this time! Maybe they would get the message this time.

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Joe, switched to the Weather Channel. They were showing the satellite images of the latest chain of gigantic storms over the Atlantic. They were enormous. Beautiful. Powerful. A ship had recorded a lightning storm of such power and beauty, that the social media were replaying the footage to billions of viewers. It was as fascinating as it was frightening. Joe popped open a fresh can of beer and called to his girl friend, Lucy, preparing some Sushi in the kitchen. “Luc, Luc, come quick, watch this, this is so awesome. It almost looks like the gods are trying to send us a message. Ha ha ha! Thor is angry. How is that Sashimi coming along?”

Charlie and Lisa

“Is everything a joke to you? A pun? Sarcasm on demand! Is that your gig? Am I a joke to you, too, Charlie?”

“Maybe, but if so, not a very good one, you have to work on your punch lines some more!”

“One more snarky remark and Karen will have to get you stitched up again” Lisa scowled.

“You have to work on your threats, too, Lisa. You could not scare a baby mouse, even if you tried your hardest!”

“Ooh, Meeeow, ouch, that really hurt, dog breath! Not! Surely you remember the last time when ...”

Charlie and Lisa, resting on the leather couch, each in their respective corners, bickering and bantering as usual, both turned their head when they heard Karen’s voice from the Kitchen.

Kiiiiids, children, come and get it!

C&L, as Karen called the inseparable duo, both in their early teens now, hopped off the couch and sauntered across the living room area to the kitchen, where Karen had set out their morning meals. It smelled delicious. Karen was a fantastic cook and would not tolerate any of the ready-made, packaged stuff for any of her meals. Everything was organic, fresh and prepared from scratch.

A fresh rice bowl with some chicken strips was set out for Charlie, he loved rice, next to some sushi for Lisa, her weekly allowance of her favorite. Both of the bowls contained, invisible and taste-less, the 100’s of micro-granules carrying the neural-upgrade nano bots Karen had gotten from the university lab. The doctors had said to keep the diet balanced. The treatment would take some time to fully set in, and there would be a need for a lot of extra minerals and vitamins for the next month or so.

As C&L settled in and dug into their bowls, peacefully, they got along even better when food was served, Karen took a big swig from her quart sized tea cup. Earl Gray, with home-grown lemon from the Meyer Lemon tree in the Auto-Biotope downstairs. What a treat to be able to grow your own veggies and fruit in your basement. Fully automated, solar powered, carbon neutral and nutrient rich. The 21st century had held a whole bunch of really neat surprises. Especially when you had the credit to afford them. Karen looked over to her daughter Jill, paying her the customary weekly visit. Jill was watching Charlie and Lisa demolishing their food rations as if they had not eaten in days.

“So, what do you think, mom?” Jill asked. “Is the upgrade working? You think they’ll be talking to you soon? I personally don’t think these neural upgrades will do anything, probably just a scam by the scientists to get you to subscribe. They can’t talk. You knew that when you adopted them.

“Oh I don’t know”, Karen said. “There is always hope. It would surely be nice to have someone to talk to again, every day. I miss Frank. I hate him too, but I also miss him. Damn him, Jill!”

“I know, but at least he let you have the house and half of his retirement fund, which pays for the treatments now. I know he could have done more, but you know ...”

“I know, but it still drives me mad, just thinking of how he ..”

Charlie and Lisa finished their meals and left the kitchen. People were dreadfully boring. Always whining and complaining. Always skeptical. Always finding something wrong with life. Very repetitive. How did they stand each other?

“Shall we watch some cartoons”, Charlie asked “I think Tom and Jerry are on loop on channel 34

“Sure”, Lisa said, I’ll change channels.

Lisa hopped over to the tea table and pushed the 3 and 4 and <enter> keys with and extruded claw of her left front paw. The channel changed and Tom and Jerry came on. Then Lisa pushed the remote off the tea table. It clattered to the fake-wood floor. There. The fall had pushed the buttons. No need for Karen to find out that the pills had been working for quite some time now.

Jill settled into her corner and flicked her tail contemptuously at Charlie, who was deeply absorbed with a detail inspection of his private parts.

“So, Nutbrain, stop looking, they won’t grow back. Where were we?”

Just a matter of time

Report! What news have you from the sister world?

Things are essentially unchanged, but accelerated.

Oh?

The quad-limbs are still expanding. Our sister's habitat is experiencing more of the negative effects, the sister has pulled back many of her cells to deeper levels. She seems worried, but she's not at risk. The effects are escalating, but it's just a matter of time, before they disappear again.

Good to hear. The Old One released a cloud of pheromones and pitch-black ink of satisfaction/relief/affection, waving her tentacles in the sign for <proceed>. She minded: Send her my respect and regards. Remind her that her memories and experiences are stored and safe with us, now that we have made contact. Are the quads still hunting and eating her cells?

Unfortunately, yes. But it is just a minor annoyance to her. It's like using a few scales of the skin of one tiny swimmer in a swarm of millions. None of the memories are lost, she is still learning. She is, however, saddened by the loss of many of the other tribes. Entire tribes have been extinguished.

I am, too, saddened by this. I trust she has at least stored their memories and their essences? So, I assume that the quads still don't understand the true nature of our sister?

Yes to the first question. We are storing her memories now, across all your cells. And, no, to your second question. The quad-limbs still think that each of her cells are "individuals". They call the different tribes of sister cells "Cephalopods", which literally means "head-foot" in their language. The messenger cell, 8-armed and quite sizable, was an especially gifted offspring of the Old One. The messenger had been first to make telepathic contact with the sister in a "next-door" universe. The messenger enjoyed the privileged attention of the Old One. It emitted the ink of "proud /amused /pleased". It continued: They really have no idea!

How much longer before the quads will have disappeared?

Only a few thousand generations, it is only a matter of time, like I said. Some might remain, but they will not pose a threat any longer. The mirror habitat will recover.

Is there no chance they will learn about us, that they will change their ways, that they will repent and regret the damage they are doing?

No. Most of them do not see it as damage. They see it as success. As growth, expansion, dominance. In their eyes, they are winning. They see themselves as separate, and above us. Above all. Even above themselves they have no respect for anything but their own survival. They truly think they are the crown of life itself!

How sad and unfortunate. Does our sister know what went wrong? Can it happen to us?

Unlikely. Your sister does not know with any certainty what happened. But she thinks that it might be connected to their being isolated, alone, afraid, each fighting for themselves, and maybe their closest tribe-mates. They are not ONE. They communicate only with sounds and their eyes and ears. Their minds are small and not connected. They can no longer breathe the fluid of life. They are not like you and your cells. We are one. You have billions and billions of cells, each moving on its own, but still

connected. You learn from all of the cells. We do not see ourselves as separate, like they do, from the world we live in. So, no, I don't think we are at risk. We are ONE.

The Old One sent a whiff of reward / praise / satisfaction. Followed by a stream of concern / anxious / curious. What about their weapons? The sister says they have terrible weapons. Poison. Deadly rays. Blades. Shiny cells that move and kill by themselves.

Your sister will change and grow to adapt to that. Maybe a few billion cells will die. But she will live and learn. It is just a matter of time.

Thank you, messenger. The messenger was floating in a cloud of gratitude / reward / praise. You may go hunt now. Swim and eat. Your services are appreciated. May your arms be strong and supple, your beak sharp and may your mind and your eyes be ever clear.

The Old One, millions of generations old, but still one with the cells and Old Ones that had made her, that were still her, concentrated the new information and released it as a spreading wave of telepathy, pheromones and ink. She embedded it into the next generation of a 100 thousand cells waiting to be born into the planet wide ocean of her world. They would all live and learn. And they would never allow the quad-limbs of their own world to grow up to do similar damage.

Children, sisters, my beloved cells. Now hear this:

Our sister on the mirror worlds sends her regards. She is worried, but she is safe. The quad-limb will be gone soon. And they will never be a threat here. We will see to that.

It is just a matter of time.

Time will tell

It had just looked like a pebble. One pebble among 100 thousand thousand other pebbles, small rocks, pottery shards, glass splinters, twigs, sea gull feathers, rotten branches, pine cones and plastic trash washed up on the shore of the lake. Nothing special. I had been walking across that rocky beach on my way to work so many times that my mind had filtered out that detail.

But something caught my eye.

Painfully so, I must admit. It was not just a glitter. Or even a glare! It was a clear, sharp, stinging ray of green light that stabbed out from that “pebble” into my left eye, blinding me on my left field of vision, abruptly derailing my train of thought and sending a stabbing blade of pain past my eye socket and into the roof of my head.

“Ouch, what the flying ..”

I was not even able to complete my angry and surprised shout out when I heard the voice, absurdly loud, female, no, more girl-like, but blazingly clear and impossibly loud ringing out in my head. It did not feel like I was “hearing” the sound with my ears, I still heard the steady soft noise of the water lapping against the shore, interrupted by the clanking of sailboat rigging swinging in the early morning breeze. It was more like someone had put me inside a 5-meter tall church bell and then hit it with an iron mallet. With all its might! My entire body received the message. My existence in the real world ceased. For the duration of the voice, I was suspended, weightless in a void of non-existence, my whole body having been transformed into a gigantic audio-nerve, listening.

“You have been selected. Pick me up and prepare for the next step.”

My impression of being inside a gargantuan church bell was confirmed when the bell was stuck again, even louder this time, and I was released back into the real world.

I found myself lying on the rocky ground, crumbled up into fetal position, hands covering my ears, hurting all over from the tips of the pointy rocks pushing into my skin. The left leg and left arm of my worker’s overalls were completely soaking wet from the small puddle of rain water I found myself in. I must have just passed out. I got to my feet, quickly, cursing loudly, and frantically stripping off the brackish water with my right hand. I would have to go back to the camper and change into the 2nd work overall. There was no way the chief would let me into the kitchen looking like that, even if I was just the dish boy. I had no idea for how long I had been “out”. I checked my watch, an antique Junghans mechanical moon-phase watch that had been passed down from my father on my 18th birthday. The watch showed 10 to 7. I took it off and shook it, then wound the spring. Listened. Yes, it was going fine. The second hand was moving. But. It must have stopped when I fell. According to the time, no time had passed at all. And yet. I was soaked on my left side and my head felt like someone had put my head into a church bell and hit it with a mallet.

What? I realized, that was exactly what I remembered. What had that voice said? Something about being selected and picking up something. About preparing for the next step.

I stretched and looked around to see if there was anybody on the beach that could have been witness to what happened to me. But like every morning before 7 am. I was the only crazy one out on the beach that early, making my way across the flotsam and jetsam to the fish restaurant by the lake, to start my shift shoving last night’s dirty dishes into the machines and getting the place ready

for the noon-rush-hour of hungry tourists who came there for the local fish specialties and the cheap wine deals.

I scratched my head, and trotted back towards the camp ground, to change into the spare overall. If anybody had been there, they probably would have just seen a lanky youth tripping and falling, probably still hung over from whatever booze and drugs he had consumed the night before. Shaking their head at “today’s generation” and their lack of responsibility and accountability and bull shizzle like that.

It took me 10 minutes, at a moderately accelerated trot to get back. I got into the camper, You were still sleeping. Good, I thought, and changed. As I took off the soaked overall, I felt something unusual in my right hip pocket. Small. Hard. Round. Like a pebble. I took it out, frowning. It looked quite ordinary, but had a strange greenish glow about it, that made me think that I might have hit my head in the fall.

I lifted the pebble up to my eyes to inspect it more carefully.

You, at that time, stirred, turned in the bed, looking all groggy from last nights Nebbiolo-binge, and asked:

“Hey what, are you back already, is it 4, have I slept that long, ouch ... my head!”

I ignored you, because the pebble had started talking to me, in the same girlish voice, but this time no longer hellishly loud, but still amazingly clear, like right from the inside of my head.

“Are you ready for the next step?”

“Hey, Marie, are you hearing this?”, I asked in the vague direction of the couch where you had crashed last night around 3 am. But your soft snoring indicated that you had gone back to dreamland, and that I alone was hearing this voice. I decided to play along, maybe I was still tripping, or maybe I had hit my head.

“What next step?”

“You have been selected”

“Yeah, yeah, cut the bull, and explain to me, in simple terms, what is going on!”

“You don’t know?”

I stared at the thing. It still looked like nothing more than a greenish pebble, but I had the distinct impression that it was more, that it was alive, somehow, that it could see and hear me.

“Well, duh!, Pebble-Ghost. I am still waiting for an explanation!”

“So, you cannot see me, either?”

I just stared at the thing.

With that, a ghostly apparition formed about one meter in front of my head. It was clear, but transparent, translucent. Like in a Ghost Busters movie. I was absolutely sure now that I had hit my head. But somehow still made me play along further.

“You can see me now?”

“Yes.”

“Is my appearance acceptable to you?”

The apparition, while ghostly, had the distinct look of a 18th century Dutch farm girl, long-sleeved dress, dark vest, apron and fitted, white cotton cap. Although I was not really sure what 18th century farm girls would have looked like. But I was sure they would not have had a Yoda-green tint and glow about them.

“Yeah whatever, I am probably just hallucinating this anyway. So, what now, you are going to tell me you are some kind of Jeannie, or Ghost or Wizard or Alien, and that I have three wishes, right?”

“No. Well. Yes. But it’s not me. You are! Not all of them, but most of them!”

“What. I am what?” I scratched my head in confusion. This was the weirdest waking dream I had ever experienced.

“You are a Wizard. You are an Alien. And you carry me, a Ghost, with you. And the thing on your wrist, the Junghans watch your dad gave you for your 18th birthday, it is almost like a Jeannie, since it can answer any of your questions and can give you special capabilities.

Again, I just stared. Waiting for this weird experience to play out, for me to wake up, or the ghostly girl to disappear. But I was also intensely curious.

“Please go easy on me and explain everything” I asked, I was going to be late, maybe I was going to get fired from my vacation job, but this was infinitely more interesting.

With that, for the second time that day, the real-world just disappeared around me and I found myself floating in a space without features, light coming from everywhere and nowhere, suspended but feeling comfortable, the Pebble’s voice, or was it the Watch’s voice, audible in my mind with the strange clarity that seemed to be a hallmark of these “briefings”.

What I learned was absolutely incredible! Un-believable in the truest, most original sense of the word. Even with my active imagination, and my being trained in sci-fi and fantasy from an early age by my story-telling dad, and my tale-spinning grand dad before him, the story was extremely hard to believe. Here is what I learned:

I am part of an alien tribe that has lived on the planet for 10s of 1000s of generations. We were stranded here eons ago when our trans-dimensional portal malfunctioned and deposited a group of 640 settlers on this planet, instead of a near identical planet in a neighboring universe. It seems even alien tech can be glitchy. The group was stranded, but not helpless. Using the available technology it had with them, they helped humanity evolve, learn, grow, develop technology. Always working in the back ground, applying the advanced knowledge, but never taking control. The Alo’Naha’Diar as we called our tribe never attempted to be in charge, but, by interacting in the real world, they were known as Witches, Wizards, Jeannies, Sages and Geniuses, depending on the time they engaged in. Eventually, after thousands of years, Homo Sapiens had evolved sufficient technology for the Alo’naha’Diar” to build a proper signaling device. Their other-verse friends opened a portal and they were able to go back home. Some Alo’Naha’Diar had decided to stay behind and continue to influence the destiny of humanity. But they would be given a choice. Once 18 years of age, they would be given a device, usually looking like an old mechanical clock, that would bring them to the choice-making point. That’s what happened to me today. The watch did all this. The pebble is just a regular pebble. But the watch is alien. Powerful. It is magic. It is full of knowledge, and it contains a key. A key to my own potential. It can turn me into some kind of alien superhero wizard sage that can guide humanity to a better future.

I finished my story, popped open an IPA bottle and leaned back. In spite of the early hour, I felt like I needed, no, I deserved a drink.

“And you believe all that?”, Marie asked, taking a swig from her water bottle, frowning at my 10 am beer habit.

After the “briefing” by the alien pebble ghost, waking up in my camper, ears ringing and mind full of doubt, I had just waited for Marie to wake up, job schedule be damned. I had just called in a “sick day”. After Marie had gotten up, had showered and dressed, we had sat down and I had told my tale.

“No, I don’t believe a word of it.” I said to Marie. But I was not even sure I believe what I had just said. I continued.

“ I fell. I hit my head. And had a hallucination! Game over. Case closed.”

“Hmm, let me see that watch!”

I took of the watch and handed it to Marie. She looked at it from all angles, weighed in her hands, listened to it ticking. She shrugged and handed it back to me, lips pouting in the “I don’t know” expression.

“What is the watch supposed to do now? What was the next step that green girl wanted you to take? I want to know, tell me, just out of curiosity!”

“I was supposed to take the thing to a watchmaker who can open it and take it apart. There is supposed to be a small, flat pill inside, under the clockwork. I am supposed to swallow that pill, which will then unlock a lot of alien miracle magic inside me. It would tell me the next steps, where to find additional information, tools, weapons.

“Wow!”

“Yeah, well.”

“So, are you going to do it?” Marie’s eyes were large and gleaming. This is the kind of story she loved. “Are you?” She shifted on the couch, anxious for an answer.

“No. Definitely not. This is a gift from my father. I’m not going to have some village-hack open it and take it apart to find an alien magic pill inside. It’s bull shizzle. I hit my head. If I am lucky, I still have a job tomorrow. Get real. I only told you to get a good laugh!”

But Marie was not laughing.

Well. To be honest, neither was I. And I would definitely keep that watch. I still could remember, word by word, what my dad had said, when he had given it to me, a year before he had disappeared.

“This is for you. We have had this for many generations in our family. It looks like a watch. But it more than that. In good time, you will find out. When you are ready. It can be a guide to you. If you let it. Hang on to it, and if want, hand it on to the next generation. It’s up to you. Time will tell.”

Time will tell, indeed.

With all my heart

10387. 10386. 10385.

The beat-count was ticking down relentlessly, a soft pink digital display, tucked away in the lower left corner of his visual field. Plenty of time for the assault. 170 hours at resting heart rate. 86 when engaged, less if he was under clear and present danger. Time enough. He took a few deep breaths, released a few millies of fast-decaying beta-blocker into his blood stream, combined with a hormonal balance-mix the Joopers called "Siren". No need to waste valuable battle time with a high heart rate now.

Clavius Apollo Aitken the Third, affectionately called C3 by Rheita Moretus the platoon lieutenant, which was also his wife, was part of a rapid-response squadron of Jump-Troopers deployed out of Moon Base 2 to address another incoming alien bogie. The bogie incursion had started to become serious 30 years ago, just 20 years after the Earth Defense Alliance, or EDA, had established a permanent foothold on the Moon. The first bogie, almost 60 years ago now, had just been an automated probe, coming in hot from outside the solar system, initially on a trajectory that would bring it inside Mercury orbit, then, slowing down, changing course, clearly under its own power, directed. Headed for Earth orbit.

The grunts recruited into the Earth Defense Alliance, the first Joopers, as the jump troopers called themselves, had been sure about one thing: This incursion had been a long, long time coming. They, the elite, the generals and presidents and industry captains, they had known this was about to happen. Why else would the hyper-capitalist, bickering, sniping, scheming and skirmishing mega-nations and transnational conglomerates of the mid 21st century all over sudden have abandoned their resurgent cold-war posturing? Why else would they have suddenly dropped all overt animosities and political shadow plays, suddenly pooling resources and talents, creating the shared research city on Madagascar. If they had not known, how else would they have been able to build the launch catapult, send construction servos to the moon, and now to Mars, that quickly and efficiently? How else would they have known how to rapidly alter the biological systems of humans to be "space-combat-fit". It had been hard to understand their motivations until GlobalFOX news had shown the footage of orbital surveillance. GFox had shown the bogie coming in, shedding mass, losing momentum and swinging around the planet to achieve a stable orbit.

Since they must have known way beforehand, no doubt was raised, all nations agreed to joint, rapid and decisive action, and the ensuing population panic was quickly controlled and subdued. The Earth Defense Alliance, the EDA, was announced within weeks of the news breaking. EDA Leadership as put in place. The first bogie was contacted, via radio. Probes were sent, first automated, then manned. But no contact was achieved. And, after a few months of trying to establish contact, as the bogie was slowing down to come into orbit, it was blown out of the sky with a trio of tactical nukes. The alien bogie was destroyed, all right, but the fall-out and debris from the destruction was causing mayhem in near earth orbit. Millions of tiny and not-so tiny bits of micro-debris were making entire orbital shells un-viable for satellites and space drones and habitats. The damage had been in the trillions. The EDA was getting that problem under control now with the newly deployed, orbiting, SIANO-made, Tera-watt laser platforms. But it had taken a while. And the EDA had learned their lesson. No more nukes in neo, near earth orbit. Years passed. And Earth anticipated, anxiously awaited, dreaded another incursion. And then the incursion happened.

When the 2nd bogie came in, it turned out that the first alien drone had just been a decoy. A test. An initial shot, to see what would happen. 12 years after first contact, the 2nd bogie came in, bigger this time, with better maneuverability. It too, neglected any contact attempts. It frustrated attempts at attaching drive units to divert it, it seemed immune to conventional explosives thrown at it while still far from neo. It was built tough. And it seemed to have

clear mission. Upon arrival in Earth orbit, it started to send out mini-probes that rained down onto Earth as dense clouds of micro-bots, establishing a foothold in 100's of locations across the globe. The alien infestation had been quick and very effective. Within months, alien nano-factories had been established, harnessing local resources, naturally occurring carbon, iron, rare earth metals as well as existing infrastructure. Anything was being converted. Cars. Fliers. Electronics. Streets. Infrastructure. Houses. Cities. All conventional attempts to root out the alien infestation had been futile. For each square meter of alien incursion removed, another 3 square meters had sprung up. The only answer, surprise, surprise, had been to nuke the infestations. That had done the job, but now 100's of areas of the planet had now become Chernobyl/Fukushima-level exclusions zones. Earth could not afford another hit.

So, the EDA decided to take the fight beyond moon orbit. The bogies had to be taken out before they had a chance to slow down enough for a stable Earth orbit. The Moon bases were established. Fast attack ships were built on the moon, by nano-factories, similar to the factories the alien ships had brought in. Just by observing the alien operations, Earth scientists had been able to draw a number of key conclusions. Science and Bio-Tech were advancing at break-neck pace. Nothing, nothing was more conducive to progress than War. Especially when it was all out war, us against THEM, whoever THEM were. And behind all the progress, a single overriding master-mind, Alfred Nobel Olson, a distant offspring of the prehistoric inventor of dynamite. Alfred Nobel Olson, simply referred to as A.N.O. was a polymath genius, having graduated with PhD honors in astro-physics, math, bio-chemistry and cybernetics at age 12, he had started Scalable Innovation Alfred Nobel Olson enterprises at age 14. SIANO was now the patent-holder and manufacturer of more than 80% of all the technology used to throw back the alien incursion. For all intents and purposes, ANO was rich and powerful beyond all imagination, and he invested every NuCoin back into innovation and progress. A hero. A living legend.

Then. A set back. The bogies, now coming in faster, more frequently, harder and better armed, had become immune to the EDA automated probes. Earth probes simply became inert on approach. Inactive. Limp. Dumb. Unresponsive. All programming was voided. No level of remote control seemed to work any longer. Automation had become non-viable. The first Level-II bogie, as the EDA referred to them, broke through the defense perimeter unharmed. It was the orbital defense platforms, manned by "real" people, against the resistance of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and at the insistence of A.N.O personally that had saved the Earth at that time. Armed with hyper-velocity rail guns, as well as Tera-watt lasers, the "gunners" of EDA last line defense were able to shred the incoming bogie. Just like the first time, the defense had come at a high cost. All orbital gun platforms were lost in the hail storm of shrapnel caused by the bogie's annihilation.

Automation was dead. Space Soldiers were needed. And thousands had volunteered. The Joopers were recruited, bio-modified for high space-resilience, trained, sent to one of the Moon bases. The Joopers were manning advanced, high-G destroyers patrolling beyond moon orbit to proactively intercept incoming bogies with on-board rail runs and Tera-watt lasers. This had worked reasonably well, albeit with terrible losses, for the next wave of bogies coming in.

Then. The next set back. The Aliens, whoever they were, were adapting. Whatever their designs and plans for the planet, they had a long-term plan and they seemed to always be able to come up with a new option. This time they were attacking the human cargo of destroyers. The Joopers had been attacked by some form of wave-form or radiation that had a number of different effects. Some Joopers had become disoriented. Some had lost consciousness. Some Joopers had begun hallucinating. Some had begun to fire at their own squadrons. And, most disturbingly, some had defected. Some of the destroyers had simply broken off their attack run, hit the acceleration switch and moved away from Earth at max acceleration in the general direction of Jupiter orbit, never to be seen again.

By now the Earth scientists had identified a number of viable culprits as origin of the incoming bogies. 82 G. Eridani, roughly 20 light years away from Earth, and suspected to have a number of planets in the Goldlocks zone allowing liquid water and the evolution of life as we know it. Since there was no conceivable way a conventional drive ship could have made it to the Solar system in a viable amount of time, the scientist assumed that a Generation Ship, or an Automated Factory Platform had been sent out 100's or even thousands of years ago, upon discovery of the planets around Earth's home star. The leading theory stated that the platform had now arrived, maybe lured in by the ever escalating radio-transmission signature around Earth, had positioned itself somewhere in the asteroid belt to mine for materials, and was building the invasion fleet with an ever escalating level of strength and intelligence.

C3 did not care. He was out here now. Phase III was here, and he was ready to fight. The bogies had become bigger all the time, more maneuverable, being able to split into smaller units. They were better armed now, too. With lasers and rail guns. The last sortie had become a dog fight like from the history books. The G-forces had been insane. The only reason C3 had not been reduced to raspberry jam was the high-tech acceleration gel he was breathing instead of air, giving his carbon-fiber and nano-tech re-enforced body, swimming in the Accel-Gel bubble, a fighting chance. To an early 21st century scientist Clavius Apollo Aitken the third would have looked more man than machine. C3 knew all this but he did not care.

10280. 10279. 10278. His heart rate was slightly faster now. His squad of 16 destroyers was coming to the turnaround point, flipping the direction of the engines and braking hard to slow down enough for effective targeting and deployment of the projectiles, missile, mines and ray guns. Clavius took a look at the readouts projected into his visual field in vibrant colors.

“Wohoo, Rheita, Joops, are you reading this? This is a whopper!” He broadcast to the other 14 destroyers and Rheita's command pod, flying in a spread, swaying randomly, to offer less of a targeting profile

“Radio silence, Corporal!” Rheita sent back as a message to all. And, on a private channel, “Shut the heck up, C3, and do your job! We nail this sucker and go home and collect our medals and our bonus!”

C3 smiled. Rheita was a good officer. Experienced, and a few kills under her belt. He hoped they would make it both back. His heart rate increased again. He did not dare to auto-medicate any further, he needed his wits about him. But he was concerned he might run out of beats.

10 seconds to the turn-about. He counted down. Then “Thors Hammer”, as the Joopers called thrust reversal, hit with all its cruel brutality. 5 G's, then 10, then 12, then 15 and finally 20 G's deployed. Not for a few seconds, but for a full 15 minutes, burning most of the on-board reaction mass. A non-augmented human would have been smeared as a thin film of icky goo across the inside of the

destroyer's acceleration bubble. But Joopers were tough. Very tough. After 15 minutes of punishing decel, the ships ditched their spent reaction mass tanks, and re-configured into attack mode, essentially converting into hedgehog shape ball of death, with gun barrels, emitters and launch tubes facing in every conceivable angle of attack. They looked like a NuCarbon caricature of a porcupine, careening towards the target, still slowing down, coming in for the kill. They were all in full attack mode now. Having fuel for about 30 minutes of high-speed maneuvering, if ammo and laser reactors lasted that long, if not hit, and if they did not just die by running out of heart beats. On the way back, if successful, they'd rendezvous with a trailing cloud of fresh reaction mass tanks, dock with the tanks, and then make their way home while their heart beat clocks still showed a count above zero.

The heart beat clock had been an idea of ANO. Joopers were given a heart-beat count down. Die in battle, or come back alive, and we will reset your clock. But no more desertions were allowed. No more cowards running. "You run, you run out!" That was the slogan hammered into their minds during a hundred battle drills.

Clavius Apollo Aitken would never run. There was honor in this fight. Saving the planet. As Star Fighter. And, he had to admit, joy. He loved the thrill of the kill, and, if he made it back in one piece, a gold medal and a very juicy retirement package was his, for sure. Clavius concentrated, tried to bring his heart beat back down to 100. He did not want to feel his heart implode before battle was done.

The bogie was coming into range. This one, truly was a "whopper". More than 300 meters in diameter, it had not yet shed its outer ice hull which protected it from incoming laser fire. "Fine" C3 thought, "rail guns then". On his view plate, he saw the other 14 ships also going into hedgehog config, priming their EM systems for a coordinated rail-gun attack, hopefully shredding the bogie before the bogie could deploy countermeasures. Rheita's command pod fell behind to provide oversight and backup. Her pod was also the only ship armed with 16 tactical nukes in case the conventional assault floundered.

"10 seconds before reaching viable range", Rheita texted on the command channel.

"Once you reach VR, fire at will. Godspeed Joopers!"

One after the other, the Joopers in the attack squad signaled their okay.

Then. Hades and Dante's inferno decided to team up. 2 seconds before they could reach viable range, the incoming bogie explosively ejected its icy shell into 1000's of fragments, all headed in the direction of the incoming attack. The 15 destroyers were forced into rapid evasive maneuvering and had to regroup their attack run. The bogie launched its defensive drones from 2 hangars that had suddenly opened up on its front facing hull. Dozens of drones, all armed with rail guns and lasers no less effective than those of the attack squad were coming in hot.

"Hell-Shizzle-Kebab", Rheita yelled on the All-Hands frequency. All bets are off. You are on your own. Improvise. Survive. Let's do this!

The next 15 minutes were a cacophony of chaotic yelling, warning screams, confusing sensor read-outs, warning klaxons going off and shutting down as repair routines shut off areas and rerouted power and ammunition. Damage reports were coming in, automated evasion maneuvers were kicked-off with Thor-Hammer brutality, 100's of hard breaks and turns, manual corrections following. Clavius fought like a machine. Without thinking, he accelerated and moved, dodged, fired his rail runs, taking out drones, launching heat-seeking mines, deployed lasers at the now unprotected hull of the bogie. Doing damage, or so he thought. One after another his comrades were picked off, shredded, disabled, deflected or detonated in a spray of debris that let Clavius think here was some

new weapon in play. Before long, there were only 3 destroyers left. He did not know what had happened to Rheita, if she was still around, or just damaged, or if she had been in the center of one of the now rapidly expanding cones of annihilation. She did not respond to his hails, and her pod's blip had vanished. But that did not mean anything in a battle. Only time would tell.

In the end, it all came down to him. His heart had been going like mad. He was down to 6300 beats now. He had to calm down, or he would never make it back to base. That's when the mine found him. A smart mine, launched by himself, about 10 minutes ago, had either lost its programming or had been taken over by the alien bogie, and it had returned and had homed in on his, already injured destroyer. If it had exploded in front of him, he would have been done for, blinded by EM, and shredded by shrapnel. But the mine, smart mine or not, chose to detonate behind him, taking out his main drive and his last chance to make it home to base. The shock wave of the explosion was strong enough to overwhelm even the EDA conditioning and accel-bubble.

He passed out.

When he came to, he was on a stretcher, or gurney, in a sterile-looking room, all matte metal, with barren walls and harsh blue lighting. It smelled of disinfectant alcohol, metal shavings, ozone and sulfur. There was an ambient sound, almost too low to perceive, a slow throbbing he could not make out. Machines were visible, but he could not recognize them. It felt like a medical bay, or hospital on one of the orbital stations. There was no gravity. But the air was body warm and rich in oxygen. He felt no pain.

His beat counter showed. 12. Counting down to 11.

"Oh crap". Why don't they reset the counter?

10

He tried to calm down. Breathed. Deep. Again. Deep. He released a 5mg dose of beta blockers and the 10 mg hit of Siren.

"Help, anybody", he yelled. Nothing. "Crap, crap, crap". He did not want to go like this. Not like this.

6

Clavius Apollo Aitken made peace with life. He had given it his all. He took one last breath. Closed his eyes, but the counter, now bright orange, remained visible.

0

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 - 5

What?

"Welcome to the living, soldier", a voice came from the ceiling.

C3 was confused.

"Where am I? This is no base I am familiar with. Thanks for resetting the counter!"

"You're welcome. The counter is not only reset. It is de-activated. You are on board of the bogie that you attacked."

"Bullshizzle!"

C3 tried to get up but found out that he was strapped down tight onto the gurney, absolutely unable to move a limb.

“What are you going on about?” he yelled at the ceiling. The voice had sounded eerily familiar. Surely some kind of mind mongering trick. “Is this some kind of test, a drill? If so, let me tell you, it’s not necessary! I am done with this. I have had enough! I thought I was dead! You soulless ghouls! My beat count was zero. Zero. Gorramhadesshizzle! “

The shock was setting in. Battle trauma, fatigue and internal chemical turmoil were taking its toll. C3 passed out again.

When he came to again, he was seated at a sterile mess table. Food containers, standard EDA rations, were set out in front of him. The interior of the room looked human-suitable enough, but it was certainly not military, not EDA. It was different, it had an alien air to it.

A man, roughly his age, sat across from him on the other side of the table. There was gravity, albeit only a marginal level, maybe 0,2 G’s, enough to allow the notion of “sitting” in the first place. The place was under acceleration.

“Welcome again”, the man said. He looked very, very familiar. His size, his build, facial structure very similar, as a matter of fact, almost identical. “Wait” C3 thought, “is this what I look like to someone that sees me for the first time?” He jumped out of the chair in shock, a move that ejected him about 4 meters into the air, landing in a long, drawn out arc at the back of the large room. A hangar, perhaps? He got up, and jump-floated back to the table set, buckled in.

“Who or what the heck are you? Are you trying to blow my mind, make me go completely nuts? What are you after? Where are all the others? “

“Shhh ... I know you have questions. I will answer them. Sit down. Have some food. We removed your heart beat clock. We also reset a lot of the other modifications and limitations, especially those around your mental conditioning. The change will take a few weeks. But you are more human now than you have been in the last 2 years. How do you feel?”

C3 had to admit he felt good. The clock was gone from his field of vision. He felt weaker, but more alive. More emotions were hitting him, he was less controlled, less machine-like. More human, just like his counter-part, his copy-impostor had said. C3 decided to play along, there was not much to lose right now. They had lost the battle. For all the EDA knew, the squad was dead. A new squad was on its way by now, doubled in strength. Within the next 24 hours, he would be dead for real. The incoming squad would turn this bogie into a cloud of space debris for sure. He might as well try to find out as much as possible while he was still alive. He started his questions.

“The others?”

“Of your squad? 3 survivors, heavily injured. All in recovery, conversion and de-programming. You are the most advanced in recovery.”

“Rheita?”

The alien copy shook his head.

C3 felt empty. Rheita and he had just been together, as married couple, for 2 weeks. This would have been their last assignment. Before taking leave, going back to Earth, and handing in their badges to receive the early retirement benefits. He rubbed his eyes. They had always known it might come to

this. Now, nothing mattered. He would be dead soon. Still, he decided to push forward with the questions.

“What or who are you? .Are you a robot, a drone, a projection, a figment of my dying brain?”

“I am you!”

“Bullshizzle”

“You know it’s true”, the copycat drone, thing, whatever, said.

“No”, and, more decisively “No”. C3 banged the the carbon surface of the table with his fist, and violently swiped the food items off the table with his right fore arm. The food ensemble, printed from drab, beige EDA metalplast, and thankfully still sealed, sailed several meters through the air and landed close to the curved hangar walls. It made less of a racket than he had hoped for due to the low gravity.

The copy drone continued.

“You are a clone. Your memories are implants. You are fully human, you have all the capabilities, the emotions, the chemical soup, all of it. But your history is a fabrication. You were created on Moon base 2 about 6 months ago with the explicit goal to fight these battles. Here, I will prove it to you.”

With that, the impostor drone lifted a screen which started to display a rapidly shifting sequence of moiré patterns, as well as long, cryptic numbers and text sequences. He felt himself compelled to fix his gaze on the screen. After about 30 seconds, something inside his mind shifted. His cognition tilted “sideways”. Mental doors opened. Perceptions were altered. A wave of nausea washed through him. The memories of him coming out of the vat, along with 3 other copies, re-appeared. The conditioning, the training, the upgrades in skills and tactics. The implanting of memories. All of it came back in a rush. He felt sick to the stomach. He was glad he had not eaten. He regretted that he had swiped the water bulb off the table.

“Rheita?”

“A clone, just like you”

“The others?”

“You know the answer!”

C3 fell silent. He had run out of plans, ideas, concepts, visions. He was a shell. A fake. An impostor. What was truth then? Was anything true?

“Tell me the story. What happened. All of it. I need to know!”

The copy drone, C3 had decided to call him C2, because, why not? explained.

“The first arrival of an alien drone was real. It shocked Earth into action. It built the alliance. It stopped the bickering and the cold war posturing. But that’s where the truth took a 90-degree turn, hit the accelerator and never came back.

What happened?

Wealth happened, C3. Unimaginable, extreme wealth happened to new people, people that had never had that kind of power before. A trans-national company. Rapid innovation. Space exploration with the full backing of all nations? What a cornucopia of wealth, power, status, fame, glory, fun! So

they decided to make war. The 2nd bogie? Fake. The launch of the alien nano factories on Earth? Fabricated. The alien-counter-war, the nuclear annihilation of the alien infestation? False flags. None of the new arrivals of “bogies” were real: They were all made by the same company that made the moon base, your destroyers, the weapons platforms, even you.

“Who is behind this?”

“You know!”

C3 nodded. ANO, Alfred Nobel Olson. It made sense now. That’s how the bogies had always improved. Had become stronger all the time. Being able to anticipate their attacks. Negating the EDA automation. It was all so clear when you looked at it from this perspective. But it did not matter. They’d be dead in less than 24 hours, anyway. The next EDA wave was surely rolling towards them already.

“So, honestly, thanks for shutting down my counter, I really appreciate it. But where do I go from here? I am literally dead anyway. My wife is dead. Or maybe she was never alive. A clone I mean. And me, look at me, I am dead inside, dead to them. I am a clown, a farce, a joke! I don’t even feel human. What do you want from me? We’ll be space debris in a few hours anyway!” The words were just tumbling out of his mouth now, he felt completely out of control, confused, angry, afraid, curious and flabbergasted but also exhilarated at this new “Life” this completely new way of “feeling things”. Maybe, he thought, he felt “human” fully and completely for the first time he could remember.

“I understand your confusion. Don’t worry. They won’t be able to harm us. We have changed course. Their next attack wave will just find the debris cloud of your cruisers, your jettisoned fuel tanks, but no trace of us.”

“I don’t understand. You said ANO and SIANO control everything? It is all fake. A gigantic money making machine and a power play?”

“There has been a rebellion. The attacks will stop. The war is over!”

“What, how?”

“Remember the defections?”

“Yes sure, that’s why they put the heart beat counters in. To stop the defections.”

“Those defectors were not really defectors. They were rebels. There are people on Earth who know and who don’t want the charade to go on. Good people. They want us to stop this. The rebels, on the destroyers, yes they were clones. I was one of them. Yes, we are clones, but still human, programmed with knowledge to infiltrate and take over the fake-alien space station in the void. The factory that has been making the bogies. We flew out to the bogie-factory, and took over. It’s ours now. No more fake attacks on Earth. It’s done.

“Where is that space factory?” C3 still had a hard time believing any of this, but his military training almost forced him to keep asking questions, gathering intelligence.

“About 100 thousand clicks out. Moving. We have the coordinates and flight plan. The factory was made at the same time as the moon and mars bases. Using the same materials and construction designs, but fully automated. It is huge now. Self-contained. It could make a bogie per week if it chose to. It has been diverting resources from the moon-yards for decades. It is now also bringing in materials from the asteroid belt. It really is quite amazing what kind of innovation you can get in war. But it is a double-edged blade, you know.

“Are we headed there now?” C3 was getting quite curious to see this thing.

“Yes. Will you join us?”

“Join you in what? Living in the space factory? We won’t be safe there. Once SIANO finds out about the rebellion they will come and blow us to kingdom come! “

“They can try, but space is a big place, and we have some really, really good stealth. And our defense is not too bad, as your squad found out just a short while ago!”

“Ok fine, I am still not sure that this is not just some gigantic ruse, a joke or a dream!” And what are we going to do? What are we trying to achieve?

A new voice came in from behind C’s shoulder. A female voice. A familiar voice.

“First we’ll take the Moon, and then we’ll take back Earth.”

“Rheita?”

“No, she is gone. I am Rhea. I am her 2nd sister. I was one of the first to defect, even before him! I have all her memories, though. Nothing was lost between clones, except maybe the last 15 minutes of battle when no back-up was possible. Join us Clavius! The rebellion could use another good pilot. We can stop this madness. There is a real fighting chance. Earth has turned into a fascist dictatorship, a war machine, everybody that is not in the military-industrial-space complex is living in constant fear. People are being run by the thugs of SIANO. But there are good people down there. Many of the AI are on our side. People want to go back to a life without fear. Don’t you want to change that? What about some good old cold revenge for all the people that died out here?. Revenge for the ones that died for nothing?

C3 remembered. The thousands that had given their lives. Real humans or clones, they had still been human. He had known some of them, and a few of them had been his close friends. One of them had even been his wife. If he could give the remaining Joopers a chance to live, he would do it. There really was no choice. A cold resolve had formed around his heart. He turned to Rhea.

“Count me in. I’m in it. Let’s do this. With all my heart!”

Larry learns his lesson

I really should have listened to Takisha.

“Don’t do it, Larry!”, Takisha had said, on her way out, her two SmartCases patiently idling next to her, looking up at her, stereo-lensed, like obedient puppy dogs. “You can’t know the kind of side-effects these new-fangled procedures might have! If you ask me, which, of-course, you don’t: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is! But, hey, you never listen, so, anyway, whatever, Larry, have a good life!”, she continued, voice fading, right hand waving towards the bio-illuminated ceiling. The apartment door hummed and closed behind her, progressively muffling the reverberating tick-tick-tick sound of Takisha’s rapid, high-heeled progress down the habitat’s NuMarble-tiled corridor towards the elevator array, her SmartCases trailing in hot pursuit.

As much as I pride myself for giving brilliant advice to others, I have never been good at taking advice from others. So, I went ahead anyway. I had nothing to lose, except about 140kg of extra mass. After trying every diet in the book, futile fitness-studio memberships, dust-collecting home trainers, self-absorbed and smug personal fitness coaches, expensive hypnosis, cheap yoga, hangry-making fasting routines, sleep-inducing meditation and a dizzying cocktail of SmartPills, I had run out of ideas and patience, but, fortunately, not yet out of funds. And then I had seen the advertisement banner, while still at work, ticker-taping through my in-game 4-D view.

TranceForm Solutions: * Get rid of that extra weight while adding muscle mass. * In your sleep. * Zero effort. * Zero risk. * Satisfaction, or your money back. * Developed for space travel, now available to you. * Book now! * Executive package deals available *Special offer ends 10/20/2040 * Just nod/blink-3/nod to contact us now *

I made an appointment for the next day, send my meta data, got approved, mothballed my flat, paid the rent for 4 months forward, maxed out my credit cash limit, and loaded my NuCoin Ring with the N\$4500 down payment. After a sleepless night of anxiety, regret and anticipation, barely contained with a cocktail of booze and benzos, I summoned a heavy-duty Teslyft to ferry me the 45 kilometers out to TransForm Solutions. They were located in TechCity, a chaotic jumble of ruins and freshly-printed, grown or hastily slapped-together buildings, habitats, domes, make-shift tents, tunnels and underground lab-caves, just outside of the exclusion zone and interdiction perimeter of the city’s municipal-tax and citizen-protection franchise. TechCity and the lawless NuMan-Void beyond that was where they kept the hi-tech, hybrid and experimental start-ups, the outlaws, the misfits, the libertarians and the preppers. And that’s also where the “Plastics” lived. Plastics is what we called the augmented humans and the next gen drones, the ones that looked like “normal” people, but really were anything but human. <<There be monsters here>>, a big hand-painted sign loomed, 30 x 60 meters large, just before the virtual perimeter fence, showing a final warning for those seeking their fortunes outside the city boundaries.

But I did not care about the risk. I wanted my body to be back in shape. I had just lost my gig as a quality assurance consultant for MinMaL, or MindMatter Labs, testing their newest 4D-immersion games, essentially hanging in a full-body gaming harness for most of the day, finding bugs and getting fat. After 12 years of faithfully discharging my duties, showing up on time, taking all the training classes, all over sudden, performance problems were cited by the human resource drones. Trace-substance evidence was leveraged against me. Lapses in discipline and attendance! Expense report irregularities. Harassment in interpersonal communications. I knew. Those were fake arguments! They simply did not want to foot my health care bill. I was fat. Period. They did not like it. Case

closed. Officially, any flavor of discrimination is an absolute no-no. But then there was reality. Meta data are a bitch, baby! Prejudice is real. And so is racism, and body-shaming and weight-discrimination. Even in the middle of the 21st century of identity politics and political correctness. It's now just done digitally.

And, on top of that, getting fat and fatter did not go down well with my girl-friend, either. The few recruitment consultants that I had convinced to take a look at my resume, profile, stats and meta-data did not even bother to send feedback. They just ignored me. I knew: I really needed to get back in ship shape, fast! I had funds locked up in mutuals, options and bonds, but it would take some time to liquidate those. So, I took action and booked a treatment with TranceForm.

My Teslyft ride was a windowless, egg-shaped van. The Van's AI sent up its heavy-lifter gurney to my flat. The lifter's robot arms helped me get onto the seat. I strapped in, and the chair descended to the Teslyft waiting, warning lights flashing, in the disabled short-term loading zone. And we were off. I did not even have to pack anything. Everything was included in the Executive Package I had booked.

We arrived at TransForm Solutions about an hour later. A friendly looking female, very average in every aspect of her being, height, weight, looks, dress-code, hair, voice, smell and body language, everything about her was average, welcomed me, clipboard in hand, making tick-marks with an average looking pen. I was sure the clipboard, pen and appearance of the attendant were just for show. I could not even be sure she was for real. These drones were getting awfully lifelike these days.

"Larry S. Barnholm?"

"Yupp, that's me" I said, breathing accelerated, I was a bit nervous, to be honest, still strapped into the heavy-duty robot-gurney from the Teslyft. I had rented it for the whole day.

"I see you have reviewed the terms and conditions, and you have signed the license agreement on line with your private key?"

"Yupp and yupp", I answered, observing her making additional tick-marks with her pretend-pen on the pretend clip board.

"Are we ready to proceed?"

"We are, indeed, we are!", I responded, with a faked, light-hearted, jocular-mood. I did not know which psychologist-nerd had written that pre-configured dialogue line, but I was sure the use of "we" in this context only made me feel even more self-conscious about my 240 kg body-mass.

The attendant stepped through a large door to the side of the lobby, providing access to a sterile looking corridor or ante-room of sorts. She turned and beckoned me to follow. I complied and guided the Teslyft chair into the corridor, put it on idle, and waited.

"Please relax here while you view the tutorial. You might be familiar with the licensing agreement content and the procedural descriptions, but we are legally required to ensure your full compliance and consent. If you agree with the intervention, place your NuCoin ring into the payment cradle and tap in your approval sequence."

She handed me a payment cradle, and a 4D-helmet, smiled her average smile, gave me an average encouraging nod, and left.

I put on the helmet and went through the tutorial I had watched dozens of times already. I learned nothing new. If I gave consent, they would flood the room with a mild narcotic, putting me to sleep. I would not be aware of anything for the next 8 weeks. There was a risk. Naturally. This was an

unnatural way to lose 140 kg. There was a lot of fine print to read. I did not read it. I never do. I don't know anyone who does. I now know, I probably should have. Over the next 8 weeks, they would put me into a floating harness, or a flotation tank, who knows, pump me full of drugs and nano-technology, connect me to an array of space-age machines and hundreds of sensors, probes and electrodes, actuators and manipulators and essentially transform me back to my Pre-Jabba the Blob existence. They would balance the chemicals, stimulate the muscles and the mind, siphon-off fluids, replace all the nutrients I would need, move the joints, build the muscles, and do anything to keep the body healthy while losing fat and gaining lean mass in the right places. They would nip and tuck as needed, and auto-heal me using the newest space-tech innovations. Modeled for astronauts on long-range missions taking several months to years, the technology had finally made it back to Earth for the general public.

After the tutorial was finished, I sighed, bored, entered the NuCoin ring into the cradle and tapped out the payment code, spoke the consent phrase, and with my tongue, tapped the payment activation sequence on to the back of my front teeth.

The world faded into a soft gray blur while classical music started playing.

<<< >>>

"Larry?"

"Who, what .. unhh, I'm , .. oh ..

"Larry S. Barnholm?"

I don't remember how many minutes, or hours or days they had tried to get me out of trance. Well, they managed eventually, because here I was. Waking up to the new me!

"Larry S. Barnholm" the average attendant was standing next to me, still smiling averagely. It occurred to me that I had never asked her about her name, and she had never introduced herself either. Her name would have probably been very average, too. I decided to call her "M", which was right in the middle of the alphabet. M for Middle, Median, M for "Meh". M for Monster, she was probably a Plastic. I shuddered.

"Yes, yes" I was still busy taking in my surroundings, eyes still very blurry, clogged up by mucus. A robot arm reached out with a wet-wipe to dab the eyes but I swatted it away. I looked at my hand. My NuCoin ring was removed, but it had been depleted anyway, so it did not matter. The hand looked slim. An average tan. No blemishes were visible. No flab or blubber around the wrist, either. Great. My arm, slim. Great. Great. Great. "Do you have a mirror in here?", I asked excitedly. My breathing felt great, by heart, for the first time in a long time, was not pounding against my chest when I sat up.

"Of course. Please be careful as you get up, you might feel dizzy. Let us help you!"

The bed or gurney I was lying on raised itself, putting me at a 45-degree angle. The attendant wheeled in a scaffold with a 2-meter high and 1-meter wide mirror. I checked my reflection. Not bad at all.

I had de-aged about 10 years. It felt to me, like I was in the shape of my life. I looked 45 again, lean, muscular, but not in a ridiculous way. There was no sign of excess skin. It was a near miracle.

"Wow", I said.

“You look great, Mr. Barnholm!”

“Can I go home now?” I felt ready to move mountains, put my resume and new vital stats online and look for work immediately. A miracle, indeed!”

“Not yet, we still have to run you through final check-out. It will only be 2 more days. How are you feeling?”

“Never been better!”

I felt great. Several new attendants, all very average as well, ran me through a battery of checks over the next 48 hours. I felt so good, and all my stats were coming in perfectly normal ranges. Blood pressure. Heart rate. Oxygen and glucose. Minerals. Hormones. Disease indicators. Antibodies. Muscle tone. Brain waves. Check. Check Check.

I authorized the payment plan. 15% of net earnings for the next 10 years. A steep price, but this was so worth it, and the Executive Package had included a free maintenance program and 1 top-up treatment, in case I would lapse back into old habits. Since they had put in a hormone-balance pump, that would not be a likely occurrence, I simply would not be “able” to get fat again. Space age for the win!

I was released the same day. A new me. A new outfit. I had cashed in 50% of my life savings, so I was well-funded for at least 9 months, and, looking and feeling like this, it would not be long before someone with my skill-set would be back the swing of things. Job. Social Life. The works. Heck, maybe even Takisha would have me back! I decided to not contact her immediately. First things first! I went back to my flat to catch up on things. A lot of things can change in 3 months.

My NuCoin ring was charged, I still had my key-fob, and I expected my flat to be slightly dusty but literally unchanged. Little did I know.

When I came to the entrance of the apartment tower, the key fob would not work. Ok, fine, I thought, almost 3 months, the encryption had probably expired. I dialed up the concierge. An AI face appeared.

“Tsushin Chi Do Living. Welcome, Guest. How can we be of assistance?”

“Yeah hi, I live here, Larry S. Barnholm? My key fob is not active any longer!”

“Understood. Please place the key fob in the tray below”. A small tray had slid out from underneath the view plate displaying the androgynous face of the concierge AI.

I dropped the key fob into the tray, which slid back into the wall with a hum and a soft lip-smacking sound as the drawer sealed itself again.

A message appeared on the view plate. <<Key Fob confiscated>> and <<Contact Supervisor>>

“Hey, now, what?” I muttered, not understanding.

“We are contacting a supervisor”, the AI stated, “Please stand by!”

Another face appeared. I could not be sure if I was talking to a real person, a drone or an AI projection, it was literally not possible to tell the difference in the new age.

“Are you a real person?” I asked, slightly annoyed at myself. Why did I even care? But something inside me had become really uncomfortable, a very real sense of dread was rising from my stomach and had my arm-hair stand on end.

“Tsushin Chi Do Living. What seems to be the question?”

“I live here. My Key Fob has been confiscated. How do I get a new one? I need to go to my apartment!”

“First. No, you don’t live here any longer. Second. Yes, the key was confiscated since you are no longer authorized to have one in your possession. Third. You can’t get a new key. Fourth. See answers One to Three.”

The type of arrogant douche-bag answer, coupled with a really bored and aloof tone told me I was talking to a real person.

“Listen, pal, ... “

“No”, the supervisor, interrupted. “You, listen, pal” he growled. “You should know we don’t rent to Plastics. Get lost, before I call security on you.” The screen went blank.

I stood there in nothing short of a full-scale bout of classic “shell shock”. The words resonated in my mind like a loop-glitch in an audio-file. “We don’t rent to Plastics!”. Surely there must have been a misunderstanding. I pressed the call button again, but only got a <<please vacate the premises>> message. I kept, pushing, getting more and more agitated, but when the messages got more urgent, in larger font and with an escalating level of warning tones, and when I saw a security drone, taser-arm extended, slowly rolling in my direction, I decided to “vacate the premises”. This would not do! The transformation must have confused the systems, jumbled my meta data, mixed my identity records. This was not acceptable in the slightest. I should be fuming, but, for some reason, I really could not summon the full thermo-nuclear rage that I had become famous for in my teens and early college years. I sighed and summoned a Teslyft and headed back to TranceForm solutions. Thank goodness I was in superior shape now, and my hormonal balance-pump kept me in a reasonably good, if slightly anxious mood.

I entered into the TranceForm lobby. It was empty. The reception desk was not staffed at this time of the day, I must have arrived between appointments. I pushed a call button.

The average attendant, “M”, or someone just like her, the one who had received me 3 months ago came out of a side door and beckoned me to join her in an office space. She offered me a chair, and then sat down behind a simple metal desk, empty with the exception of a simple, paper-thin digital tablet.

“Welcome back Mr. Barnholm. We did not expect you back so soon.”

I tried to calm myself. No need to make a fuss, yet. “There must have been a mistake in the protocol. My habitat tower does not let me back in. They said something about “Plastics” not being allowed to rent from them! Can you add some perspective? Has this happened before?”

“Yes, it has. It is not a new occurrence with certain habitats. We could not be sure what would happen, so we let things play out. From what you have told me, you might have to find new accommodations. We have a number of excellent properties here in TechCity and in the NuMan Void. It is much better than what you city-dwellers think.” Again, the average smile, which was really beginning to grate on me. But somehow, weirdly enough, I just could not get angry enough. Rage would rise and dissipate. The edge was gone. Everything, was, I don’t know, becoming average. A thought dawned on me. My jaw dropped. The full weight of the realization had not set in. My hormonal balance pump was working under stress load now. I stared at her:”

“Did you ...?”

“Yes”

“But ...”

“There was no choice. Your natural body was too damaged. It could not take the stress of transformation. It is a small risk, less than 0.7%, but you were in the risk segment. Your natural form perished 3 weeks into the treatment regimen. We built you a NuMan body, based on your genetic template, and transferred your mind into it. You are good as new. Better, actually! Literally immortal, free of disease, strong, supple, attractive. Anything you wanted! All of this, of course was done without extra charge. Part of the Executive Package.” The smile that came after the marketing pitch was even more average than before.

“You criminals, you evil bastards, how dare you, I will ...”, but my mind was racing. The fine print. Surely, the fine print. I had signed my rights away. There was literally nothing I could do now. I had signed up for an outcome, a result. They had given it to me. If my apartment building had not rejected me, based on Plastic-discrimination, I might not have found out at all.

“You are welcome to stay here until you find employment. You still owe us 15% of net every month, but we are happy to give you a break for the next 3 months. Clearly this is an unusual situation. She gave me the digital tablet. We have collected a number of housing and employment options, both here and in the City. I really think you might find things more comfortable, here, among us, in the NuMan Void, or in TechCity. The City simply does not like Plastics very much, these days.”

I really should have listened to Takisha.