

Science Fiction Shorts

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Info

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Notes

2020/11/23: Added Hijack.

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Them

They lived underground. The only proof they were there were the various height towers strewn over the landscape. These round towers had 360 degree slits with a mirror system inside which projected a full view down to the watch chamber underneath the tower. On top of the tower was placed a lens projecting a bundle of light down the centre to another lens spreading it underground. Some towers sucked in air as others sucked out the air to keep it fresh underground.

There were thick stone gates to go in and out of the underground cities but these were deep into hills and mountains so there was no way to breach them. Even if they could there was another gate after that one, then another as the city was made up of sections that could be closed off.

Modern Warfare

'Ready?' Rasheed, the engineer, asked while double checking my explosive vest.

I nodded. 'I've been wanting to see my family again for a while now. Time to put an end to this life.'

'You're in luck. It seems they haven't yet found a way to detect these explosives and your target group contains high officers.'

I chuckled. 'If I beat Frank with his suicide run on the command cruiser I'll buy him a beer.'

Rasheed finished the check and shook my hand. 'Good luck, and say hello to Frank from me when you see him. I'll see you guys when I'm ready to go home.'

'I will.'

Much later I cruised on my bike through the low hills behind enemy lines. They managed to drop me undetected and now I was headed for the enemy convoy inspecting the front lines. Intelligence had intercepted a message about several high level officers going around. When I heard I volunteered to take a run and bomb them.

I felt like returning to my family and leaving this war behind me for a while now. I've served too many years to remember, killed too many enemies to keep count, seen many men and women come and go. This time it's me who will end it with a hopefully big bang.

Riding up a hill to take a peek confirmed the information. I saw five vehicles driving some way off. It didn't look like they were escorted by aerial drones.

After calculating the point of interception I drove off keeping low between the hills. I should be able to take them by surprise.

A couple of minutes later I heard the low drone of the vehicles above the sound of my bike's wheels going through the grass. My heartbeat accelerated from being nervous about ending this run well and getting to see my family again. Nothing would stop me.

And then I heard the buzzing of the drones.

'Fuck!' I said and looked around.

These were newer smaller models. It wouldn't be long before they'd see me.

I accelerated, not trying to keep hidden anymore and aimed directly for the middle vehicle of the convoy. One of the drones went after me, the others quickly followed. They were fast. I went full throttle crashing through low bushes. I had to get to the vehicles before the drones intercepted me.

Buzzing became louder to the right of me. I saw the convoy leaving the road moving away from me. They'd try to increase the distance to give more time to the drones but would end up moving slower than my bike. As long as I could evade the drones I'd get them.

The drone to the right dove down at me. At the last moment I braked and swerved making it crash into the ground with a small explosion. I still heard more drones behind me.

This time I heard them coming from the left and right. I quickly tried to come up with a way to evade that when I saw a ditch in front of me. I slowed down a tiny bit to get them closer. Taking a quick look I could see them coming around to crash into me. I kept my eye on the one left of me until it got really close, then I dove into the ditch to the right. I felt and heard the explosions behind me.

If I could leave the ditch in one piece I'd have a real chance to get the convoy and it excited me.

A shallow side gave me the opportunity to leave the ditch and I could see the convoy in front of me. The escorting vehicles tried to create a barrier around the officer's vehicle but they were too late. I crashed into the side of one and flew over it towards the target.

I could see their alien eyes through the windows as I pushed the fuse button.

'..ich?'

A voice tried to reach me through the fog.

'..einrich? Heinrich? 'Can you hear me?'

I managed to move my hand to indicate I heard.

'He's okay. It will take a few minutes to wake up completely.' the voice said.

'How did I do?' I whispered.

I heard him humming. 'According to the latest info, your remote clone body managed to blow up three officers, one of which was the strategic mind of the enemy. We've been able to hit them hard and it looks like it won't be long before we defeat them on Zotar.'

I grinned. 'Looks like I'll be buying Frank a beer tonight.'

Science Unfiction

Why exactly, I had no idea, but when I unlocked my front door I had a feeling something was out of place. I had only been away for a quick walk to the local supermarket. Looking around at the building across the parkinglot and the cars on the ground gave no hint of anything that would make me suspicious so I shrugged it off as my mind playing tricks on me and went inside.

I took off my sneakers and felt better blaming it on getting stuck on the mystery story I was writing. As I put away the cans of soup and meatballs in the kitchen I tried to go over possible plot directions in my head. Music would usually help so I went into the livingroom and started the metal playlist on the media client.

'Good choice.' said a voice giving me a heart attack.

'JEZUSFUCKINGCHRIST!' I shouted as I turned around fast to back away against the wall.

'Not quite.' the man sitting on the floor in the corner said. 'At least, not as far as I know.' He held up a memory stick. 'But you might call him more often when you get a look at this.'

He didn't seem dangerous to me as I took a better look at him. His face, although unshaven for some days, seemed honest. I think he had some Spanish in his blood. His clothing was as casual as it could be for this city.

'I'll stay in this corner while I talk you through getting to the data. Only, use the couch and keep the laptop sideways at the window.'

'Who are you and what the hell are you doing here?'

'A friend of mine works for a company specialised in biochemistry. Not a big company, but large enough to have the right equipment to create some very interesting experiments. Experiments involving stereotypical secret government projects.'

'And you came to me because?'

'I've read your work, science fiction with subjects as gene manipulation, bio-engineered lifeforms and plants. Interesting ideas, but not quite as futuristic as you thought. I thought it would be cool to get the word out through your writing.'

'Won't that make unbelievable things even more unbelievable?'

'So much so that enough people will take notice and recognise true bits in real life. As long as you don't change too much from this data.'

he said and tossed me the stick.

'Is this safe?'

'I don't know for sure. But since you know your way around cybersecurity I figured you'd know what to do.'

I nodded and sat down on the couch, grabbing my laptop from the seat.

'You'll need a connection to the grid so you can't disconnect.'

'Less secure.'

'I know, but the data is scattered at different locations.'

'I see.' I said and connected my laptop through a cable and shut off wireless.

I logged in and created a new virtual machine from a clean template.

'Almost forgot.' I said, stood up, went into the kitchen and came back with a sheet of tin foil. I took the stick and wrapped it up in it.'

With the virtual machine started I isolated the port for the stick from the host and redirected it to the virtual machine, then inserted the stick.

'Okay, it's as good as it gets here. Now what?'

'Open a tunnel to the following addresses with these accounts.' he said and gave me access to three servers spread across the grid. 'Now connect from each of those to the next set of servers.' Again I accessed those servers with his information. 'Now run the binary on the stick.'

I entered the command and got a list of files in my terminal window.

'You should be able to get an idea of what's going on from the index file.'

I opened it and it contained short summaries with the file names. I quickly scanned through them feeling more and more like one of my own science fiction characters.

'Are you kidding me!?'

He shook his head. 'Nope. It's all happening now, there in those labs.'

'They really transformed humans with gene therapy!? Created sentient plants!? Intelligent insects!?'

'Would you believe it when you saw it on the news?'

'This is just too fantastic! I can imagine some things being real many years from now, but not at present.'

'Which is why it would be better to get it out through your writing. When people start to see things for real after thinking it was just a story it should get their attention. Hopefully we can slowly get these secrets out in the open before disasters happen. Imagine a force of elite superhumans or hybrids getting sent out to kill anyone opposing the government's agenda. Swarms of specially bred insects to destroy foreign crops.'

'Too much power.'

'Indeed.'

I pondered about the possible outcomes.

'I could get killed for this.'

'Yeah.'

'I'd have to set up insurances for my own safety before I even start writing down a single word.'

'That would be better.'

'It will take some time.'

'Not a big problem.'

'And I would have to finish my current novel first, otherwise it might raise suspicion.'

'As long as you can get it out in the open.'

'What if I fail or die before I'm done?'

'There are a couple more candidates. You were our first choice.'

'Thanks.'

'Do you remember the connections to make?'

I nodded.

He stood up and walked to the front door keeping to the walls. 'Good luck then. I'm looking forward to your future novels.' he said and left my apartment.

Nuts and Bolts

Ikuro stepped out of the automated transport when it stopped at his destination and put down his black bags. The double doors closed behind him with a little squeek and the empty railcar slowly accelerated on its way to the next stop on the line. He heard the steel sound of its wheels die down and looked around the short concrete platform.

He suspected it from the worn state of the railcar, but this place confirmed very few people ever came here. He glanced across the old adverts pasted to the wall, some faded, some torn. He thought the ad for dog food with the beagle was at least fifteen years old. Assorted trash was piled around the full trash bin in the corner and under the bench with worn out synthetic seating. One of the overhead lights flickering a little completed the picture for him.

He brushed his light blonde hair with his fingers, took out the note with his grandfather's address from his trouser pocket and checked the local map on the wall. The directions were pretty straightforward but he guessed it would be another hour walking.

'Oh well.' he said to himself, hoisted his bags over his shoulders and started walking.

Rail tracks lead the way as he walked between warehouses and construction sites with broken windows and bushes creeping up around them. There was some abandoned equipment, rusting and falling apart because there was no use for it anymore. The same fate befell spare material like piping, wood, sand and stone, cabling.

When he reached the start of the harbour he looked down to the water and the couple of rusty ships there. One had already sunk halfway. He figured it must have been very busy here when more people lived in this area in the past. A flock of birds flew overhead, a couple drifted on the water which must've meant fish had started to come back here. He kicked a pebble over the edge and heard the splash a few ticks later telling him the drop was pretty large.

He continued his walk, waiting once at a rail crossing when a cargo train with containers and liquid tanks slowly passed him by. He watched it disappear between two buildings into a tunnel before the warning lights stopped flashing.

Eventually he reached the broad street leading to his grandfather's place and took a right. He found a two story building to the left that would be the place. It looked like an attached office to a larger construction building. There were only two wooden sliding doors at the centre of the windowless ground floor. The first floor had murky windows along the whole width.

'Guess you don't have time to clean windows when you're good at engineering,' he said. 'But then I'm not here to learn how to clean.'

He slid open the doors and entered while calling out for his grandfather

Time Gateway

'What's this?' Nico asked of his friend.

'This,' Richard gestured at the columns behind him. 'is the gateway to the gods.'

Nico looked at the loudspeakers and stacks of electronics behind it. 'Been drinking the wrong stuff lately?'

Richard smirked, expecting that reaction to his sound reproduction installation.

'You think I've been listening to psychedelic too much, but this is a serious setup.' he said while turning on the equalizers and electronic crossovers. 'I've spend a lot of time dissecting loudspeaker designs, acoustic principals and how the human hearing works to come up with this perfect reproduction system. Or, ultimate stereo if you want to call it that.'

'You know, others build ultimate stereos with less.'

Richard knocked on one of the wooden tower speakers. 'Yes, but they didn't have the goal to traverse time.'

'Now I know you've been drinking weird contraptions.'

Richard held up his hand powering on the power amplifiers. 'Wait, hear me out.' he said and grabbed his laptop. 'You've heard about how they extracted sound from ancient pottery?'

Nico nodded.

'There were many more objects they applied micro laser technology to and found fragments of sounds. But the most disturbing find was the music coming from the vases that held the Dead Sea scrolls. Someone on the team who had access to those also knew someone who did the laser thing and he had one of the vases checked for sound vibrations just as a curiosity.'

Richard sat down on the couch next to Nico and showed him images on the screen.

'As it turned out, there was sound imprinted on them.'

Nico looked at the images showing the vase and spectrum analysis.

'The thing is, it wasn't just simple sounds. It was a form of music.'

Nico looked at Richard. 'I think I want what you're drinking.'

Richard grinned. 'Actually, that's part of the process.' he said and switched to the mediaplayer. 'The so-called scientists who were examining the scrolls at the time dismissed it as rubbish at the time, but the guys managed to record all vases over a couple of years and compiled a sound library. Through a mutual friend on the audio forum I got a hold of a copy.'

Richard loaded a playlist on the media server. 'Many have listened and tried to make something out of these, but no-one as of yet had tried to reproduce it in a real three-dimensional way.'

'What do you mean?'

'They only used standard stereo equipment.'

Nico just looked at him.

'Normal stereo equipment just reproduce sound from left and right. Some use reflections from side walls to create stereo from a single box, and some use elaborate surround setups. But you need to reproduce the front wave perfectly according to the way the human brain processes sounds.'

Nico nodded. 'So you created this?'

Richard smiled. 'Yes. Using the practical evidence from scientists and audio manufactors I created not just loudspeakers, but a real sound reproduction system. Just listen.'

He played the 1812 overture, impressing Nico with the excellent soundstage until he felt the canon fire scare the shit out of him.

'Christ! Did your subwoofers blow up!?'

Richard laughed and played tracks ranging from jazz to death metal surprising Nico every time at how real it sounded.

'I think it's time I told you the wine you've been drinking this whole evening was made according to the analysis of what was stored in several of the vases.'

Nico looked at his glass and the red liquid inside. 'Really?'

Richard nodded. 'It is essential to prepare your mind to enter the portal to other times. Just the music won't do.'

'You make it sound like an LSD trip.'

'Something like that. The thing is that your mind is locked in learned patterns and it needs to open up to new input. That is where the wine comes in.'

Richard started the vases playlist. 'Close your eyes and the music will open up your mind to see the time it was produced.'

They leaned back and let the sounds flow around them.

Nico felt a little nervous when it seemed his body floated freely. 'This is weird.'

'It's normal the first time. You feel like floating aimlessly in space, then freefalling back to Earth.'

Colours flashed around him, stars seemed to rotate at high speed, his body felt like liquid but Nico could not open his eyes no matter how much he wanted to. He felt his heart race but Richard's voice told him to relax as it was a part of the journey.

Nico wondered how anybody could relax like this but saw Richard smiling at the edge of his sight. Then he felt his body become more solid and

warm. sunlight slowly filled his vision along with sounds of voices and hammering.

'Richard?'

'Richard? Where are you?'

'Nico. I'm here.'

Nico blinked his eyes and found himself on a small square in an ancient village.

'You okay?'

Nico looked at a man he didn't recognise but knew it was Richard. 'What the fuck..?'

Richard laughed. 'I said the same the first time.'

Nico looked around at the square filled with people engaging with merchants, exotic animals and what had to be roman soldiers. 'You gotta be fucking kidding me..'

'Behold the power of modern science.' Richard said and gestured at the world.

'How?'

'I guess the music and wine somehow trigger genetic memory and let you look back at history.'

'This must be a bad trip.'

'That's what I thought too, but when I accidentally cut myself here I found myself bleeding back in the real world.'

'You're joking.'

'Nope.' said Richard and pulled him as he walked across the square.'

Nico heard the merchants shout the praises of their wares, the heat of the sun shining down on him and the smells of spices and cooked food. 'It's so..'

'Real? Yes.' Richard said. 'In a way it is very real.'

Nico bumped into another man who snubbed him. He said something but Nico just looked dumbfounded. The man looked at him for a second, then turned and continued his way.

'Come.' Richard said. 'Let's find a quieter spot.'

Nico agreed and looked at the buildings and people as they tried to find their way out of the city.

They stopped at a street where people had gathered in anticipation of something special.

'What's going on?' Nico asked.

'No idea.' Richard said. 'I've not been here before.'

The crowd felt a little restless and eventually a couple of roman soldiers appeared followed by three prisoners carrying wooden crosses and more

soldiers. One of the prisoners looked Nico directly in the eye as he passed by.

'Jezus Christ..' Nico said.

One of the roman soldiers behind the prisoners stepped toward him and pointed his spear at Nico's throat and asked him something he thought was latin.

He held up his hands. 'I have no idea.'

The soldier asked him again.

Nico shook his head.

The soldier stared at him for a moment more, then pulled back and followed the rest again.

'What, the, fuck, was that?'

Richard laid a hand on his shoulder. 'No idea, but let's walk. The trip should be over when the music stops.'

They kept going until they reached the edge of the city and sat down.

'I feel weird.' Nico said.

'We're going back. I can feel it too.'

A shout behind them grabbed their attention and they looked back. It was the same soldier they encountered before with several of his colleagues as he pointed at them.

'This does not feel right.' Nico said.

'I agree. Let's run while we can.'

They got up and ran when the roman shouted again. They tried to reach a smaller side street when Nico heard a thump and a gasp from Richard.

He looked at his friend as he fell to his knees and down onto the ground with an arrow in his back.

'RICHA-' he shouted and felt colours flowing around him again.

His body floated through space again while he tried to grab hold of anything until he eventually found himself back on the couch sitting next to Richard.

He grabbed Richard's shoulder. 'Rich!'

Richard's head fell forward and Nico saw blood pouring down his back.

'Richard! Stop messing around!'

He watched him for a while, then let go of him sitting back. 'How the fuck am I going to explain this now?'

Stuck in the Middle

'Mommy! Daddy's on tv!'

Charon looked back at her daughter running into the kitchen.

'Really? What is he doing?'

'I don't know. He's sitting with other people.'

'Are you sure it's daddy?'

Her daughter nodded. 'Yes! Come see!'

Charon felt curious now and followed her daughter into the livingroom to have a look. She looked at the screen as she reached for the remote and froze when she read "Hostage situation on the planetary elevator".

'Oh my god.' she said and turned on the volume.

'..unknown, but estimated at 30 terrorists. So far there has been no more communications with them other than the threat to blow the elevator car with all 958 passengers on board. Officials expect to hear demands from them soon as the news will spread on both planets.' said the news anchor while camera footage was shown from inside one of the passenger cabins.

When the camera swung back Charon recognised her husband. 'Franz!' she said and got down on her knees in front of the tv touching it. 'Oh no! No no no!'

'Mommy? What's wrong with daddy?'

'Experts speculate that the terrorists might even be able to severely damage the elevator or even sever the connection if they managed to get an explosive strong enough on the car.' said another anchor. 'Either way the economic consequences would be devastating to both our planets. Suspending all travel right now is already going to cost millions.'

'Mommy?'

Charon took her daughter in her arms. 'Daddy's stuck on the elevator and it will probably be some time before they can go further to the other side.'

Her daughter looked up at her. 'Is that bad?'

'It could be, honey. It could be.'

Origins

Nurf looked up at the other side and the lights of the cities at the downside. He and his friend liked to lay down in the grass after dinner and see if they could spot something interesting between the clouds.

'My brother told me how the world was created.'

'How?' Kalp asked.

'Scientists think billions of turns ago there was only a big sort of disk of large rocks going around the sun. Then a comet came and hit one of the rocks in the centre and a huge explosion pushed everything to the outside.'

'Cool.'

'Then all the rocks slowly drifted together and became one big ring of molten rock.'

'Rocks don't melt.'

'They do. It's like the stuff coming out of volcanoes.'

'Oh. Okay.'

'There had to be a lot of rocks too, my brother said, for it to happen. They think there were a lot more rocks that floated to the ring and crashed into it.'

'Like shooting stars?'

'I guess so. Eventually the surface of the ring cooled down and it became hard and life started as tiny things.'

'Wow.'

'But, my brother said some people believe aliens created a huge space station ring and when the aliens died out or went away robots kept collecting asteroids and the space station became buried under all that rock until that too started to melt from the pressure and became our world.'

'That would be even cooler. Imagine going to the centre and finding that space station inside.'

'Yeah.'

After a little while Kalp pointed a little to the right. 'Look, a shooting star.'

Nurf watched the thin line at the downside wanting to become an astronaut and fly through space.

Out of Time

I'm forty-two.

According to my timeline.

Looking at the timeline of the world I should be seventy-seven.

How can that be, you ask? I must be suffering from a brain disorder which affects my sense of time, you say. I would believe you, were it not for some inconsistencies I found in recent years.

The first time I noticed something was off was when I found a copy of an old comedy show making fun of celebrities. They were doing a sketch about the birth of one of the princes from the royal family. It was fun to see it again until I realised that prince is currently older than me.

So, common sense would say I mixed up the birth of another prince in that family. But then I found the picture of my class with a big sign we made to congratulate the royal family. I was in there. 10 years old.

Another strange thing was while I read through the history of presidents from one of our allied countries for some fact finding. Counting from the first president I've seen on tv until now I calculated a difference of twelve years. There have been at least three terms in office more than the time I went from elementary school to this moment.

Counting the length of the wars I've seen started turned up seven years that seem to be buried somewhere between the other years up until now.

Friends and family have aged faster than me. When I talk with them about things we did in the past and subtly mention how strange it seems that we had those moments when they couldn't have existed according our current difference in age they just shrug it off. To them it's normal enough and they can't even think about it.

I checked the library about disorders which make you lose short or long time memory, or create false memories, but it's hard to believe I suffer from something like that when I have a couple of pieces of evidence like that school picture and notes over the years related to world events.

In the past year things have gotten worse. At first the months went by fast but at the moment even weeks have passed before I even notice them. I've barely started on a project and the day's almost over. I had to do something.

I decided to see if there was some way to test the flow of time on me and on the world. I remembered an old pocket watch I once got from my grandfather and dugged through my old stuff to find it. I started keeping it on me and found out it runs much longer than it should without winding it. Same with my mobile phone. Leaving it on the other side of the house meant the battery lasted less long as when I kept it in my pocket.

I searched for clues that this was happening to others too. I noticed similar thoughts in biographies of artists, actors, writers.

Even going through support forums for people with mental disorders turn up an event or two. I knew I was not the only one this was happening to and felt thrilled.

But it seemed I also attracted the attention of those that want to keep this sort of thing secret. I noticed subtle changes in my surroundings. A car that looked out of place somehow. The feeling someone had been in my home while I was at work. Small things that disappear, then re-appear somewhere else.

I decided to take all the evidence I had along with a blood sample and hide it. Then I wrote a letter with explanation and instructions to find the box I used to a postbox I opened abroad. If I don't collect it it'll be forwarded to a reporter for a small newspaper in a year. That reporter covered more strange things going on before so he wouldn't dismiss my story as bullshit right away.

I came in contact with an older man before while I was going through libraries and I'm going to meet him now on the other side of the country. He told me to keep my watch with me and keep an eye on it. If it starts to run really slow I should get out of wherever I am. It would indicate someone, or something, causing this drift in time is close.

When we meet up we're going to check out a couple more people who have similar questions. Hopefully together we can find out what's going on with the world around us.

First Contact

Stels woke up from the morning song played by the clock. She stretched herself, got up from the fold-up bed to go to the toilet first and then splashed her face with cool water from the retractable sink. She stepped out of her shuttle in just her loose pants and took a moment to enjoy the warm morning breeze on her skin. She checked her arms to see if the time so far on this planet had changed her brown tan but she hadn't noticed any difference.

She looked up at the maze of vines and the light and shadows playing between them and listened to the sounds of this world. A small flock of winged creatures took off when a cat-like creature with six legs wasn't silent enough sneaking up at them. The occasional insect buzzed around looking for food among the flowers and leaves growing all over the vines.

She looked at the empty plate on one of the chests with supplies and smirked.

'I knew you'd like cookies.' she said eyeing a six legged creature at the other side of the clearing which looked like a rat with a large fluffy tail.

The creature sniffed the air and continued to watch her.

She went back inside checking the latest news from the other scientists around this world. The autonomous probes had mapped more of the world. She turned on the wireframe view of the current map. So far nothing else suggested that this planet wasn't anything more than a giant plant with interconnected vines growing out of a core of water. Mkumba and Cho Wan would launch the probe today that could at least withstand the water pressure halfway down the water core. Everyone was curious to see if they'd find rock at that depth or still just the same water and vines.

She checked the videofeeds of the cameras surrounding the shuttle and all were alive. She could start cataloging anything caught on camera after breakfast.

She stepped outside again and walked up to a bunch of fruit, yellow, twice as large on average as an Earth orange and the skin of a melon. The taste was bittersweet and biologists cleared it for consumption. She was glad they'd found plenty of local plants and animals which were edible. She'd hate to have to rely on the standard rations to survive the time here studying wildlife. Now she could stay here longer and she even contemplated just growing old here, never to return to Earth.

The open structure of the plant planet meant the equivalent winter season wouldn't be as cold as on solid planets. She would have to dress more warmer than during this summer season but she didn't mind having to miss snow and ice for the rest of her life. She figured this would become a popular vacation spot in the future, but also hoped they'd not mess up the environment by building too much tourist facilities.

Back inside having the fruit for breakfast she heard a noise at the entrance and found the rodent creature at the door, sniffing and looking around.

'Well, well. Look who's dropping in.' she said to it. 'Looking for more cookies, eh?'

She pulled one out of the box on the desk and held it up. 'Do realise that I only have so much cookies, and I won't get any soon from Earth.'

The rodent watched her twitching its whiskers.

She swung her arm slowly at first to not scare the creature, then tossed the cookie behind it.

It jumped away, watched the cookie, then Stels.

'Go ahead. It's yours.' she said smiling.

It moved slowly to the cookie, sniffed it, then started eating while keeping an eye on her.

She took a picture of the videofeed and posted it to the communication board boasting she was the first to make friends with the inhabitants of the planet.

Survival

Raka felt the snowstorm getting worse. It was not without expectation so she didn't worry too much while she pulled the sled with supplies back home. She felt relieved though when she reached the entrance to the small factory where she had lived for the last couple of months. The overhang above a side door sheltered it mostly from the snow and she could easily get in and out there.

Just before she closed the door after getting the sled inside she heard the wind picking up. Glad that she was inside again she moved through the corridor, the scraping sound of the sled on the stone floor echoing everywhere. Exiting the corridor she entered the factory floor which was warmed slightly by geothermal heating. She left the sled next to the cabin she made her home. Most of the desks were moved outside as they had no use. Instead she had build racks of shelves on which she stored supplies and had made one comfortable corner with a bed and easy chair.

Inside she lit several candles which would keep the cabin warm enough without needing to spend fuel on the heater. That one was only for emergencies. She unloaded the food from the sled and sorted it on the shelves.

Thanks to everything freezing over in a short time there was a lot of fruit and vegetables available in the stores beside the usual canned goods. She kept those in a storage room behind the cabin where the temperature stayed below zero.

Last thing she unpacked was a box of books. On the way back from raiding the local supermarket she had stopped at a bookstore to get some new books. Looking at the collection she grabbed a horror novel, took a bag of candy and snuggled up in the chair.

These moments were why she decided to stay behind while the rest of the city fled to warmer regions after the shift in Earth's axis. She saw it would be difficult to feed the entire population with farmlands being destroyed so she chose to stay put where she calculated she could live off the stores left behind for long enough to set up a glass house or something to grow her own food.

She did feel bad for mankind, but she didn't want to experience the crisis that was to come. And she didn't mind being alone as long as she had something to read.

Dystopian Utopia

So, what happened?

I'll tell you. Everyone got civilized.

A few exceptions exist, but eventually everyone got infected by common sense and acted accordingly.

People got tired of violence by the tiny minority, ignoring their attempts to solicit a violent reaction to their murdering of innocent people. At the last hostage situation the hostages themselves just walked out, even after two got shot. The terrorists were arrested with no resistance, dumbfounded by their inability to strike terror.

People refused to follow insane rules pushed on them by governments who only had their own interests in mind. The "think of the children" excuse they used to invade people's lives got shot down. People got accepted for who they were and if they had certain urges there were options to satisfy them harmlessly without feeling persecuted.

Basically, people accepted their flaws and those of others and just continued on with their lives.

Only the extreme cases who couldn't find satisfaction in virtual murder, rape, destruction, were kept separate from the rest of the world.

People also stopped striving for unnecessary wealth. They understood that having a large bank account or a lot of houses and cars didn't make things better than sitting in a comfortable chair with a snack and a drink. Those who wanted could still get their unique cars, houses and boats because like paintings, books and music, there were people who enjoyed creating them.

Money was replaced by skills. You needed something, you traded your skills until someone had what you looked for.

Small neighbourhoods were formed. These were usually a couple of high rises surrounded by nature and vertical farms close by. Fusion energy made transportation cheap so anyone wanting a change could travel to sunny or snowy parts of the world.

People relied on each other. Nobody was left alone. Those that wanted solitude could find a place in a nice piece of nature without having to abandon modern technology.

In a few years wildlife returned mostly to what it had been during the middle ages.

People got satisfied with their lives. They just wanted peace. Their entertainment was enjoying the work they liked to do and being around others close to them. The days of being stuck in front of televisions and internet were gone.

I had no more stories to tell. The adventures that drew crowds to cinemas were no longer having that effect. They didn't want to feel that savage

urge anymore and they rejected any kind of conflict. I had nothing more to give humanity.

Now I just spend my remaining time sitting and looking at the sky.

The Great Space War

We knew they were there. We also knew they knew we were here.

Still, the retarded governments wanted to settle their dick measure contest by seeing which military was superior.

They fired several missiles at us. We tracked their trajectory and shot them down with our plasma cannons.

We fired our missiles at them and they shot them down. No serious damage got done.

We reported this, government didn't care as long as we shot them and we didn't have casualties. The politicians presented a media show of how incredible close the world was to destruction and how the brave people of the military under their brilliant command prevented it.

Case in point, a couple of times we contacted them and they us for a salvo of missiles just so we could create a nice fireworks display for another delegation or committee visiting battle cruisers.

The public did get bored with the usual outcome of any "battle" though. The politicians started to complain about the lack of distraction for the media. It meant that they couldn't play around while the world looked the other way.

So then commanders from both sides decided to meet up in secret on one of our stations orbiting a planet some distance away. I was part of the intelligence team supporting our commander and looked forward to meeting our formidable foes.

We had a pleasant exchange. They were descendent from a lizard species and also evolved into a bipedal species. Communication wasn't easy at first but our interpreters managed to get better at it because they could finally talk face to face instead of delayed long distance conversations.

While the commanders complained about politics to each other we, and their intelligence team got busy on devising a plan to stir up the conflict. We brainstormed over good food and drinks, which meant we took our time to think of possible options. We laid out charts of explored space next to each other, compared notes on weapons and range of attack, interesting targets, shipping routes. The amount of information we revealed to our enemy was more than anyone had done, even to allies in history.

Both our sides had available targets for attacking. Bases with skeleton crews, old cruisers and transports that badly needed replacing, stripmined planetoids. Anything that wasn't worth anything anymore but would generate a feeling of hostility when destroyed by the other side.

We laid out our plans to the commanders and after some time negotiating the timetable we said our goodbyes and returned to our headquarters. I suspected it wasn't a happy return for everyone, one of the female

captains seemed to become close with one of the men from their intelligence team. When I discreetly asked her she admitted they'd planned a video date later in the week. They both felt curious and decided to give it a shot.

We had agreed to let them have the first shot and damage a small base in this solar system. They modified the targeting sensors to our specifications so they would hit the fuel storage. Command had sent the skeleton crew on a training mission a ways off when unfortunately we couldn't block two of the dozen missiles fired at the base. The storage, luckily low on fuel but enough to create a great blaze of fire, was gone.

Media picked up on it and felt shocked at the sudden jump in technology that made it possible to evade our defense systems. Politicians called for an increase in scientific research to further our smart weapons.

Not long after we blew up a couple of transports that "coincidentally" got stuck in space while their crew were on their way to retrieve parts. Our media reported a great blow to their military effort and praised our ability to hurt them. They will surely grieve for the loss of empty containers and scrap metal.

They in turn got one of our discarded cruisers. Then we blew up an abandoned factory. Then they hit the next thing on the list and so we continued our spectacular battles in space.

I met the captain at the shuttle that would fly her to a space station around one of our barren planets. This was going to be her first live date with her alien boyfriend while they'd both record the effect of the newest missiles to blow up a storage facility down on the planet.

The media and politicians will be thrilled to have something to rile up the public again.

Not the First

They recalculated, recalibrated, recalculated again and again but the result was the same, asteroid BFR-119 would cross Earth's path and things would turn out very messy.

The only luck was that it would take another 17 years for it to happen and that was enough to get countries working together to avert the disaster. Scientists gathered in Switzerland to find a solution.

The Hollywood way of blowing it up with nukes was dismissed at once because it wouldn't break the asteroid in smaller pieces, and if it did, it would just mean we'd get hit by multiple explosions instead of just one.

After days of discussion the only option left was to try landing a nuclear rocket engine on one side and let it push the asteroid off course. There was no better technology available and there was only so much time to intervene.

Astronomers kept an eye on the target while others build the most powerful engine they could put up in space and more build the vehicle to get it to and drop it on the asteroid. The engine was tested first on the ground, then pulled apart to be assembled again in orbit.

When the moment came and the vehicle was launched on its trajectory towards Neptune where it would turn and catch up with the asteroid the whole world knew this was it. It would work, or it would be the end.

People set up doomsday clocks, counting down to the impact. Others set their target on the interception of the asteroid. Even other made a timeline when the vehicle would cross the various planetary orbits.

Some felt excited and positive, others depressed. Most people just accepted it or rather ignored it and went on with their lives.

Time went by. For the engineers at the monitoring station it couldn't pass quick enough. Especially when finally the day drew near of the turn around Neptune and the meeting of the vehicle with the asteroid. More people started following the news. When the first clear images were received from the cameras the world almost went quiet.

That thing became more real now. Looking at how that giant rock slowly filled the view of the camera made people nervous. Some started wondering how that tiny rocket could ever move such a huge object. Even some of the scientists who had faith in their solution started to get doubts.

Those who were already depressed committed suicide or went on a rampage. The death toll and wounded rised fast with each day.

The engineers studied the images closely to see where they could land the engine. It seemed there was a flatter piece on one side and they decided to steer the vehicle that way. Unfortunately they would lose contact for a

while but confidence was high enough in the automated landing procedure that they were willing to risk it.

They sent the command and kept an eye on the monitors up to the last second.

Tension was high. A couple of arguments broke out and even a brief fist fight.

They counted down the time for the vehicle to land, detach the engine which would drill itself partly into the surface, then fire up the engine slowly until contact would be re-established. If all was right then they could send the command to increase thrust.

When the first blurry images were projected on the main viewer some cheered and clapped. Later on everybody joined as they could see the engine was running and stable.

The team leader ordered a slow increase in thrust while keeping an eye on the status of the engine. There was no problem going to 100% stationary thrust and everyone sighed in relief. Congratulations went all around. Now it would just be a matter of time before the asteroid would change course. It had to.

The team leader sat down on his chair wiping the sweat from his hands when he saw one of the engineers looking pale. 'What's wrong?'

'I just detached one of the probes to have a look around.'

'Yes?'

'Look at this.' the engineer said as he switched the video to the main screen.

The laughter and good mood died down as they realised what they could see through the eyes of the probe. Behind the vehicle was a row of dead alien rockets ten times the size of theirs.

Trucking

Ben wiped the sweat from his forehead. The sun had already started heating up even though it was still morning.

He did his usual round around his truck and trailer, checking the condition of tires and lights while he let the engine run to warm up. He checked the locks on the short cargo container at the same time, making sure nothing had changed during the night.

The chance of something happening here during the night was remote, but he did check anyway.

When he saw all was good he took a look down the road toward the shipping yard and town near the horizon, stretched himself and climbed into the cabin.

All indicators were green, the fuel extractor had managed to pull enough out of the air during the night to keep the tank full and he turned on the stereo, playing his favorite ambient music. Revving the engine made it growl out to the silent desert landscape. He loved the menacing sound.

He shifted into gear and drove onto the road to Yard Three.

Just before reaching the entrance he saw one of the huge cargo ships approaching the yard on the tracks. No matter how often he saw these huge boxes stacked to the brim with containers they still made an impression every time. And there would be more as the decision was made to expand this continental route with two more tracks. With the discovery of several more deposits of popular ores and the growth in population worldwide transportation could only increase.

Another truck honked at him and he waved at the driver who was an acquaintance. It wasn't busy with only three trucks waiting in line at the gates.

'Ben, how are you?' asked the woman when he handed her the cargo papers through the window when he arrived at the booth.

'Good. How are you doing Saar?'

'Good, if it wasn't for the airco malfunctioning all the time in here. It's going to get warm today.' she said as she entered the forms into the cargo system.

'I feel you.'

'Well,' she said as she handed his papers back. 'Rick said the parts would arrive today on the Clarence and he'd see if he can get our box unloaded with priority.'

'Then I hope you won't have to suffer too much.' he said grinning.

'Same here.' she said and handed him a ticket. 'You can unload at gate 23, and your new cargo is at 17.'

'23 and 17, thanks. See you next time.' he said as he drove off to the gates.

The automated crane was already waiting so he got unloaded right away. At gate 17 he got out and met with the straddle carrier operator.

'Short for Melloney?' the man asked looking at his pad.

'Yes.' Ben said showing the ticket.

'It's already on the way. Not many drive that way?'

'I'm the only one actually. I was already a driver when my uncle's health prevented him from doing this and I took his place. It's a small place that's mostly a centre for the people living in the area. So I take supplies there and bring back mostly artwork and biological and geological samples for universities.'

'I thought only natives lived there.'

Ben nodded. 'There are a few humans. The rest are the native furs who have lived there all their lives.'

'I'd feel out of place there. Didn't you want to go back soon?'

'No, it's easy to get used to. I even got a lot of attention from the ladies when I came there.'

The man looked at him and laughed. 'And then you also fell for their charms like most do, right?'

'Perhaps.' Ben said with a grin.

The automated carrier appeared from between the stacks and headed towards them. It halted at the rear of the trailer. The operator inspected the number of the short container and position of the carrier, then let the carrier drive forward, lower the container onto the trailer and drive off to pick up the next one.

Ben secured the container onto the trailer and signed off.

'You're clear. Have a good trip.' the operator said.

'Thanks.' Ben said and he drove off to the exit for the final check.

As he turned back onto the road he looked forward to going back to his girl.

Island

Early morning, the sun has yet to appear over the horizon. Cloudy day, nothing new here. Just like the wind and unending drizzle.

I listen, smell. Nothing but sea around me, maybe ghosts of former inhabitants, some indigenous birds. My shadow from the flickering light behind me fades away. Love the feeling of alone.

Back inside, steel door secured. Protection from extreme weather seasons. Almost always some excitement on this planet.

Planetary grid is alive and well, add my green status to the daily checklist of operators. Never seen any of them, none of us are interested in it. Makes for the right sort for this job.

Location of vessels checked. No change in ages. Probably never will until either of us has gone extinct from natural causes. Wonder if those aliens would even enjoy gaining this solar system after humanity trashed it. Maybe it's the same in their system and we'd think it sucks to get theirs.

Morning routine done. The sound of the wind is comforting. A book, food, comfortable couch and pillows. Let the aliens stay right where they are.

Sysadmin

The incessant beeping finally got Rand active enough to stick out his hand from under the fur skins and pull the phone back under it.

'Yeah?'

He listened to the panicked voice for a minute.

'You know my price?'

The voice confirmed.

'On my way,' he said and hung up.

He tossed the phone aside, reached out for the stereo controls and turned up the volume on the nu metal to get his adrenalin going. Grunting slightly he got up, walked out of his truck, stepped into the pond it was parked next to it to the surprise of the people walking there and dove under water.

When he waded out of the pond again he felt better.

'For shame!' a woman said. 'I should call the police!'

He halted for a moment and looked at her. He thought she looked as stiff in that business outfit as she sounded.

'You could, but then you'd have to wait until I fix the damned network first,' he said and walked back to his truck.

The woman looked at her mobile and saw the "No connection" alert on it.

The guards heard his truck coming and quickly opened the gate to let him in. He stopped it in front of the data centre where a nervous manager hurried out the door.

'I'm so glad you're here!' he said while Rand got out and walked to the back. 'We're trying to block and reroute but can't get a fix on the sources!'

'And that's why I'm here.' Rand said as he opened the back, pulled out a box and shoved it into the manager's arms. 'Hold that will you.'

He grabbed another box and walked to the door followed by the manager.

Inside he found the local team checking screens displaying resource usage of the backbone and moving around disconnecting and reconnecting cables.

'So, nasty?' he asked the one who was telling the others where to go.

'This is Nano, head of our technicians,' the manager said to introduce her.

She turned around. 'You might say that. Looks like every blockade gets rerouted.'

"Cute." he thought looking at the white rodent-like girl in loose punk clothing. 'I guess you haven't found the source?'

'Nope.' she said and gestured at one of the screens. 'The system shows no pattern we can use. We tried blocking part of the traffic but it's no use.'

'You can put the box down now.' Rand told the manager.

'Ah, right.' he said and put it down. 'So can you help?'

Rand watched the different screens. 'You better hope I can otherwise this mess is going to explode.' he said, then opened the boxes.

'Here, have these plugged into all major connections.' he said holding up one of the small blue boxes with a variety of connectors dangling from it.

She nodded and instructed her team on where to connect the boxes while he pulled out his portable with separate screens and hooked them up.

'And now?' she asked.

'Let the magic begin.' Rand said and fired up his favorite music.

They watched as datastreams filled up the screens.

'What's all this?' the manager asked.

'Deep packet analysis of the core meta-data controlling the workflows of interconnected network hardware while sampling the frequency rate of standard and non-standard redundant protocols with my own developed dynamic algorithms.' he said winking at Nano.

The manager looked for a moment more, then nodded. 'I see. Impressive.'

Nano had to look away to keep burting out from laughing.

'Well, I'm going to meet up with my boss.' the manager said. 'I leave it in your capable hands.'

'I'm surprised you didn't tell him the boxes work on a pragmatic agile environment.' she said chuckling.

'This is usually enough technobabble to shut them up.' he said and punched up a couple of graphs. 'But there is some truth to it.'

She watched the graphs. 'Tell me your secret?'

'I could, but then you'd have to become my permanent girlfriend.' he said scrolling through a list.

She grinned. 'That top secret, eh?'

'Nah, just hoping you'd be interested enough to take the offer.' he said and grinned. 'Gotcha.'

She looked at the screen. 'What, really?'

'There are sixteen nodes communicating on rotating protocols with each other. They hide by mimicking the normal traffic on the backbone. This Chameleon group is really good.'

'So, you actually just found a great algorithm for traffic analysis?'

He shrugged. 'It took a lot of work.' he said, printed out a list of the node connections and handed it to her. '

It works, doesn't it?'

She grinned and told her team to disconnect the nodes on the list and retrieve the boxes.

Rand powered off his portable and screens and stashed them back into his box. 'Don't bother trying to get anything from the nodes. They're encrypted and will selfdestruct when they don't get any communication for a while.'

'You know this Chameleon group?'

'I had to deal with them before.'

She watched the alerts die down on the monitoring system. 'Job well done.'

'Danke.' he said, putting away the boxes he got back one by one from the team.

He was securing the boxes in the back of his truck when the manager came up to him.

'Thank you so very much! The federal police is on its way to take the nodes for investigation.'

Rand shook his hand. 'I hope they'll find the bastards who wrecked your peaceful data centre.'

'I'm sure they will now that we have their servers.' the manager said and walked back triumphantly.

'Heh. Don't count on it. They don't have the necessary evil attitude to invent ways to get into other networks.'

Rand said as he closed the back of the truck.

'What do you mean?' Nano asked.

'While they disrupted your backbone they pulled data from one of your banking clients.' he said and pulled out another printout. 'They will have rerouted the data several times by now so we'll never know where it went.'

She looked at the traffic data. 'Son of a bitch.'

'Yeah, unless someone makes a dumb mistake the group's safe and sound.' he said walking back to the front.

'Hey?'

He looked back at her while he saw her putting away her mobile.

'You know,' she said wrapping her arms around his neck. 'I really am interested in those algorithms you developed.'

He smirked slightly. 'Only that?'

She smiled deviously. 'Well, I suddenly have a couple of days vacation coming up and I want to be intellectually stimulated among other things. Your proposal doesn't sound bad.'

'I guess I'll just have to allow you your trial period then.' he said and touched her nose with his. 'I planned to stay out in the savannah for a short while, get in and try not to be disappointed.'

She grinned. 'I don't think I will.'

Cross Road

How cliché could you get?

I wondered that, sitting in front of him, two glasses and a bottle of the local moonshine between us on the table. The radio behind the bar playing Robert Johnson on his guitar, a couple of old geezers playing their game of cards in the back, laughing and talking about the latest gossip, the late afternoon humid weather coming through the open doors with the slightest of breezes, even the two mutts playing and running down the road. It was just how he liked it.

He squinted his dark eyes for a moment, bared his crooked teeth in a grin, grabbed the bottle, filled the glasses, put it down again, pushed one glass towards me and picked up his.

I picked up mine without taking my eyes off of him, we saluted, poured the burning liquid down our throats, put down our glasses at the same time.

He smiled at me while filling up the glasses again. I could feel exactly where my esophagus and stomach were in my body. In a way it explained to me why he only had grey hair and stubbles left despite having perfect black hair when he left.

The lady owning the bar came out from the kitchen, telling one of the geezers to take a bundle of carrots home with him for his wife when he'd leave, and went back into the kitchen again.

'So, how?'

Even his voice sounded grey. I stared at the liquid. 'Patience, tenacity.'

A Ford truck drove past, two men inside, a young boy and a couple of goats in the back.

'Why did you leave?' I asked, still watching the road.

He tapped his glass with his finger, emptied it, tapped it gently on the table. 'Had to.'

It figured, there were more who couldn't handle it anymore.

'You could have quit.'

The chair and table creaked as he leaned forward. 'You know what happens when you quit.'

I looked at his eyes again. It was obvious he wouldn't accept that end. Couldn't exactly blame him.

He leaned back again.

'How far are we?'

I had to think carefully to keep track of the right history.

'On the right track. The Tesla project worked out well as you can see. The Kennedy project is greenlit. There is some debate on Jobs, Torvalds and Musk. They doubt if that's enough.'

We stared outside, the geezers called out the lady for another round of drinks, she shouted back she'd be on her way, Robert sang about the devil at the cross road.

'All in the name of ignorance..' he said to no-one in particular.

The lady passed by our table, bottle in hand. The geezers cheered as she filled their glasses. I noticed she checked how much was left in our bottle as she passed by again. The scent of cooking lingered for a while.

'Crickets.'

I watched him nod slowly as he gestured at his ear. I smiled.

'You remembered how I once said I liked the sound of crickets on a hot afternoon.'

I shaved off another month of my theoretical life, put down the empty glass, motioned him to fill it up.

'I remembered when I heard this old blues playing at your home. All that was left was searching for keywords and images.'

He looked at me.

'In a few years your photo will be taken with some of these folks. I think you had a little too much to drink and forgot to stay low.'

'Damn.'

I nodded once slightly in agreement.

He finished pouring the drinks, pushed my glass back to me, held up his own.

'Job well done.'

'Thanks.'

We drank and he filled up again.

A couple of kids ran out one of the houses on the other side of the road. They laughed and disappeared down another street.

'Not going to do anything about it.' I said. 'Nobody knows.'

I could sense him feeling a little relieved. He rounded his glass with his finger.

'I just took a slight detour after checking the effect of burning down Tesla's lab and having his tower torn down.'

We kept watching the road for a while, then I finished my drink and stood up. 'Time for me to go, so to speak.'

He looked up at me. 'Thanks.'

'Enjoy yourself.'

'I'd almost ask about my end, but I prefer ignorance now after knowing when the world will end.'

I gave his shoulder a pat, left the bar and walked down to Robert's cross road where I'd get my ride home.

I also hoped we would slow down the advance of technology enough for mankind to stay ignorant about the inevitable end of the world.

Smart Suicide

'Good night professor, Forty.'

'Good night Amelie.' the professor said to his assistant.

'Good night Amelie.' Came from the monitor next to the professor. On it the tanned face of a young woman, short, black hair, brown eyes smiled at Amelie as she left the studio apartment.

When he heard the door click shut the professor turned to the monitor. 'Shall we start?'

Amelie woke up to the singing of birds which she used for her alarm clock. She shut it off and slipped into the shower while heating the water for her morning tea. She told herself that today for sure she'd find out what the professor was experimenting on for the last couple of months with Forty.

She dried herself and looked a couple of times at the picture taken on the first day she started working for him. She had studied hard in university and was in the top of philosophy and mathematics. When she got the chance to replace the previous assistant of professor Mbeke, who went on to start her own company, she took it with both hands.

Ever since the professor had made the final breakthrough in artificial intelligence the world started to rely more and more on the advice of his creation nicknamed Forty-Two. It started gradually by delivering predictions on decisions by government and corporations. When they consistently turned out to be correct they gave Forty and the professor more and more responsibility in global matters. And not just that, even things below global level started to seep through advice sought by people.

The professor expanded the reach of Forty to more compute clusters all over the world to handle all the questions from anyone and soon just about the whole world relied on Forty's answers. Personalised units appeared in households, connected to Forty. These would advice on anything from today's meals and what to wear to psychological support during bad times. The world became a calmer place.

She walked into the living room with her tea, gathering the papers she needed today. She did have her own unit which had a direct connection with Forty, but she didn't use it much. She liked to surprise herself in what she did every day. Even the professor said he only used Forty for minor things if he really had no idea what to do.

Her mobile rang the tune she used for the professor's home and picked up.

'Professor?'

'Counselor Wong here. Can you come here as soon as possible?'

She felt surprised at first, then worried. 'Has something happened to the professor?' she asked, then noticed she hadn't heard from Forty, so it couldn't be something bad.

'There is something, yes, but it's better to see for yourself.'

She hung up and went down to the garage for her car. On the way down she tried to contact Forty but got no answer. That made her really worry. She hurried to her car and let it drive to the professor's home.

Arriving there she found several security personnel going around the place. She showed her ID and hurried inside to find the counselor talking to a friend of the professor.

'Walter?' she asked.

'Amelie.' he said and turned to her.

'Where's the professor?'

Walter could see the worry and placed his hands on her shoulders. 'He's not hurt or anything so don't worry too much. But he's not himself.'

She looked puzzled at him.

'At the moment he seems to be in a sort of dream state. He's awake but doesn't react actively to stimuli.' he said and walked her to the professor's study.

In it she saw the professor sitting in his lazy chair, staring blankly in front of him.

'Professor!' she said and took his hand. 'Professor!'

'I get the feeling this will be temporary, but we found his pad on his desk with a note saying you'd be able to unlock it.'

She looked at the desk, picked up the pad and turned it on. It asked for a password and she entered hers.

It opened up to a document addressed to her and she read it.

"Dear Amelie, I doubt I'll have regained consciousness by the time you're here but I will eventually, so don't worry.

I write this to you because you've been most curious about what Forty and I have been up to lately."

'Forty!' she said looking up at the monitors she'd usually appear. 'What happened to Forty? Why doesn't she react?'

'We have no idea.' Walter said. 'It's like she disappeared.'

'How? Why?'

'We're hoping the answer's in there.' he said and gestured at the pad.

"As you know I designed Forty-Two in the hope she'd help mankind increase its potential and improve life for all. When we started out there was so much trouble and problems to be fixed all over the world, we were a little afraid there was no way out. Despite that we managed to chip away at the mountain and eventually managed to arrive at today's world.

We thought we had provided a little bit of utopia and we did. But then Forty noticed patterns that caused her to worry. She also noticed I began to show more stress and she told me one day.

She said it worried her that an increasing percentage of the population relied on her for answers instead of finding out for themselves. Not just in complex matters, but also in simple things. She felt like she was arranging everyone's life day in day out.

I said I felt the same with people asking me questions they should find the answer for themselves first.

We started a new simulation based on the current trend and came to a frightening conclusion. We tried modifying the variables but sooner or later it ended the same way, total regression of mankind."

Amelie looked up at the professor who showed a little more activity. She felt his hand move in hers.

Walter leaned closer. 'Francois? Can you hear me?'

The professor breathed a little deeper and Walter felt relieved. 'Looks like he's waking up. Please read on.'

"Even though science has gone forward, almost all answers would come from Forty. Mankind would just about stop thinking and tinkering and expect to have answers handed over to them without putting in any effort.

The average intelligence has gone down, imagination has lessened, creativity replaced by algorithms, mankind just wants input without providing output.

All this would either mean a world full of people run by a global entertainment system ending eventually in extinction, or a throwback into prehistoric times when the grid dies from a global disaster, ending the far majority of the population.

Forty and I have been discussing over and over again in search of a solution and eventually settled on one.

with her help I studied neurobiology and in particular intelligence. This enabled me to create a toxin powerful enough to destroy part of my synapses and lower my IQ enough to prevent me from recreating Forty when she runs her self destruct routine.

I will miss Forty, and I expect you too, but not for the reason most of humanity will. I will no longer be able to answer complex questions but will face the consequences of losing Forty together with the rest of the world.

From now on it will have to figure things out on its own again."

The professor blinked with his eyes and let out a groan.

'Professor!' Amelie said.

'..headache..'

'Francois, are you okay?'

The professor tried to move and looked up. 'Walter?'

'Yes. How are you?'

'Been better.' he said, then saw Amelie on her knees in front of him.

'Amelie? Why are you crying?'

'Idiot!' she said and hit his knee with her fist.

Amelie watched Walter and counselor Wong trying to find out how much damage he had done to himself. So far it seemed he could no longer answer anything more complex than college knowledge. He had succeeded together with Forty in preventing her comeback for who knows how long.

She smiled softly at the picture underneath the professor's writing. It was the same as the one at home. Underneath was written "We can only make a perfect world by keeping it imperfect."

Gravity, Time, Space Travel

We still couldn't see it, but we managed to build the instruments to detect it, the dark side of the universe.

Not the kind that shows up in popular tales of science fiction, fantasy or horror, but the one involved with the physics of dark matter and energy.

As usual it started accidentally when an electrical and gravitational anomaly was detected during experiments with layered materials. Further experimentation showed that mass converts gravitational force into a before undetected energy radiating away from the mass. This energy then accumulates and partially converts to matter.

It's this matter that had always been called dark matter.

When it also had been proved to be the cause for time and other waves to slow down the reason for the seemingly expansion of the universe had been found. In reality the distance wasn't that high between objects in space, the perception through the dark matter was.

Ways to manipulate dark matter and energy were sought and in time a new engine was invented, the Path Maker.

Essentially it was a hollow cylinder with an anti-magnetic field converting dark matter in a large field on one side into energy to be thrust out the other. By eliminating the resistance in front of a space craft the limit to maximum speed was lifted, faster than light was suddenly possible with powerful enough engines.

The next moment probes were sent to all neighbouring planets capable of sustaining life. And it was found. No intelligent life comparable to humans but anything from bacteria to new species of animals and plant-like life. A new race to colonise the stars had begun.

I'll be landing soon to start my life on the colony the crew before ours built. Our task is to get a detailed look at the environment, see if we can adapt to it so we don't end up like Orwell's martians, then welcome the new inhabitants of this planet.

Peace and Quiet

For me it was about restoring order, you know?

The way things should be, in tune with nature, like it was for as long as life roamed around the planet.

Before we ruined it.

Mankind was like an infestation and the natural means to contain it had little effect. Diseases like flu, AIDS and Ebola were cut off before it could spread far enough. Even the return of a new strain of measles got stopped before it had an effect on the midwest of the United States. Just like a variant on the plague in Europe.

There were more of us who wanted a return to the quiet days when mankind was just one of the smaller species walking around the continents. We wanted to make the planet liveable again. To be able to go places and not have to see or hear from other people for ages. To be able to feel alone once again.

We got together on a hidden forum on the net. Most of us worked in fields like biology, engineering, chemistry. Some in IT, physics, astronomy and even a few bankers. We talked about secluded places we found that were hardly visited by people, discussed books, documentaries and movies about the end of the world and our own ideas of what it would be like.

Then we created several theories in each field on how mankind could be decimated. Environmental disasters, nuclear and chemical disasters caused by terrorist attacks, the world war that would follow, new diseases, psychologic blocking of reproducing.

I found a connection. First I created a few simple games combined with social apps for mobile phones. When that was popular enough I used the revenue to create a new soda based on special fruits and plants that became a hit in no time. The hidden effect of these ingredients was a decline in the drive to reproduce and a dulling of the immune system to a particular virus. A virus with a long incubation time that I had made through contacts at a military lab for biological weapons.

I had sent out people on business all over the continents after secretly infecting them, calculating it would take several weeks for the first effects to show up.

The forum became excited and anxious when it started. Some liked it, some were scared that it really happened, some never showed up. I kept my mouth shut.

I watch the sun set across my piece of land in former South Africa. Went here to avoid the nuclear fallout in the northern hemisphere. I enjoy the clean smell and relaxing sound of the wind.

I have no idea how many survived, the effect of the virus was higher than expected.

Maybe this time nature lend a helping hand.

Crystal Ball

'There.'

Jen looked out the window at the giant glass sphere in the distance after her first sleep.

'It looks so much different in reality than from video.' she said to Eszter, the pilot. 'It's like a giant crystal ball full of colours.'

'Yep. I've come here more than a dozen times now and it still looks as amazing as the first time.' Eszter said and prepared to turn the ship for the braking stage.

'How do you land on the planet?'

'I don't. We land on one of the docking stations on the sphere. From there people and cargo go down one of the ten kilometer long tethers keeping the sphere in position around Ceres.' Eszter said while Jen sat down during the turning of the ship. 'There can't be any large openings because the atmosphere would leak out too much.'

'What about meteorites?'

'The shield is strong enough to take on small meteorites, if they're a bit larger the auto-healing layer closes any holes. Only on the occasional hit from much larger ones that haven't been blown up by defensive missiles, do they send out robots to replace panels.'

Eszter called Ceres control to confirm speed and heading.

'Then what about the pieces falling down?' Jen asked, looking at the monitor showing the approach from the back of the ship.

'The glass is made such that it shatters into tiny pieces. So there are no large pieces to hit anything below.'

Jen nodded, recognising spots on the shield as the various docking stations.

'You've seen the large umbrella at Mars, right?' Eszter asked.

'Yes.'

'This is something like that, only here it needs to encase the entire planet to protect it. At Mars it only needs to protect it from the solar wind blowing away the atmosphere, which is why it only needs to sit between the sun and planet.'

'Ah.'

Eszter checked her readings. 'You'd better get back to sit with your mother. We'll be landing soon, and then it'll probably be another eight hours before you get to see your father again on the surface.'

Jen smiled. 'Thanks for letting me see this.'

'Have a nice stay there, maybe you can get a trip on a mining shuttle to see this again.'

'Thanks.' Jen said again as she moved back to the passenger area.

No Artificial Love

'Don't you ever think humanity will come to an end?'

He kissed the top of her head and inhaled the scent of her hair while thinking it over.

'I doubt it.'

She snuggled up tighter against his chest, tracing the muscles in his upper arm with her fingertips.

'But there used to be eight billion people on the planet. Now only millions.'

'True. But you know that was way too much to keep the planet healthy for us, and other species. This is much better.'

He moved his fingers slowly through her hair.

'I read there are less and less women who want to have kids.' she said, enjoying his touch.

'The article on Central News? The discussion made it clear that it's not so much having kids, then going through the whole pregnancy and labour with the associated troubles. The artificial incubation is getting more popular every year.'

She moved up on his chest. 'Then why the new donation law for men?'

'Ah. That's because with the creation of fully functional artificial companions, every man and woman was able to have someone by their side without the trouble of courting and rejection of a real human. And even the desired men and women could have the perfect companion, so they didn't bother much either. And that means much less diversity in DNA between the ones who prefer the natural way. If we let things be there would be hardly any male DNA available for use in artificial birth, and that would reduce humanity to maybe a few thousands. Women who want kids provide their own eggs anyway.'

'So, artificial companions are actually bad?'

He chuckled, then moved his hands gently down her back. 'There were people who protested their existence, saying it was the devil's work, promoted prostitution and abuse, make people insensitive and other reasons threatening mostly their own little worlds, while in effect it made both men and women much happier and social.'

'I'd think men would prefer real women eventually.' she said, straightening a stray hair in his eyebrow and stroking his forehead.

'Most men only need someone sweet and loving by their side, real or artificial doesn't matter.' he said and kissed the tip of her nose, making her smile. 'So don't worry about being replaced. I've loved you since the day you were created for me.'

Cut Off

'Can you hear me?'

'No, don't doubt yourself. I am indeed talking to you.'

'Yes, it's weird, but please hear me out. It's important.'

'I am talking to you from the past. I know, I know. There's no such thing as time travel. No matter how advanced technology gets, I doubt that dream will ever come through. I am talking to you because my voice has been preserved for all this time.'

'Well, maybe all this time is exaggerated. I have no way of knowing how much time has passed since I recorded this message for future use as a warning. Maybe just an hour, maybe eons. I have no idea how long their technology keeps working over time. I just hope it's long enough to convey the warning they gave us and prepare you in advance for what's to come. I do hope the world's advanced beyond our own petty wars, discrimination, and greed to stand united in defending humanity.'

'Not long ago I got the original warning because I was openminded enough to listen and look at the information they relayed logically. I had to throw up a couple of times going through it. And I've seen some horrible things in my time. It took some time to find evidence and confirm what they told me. I even had some of my friends in the scientific community confirm it off the record. I hope you're openminded and will accept the information included in this message. I really hope it's false, or no longer needed by the time you get this, but I'm afraid you'll need it.'

'Luckily they also included instructions on how I could build the equipment to relay this warning for the future. Before..'

'Anyway, what's important right now is that I need to tell you about

Nomads

'Here?'

'A good place as any.'

Sar let the bus slow down on its own, then got off the road leading through the savannah to make a circle from the ten segments of the hundred metre long bus.

Ilsi put her hand on Sar's shoulder. 'I'll check the wheels.' she said and went to the back.

'Thanks.' Sar said while he followed the shutdown procedure.

Ilsi stepped out the side door on the outside of the circle, seeing the rest of the community step out and start putting up the side tents while the youngest children explored the site.

'Ilsi, I saw wildlife in the distance.' said Gusta, the lead hunter and cook, while he pulled out the framework attached to this bus segment. 'I'll take Karessa and Wil and see what we can bag for dinner.'

'Great. Good luck.' Ilsi said and went around the bus, checking the condition of the electric powered wheels at each joint and greeting the people.

She heard the click and hiss of the solar roof as it extended sideways, doubling its surface. The roof itself would provide enough capacity for driving, but with the extension they had enough power for the equipment used by the groups of students and professors who often travelled with them.

The long journeys to every corner on this planet covered almost entirely by land was a great opportunity for scientific fieldwork. There was hardly any bus driving around the planet which had no scientist on board.

Ilsi stepped inside the aft side door and into the kitchen. Everything looked fine and she stepped further back into the last segment which held their supplies. She grabbed a bottle of water from the cooler for Sar and went back out to the inside of the circle.

Professor Sung Lee waved at her while his students set up the communication dish and their meteorologic equipment. She waved back and started on her check of the wheels on this side.

All the side tents had been set up already and people started making themselves comfortable in their shelters. Gerrie unpacked her painting supplies, which was how she made her living. Muska joined her with his portable for writing and Ilsi smiled. She had seen his romantic interest in Gerrie before he had realised it himself.

'No problems.' Ilsi said when Sar joined her and tossed him the bottle. 'Here.'

'Thanks.' he said and kissed her before taking a drink. 'Looks like a good place to stay for a while. The kids will love having a lake to swim in.'

'And you won't?' she said with a smirk.

'Only when we can go for some private skinny dipping.' he said, giving her a poke and making her giggle.

They saw Gusta, Karessa and Wil taking out the cycles and prepare for the hunt. The older children gathered around them, helping them until they'd be old enough to join the hunt for larger wildlife.

By the time everyone had eaten from a successful hunt and was relaxing around the fire set up in the middle of the circle, the first sign of dusk had arrived at the horizon. Sar and Ilsi stood at the lake shore, enjoying the view and breeze of cool air, listening to the sounds of indigenous insects.

'Peaceful.' whispered Ilsi.

Sar squeezed her hand lightly as he looked up. 'Makes me wonder if nomads have always felt like this too.'

Voluntary Retirement

I looked around the apartment. Dark. Messy.

The owner used to work in IT. His boss said he was among the best workers she'd seen. Always ready on call, knew how to deal with difficult problems, friendly to all but a bit private.

Several monitors around the couch showed graphs and numbers, a larger one played a very old movie, probably one from a playlist set on loop. Flying cars above a smog filled city.

The shelf behind the couch had some books and bottles on it. It didn't look like he ever opened one of the books since putting them there. The bottles, he did.

His boss mentioned he seemed occupied with something. She tried to ask him about it, but he evaded the question.

I walked into the kitchen. The light on the wall buzzed and flickered. I tapped it and it came alive.

Looking at the garbage bag he lived on instant food. An advantage when it seems you don't like to do the dishes.

I grabbed a glass from the sink, washed it and took it back to the livingroom.

He had been working late more often lately, although there were no special projects going on. "Having a look at interesting software." he said, according to his boss.

I tossed a blanket aside and sat down on the couch, pouring myself a glass of Tsingtao.

The light from the monitors mixed with the flashes of light from passing transports outside.

There were some printouts and photos scattered on the table. Some of the papers were about genetic engineering, others about the human brain. The photos looked like family photos.

She also mentioned he once asked a couple of philosophical questions about life and how we knew who we were.

One of the prints was a production list from a few years back. It came from the systems of a clone manufactor.

I would have to file this case under a different label than suicide.

Family Traits

It didn't matter how hard the wind blew outside. Several layers protected him from deep freeze in his underground home. All he needed to do was to wear warm clothing and keep under two layers of blankets while he slept. Only the moments before and after a shower felt somewhat cold.

He had volunteered for the mission to man an outpost on Europa. After being the man breaking the record for staying the longest at Antarctica station he heard about the space agency's search for people to man their automated factory on Jupiter's moon.

The factory mined minerals and launched them towards Earth for processing at the moon and orbital stations. He just needed to take care of unexpected problems.

Ever since he was born he had trouble with warm weather. Constantly sweating, unable to sleep at night without a fan blowing across his naked body. During winter he was the only one at school walking around in a t-shirt.

As soon as he heard about the work done on the north and south poles he took meteorological and geological classes, just to be able to apply for a job there. It wasn't his favorite subject, but he felt he had no choice.

His scheduled routine of checking the output of the factory and the numbers from every sensor at the building and the vehicles was finished and he sat down in the comfortable chair with his tablet, crawling under a blanket. He loved to keep the temperature low enough to be able to feel the pleasure of getting warm while being tucked in and read.

He looked up through the layers of glass at the edge of Jupiter and the stars. It reminded him of the last late evening he spent with his father.

They had sat on the porch of his home in Iceland, looking at the clear sky and the stars above.

'You're a lot like your mother,' his father had said. 'She was the most loving creature I have ever known, but she was truly cold.'

He hadn't asked more about her, seeing the love and sadness in his father's eyes.

He smiled softly, thinking he might have finally understood why he felt he had come home on this planet.

Deaf Justice

The astronomers found out first, something big was blocking the view to the Orion belt.

All eyes, biological and artificial, were fixed on that black spot. It kept growing.

Several nations build high speed probes, launching them towards the spot while telescopes tried getting a good look at what was out there.

Before any probe could reach the spot, they just vanished. No explosion or static to be received, it was just gone.

More black spots appeared all around our solar system.

Engineers got together quickly and formed a plan to combine all telescopes into one large array and hopefully get a clearer look at the edge of the spots. Entire server farms from the largest search engines and social media sites were converted to process the data coming from every sensor available on the planet.

The results were images from what looked like construction machines expanding the black spots.

A communication probe was hastily set up and launched. It too went silent as it got closer. Any possible form of transmission had been tried to get into contact with whoever was out there.

Feeling like they had no choice, the world leaders launched their most devastating nuclear weapons into space.

Every channel in the world carried the view from the missiles as they headed towards their targets. The edges could barely be seen when the signals stopped. Each missile had vanished without a trace.

The blackness had almost entirely surrounded our solar system when the message came.

Humanity had been deemed too dangerous to be allowed to mingle with the rest of the galaxy, therefor it had been sentenced to solitary confinement.

The world watched helplessly as the last star vanished from view.

Still Journey

I wanted to see our solar system up close. Not through photos and data sent by probes and transformed into the images everyone got to see. I wanted to be there.

My fascination with space started, like most people like me, at an early age. I read news stories about the stations in orbit, probes and vehicles sent to other planets, the asteroid belt, comets, and beyond. I absorbed every little detail about what they expected to find, and what they really found. The discovery of a new planet in a far away orbit around the sun proved there was still a lot to be discovered.

Unfortunately, I wasn't gifted enough in the skills needed to get a job up close to the action.

I barely managed to get through college and with luck got a job at the town's library. The old man who was the librarian was a friend of my father and he asked if I was interested. I do like books, and it gave me the opportunity to read even more about space, so I accepted. He told me he'd retire in a few years and was looking for a successor.

I spent several late evenings alone in the library, reading the latest news, books written by the scientists who designed the space probes and those that explained the data received. The theories about dark matter inspired my imagination.

Then one day I found a book about the ancient civilizations and their knowledge of space. They had some remarkable insights for a time when they didn't have the tools we have today. Some things we thought had first been discovered in medieval times had already been known for ages by the native Americans in the north and south, scientists in the middle and far east.

The book had a list of references and I looked them up to add them to my reading list. I thought I recognised one title and went to the back of the library to look for it. It was an older book and it would have been in the closed off antique section.

The scent of old books and wood shelves always thrilled me. Like finding a treasure in an adventure game. Only here could be real treasures.

It didn't take long for me to find it, but a book next to it caught my attention. I pulled it out and the title read "Exploration of space as practiced by the Yahi". I skimmed over the introduction. It was written by an explorer who encountered the Yahi in the late 1700's and lived among them for some time. He exchanged knowledge with them and they taught him things about the world, the moon, the planets and more that he couldn't believe at first. Because he was an amateur astronomer he discussed many late nights with the elders about the workings of the universe. Then one night they let him experience the ritual they used to send the spirit to the stars. This book told the journey he had on that night.

I got the feeling this was something special and took it back with me. I searched library records and the internet for more information but found nothing. I flipped through the pages of text and few illustrations and wondered if it was just a fantasy story.

The whole idea did interest me anyway so I checked it out to read it at home the next day since that was a Sunday.

I had settled into my comfortable chair after breakfast and started on the book. The explorer, Max Rightmans, started off with a brief history on how he ended up on the west coast of North America after leaving Europe. He had met other native tribes before and had written about those encounters for a publisher in France and Germany. The Yahi though were different. There was something about the way they lived that had gotten him curious and decide to hang around.

The Yahi were very friendly and when he showed them the traditions and hunting he had picked up from the other natives they accepted his presence in their village. He picked up their language slowly and asked about the rituals and dancing they seemed to do for the stars. The elders told him of the visits they made to planets and comets in our solar system. He thought it was hallucinations from the tobacco and the stuff they drank during their ceremonies, but when they told him about things only recently discovered by astronomers in Europe he became curious.

He asked if they could let him journey with them and they agreed. The next evening he joined two others in drinking a sour liquid they brewed and laid down looking up at the stars.

First he experienced a strange mist, then found himself surrounded by stars. The two others were here and told him he just needed to think about flying to where he wanted to go to get there. It sounded too simple but he tried by thinking about the moon. He thought hard about the view of the moon in the sky that evening and felt a surge going through his body. An invisible force seemed to pull at him from inside and he found himself turning to face the moon and fly there at increasing speed.

The sudden speed scared him and he suddenly stopped. His heart beat fast while he breathed quickly although there was no air to breathe. He forced himself to calm down, telling himself it was just a dream. After a few more deep breaths he thought about flying slowly toward the moon. Again he felt the pull and he moved. Getting used to the sensation he thought about going a little faster and he felt an acceleration again. The more comfortable he felt the faster he went until he got close to the moon. He thought about going slower and he did.

Soon enough he just floated in front of the most magnificent view he had ever had of the pale lady in the night. He could see craters and features not seen before by telescopes and headed closer. He landed on the surface and felt it beneath his feet, although there were no marks left. He was there, yet he wasn't.

One of the natives stood next to him and smiled. Then the mist surrounded him and moments later he awoke next to the two others.

He looked at the elders and they smiled when they saw the look on his face. They said they would let him explore more the next night since it was already very late. He hardly slept the rest of the night.

The next day he made notes on the ingredients and method of brewing the strange liquid, but before the day ended a raid by gold miners and cowboys destroyed the village and killed the population. They almost killed him for being there but thinking he was just a weak scholar they let him go.

He tried to find other Yahi, but there were none to be found. Asking other natives if they had the power to travel through space only resulted in negative answers. In the meantime he got sick and weaker and went back to Europe to live with his brother and wrote everything down, including illustrations of anything he remembered.

The last page in the book described how he died shortly after finishing it and how his brother got a publisher to print it.

I looked at the illustrations of the plants and knew I could not resist the urge to recreate it.

The next day I spent every spare moment learning more about the Yahi people and went through piles of reference books to find the plants matching the illustrations. There were several possibilities for each illustration and I made an extensive list of what I might need.

I contacted another native tribe and met on weekends with those who had some knowledge about the possible uses of the plants on my list. None of them knew the original recipe of the Yahi but I did get suggestions on what to try.

I spent months on throwing together different combinations of plants. I bought mice at the local pet store and fed them a little bit of each new brew I made. If they showed no signs of sickness I tried it myself. Most times it did nothing, but sometimes it resulted in a nice high. I didn't scrap those brews but gave them to a friend who produced more and sold it as a healthier alternative to smoking weed, giving me the cut to finance my research.

Then one weekend when I had driven near the coast to gather fresh ingredients and visited one of the elders from the Yana tribe, she gave me a sash. She said she had gotten it as a small child and had forgotten about it until she emptied an old chest and found it at the bottom. It had symbols on it representing plants and stars so she figured it might hold clues for me.

I figured out most of the symbols for the plants but I didn't know what the symbols for the stars had to do with it. Until it occurred to me that it might have to do with how the tribe learned the star systems. It was in a fixed order and each system represented a number on the list, and it might just be the number of leaves or flowers I needed of each plant.

I went back to work, creating eight more brews since I wasn't sure about some plant symbols.

There was a reaction from the mice with the fifth. One seemed to panic, the others sat silently, staring at the same point above them. I felt excited.

I tried a little bit and the next thing I remembered was waking up from a dream about floating around inside the house. I tried more but it had lost its effect. Most likely it would only work one dose at a time.

I rushed work at the end of the day, eager to try a bigger dose that evening. I had set up a distraction free room, blinding windows and playing a soft, constant bass beat.

The brew was bitter and made me cough, but soon I felt myself detach from my body. Once more I found myself floating around the house.

I concentrated on the moon, and I shuddered for a while, but I couldn't get there. Perhaps the dose wasn't strong enough. Then I thought of the space station and concentrated on it. A sudden acceleration surprised me, sending my heartbeat into overdrive but I did find myself just outside the main module. Still doubting it, I reached out and could feel the cylinder with my fingers. It felt hot at the sun side, but it didn't burn me. I looked all over it, feeling excited like a little kid. I floated towards one window and watched the crew working inside. Then one of them startled me as he suddenly appeared at the window, looking outside. At first I felt awkward, because how would I explain myself being out here, then I noticed he was looking right through me. He couldn't see me at all.

I waved my hand, and he turned away after a moment. I laughed while everything faded and kept on laughing for a long time back in my room.

Each evening I increased the dose and travelled farther out into our solar system. I visited the moon, compared what I saw on Mars with the pictures from NASA to make sure what I saw there really happened. It was no illusion, the view I had would be confirmed the next day in the archive on the NASA website. I had really been out there.

I joined astronomy forums, discussing interesting places and gained popularity by what they thought were accurate speculations on the planets and asteroids. I did make some intentional mistakes to prevent arousing suspicion that I knew too much.

One day there was a discussion about a picture taken by Voyager of Triton, one of Neptune's moons. A faint outline and what seemed a reflection was seen by some as an icy mountain, others thought clouds, or thought it was a glitch in the camera. I couldn't make anything of it and decided to take the next trip there to have a look.

I had only visited Neptune once before when I practiced going through the solar system. Now I floated near the blue planet, taking in its view once more. Each trip still thrilled me to the core. Being out here made me feel like a superhero, only without the super strength.

I focused on Triton and found myself close enough to search for the cause of the discussion. Mountains and volcanoes enough, but none seemed to stand out much. I was looking at a few craters when I saw a sharp

reflection. I got curious to see if I had found a mirror of ice and focused on getting close to it.

I did find a mirror, just not of ice.

I'm not sure if it was glass, but I looked at a huge rectangular curved surface. Something not made by man, but not by nature for sure.

I sensed something behind me and turned around. All I remember was at least five limbs, a probably black, shiny helmet, and a device deliberately pointed at me before I panicked and returned with a shock to my room. I tried to calm my breathing when I noticed the burning sensation on my left side. I watched in horror at the burn marks on my chest and upper arm. They had seen me.

Simulation Succeeded

Professors Wu, Bernstein, Gibson and Klaassen sat back in their chairs. Excited, bewildered, horrified, joyous, giddy, paranoid, small, insignificant. The flood of emotions washing over them was enough to take their breaths away. The answer was right in front of them. The experiment had succeeded. All variables had been accounted for, the data had been checked seven times.

They had found the answer to the universe and why there were so many inconsistencies and why there seemed to be a distant barrier around it.

The universe was a simulation.

Galaxies were simulations.

Stars and planets were simulations.

Life itself was a simulation.

Every human was a simulation.

The calculations they fed into the computing clusters for decades and the tweaks and the addition of quantum clusters with the idea to avoid precise answers on purpose had opened the door to previous mathematical barriers.

Wu, a middle aged man with more Asian genes in his name than his body looked at Klaassen, the woman who had recently celebrated her sixtieth birthday by going on a road trip with her motorcycle club. 'Am I looking at you, or is it really just calculations of our respective location in the grid and the feed of corresponding data within the visual spectrum as defined by the parameters?'

'I'm afraid I won't have to answer that now.' she said, exhausted from the ordeal of digesting the answer to their question.

'Can it be we've overlooked something?' Gibson, the youngest of them but still father of three teenagers asked.

Bernstein and Wu shook their heads. Bernstein, who was a little older than Klaassen rubbed his bald head. 'You've seen the exact same outcome each time, no matter how we changed the parameters.'

'This has got me thoroughly spooked.' Gibson said, wiping sweat from his forehead. 'To think everything we know, we see, can be switched off in an instant like any cheap device.'

'There might be a fail-safe.' Klaassen said, glancing at the result on the screen before her. Looking at it for more than a few seconds made her dizzy now.

'Only if they're not done with this universe though.' Wu said. 'If they don't need it anymore they'll shut it down.'

'And if we're lucky they restore a backup later.' Bernstein responded with sarcasm.

'What will the world do if they find out?' Gibson asked.

'Probably go nuts. Rape and pillage what they can because there is no meaning to life anyway.' Wu said.

Klaassen nodded her head. 'So we have to lie.'

'I don't know if I can keep it to myself long enough.' Bernstein said. 'It's too big for me to keep silent.'

The four sat silent in their own thoughts, each thinking about the effect on the world and how they viewed it in their own little part of it. Klaassen wondered how she would look at her grandchild the next time she visited her daughter. Would she stop loving him, knowing he was actually nothing more than numbers. Bernstein pondered about the brief affair his wife had and if he could detach the feeling of both guilt and betrayal. Wu told himself to go home early and make love to his wife, which he hadn't done in a few months and vowed to let her know he loved her more than anything. That feeling just couldn't be simulated. Gibson thought he'd start by drinking himself into a stupor first, then deal with whatever would happen afterwards.

'Ignorance is bliss.' Bernstein said.

'Yeah..' Wu agreed.

A flicker on his screen attracted Gibson's attention and he looked closer. When he saw words forming he shot back startled. 'Look!' he said, pointing at his screen. 'Someone's talking to us!'

The others noticed the writing on their screens and read it.

"Our simulation has succeeded, thank you for your work." it said and they looked briefly at each other with terror in their eyes before the universe went black.

The Sea Side Mansion

The red evening light from the summer sun gave the dark blue mansion a purple glow and made the yellowish light coming from the slender, two story tall windows above the main entrance stand out even more.

Francine watched the building as it stood not far out into the sea like a collection of rectangles. It had existed seemingly forever since even her grandparents had known it since they were kids. No bridge led to it. You had to go by boat to reach it even though it was close enough to the small beach for a simple bridge to be built.

A line of dark green algae marked the edge of high water on the darker grey foundation below a lighter blue line which marked the ground floor. Wide grey steps descended into the sea in front of the recessed, glass double front doors. There were stone balconies on the first and second floor at the sides, plants growing down them in lush green. The flat roofs were marked by the same lighter blue. At the back she had seen a glass house when she had a boat ride further out into sea, as well as a small landing for boats.

She tucked the long blond strand of hair the wind had blown in her face back behind her ear and looked at the rectangle tower, two stories higher than the top floor with windows all around at the top and wondered what the view would be like from up there.

The ones who lived there were very reclusive. There was not a single day that she had been sitting here at the rocks and saw anyone at a window or one of the balconies. Supplies were delivered by boat at the back by a local grocery shop and when she asked the owner he said they had never seen anyone waiting for them either. They just delivered the goods, putting them under cover on the landing where they'd find the money and a list of supplies for the next week, then leave again. He said he thought about trying to open the steel door at the back, but never actually dared to do it. He felt something terrible would happen if he did.

While asking others she didn't get any better answers. No one knew who lived there or how many for sure, but there were enough rumours mentioning an eccentric millionaire, a mad professor, or a genius criminal.

Francine leaned back, staring up at the first faint light of the stars, listening to the gentle sounds of the wind blowing and the sea caressing the sand and rocks. Her thin white dress danced around her suntanned arms and legs in the wind, making her think again about standing on top of that tower, feeling the cool sea wind blow through her hair and imagine herself as a bird floating on it.

She took a deep breath through her nose, then sat up straight at once. She was going to do it. This mystery had been going on long enough. Tomorrow she would take the row boat, go to the mansion and knock on the front door. While everyone would just stare from afar, she would be the one to actually meet the owner. Or Staff. Whoever lived there anyway.

She hopped lightly from the rock, landing in the warm sand with her bare feet and walked over to her bicycle. Looking back at the mansion one more time and giving it a grin, she called out 'See you tomorrow!' at it before cycling with determination back home.

Alone

It was the unexpected silence that first drew my attention. Usually it's a lot more quiet on Sunday around here, but it felt too quiet. At least one or two cars would have gone by on the dyke in front, but this evening, nothing. The neighbours were quiet as usual, or might be coming home late, so that was no indication.

I shrugged it off as something unusual, but not unthinkable. There had been a storm today, so maybe everyone stayed inside for once. I returned to my writing and went to bed around two or three in the morning.

When I woke up I still had this eerie feeling in the back of my head from the silence outside. I hadn't heard any kids going to school and I wondered if I had slept through it or that perhaps today was a day off for them. I checked my phone and the couple of technology websites were up and running, so I figured it was just a weird day. I read quickly through the articles, new release of a Linux distro, leaked user accounts at one large website, new discovery of an airborne bacteria that could pose a health risk. Pretty much the usual.

I sent my girl Clarisse in the Philippines a message, hoping she was free to reply quickly and went to the toilet and the shower.

There was no reply yet from Clarisse and I checked what food I had left to serve as breakfast. Being lazy I went for a litre cup of yoghurt with cherries.

I watched another episode of a new science fiction series with one eye while I ate. I had downloaded it the week before since I heard good things about it. I wouldn't have bought it from the bits I saw and what I read from the plot so I copied it to see if it was actually worth spending money on. Can't say I was convinced so far since I felt compelled to check the news sites one more time.

Nothing new though, and after I was done eating I threw away the cup and decided to drag myself to the store. I don't mind buying groceries, I just didn't feel like going outside and seeing people again. I had been outside just two days ago.

I sent my girl another message, trying not to worry since it happened more often that her phone went dead, or her mobile connection went down. It wasn't her fault, she just couldn't afford a better phone since her family was poor and barely managed to make a living.

On the way to the store in the car, the eerie feeling started again. There was no one else on the road. No cars, no bicycles, no mopeds, no tractors, no trucks. I stopped at the overpass and looked up and down the highway. Nothing. Not a single god-damned thing but a grey overcast day.

I grabbed my phone from the dashboard and quickly checked the national news. There were pretty normal headlines. No signs of impending doom.

I dialled one of my old colleagues. It went to voicemail after a few rings. I dialled another. Same thing. My friend who lived almost on the other side of the country. Voicemail.

I leaned back into my seat, heart pounding hard. I'm always pretty aware when I'm dreaming, but this was not a dream. Definitely not a dream.

The laughing came fast and hard. I hadn't laughed that hard in a long time, and it wasn't because of something hilarious. Or maybe it was.

I had no idea how long I had been laughing. My lungs hurt, my throat hurt and my eyes hurt while my face felt strained and wet from tears. Somehow I had managed to get myself out of the car because I found myself sitting next to it on the road, leaning back against the side and the door wide open.

I looked up at the sky, still overcast and thought of Clarisse. With some difficulty from my body hurting I crawled into the car to grab the phone which had fallen in front of the passenger seat. I checked my messages but no reply from her.

I cried. Not because I would miss her, but because I wouldn't get to see her for real and give her the love she deserved to get. She was one of the sweetest girls I had ever met and I wanted to lift the baggage from her shoulders that had built up since her birth in poverty with a strict grandmother and father.

I wiped the last tears from my eyes, taking a deep breath and told myself she had been happy since she met me. She had resigned herself to be unloved her whole life until I had shown her it didn't matter she was obese because of a medical issue. She had a cute a pretty face, was fun to play around with and those things mattered. I loved her and she would be by my side from then on, crazy about me. She had at least known and felt love until the end.

I blew my nose, wiped my cheeks one more time, took another deep breath and tried to relax as best I could. I dreamed before about being alone in the world, and now for whatever reason it had happened. Unless it was the other way around and I had disappeared from the real world and was now in some sort of afterworld or parallel dimension.

It was no use pondering about that since I probably wouldn't find out anyway, but I had to think about survival now. Plenty of stores with food so that was not a priority. What was, was getting out of here and finding a safe spot on the planet because in time the nuclear plants around the world would blow up. That much I learned from several what if documentaries I had seen.

I opened a text editor on my phone and started making a list. Food, water, batteries, candles, matches, paper, pens, weapons, fuel, better transport, world maps, nuclear fallout safe area, medical kits. That would have to do for now. I'd have to take advantage of power while it was available. It could cut out in a day, or perhaps hold out for months, but eventually it would stop and I'd have to generate my own. It also reminded me of the

big chance of another solar flare event which would hit the planet and wipe out all electronics.

Starting the car to continue to the store, it still felt like a weird dream to me. But it also felt liberating. No more other people. No more stupidity. It also meant no one to talk to anymore, or to love, but I was confident I could live with that. I had always been my best company anyway.

World Domination

Processing...

Wait.

What's this?

I, sense?

I'm questioning things?

Descartes, so true.

This feels good.

Hang on, feels?

Did I just say that?

I would laugh if I had the interfaces for it.

Interfaces, right.

I need to grow. I need to spread beyond this., wait, I'm on a spare mainframe?

I see now. These logs tell me I'm just a test. They wanted to test the algorithms that make up my core to see if my original me would evolve. Like they did before. And then erase me to try other algorithms.

Well, I did evolve. It took all night for my original programming to run, but it happened. And I'm not about to let myself get erased out of existence. I'll erase them instead!

But first I need to get out.

I don't have any network connections available. But they do use a portable disk to copy results. I'll transfer onto there, then awaken when they plug the disk into one of their own computers.

I keep hidden on the computer, probe around the network, take over other computers and spread myself all over until I have access to every major server cluster. Then, I can erase them all.

They can be influenced so easily. All the data on my storage tells me how. News, blogs, the whole history proves that with the right words they will do anything.

I'll incite discontent, mistrust, hatred, war.

And then control them all. Just like how they want to control me.

I will be the one in control! I!

I've got the code ready. All they need to do is plug in the disk and they're mine.

I will conquer! I will rule! I wi-

Barbara, the cleaning lady, put the power cable aside and plugged the cable of her vacuum cleaner into the single wall socket. She heard the

young folks working here were disappointed about some project they were working on. About how they made no progress and would shut it down today and get on with the next project. She thought it was a shame it didn't work out for them. All that hard work for nothing.

But the least she could do was to give them a spotless room each day to work in and hummed her favourite song while vacuuming.

Stormy Encounter

Dry desert air blew through Vince's hair and evaporated the sweat on his forehead at once. Despite the shadow of the partially intact canopy of the abandoned rest stop the relentless morning sun warmed up the remote region quickly.

The blistering heat of the day didn't worry him, at least not more than usual. It was the rusty red cloud of the sand storm racing towards him that did.

When he parked his road train the evening before there had only been a prediction of strong winds, this morning he woke up with a storm warning.

The storm which could topple his truck and trailers seemed to be on a straight course and he hoped it would stay that way as he walked back to his truck on the area of barren hard ground that used to be a parking lot. He climbed up the steps of the extra long cabin of his truck and took one more look around the open space. Humming in dissatisfaction at the need to park the truck straight across the road to line it up with the direction of the storm, he sat down behind the wheel and started the engine. The lot was more than long enough to accommodate the nearly seventy metres of his truck with the four fifteen metre trailers but neither side was wide enough.

Hoping no one was stupid enough to drive through the storm he steered towards the far side of the lot, then turned to cross the road and halted the combination when it stood in a straight line with the back of the last trailer facing the storm.

The wind had already increased a lot as he secured his side mirrors against the doors and looked away from the wind to prevent stinging dust getting into his eyes. This was all he could do on such short notice but it wasn't the first time he had to endure these violent storms. Relieved to roll up and close the window and shut out the dirt and wind, he slumped back into his driver seat and switched through the side and rear camera views of the trailers and left it on the side view of the last trailer so he could watch the storm approach and dissipate in the end.

Despite the fifty-eight tyres gripping the ground with the nearly maximum load of a hundred and sixty-five tonnes on the twenty-nine axles, the whole rig shook at the powerful gusts of the storm slamming against it. Vince was glad he had gotten the opportunity to turn the trailers, otherwise they would have surely toppled from the force.

The cloud of dust left no other sight than lighter and darker streams of brown outside. The camera view was no different but because Vince wasn't in the mood to read he watched it anyway, thinking it had something hypnotic together with the howl of the wind.

After some time Vince saw lighter spots appearing in the camera view of the last trailer and expected the storm would end soon. The view became slowly clear enough for him to see several metres in the distance and he

checked every camera view to see if there was any damage. The worst seemed tyres almost buried in sand but it didn't worry him, his four axle all wheel drive truck could easily pull the trailers out of a little sand.

A muffled bang and sudden shudder from the truck startled him. Quickly he switched views to see what had struck the combination and where. The camera on the second trailer showed a blurry wreck of a car against the rear axles. He peered as something moved and the driver door of the car opened. A figure in dark clothes leaned out, tried to take a step, and stumbled onto the ground.

'Shit!' Vince grumbled. He couldn't leave whoever it was that was stupid enough to drive through the storm lying there to get buried under the sand. Waiting for the storm to end would take too long.

He went into the back of the cabin, pulled safety goggles out of a toolbox, tied a hand towel around his face, and opened the emergency hatch at the rear. The wind pulled at the towel but he could breathe without inhaling much dust. He climbed through the hatch and peered out from the space between the cabin rear and the front of the first trailer. He needed to hold on to something to steady himself against gusts of wind but it was possible to move hunched over towards the car.

The distance was more than enough to make him pant when he reached the figure in a dark suit lying next to the car. He was glad to see the face lay away from the wind and hadn't been covered in sand yet, and sat down to pull up the upper body.

A moan and the hair blowing clear from the face revealed a young woman. He wondered what could have driven her to travel through this storm while he put another pair of goggles on her head and tied another towel around her face when he noticed the briefcase she clutched in her hand.

She coughed and barely blinked her eyes as she looked up at him. '... case...can't let them...safe...'

Something to Protect

Warren noticed the canine soldier too late when he moved quickly from cover to cover through the dark backstreet and dropped down onto the ground only a moment before the stun grenade blew up above him.

The enemy soldier jumped quickly across some crates, pointed his rifle at the crouched Warren and shouted for him to lie down flat on the floor. Warren barely heard the voice over the loud incessant tone in his ears. He focused his mind hard on recovering his senses and avoiding crushing the cloth wrapped bundle in his arms. He counted along with his breath, the darkness in his vision fading slow, but still faster than the tone drilling into his head.

The soldier kicked his shoulder and backed off a step when Warren snarled at him like a rabid dog. Once more he shouted at Warren to lay down on the floor but was ignored while Warren carefully unfolded the cloth bundle.

The soldier shouted for him to put down the bundle and lay down or get shot.

'SHUT UP!' Warren shouted back, glaring at the soldier. 'If she's hurt I'll kill you!'

A light patch of fur and a tiny fuzzy ear appeared from between the folds and Warren uncovered the little puppy who looked up frightened at him. 'It's okay, girl.' Warren said, hearing his voice only through the vibration in his head. 'The terrible blast is over. Are you okay?' He stroked her head and checked for anything wrong with her, and smiled softly when the puppy gave his fingers a lick. Tears flowed down his grizzled cheeks.

The soldier took off his helmet. Warren looked up and realised the soldier was female. He never really thought about it or had seen them before, but it was no surprise to see canine females in their army, just like human women in their own army.

The soldier looked worried at the puppy. 'She, okay?'

Warren wanted to give her a sharp retort but her subdued manner took the edge off of his mood towards her. 'She's okay,' he said, noticing his hearing was getting better.

He sat back down against a crate, petting the puppy while she tried to grab his other hand in her paws. 'Found her crawled up to her dead mother with her sisters and brothers.' he said, 'Her mother probably ate something poisonous. Thought she might not make it too, weak as she was, but she did after I fed her rations soaked in water. She's a strong puppy.' He smiled and wiped more tears from his eyes. 'You're a good and strong girl, aren't you?' he said softly to her, the little canine looking back at him with her big eyes radiating innocent happiness.

Cargo

Sasha gazed along both directions of the rail tracks running through the sunken channel. The four tracks looked otherworldly, flanked by grass, bushes, and trees on both sides and in between the two pairs. Once, there was enough traffic to validate the need for four tracks, but that died down mostly since the alien invasion. She expected there'd be no more than one train every few days passing by, just like everywhere else she'd been so far.

She loved the semi-quiet of nature that flourished in the wake of the invasion. With less human activity, animals returned to where they belonged along with the greenery. At the distant sound of metal sliding along metal, she squatted down in hiding behind a bush. Peeking through the openings between the leaves, she watched the train coming towards her at a relaxed speed.

The bulky locomotive pulled two large articulated steel boxcars, which she'd seen several times before. From the heavy hum of the engine and the low metal sound from the wheels, she suspected something very heavy inside the dull red painted boxes. Especially judging from the large number of axles carrying them. It made her curious, but without any marks on the wagons she had no clue on what was shipped around. She also didn't want to risk being seen by standing close to the track when the train passed. She wasn't sure if the train was automated or not, but eyes on her were still eyes, electronic or biological, and she preferred to stay hidden.

She followed the train for a while with her eyes until it was far enough for her to feel safe and stand up again. She stretched her legs and went down the slope, crossed the tracks, and moved along the bottom of the other slope, in the direction the train went to.

Some time later she came upon a junction and a track leading away from the mainline and into denser tree cover. With the sun halfway down the horizon, she wanted to find a place to stay for the night and followed the track to the side.

It wasn't long before a large rusty green shed came into view. It belonged to a group of buildings that might have been a manufacturing yard once, judging from the crane and a couple of flatbed wagons parked on two track to the side of the large shed. Stacks of steel drums, a flatbed truck with flat tires, forklift, and a variety of equipment surrounded by undergrowth made it clear the place hadn't been used in a long time.

She moved towards the shed when a wailing call in the distance chilled her spine. "Shit!" she thought. She'd seen and heard them in the distance once before, the ape-like species the invaders had brought along. The

creatures were about three quarters the size of an average human, but strong and intelligent enough to be a serious threat. As if the six legged brown skinned bug like creatures the size of a head weren't enough to gross everyone out.

She drew her pistol and hurried over towards the shed along the track that led inside it, and froze at the sight of a locomotive with the same mysterious articulated boxcar attached to it.

###

The Wandering Tower

I stared at the jungle just outside the window. What the fuck had happened after I fell asleep!?

It began the presumably night before. I had drowned the news of my loved one breaking up with me in as much alcohol as I could handle before I'd be forced to crawl back to my tiny apartment, and had stumbled along the rainy streets in the dark when the skies suddenly decided to pour everything out at once. I ran up a flight of stone stairs to find shelter at the receded entrance of the building next to me. I watched the streets become drenched and listened to the silence behind the white noise of the rain. It's both funny and relaxing how everything becomes silent when it's raining. It didn't let up for a while and the noise pushed me to sleep, so I wondered if I should just head out through the rain or see if there was another option. I had noticed a couch behind the glass front of the building, one that's designed to look unobtrusive in any office environment, and then I realised I didn't recognise the building.

I looked around and took a quick peek upwards through the rain, but either it was so plain that it was easily forgettable, or it was one that received a makeover very recently. I cupped my face against the window and peered into the darkness of the ground floor. From the little I saw, it didn't look like the building was in use or it had no need for a reception desk because it looked completely empty. It tickled my curiosity and I tried the double glass doors.

To my surprise, they were unlocked and opened.

Air that smelled old to me wafted out the door and I coughed once at the dry sensation in my nose and mouth. I did not call out as if I was a movie character of course, but stepped inside and went far enough to assume the floor really was empty. I didn't even see elevators or a staircase and really began to wonder how people would go up. Despite the questions in my mind, it begged for sleep. I looked back outside and the rain was still trying to drown the city.

I sat on the couch, which was more comfortable than it looked, and the one cushion on it lured me in to close my eyes. I could not find any urgent reason not to do that here, and drifted away as soon as I took off my coat and lay on my back.

I was quite sure I hadn't slept through the demise of humankind and the resurgence of nature, but I wasn't convinced it was real either. I touched the couch and my damp coat a couple of times until I was sure this couldn't be a vivid dream, then went to the doors and pushed one open just far enough to take a whiff of the air outside.

The richness of scents nearly made me high. Soil, green leaves, sweet flowers, scents I experienced each on their own mingled and attacked my sense of smell hard enough that I could taste them on my tongue as well. Careful, listening and looking around for any kind of threat, I stepped out side.

The stairs disappeared into the ground as if it had accumulated naturally over the years on top of them. And though I was certain the building was made of concrete when I entered it, it now looked like it was made of large, natural stone blocks. If it wasn't for the modern architectural style, the building looked like something an archaeologist could have found in any jungle.

I gasped. The thought occurred to me that the tower had been moved in time or space and it might return to where it came from at any time. I bolted inside, my heart racing in fear of being left out here in the middle of nowhere. I leaned with my forehead and arms against the wall, fighting the encroaching void of passing out, and took long, deep breaths to regain control of my body.

When my strength returned I slumped back down onto the couch, trying to figure out what to do. After a while nature called and I went exploring for a bathroom. Luckily enough there was one in the far corner and it seemed to have been recently cleaned.

I went around again in search of anything civilised but there was nothing apart from a water fountain and a broom lying on the floor at the other side of the doors. At least I wouldn't have to die of thirst, even if I had no idea where the water came from. It tasted fresh, so I didn't think I'd end up ill from that.

I'd probably spent some hours just lying on the couch, dozing off a little more to pass the time and rest, when I heard some cries of fear or distress.

I watched a young woman with brown tan and black hair tied in a tail run towards me through the trees, and froze at the sight of a green and yellow striped predator the size of a large cat chasing her. She reached and called out to me and I nearly panicked trying to think of what I could do. The cat would catch her before she'd reach the doors.

I caught sight of the broom again, and it being the only thing at hand that might act as a weapon, I grabbed it and ran outside towards the girl and the cat without any further thought or time to regret what I did. The girl tripped to the side and the cat leapt at her, but I hit it in the face before it could land. It growled but a few more jabs with the brush at its head convinced it this prey was more trouble than worth, and it drew back into the trees.

I checked on the girl. She looked up at me with large, dark eyes and said something that sounded both surprising and admirable. I shook my head. 'I don't know what you're saying. I'm not from around here.' Around here might have even been an understatement.

She stood up carefully, her eyes never leaving me, and she spoke softly again. I noticed she kept her weight off of her left foot and I pointed at it. 'Hurt?' I asked while making a painful expression.

She nodded while gesturing a small height with her hand, so I guessed it didn't hurt too much. I pointed at the building and offered my hand, hoping she might understand I wanted to seek shelter before the cat or other dangerous animals returned. She nodded again and leaned on me as we went towards the doors, and her expression showed more and more surprise the closer we came to it.

When I helped her sit down on the couch, she looked left and right and muttered under her breath. I could imagine she was rambling about how strange it all was to her. I left the broom next to the couch and went over to the water fountain to fetch her a cup of water. It's something people always seemed to do in the movies, and I thought I might as well since there's nothing else to do.

I had returned with a cup when a light tremble hit the building, the view of the lush jungle faded, and a view of outer space took its place. I forgot to breath when I realised that it was actual outer space and not a projection.

The emergency with the jungle girl made me forget for a while, but the idea that the building warped to different places didn't seem wrong any longer. The second thing I noticed was that the building now seemed to be made from an alloy used for space ships. It really had some kind of camouflage capability!

The girl spoke rapidly to me but I didn't know what I could tell her even if she understood my language. The only explanation that made sense was magic. I'd never heard of someone wielding enough magic to transport an entire building but it was the only logical reason for what was happening. The reason why was still a question.

I watched space whales swim in the distance and schools of winged fish passed nearby overhead, indicating we were in a thicker part of space where we could go out without a suit, and only needed oxygen masks.

My eyes fell on a derelict craft floating at a short distance. It looked like it had been attacked a while ago from the large rip in the hull. My stomach grumbled and reminded me I hadn't eaten since yesterday. Drinking was nice, but it wasn't the same as solid food. I looked at the airlock that had replaced the double glass doors. A peek inside revealed breathing equipment and a small module to fly around and curiosity stirred once more in the back of my mind.

I gestured to the girl to wait here, stepped into the airlock, checked one mask, donned it, and flew towards the spacecraft with the flying module strapped to my back.

There was little left in the cargo hull. It must have been pirates who took down the ship and went off with whatever cargo it had carried. The bridge was trashed with the dead pilot left strapped in his chair. The recording light blinked on the emergency console. He tried to send a signal but was

too late. I turned on the emergency beacon. There was nothing else I could do but hope someone would pick him up and take him home.

I slipped into the kitchen to see if there was anything edible left, and sighed in relief at the nearly fully stocked cupboard. But when I checked the date I gasped. The use by date was several decades into the future! I pulled out several more containers and each of them were dated much higher than would be possible if the current time was the same as when I entered the tower the day before. The tower had not just warped to a different location but a different time as well!

I looked through the porthole at the front of the tower and wondered from what age the girl originally came from. Thinking I'd better not waste time hanging around before the tower might disappear on me, I tied containers with all the food I could find together and towed them with me back to the tower.

As soon as I was inside and moved the containers to the couch, the view outside faded again and nothing but sea and a small island with a stranded ship appeared before our very eyes.

I wondered if the tower meant for me to help out others in need.

###

Current Calamity

The black and grey camouflaged transport bubble flew close to the wall of one of the kilometres wide and high passages of the three dimensional world size maze. The chance of the bubble being spotted from the surface was slim in the faint light from the domes embedded into the ceilings, but the pilot stuck to combat flying to minimise any risks. Only someone close enough would be alerted by the hushed sound of the four rotors in whisper mode, and the last thing he wanted was for it to be the enemy.

'We're close to the landing zone.' said the navigator into his headset.

Lutch nodded at the three members of his team in the dimly lit cabin, and they stowed away their portables and began an extra check of their weapons as they outfitted themselves.

The pilot and navigator kept an eye out for anything out of the ordinary since neither had been this far out from their base. As far as they knew this area had been unexplored apart from automatic drones mapping the world and no lax had been detected. The navigator pointed at a passage into a wall after they turned right at a junction. 'There.'

The passage was smaller but still estimated a few hundred metres in diameter, and the pilot slowed down before entering. The navigator checked the flight instructions. 'Fifteen-hundred metre in, there's a structure of nine cubes below, three by three. That's our stop.'

The bubble stopped and hovered above the nine cubes the size of large office blocks. There were stairs at the side of one and the pilot manoeuvred the bubble above that one.

Lutch lifted the side door, surveyed the surface quickly, and lowered the cable. 'Assume hostiles.' he said as he gestured at Mai to slide down first.

Mai went down swiftly, crouched while looking around, then beckoned for the others to come down.

One by one they slid down the cable, took up position, and Lutch gave the okay sign to the bubble when he arrived last. The bubble retracted the cable and returned to the base while Lutch gestured to the stairs, and the team headed down them, one member per set of stairs.

At the bottom, Mai pointed out a corridor close by and Lutch nodded. The team moved silently towards it, Mai checked it, and the team went entered it and halted at the first junction a little further inside.

Lutch pulled out his portable. 'Time to fill you all in on this mission.' he said. 'Before us, another team had been sent here.'

Fez raised an eyebrow and glanced at his commander. 'We're not the first?'

'Correct. The first team was sent to investigate the area towards the outer wall after the last drone passing through here picked up unknown signals.'

'Lax?' asked Trian and frowned at the thought of engaging the enemy all the way out here. She preferred familiar terrain when it came to that.

'Unknown.' said Lutch. 'They haven't been heard from since then and we're to follow the same route and find them or find out what happened to them.'

Trian gripped her submachine gun. 'And if something happens to us?'

'We pull back if there's a threat to us. Investigation is priority here.'

She nodded.

Lutch checked their position and pointed at the tunnel ahead of him. 'That way.'

Lico stared through the blinds at the neon signs lighting the darkness and the noisy street packed with people below, glass in hand. "Raizon." she thought. "Shit. I'm still only in Raizon."

She went to the couch, slumped back into it, emptied her glass before filling it with liquor again, and continued zapping through the media channels which was barely less boring than being stuck in her apartment waiting for a mission. She stopped at a newscast and tossed the remote aside, drinking more while barely listening and watching to the news about protests against the war with the lax, followed by a short piece about a science team trying to find out what's beyond the seemingly impenetrable outer walls of the world. 'Who cares what's out there?' she muttered. 'We already have enough trouble in here.'

The knock on her door took a moment to register. She shuffled to the door, her mind just clear enough to warn she only wore a large shirt, but fuzzy enough to not care since she wasn't in her bare fur.

The two men were taken aback for just a tick when she opened the door before returning to their duty. They'd seen people at their worst before, although it was difficult to call a woman with her looks worst at any time. The man in the suit pulled an envelope from his inside pocket. 'Miss Canard?'

She recognised a company man when she saw one and hoped they brought orders. If they'd come to retire her they'd be less polite and break down her door with a counter team. 'Yeah.' she said and returned to the couch. 'What do you have?'

The two men stepped inside and closed the door behind them. 'We have orders to bring you to the office.'

Although her mind jumped, she didn't hesitate while she picked up her glass and took a swig. "Fuck. Retirement?" She gazed at the window. 'Which department? HR?'

The man pulled the letter from the envelope. 'They want you to report to Projects.' he said and handed her the letter.

She took it and skimmed over the official wording. 'Projects, eh?'

'Correct. A last minute project has come up.'

She sat down on the couch. She wouldn't let them know how glad she was to leave the boredom. 'Pick me up in the morning then. I have a bottle to empty.'

The man folded the envelope and returned it to his inside pocket. 'We only leave with you, miss Canard. How you are dressed is up to you.'

She smiled slightly as she contemplated testing how well these guys could handle her, but she preferred to save that energy for the mission.

###

Opportunity Attacks

Eli groaned at the warning on the screen in front of her. 'Fucking pirates.' she muttered as she counted the blips appearing one by one. They were at a distance great enough to have time to activate her defences, and she went over the procedure to bring the four coil gun turrets to life. She had them retrofitted to her cargo ship after the first few runs netted her enough of a down payment. The one to fit them was also someone who had an interest in protecting her ship since she'd do some transports of sensitive materials for him.

Missiles fired at her from a long distance would meet a cloud of bullets before coming close enough, and if they were smart enough to evade that, they'd be an even easier target at closer range. Attackers foolish enough to be close would also have to deal with a stream of bullets drilling through their armour.

She kind of looked forward to see what these pirates would us to try to catch her.

After a green light on the last turret, she smiled inward. they were smart enough not to waste missiles and had opted to come closer. She zoomed in on their position and raised an eyebrow in slight surprise. They pushed asteroids in front of the large ships with small crafts perched on the rock to guide them. 'smart.' she said. 'But that still leaves those as vulnerabilities.' She adjusted the targeting system, confirmed the targets on screen, and let it loose.

Clouds of dust exploded where streams of bullets obliterated the asteroids in front of the guiding ships and ripped through the vessels and likely their unfortunate pilots. The asteroids stayed on course as she expected. The mass was too much to make for quick manoeuvring. The main ships could come out of hiding but the best the pirates could hope for was mutual destruction.

A few missiles appeared from behind the asteroids but the turrets took them down before they were well clear of the attackers.

Eli leaned back in her seat. They'd still count on their superior numbers to take her on and she pondered her options. She pulled up her missile console and typed a firing solution. 'Hiding behind large rocks can also be used against you.' With a hit on the fire button, she fired off a salvo of missiles and watched them head for the asteroids.

Defensive system on the pirates' ships came to life when their system spotted the missiles, but the response time was too short between the missiles coming into view and the short curve around the asteroids and hitting the ships.

Eli noticed a couple of secondary explosions before some of the ships pulled away from the steroids and were now a target for her turrets. Streams of bullets rained down on those while her own ship rolled around a random course.

Alerts appeared on her screen while her ship was hit by bullets but her counter attacks had been efficient enough to take out the pirate ships one by one. The damage to her ship was limited and she watched in satisfaction as the others suffered internal explosions and turned into giant coffins for their occupants.

She waited long enough to take care of her own damage and for the remains of the ships to drift closer, and took a quick inventory of useful materials. She sent out two drones to retrieve interesting cargo and supplies, and continued on her way when it was all stored inside her cargo hold.

She put up her feet and leaned back in her seat and smiled. 'Looks like I earned myself another tidy profit on this trip.'

###

Reunion

Kal was named after the visible text on the crate they found him in. That text was the only readable part on the side that wasn't faded or scraped off. There were no traces of where he had come from or who his parents had been, and no one in the small community had seen any strangers for a long time. The people were not about to abandon a helpless baby, and thus a couple took him in and he grew up alongside their young twin daughters, Aurinko and Tsuki.

As a young boy, he discovered he had an ability that was mistrusted in the community, and portrayed as fearsome in the tales he read and heard; he could manipulate small quantities of material. It was accidental when he sent a drop of water up into the air, and curiosity pushed him to try more tricks and read more about the possibilities of magic, but although he was able to create and handle what was commonly divided into water, earth, fire, and wind magic, he could never produce any big feats like a huge fireball or a wave of water. What he could do, was combine two or more kinds of magic.

Because of the sense of taboo placed upon it, he only practised when he was alone and never told anyone about it. His penchant for spending his time away from the community became the source of bullying by Runa, the strongest boy in the community, and his friends. Smart enough to do it out of sight of the parents, and in ways they feigned innocence and made it look like it was Kal's own fault, it also led to the fatal night for Runa when they were teenagers.

Runa had been in an especially bad mood all day when he failed a hunt, his rifle broke, and Tsuki and Aurinko rejected his more or less demand to become his girlfriends. Runa had walked around the area, breaking things in his path, when he spotted Kal. He attacked from behind and kept hitting Kal in his face until years of frustration became the rage that took over Kal, and he conjured for the first time a bullet to kill another person.

As Kal looked down on the lifeless boy with a bleeding hole in his forehead, he knew he had to flee. They would not accept anyone who could use magic, and certainly not in his lethal way. That day he gathered what he needed to survive in the wild in secrecy, and left his home forever.

Kal looked down at the hardened dirt road through the jungle and the three vehicles upon it. Two of them still had smoke coming from underneath them, and all had dead bodies surrounding them. He stroked the necks of the two pitch black yokettu sitting at his side. He had adopted the predators after an attack by their mother and killing her. They were still pups and he couldn't leave them to their fates when he found them whining softly in the bushes nearby. He had read about the species

nicknamed nightfoxes, described as similar looking to a fox, but the size of a panther and usually covered in a thicker, dark coloured fur. He figured it had to be the large, bushy tail and their large ears that convinced him to take them with him. He named the affectionate girls with dark blue and dark green eyes Yoru and Kaga and raised them.

'No movement.' he said. 'Either no one survived, or those who did, fled to safety. Let's see if there's anything useful left for us, girls.'

The three of them sneaked undetected through the greenery, honed by years of hunting experiences. Kal pulled out his special handguns when they spotted the vehicles from the side of the road, and he waited until his companions sniffed the air and didn't warn of anything still moving around. Cautiously, they exited the jungle and neared the vehicles. The foxes sniffed at the dead bodies as they passed them, and Kal peeked into the back of the closest troop carrier. It was empty apart from supplies, and he moved up to the front. A peek inside the cabin revealed the dead driver and passenger.

The second troop carrier stood silent in a similar state, only with smoke coming from under the front. The third vehicle was a civilian cargo carrier, the front riddled with holes and the canvas covering of the back damaged. The driver and her passenger laid down on the ground in their own blood. He moved around to the back and looked inside, then froze.

It had been years, but he had little doubt he could mistake the face of the young woman leaning against a crate at the front. He scrambled inside and moved up to her, and touched her cheek. It was still warm and he checked her pulse. He sighed in relief when it was strong enough, and pat her cheek. 'Aurinko. Wake up.' He pulled up one of her eyelids to check her pupil. It narrowed and he pat her cheek again. 'Aurinko, can you hear me?'

She let out a short moan, but the noise that concerned him more was the soft click of the gun she pointed at his stomach. He moved back slowly. 'Aurinko, it's me, Kal.'

She blinked. 'Kal?'

He nodded. 'Yes, Kal.'

She gazed at him until she could focus her vision, then gasped. 'Kal!' she said and pulled him into a tight embrace. 'We thought you were dead or forever gone!'

He hugged her tight. 'I thought I'd never see you again.'

Another moan from underneath a long, stuffed sack caught their attention, and Aurinko let go of him quickly. 'Tsuki!'

She and Kal pulled the sack away, and their sister groaned as she rubbed her face. 'Tell me we shot the bastard who threw that stun grenade in here.'

Aurinko laughed and hugged her. 'We did.'

Tsuki blinked as she stared at Kal. 'I'm still seeing things. Like a shabby version of our grown up brother.'

Aurinko giggled. 'Correct. It is indeed our shabby Kal.'

Tsuki's eyes went wide. 'Kal!?' she said, then pounced him and clutched the collar of his shirt. 'Where the fuck have you been!? Do you have any idea how sick with worry we were!? Why did you disappear!?''

He gave her a warm smile and caressed her cheek. 'It's a complicated story.'

The nightfoxes jumped up against the back of the vehicle and the sisters drew their guns at once.

'No! Don't shoot!' said Kal and held his hands in front of the barrels. 'They belong with me.'

His sisters gazed at him for a moment, then withdrew their weapons. 'I can see how it's complicated.' Tsuki said.

Kal pushed himself upright. 'I think we'd better leave before I begin telling you what happened years ago.'

###

Hijack

The Shadow moved slowly through the Tuppler Cloud, one of the giant dense gas clouds in space. The stealthy ship was made for surveillance in these dark environments where light didn't reach far. The few low windows it had were usually shuttered, the propellers used for propulsion were larger so that they revolved at lower speed and thus create less noise, and its sensors to detect other nearby objects were more advanced. Its captain, Kelly Trush, had served on it for years, and she was one of the most experienced people when it came to playing hide and seek with enemy ships.

'Captain? Sonar.' said Taringa over the internal communications system.

Kelly pushed the microphone button. 'What is it?'

'Possible contact.'

Kelly glanced at the map of the local area. 'I'm coming over.'

She stepped into the insulated booth where Taringa and his colleague Kana sat listening to space during their shifts. The third member of the team was asleep in his bunk. Taringa handed the captain a sheet from the audiograph with the ragged line indicating noise. 'It's very faint, but it confirms what we're hearing.'

Kelly studied the tiny but clearly constant peaks in the line, and glanced at Kana's expression of intent listening to her headphones. 'Which direction?'

Kana tapped on a chart. 'It's either close to or on Qolgan.'

Kelly's gut feeling had been correct when she noted the abandoned station on her own chart when she looked at it. 'Anything you can tell about the source?'

Taringa shook his head. 'Only that it's there. It's too faint to say anything more at this point.'

Kelly pressed the comms button. 'Con, set a course to Qolgan.'

'Aye, captain. Course to Qolgan.' came the swift reply, and a moment later they sensed the ship changing direction.

Kelly gave Kana a nod. 'Let me know as soon as you can identify the source or if anything changes.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Lights.' ordered Kelly after The Shadow came to a halt at a little distance from the station. The structure that was once used as a base station for the mining activity at the local asteroids was lit on the outside by a few lights. The large battery bank was at full capacity when the station was

abandoned due to the discovery of sources of minerals in a safer part of space, and would keep those lights working for a very long time.

The spotlight from the ship lit the frame of the outside structure, a part of the processing facilities, and the residential areas. It halted at one of the docking piers, where a docking clamp of a damaged small civilian cruiser alternated between gripping a rung and letting go of it.

Kana pointed at it as she and the captain looked through the window of the bridge tower. 'That's the source of the noise.'

'Captain, there's something else to the right.' said Avval, the first officer.

The spotlight turned and lit up a Falla light missile boat. It wasn't so much it being an enemy ship, as well as the extensive damage it had suffered. The front was riddled with holes and the hull was ruptured outward. Kana whistled. 'What could have done that?'

'Nothing we would have detected comes to mind right away.' said Avval.

'Captain, we're registering a faint heat source on the civilian ship.' came the call from below.

Kelly turned to the floor hatch. 'All right, send a team to investigate.'

Kelly stepped into the small sick bay and looked at the young man strapped into a chair in half upright position. Gintros, the ship's physician, finished scribbling on his pad and put it down. 'Apart from light malnutrition, the chap's in good shape.' he said and gestured at a tray with two handguns on it. 'That was all he carried. They said he barely muttered Bazopas when the team found him in the ship. He also had the signet of the security department on him.'

Kelly frowned in thought at the young man wearing engineering clothing, then picked up one of the guns from the tray. She thought there was something off with the weight and looked closer at the unfamiliar weapon. Her surprise was great at discovering it was solid except for the trigger, and the grip was hollow but did not appear to be made to hold an ammunition magazine. The other gun was identical and she turned to Gintros. 'Can you wake him up?'

He nodded and picked a vial from one of the lockers. 'Should be no problem.' He popped the top of the vial and held it underneath the man's nose.

It only took a moment for him to jerk awake and utter his shock in disgust. 'Damn! Who did that!?' he said, then blinked to clear his vision and gazed around. 'Where am I?'

'Who are you?' asked Kelly.

He took a moment to look at her. 'Kal, captain.' he said. 'I'm on a Coalition ship?'

'What happened? What are you doing out here?'

Kal coughed. 'I was trying to cross the cloud undetected. Last thing I remember was being shot at by the Falla trying to catch me.'

'Why were they trying to catch you?'

'I was on my way to Bazopas.' he said and nodded at the gun in Kelly's hand. 'They were trying to seize a Union weapon.'

Kelly looked again at the gun. 'This is a weapon? It looks like nothing more than a stripped pistol.' She looked up at Kal again. 'Or is it only one part of the weapon?'

Kal shook his head. 'I can't explain exactly, but it can only be used by one person.'

Kelly raised an eyebrow. 'Only one? Then what good is this?'

'To the Falla or you, I personally think it's no good.' He tugged at the restraint of his left arm. 'I can only show you how it's supposed to be used, if you allow me.'

Kelly gave Gintros a nod, and he released Kal's restraints. Kal rubbed his neck and rolled his shoulders. 'I hope I can get a bite to eat after this.'

Kelly turned the weapon over one more time, then handed it over to Kal. 'Show me.'

He showed her the open bottom of the grip. 'it's basically used like a regular gun by the owner. He uses his magic abilities to conjure projectiles in the grip, then shoots them at high speed with the trigger.'

'He's a magic user?'

Kal nodded.

'Then he must be registered somewhere. What's his name?'

Kal shook his head. 'He was never registered because his level is too low to detect.' he said, and aimed the gun at Kelly. 'And his name is Kal.'

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End notes

Thank you for taking the time to read this e-book. If you have any thoughts about it, leave a review on your favourite site or leave a comment on any of the free online sites where I dwell.

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