

Oz Corporation and Other Stories

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ISBN: 978-1-300-07325-3

Imprint: Lulu.com

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To my Family.

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Eldris and the Analog Black Hole

I.

The world seemed so small to Eldris Van Durin as he walked down Market Street in Glumsville. Everyone knew his name, yet nobody paid much attention to his good deeds because that was what they expected of him. From his birth he had always been a great historic figure, for he did not cry a peep when he came out of the womb of his mother. Soon after being alive for two years, he could speak several languages. He spoke English, French, Latin, and German fluently. Everyone loved him on his first time riding a bicycle for he went to all the leaders in the village and delivered them chocolate doves. He made such a stunning image of life that at the age of 12 he was invited to attend Fortuna University to study both physics and pottery. Needless to say, Eldris Van Durin had his life path figured in under two decades, that is before his entire family died in a terrible accident at a family reunion he was not present at due to his activities abroad in the summer of 84⁷.

Eldris had given up on his life. He could not eat, nor work, nor sleep for a month after his family's passing. It became apparent to his university professors that he might be driven to insanity moved to the act of killing himself to join his family in the afterlife that may or may not exist. Surely, he needed professional aid from one of the top physicians in the world. That is when Eldris learned of Commodus Fontana, the psychiatrist of the century. Shortly after Fontana's arrival at Fortuna University where Eldris was living in the

dormitories alone over winter break, something magical happened. Fortuna University and the surrounding area experienced an earthquake. And in that time of the shaking of the ground, a girl slightly older than Eldris came to his room in a panic and sought out a friend to get through the earth-shattering fear of the moment. Her name was Jackie Winters and she was scared beyond that which she had experienced before. She coupled with Eldris and held him tight, crying in his arms. Eldris at first did not know what to do or say, but eventually his kindness returned to him and he told her, “Be not afraid. The tremors will be gone soon and we will be alright.”

Shortly after the end of the earthquake, Fontana, a bit disheveled, found Eldris and Jackie in each other’s arms. He knew by the look of Eldris, that depression gripped him tightly and immediately spoke to him and Jackie, “Are the two of you alright. I am here to see you Eldris. I am a doctor and I believe your advisor spoke to you about me recently.” “Yes, Yes. Jackie, can you please return to your room. You’ll be fine now. I believe you could use a friend later though. I can be that for you. How about we go to Domodus later tonight for a few hours. It would be nice to dance with you under the lights.”

“Eldris let me just say that while I appreciate your offer, I am too busy tonight with other arrangements with my friends. I must see them instead.” Jackie said as she peered out the window to see much damage outside. “Perhaps we will see each other again for coffee or something of the sort.”

“Fine by me Jackie. Doctor, let us proceed.”

II.

And the winds howled in the winter as Eldris sat at his desk writing a paper of immense proportions describing the intricacies of the inability to test scientific concepts using an analog black hole. He was not well known in this field as of yet being only 15 years of age. He hardly could sleep at times because the backdrop of his mind showed his worth in ways that would bring him to worldly fame. Fame was not exactly what he sought, but to win friends to his side of the argument would certainly ease his pain in the passing of his family. Trusting his instincts was at this point not advised by his closest professor given the content of his theory. But, nonetheless, Eldris kept at the writing and the physics making until finally his paper was complete. And the world was never the same.

III.

As Eldris prepared to defend his master's thesis, he was sad that Jackie had left him for another man. The fact was that Eldris worked too much. He felt the pain of rejection. She left him for someone far less well known, but open and free to her musings. Eldris did not care for her enough as he felt work to be more important. He worked at all hours of the week and could not believe she followed him now, Kindro Delross, an average human that loved to hike and sing with the birds.

Eldris was still hard at work when the faculty found out Jackie had left him and they felt he should quit university to

win her back. Eldris did no such thing and she moved on without him even though if Eldris had left his position as a student she would have fallen enough in love again to reject Kindro and return to the mate she wanted, Eldris Van Durin, master of his field and man of science for the future centuries to ponder.

The End of Suffering

PART I

With friends I never understood why their faces were full of terror. I had just told them of my embrace with all of the universe alongside the timeless nothingness that provoked bliss. When I spoke of this journey of sitting meditation, my friend Kiera heard me and cried running home. And then I no longer understood the meaning of death or life for all was one in a neverland of forever and always.

Years passed and I aged feeling all humans I met with the reality I became aware of as non-duality deepened in my psyche. I still feared and hoped and dreamt, but I forged ahead differently than most I encountered and wished my teachers had not left me to go alone on this path of Dharma.

But eventually the thoughts stopped and I met Fortuna, the alien beauty of red hair and dark maple skin, that mated with me even though our genetics were different. Our child was barely accepted at first when the birth happened and I fear for its well being in this war that has plagued the Universe.

I found a lone stranger named Gus, a mountain guide of tremendous experience. He said to me upon the mountain pass that we needed to turn back for we could not reach the top going forward this way. Fortuna and I wished to proceed but he convinced us otherwise quite quickly and we made our way to a fortunate landing where a marked trail was laid by past rivals of his. We choose to make camp soon after the star set and we ate our food similar to what I remembered on

Earth, that of long brown rice, black beans, and purple carrots.

The night was cool, with fireflies floating near our tent. Fortuna and I paid Gus several hundred credits to get us to the top of the mountain, but he had failed. We were to return to the small town below tomorrow morning with a shred of anger in our hearts that held fast to the understanding of mistakes made in our own past. Soon we would be asleep and the love that existed in the tent was that of close generals next to a mountain guide. Wartime was coming and still the antenna was not set. Gus convinced us that if we stayed another day on this level we would not have enough supplies to return in safety. The granite and quartz became dark and our lamp filled with ignited natural gas lit our space, all three of us knowing soon war would be upon us all.

In the morning, my final decision was made. I would personally set the antenna atop the mountain for our forces communication infrastructure to be complete. Gus would escort Fortuna to lead back where our soldiers were posted and our child was cared for. None have ever reached the top without a guide who has been there before. But, I hoped I would be the first.

My meditation brought me peace and they were on their way after I kissed Fortuna with passion if this were to be our last moment together. She does not understand why I left humanity for this place of refugees and a humanoid race she hails from. My entire people have perished. The darkest race of beings is attempting the mass genocide of the universe. Everywhere they go they lay their anti-matter driven black hole devices to devour spacetime wherever life flourishes and

could survive in general. Soon their race will destroy themselves, but not before they destroy all others. Their religious leaders are not dissimilar to me. They understand oneness and suffering. I wish to liberate as well, but not through genocide and their own eventual suicide when all future possibility of life has failed. They wish to eliminate suffering as I do, but their methods are evil and fretted with insanity.

PART II

The rains came the next day while I was climbing up the mountain pass that was known to be more difficult than my hands could take for much longer. Gus had warned of this direction, but the boulder was in the way yesterday and we had to turn around. I love all things when I am tired, but my love for Fortuna grew stronger as my body grew more tired until a rush of energy allowed me finally to reach the top even though I had almost slipped in my grip and fell to my death. I believe this attachment to Fortuna and general love for all things entered my awareness due to a lack of proper nutrition. Love or care simply came back to me in absence of food.

Upon reaching the top of the mountain I placed the antenna securely with drilled in bolts to the rock below my feet. I then realized I had to make contact with the devilish race soon before anything else could be done. If I traveled to their scout ship early before the war, I knew we could defeat them. It would mean my death, but they could not foresee my plan. With the supplies I had I would perhaps die from exhaustion returning to Fortuna and our forces, but if I went to the enemy, I would get an audience with their high priest.

And my plan to undo them would succeed if I was taken for a mere earthling.

My bag was heavier when we started and I slowly got down from the treacherous mountain path that was moist with rainfall. I reached the marked trail and went in the opposite direction to my friends and Fortuna and the forces I commanded. I never told Fortuna this was an option in my writings to defeat the forgers of death throughout the Universe because I knew she would be depressed and cry out for the possibility we could defeat them otherwise with our own blackhole weapon. At least now since we both possessed such a weapon there was peace between us here on Alpha Guin, the Earthlike planet I made my home and last place of refuge.

I walked quickly between the trees that were alpine in nature towards the enemy scouting ship. Soon I would get there without running out of food to fuel my biological self for the journey. It was important to eat before seeing the scout and high priest for I needed to control my thought patterns. The trip took me one day and upon reaching their spaceship that rested on a flat piece of valley where the green grasses held dew, I was greeted by a scout who appeared to me by hologram technology.

“What do you want human? You will be killed if you do not return from which direction you came. Our lasers take seconds to spot dangerous targets and we are prepared to fire and break the ceasefire you organized with your leader. I would expect them with you with others to protect you. Why are you alone?”

“I wish to see the high priest and surrender personally. I killed our leader and took control of our forces. They are disbanding as we speak.”

“I see. Your language suffers from not being as complex as ours. Be warned, we don’t believe you because for some reason we cannot hear your thoughts at the moment. We wish you to delete this technology before our high priest seeks you out.”

I had full control and created Fortuna and my child in my mind, “That is not necessary, do you see my thoughts now?”

“Yes, they are showing me the death of Prime Leader Ulton Maxima. Yes, this is a great day in history. The priests will discuss and if they determine it to be wise to send the High Priest to you via hologram we will do so.”

“I ask him to be shown physically as was done the last time we spoke to them.”

“Realize we will have to kill you afterwards. That is our terms. And remember our priests can control your thoughts if they wish. We can force you to commit suicide if we wish. That is my threat if you have any motive to kill, but know it is futile. Your plasma weapon means very little to us. We are not scared of you human.”

“Bring with you others if you must to kill me. I know the high priest loses his power if he kills anything directly other than themselves outside the Cathedral of Torture and Decay.”

“When we destroyed your worlds and outposts I wondered how you escaped. Now I see you are unlike them in some way I cannot explain. The High Priest will meet with you on our primary starship. Good luck preparing for death.”

PART III

The High Priest’s minions escorted me to the mothership that was off world in orbit of the planet. I was brought into their warship center or what we called the Cathedral of Torture and Decay where statues of intelligent biological races were immortalized as a deleted set of being. I saw my own race not in memorial because I was still alive.

As I walked towards the black stone alter where the high priest stood, they showed their true face beneath their white mask to me and transformed into three jackal headed beings with a humanoid body. The gargoyle minions left me and it was just I and the High Priest in the giant Cathedral. The room became dark and fire lit his three bodies and no longer could I see the statues in the cathedral made of steel and bone. The High Priest sat down in its triumvirate form in their chairs of gold and emerald.

In three voices the High Priest spoke, “We speak as one, but are separated to symbolize the state of the universe. All things are multiverse and nothing at the same time. Who are you to ask for a meeting with all things when you know nothing of the way of this plane of existence as you are a mere human. Only the few we know of in your race that could understand us were deluded by stillness. All is chaos. Our way is better, we wish to kill in order to end suffering. That exists as our mission.”

“I have killed our leadership.”

“Quiet insolent fool. We know that you haven’t for we can see him now. Our wretched underlings may be unintelligent but we are not. We devoured your race and enjoyed destroying them, but here you are to become part of the fallen.”

I started to walk forward to the High Priest to get closer to kill them. I know there are no lasers to kill me here for this is their most sacred place of worship and they do not fear me for I am human so the guards haven’t even taken their posts as I expected.

“Step closer and we shall strike you down inconsequential disease.”

I could see their rage turn to fear. They realized they could not make me kill myself with my plasma weapon as I pulled it from my hip holster to kill all three of them within one blast. I shot. They dissolved into the heat and the mother of my child will live on. Moments later the ship state failed and an immense explosion became the end. All was pain and then darkness consumed me and rebirth was not offered to me by the entities I met but instead I disappeared from existence all together.

Eyes wide into a clear tomb. I gasp for air through a mask on my face. Where am I? The tomb opens and a red haired white woman with gray eyes in a black jacket and pants says to me, “Congratulations. You passed with marks high enough to join our mission. Glad to have you on board Dr. Ford”

Death's Embrace

I

Both Sonia and Elron were of age to marry. They walked upon the emerald and golden grasses amongst the red and white petaled rose bushes that surrounded the bright pond of Elm Park. They were speaking to each other in a manner particular to flirtatious young couples in the autumn sunshine. As the black and white koi danced amongst the still blooming water lilies of the pond, Elron got down onto one knee and reached into his corduroy pant's pocket. He pulled out a small navy faux leather case with a lab grown diamond ring inside that was engraved with both of their names.

“Wed me, Sonia. I love you more than Earth itself. I will forever be yours truly.” Said he.

Sonia, with freckled tan skin in her white dress, reached her delicate hands over her mouth in surprise and then brushed back her dark black hair and held tears of joy upon her slender face. She nodded her head vigorously and said, “Yes, yes, of course my sunlight to all that I am. I love you so much, so much more than you understand!”

The wind blew the elms and as the branches swayed leaves fell about them. Elron stood up tall and put the gold ring onto Sonia's finger and they kissed ever passionately in the temperate weather with dusk approaching.

“I want to cook you a majestic dinner tonight Sonia. Tomorrow we can celebrate with our parents. I am so happy that you want me as a husband. I am eternally yours my dear Sonia.”

“We shall wed next month, just us, our parents, and siblings. What will we be having for dinner tonight I wonder?” Sonia said with an excited smile.

“Of course, we can wed as you like. And I have planned a delicious roasted duck, glazed carrots, fingerling potatoes, and farro with sundried tomatoes paired with a pinot noir of your father’s vineyard that I was gifted last week.”

Sonia spun around with her hair flailing about and fell into her fiancé’s arms as she said, “Perfect, because tomorrow we pay for dinner in the city at a fine restaurant I hope? You know my mother and her need for expensive fare.”

“Yes, darling, yes.” Said he.

The two began to walk back to their apartment only a few blocks away from Elm Park’s entrance. And as soon as they arrived Elron went right to cooking as Sonia practiced violin in the improvisational style of Mozart. They were never happier together than this night in their small apartment where their paintings hung all over the walls as their writings and books littered the floor. Artists they were, though scientists they posed as. But, more than ever they felt as one after dinner when they hoped to conceive a child in the tender embrace of pure love.

II

The next morning Elron was elated with true happiness as he awoke to the morning sunlight peering

through his apartment's windows. He was hardly tired and he had everything to look forward to. He got out of bed looking to his soon to be bride. Though something was terribly wrong. There was blood on the cream silk sheets. He went to wake her, but he only felt cold on his hands. She was not breathing. He shook her, but nothing mattered for she was dead. Elron quickly called the authorities hoping to revive her, but alas, too late it was now. A silent death without explanation in the night too mysterious to comprehend to the medical staff. The greatest of joys was now gone. Elron's best friend was dead. Only anger filled Elron's heart now for his Sonia was never to return to him.

III

It had been two weeks and Elron was still in the deepest throngs of his depression. He refused to eat most meals and had lost weight from his previously well-kept body now pictured more skeletal in nature. Glass and aluminum containers of empty alcoholic beverages were his company now. He looked to the full blood moon as he sipped his glass of vodka and ice.

“Damn God! Damn him! Where are you fool? Take me too and let me talk with her once more at least. I'll do anything to see her again. She was a beauty of vigor that rivals even Aphrodite's prowess in elegance. I swear to all that is holy I still love her. Damn you! Damn you God!”

Tears dripped down Elron's face as he looked to his glass and then to Sonia's abstract painting in progress that she left behind held up by their wood easel. He threw his glass, and it rained vodka upon the floor with the glass breaking as it hit the oil painting on canvas. Glass shards lie on the

wooden planks of the floor and Elron cared not to pick them up this night.

“Show yourself God and tell me why? Why?” Said he crying tears of dread.

“I added her to my collection.”

Elron, terrified of the bitter cold and immense sinister nature now in the apartment turned around and saw a dark cloak of pitch black that flowed in the air like a thick gas. The face of the figure was gray bone and almost human, though devilish in nature.

“What are you?” said Elron as he stepped back trying to run away but without the ability to do so.

“I am Death.” Said the dark figure.

“You’re Death? Can you bring her back? My Sonia, please, I need her. I am nothing now without her.”

“I cannot give you her back. She no longer exists as you remember. She is part of me now. But, I can offer you a choice. Would you like a choice Elron?”

“Yes.” Elron said in hope.

“Good Elron. Good. Do you want to choose to die and join her and the others? Or would you like infinite wealth and immortality?”

Elron was shocked by this choice. He thought he loved Sonia enough to die for her, to be with her in death even, but with such riches and immortality he could be truly free he thought. He became sober all of the sudden and did not feel as a drunken fool any longer.

“Choose now young Elron. Death, to be with Sonia and the others? Or infinite wealth and immortality?”

“I love Sonia, but I will take the second option. Give me Power!”

IV

The War was finally over. It had been three months since Death visited Elron in his drunken despair. Now there was only radioactive wasteland upon the Earth. Most were dead and those remaining dying quickly. The bunkers had failed and the seed banks were destroyed. Humanity would not flourish again. But, Elron was still alive and well, now more lonely than ever wishing he had picked to be with Sonia and the others. Though the choice had been presented to him and now his wealth meant nothing.

V

And forever he thought he was to walk this Earth alone. Until one day, years later, the mark of Death briefly left his mind when he remembered the deep space S1-class starship he had purchased a few days after his original meeting with Death. It somehow was unharmed from the nuclear obliteration events. He could leave and find a new world. The polybrained artificial intelligence embedded into the starship could fly him anywhere he liked and one day, perhaps, he could see intelligent life once more. In his despair, he boarded the starship and left Earth to live amongst the other stars of the galaxy forevermore to find peace with the choices he once had made. Infinite wealth and immortality mean nothing without others to spend it with he

found. If Sonia somehow existed still, maybe, just maybe, he could find her reincarnated into another being he could share space and time with. Though he thought that unlikely as he entered meditation in the garden room of the ship. And then he said as he opened his eyes, "Death will come for me I hope."

Makima

ONE

A dark obsidian neckstone held by silver lace dangled upon a new mother's body who delivered a new baby boy in a hospital on the outskirts of Development Five, the inner most section of the capitol city of Oxima Prime. He came into the world screaming, his mother Sandra gently retrieving him from the birthing specialist's hands once the umbilical cord was cut to sever mother and child.

“With this session at an end, I bid you good luck Mrs. Sorbert. Your Husband will be allowed in to greet you both shortly. Nurses, let us take our leave and allow the family some time to be with each other. Mrs. Sorbert, remember you are being watched on camera. If anything happens, we'll see it right away and you'll be helped immediately. Goodbye.”

The two nurses and doctor dressed in blue scrubs turned away and left the sterile eggshell white room with a single bed. As soon as they left, the door reopened and Dr. Sorbert came into the room with a wide smile on his face, seeing his baby boy for the first time. He began to cry and wiggle in his new environment outside of his mother's womb. His skin was bright pink with faint blue protruding veins and capillaries.

“Sandra, Can I hold him?”

“Of course Phillip. Come closer and be careful with his head.”

Sandra slowly gave Phillip the baby. The emotions of joy had flooded Sandra's bodily systems and she began to chemically bond with her child in a new way, able to see him

in his being as his own entity, now separate, yet together with her still.

“Shall we call in the Progenitor?”

“We can if you would like. I’m in no rush. I’m glad we got through this session without anything out of the ordinary occurring. The one nurse was so kind and helpful. I don’t much remember the other. And the Doctor, what a character! He made some jokes as he injected me with sedatives during the beginning phase.”

“That’s nice dear.” Phillip said as he turned to the camera and microphone of the room. “Can we see the Progenitor?”

Shortly after Phillip had spoken while he was swaying back and forth to calm the boy down a man of thirty years walked into the room. He had hair of black with stray gray hairs on both his head and chin. He wore a white cloak and had brawny skin that seemed accustomed to more than an adequate amount of starlight. There was an insignia on his cloak that pictured a coat of arms with two ruby red horses and a set of steel sabers with golden handles atop a forest of evergreen trees. He walked up to Phillip and leaned forward to inspect the child. His grey eyes just stared at the small movements the boy made and was silent in his demeanor.

“We will do well with this one I think.” The progenitor said as he let loose a smile.

“What is it, fifteen years or so until you get more involved?” Phillip said.

The Progenitor blinked slowly and looked directly at Sandra and then to Makima again.

“Yes. Fifteen years from this day, give or take, I’ll become the secondary caretaker of the boy. At least that’s if he makes it till then.”

Sandra sent a look of disgust to the Progenitor and then calmly said, "He'll survive. He is strong just like me. I know we Hybrids have higher mortality rates in the early years just after birth, but you'll see. He will grow strong."

"Interesting he's a male. There aren't many males. Most are like you Mrs. Sorbert, female. Males have it more difficult in the early years. Females are more robust it seems. I know we frown upon praying in this century, but I will be thinking of him. What is his name?"

"Makima," Sandra and Phillip said in unison.

The Sorberts arrived back at their home in the Valta neighborhood of Development Five. 365 Ubecka Drive was a three-story structure that featured four bedrooms and three and a half bathrooms. Sandra held Makima closely, her motherly urges becoming fully apparent. Dr. Phillip Sorbert parked the nuclear fission microreactor vehicle in the driveway and then helped his wife out of the car. Makima was silent until they reached the indoors, and the lights automatically came on within the home, Makima beginning to cry once more as the change in environment struck him. Phillip put down the car fob into a small blue glass bowl that was in the shape of a fish that lay upon a maple table in the foyer of their home. Sandra closed the front door and it locked upon it shutting.

"Shall we bring him directly to bed?" Sandra said.

"I set up the nursery. It's done. You can bring him up and put him in the crib."

Makima was still crying.

"Maybe you could try to breast feed him? He might be hungry."

“The doctor said we hybrids typically need less human milk the first few days and then need more after that.”

“You’ve fed him twice since he was born. I assume he needs more since you didn’t feed him in the car.”

“Well sure. I’ll go upstairs, feed him and then put him in the crib.”

“I’ll be in the den catching up on work. Just need to check some things.”

“Can’t it wait? You’re off for three weeks.”

Phillip started to walk through the main hallway of the house that opened up to the den on his right and the kitchen on his left. He paced back and forth for a few moments.

“I could do nothing, but then getting back will be terrible. I just need to read the status reports that Jerome wrote for the past few days.”

“I understand, but still think you should stop. The project can wait. I’m going to need you these next few months.”

“Of course, but I’d like to remain somewhat plugged into the project. Energy for the city is of utmost importance my dear.”

“I’m going upstairs.” Sandra murmured.

Phillip walked into the kitchen to the refrigerator, opened it, and grabbed a sparkling water canister that had lime juice in its contents. He opened the aluminum can and moved over to the other side of the open concept room where his computer monitors were set in the den on a maple desk facing the windows that looked out into the backyard.

After a few minutes Phillip had absorbed last Friday’s status report from his computer screen. It was shorter than normal meaning no adverse events had occurred in the

tokamak reactor. Status report two of Saturday's report showed a more normal interpretation of events. The reactor was only operational 18 hours of the day, a day which lasted 29 hours. Fission nuclear reactors had to pick up the missing energy. Sunday was yet to be written. There were still three hours left for Sunday's status report to be written, each status report due the following day.

Nuclear energy was the primary way Oxima was serviced, but some tidal and wind energy was in construction on the coasts. Photovoltaic cells generally serviced household microgrids as well.

Most fathers would have gone upstairs to join his wife in welcoming his baby boy home. But, Dr. Sorbert was an obsessive when it came to work. He craved the status report for Sunday and was willing to wait the rest of the night until it was written by Jerome.

Sandra fed Makima and his blue eyes sparkled in the crib once she sat him down in his royal purple onesie. His bald head only showed a few black hairs as his arms and legs wiggled below a set of the solar system that they found themselves in. Three planets and a Star dangled above Makima as he put his arms forward to get his mother's attention more deeply as she watched him in his babylike glory. She smiled and put her right hand into the bedding letting Makima grab her index finger. His grip was light, but firm. Sandra knew Makima would be sick soon, and her best self felt he would get through the beginning hybrid sickness, but part of her, a darker part, felt sorrow overtaking her. She didn't know if he would live or die. All hybrid children had this danger, the danger of illness from the bodily growth of genetic material that some would say was an abomination.

TWO

Makima had a fever and a bout of coughing with blood spatter. Sandra called the neighborhood physician into the home for services. Dr. Drait felt it would be wise if Makima stayed untouched by anyone but his staff and Sandra. Exterior contamination was a worry and Phillip had been in contact with co-workers.

Dr. Drait set up a hospital environment in Makima's nursery. There were machines to track his heart rate and brain waves that were hooked up to his finger and skull. Sandra had been saddened by the common sickness of hybrids. Although she didn't remember, her mother had told her of her own battle with sickness which was flu like. She never remembered any blood in the stories her mother told her.

"Sandra? Come here and hold Makima for me." Dr. Drait said as he motioned Sandra to come to the crib.

"Do you want me to hold him to calm him down?"

"Indeed. Yes. I want you just to comfort him. Don't worry about getting sick yourself. It's nothing transferable."

"Of course. Hybrid sickness." Sandra said with a nervous strain as she walked over to Makima and picked him up as he cried and cried until he coughed once more. "Now what?"

"Just sway him back and forth. Try to calm him down. The experimental drug oxipedidonix should be taking effect in the next few minutes. I gave him a moderate dose given his mass."

"Was I given this drug?"

"Most likely not. It was in development when you were born, but trials are still in progress. Your boy is part of one of those trials. We got him onboarded given my

connection with the Control of Pharmaceuticals Board. Hopefully it will get rid of the coughing. The fever hasn't gotten worse which is a side effect that I was worried about. So far, nothing has happened to give me pause in my decision to administer him this drug."

Makima suddenly had his heart rate come to a slower pace and his fever seemed to begin to subside in the minutes following his heart rate decreasing.

Some time passed where Makima seemed somewhat stable.

"He hasn't coughed in the last half hour. I think it is safe to assume the drug is working."

"Thank you doctor! I'm glad we called you. I just got so worried when he coughed up blood. So terribly worried."

Dr. Drint took off his gloves and opened his backpack to retrieve something. He pulled out a stethoscope.

"I want to hear his heart. See what's going on in there."

Dr. Drint came up to Sandra with Makima in hand and placed the listening device on his chest. Moved it about. Listened carefully and then returned to his backpack, put the stethoscope in the bag and zipped up its contents.

"I want you to call me if the coughing starts up again. We got through the worst part. I was afraid when I got the call from Phillip that Makima wouldn't make it. It seems I was wrong. Thankfully I was wrong. The way these things work is the first sickness, the onset usually kills rather quickly in the cases of these hybrids. I think if Makima was in trouble, we'd be here now planning a funeral, and not having this conversation. I'm rather pleased with my abilities right now."

“Can Phillip come back into the home? I know he doesn’t want to stay at the hotel much more. I understand it has only been a day and Nurse Leia has been a great help watching him all these hours with me.”

“Phillip I’m afraid should wait another 30 hours or so. We should keep Makima on observation. Nurse Leia has already left to sleep. My other nurse Charlie should be here any moment to take over for me. He’ll be taking on the same responsibilities as Leia.”

The doorbell rang. Dr. Draint offered to get the door. It was Charlie, a tall man with chiseled facial features that was highlighted by his medium length brown hair. He came into the nursery and immediately asked to hold Makima. Sandra allowed him to. Sandra wasn’t particularly happy Phillip wasn’t involved, but the officials at the hospital office in their sector said that Makima was in a state that could prove very worrisome, that we needed to quarantine him to his own quarters in the best way possible. A house visit was arranged with Dr. Draint and all the secondary medical personnel were alerted.

Sandra was exhausted by the whole affair with Makima’s sickness. She was glad that he was still alive. When the pioneers of genetic engineering set out, she was sure they never wished such malice to come into the world, that babies that were altered in some way would have to deal with such illness. Makima was her primary concern. Her meals were left untouched and she could barely sleep spending the next 30 hours in Makima’s nursery. After it was clear that Makima made a full recovery, Sandra called Phillip home from an expensive hotel stay across town.

Phillip was crying silently when he picked up his baby boy who had made it through such an illness. Sandra handed

him the liquid oxipedidonix and asked him to administer it orally. He did so. And Phillip was somewhat happy again. The past few days of not being able to be with Makima or Sandra were truly sorrowful. But, now he returned and could allow Sandra to rest. She went to bed and didn't wake up for 18 hours. Everything was taken care of by Phillip as Charlie had left due to Dr. Drait's orders that he was no longer needed. Makima survived hybrid sickness.

THREE

Makima was wearing a yellow poncho in the rain that had a slight acidity to it. He was waiting at the bus stop a few blocks down from his parents' house. It was the first day of school after Break D. Makima was fifteen years old with dark black hair that matched the hue of his obsidian neckstone that was held by a lace of pure silver.

He was practicing a tune in his head, something of his own creation. The violin case in his right hand that held his favorite instrument swayed just as Makima swayed. Words came bursting forth,

I am arisen in the melancholy dream.

I am defeated in your odd soliloquy.

I am arisen till doubt mend me so.

I am defeated through the blood tainted river flow.

The yellow school bus arrived, slowing, then stopping to let Makima on. The doors opened and Makima took his first step, and then another. The bus driver was an elderly man with a bald head and gaunt face. He wore a blue denim

shirt and tan khakis. It was hot. The bus driver was sweating through his shirt under his armpits. Makima said hello to the driver and then sat down in one of the seats in the middle of the vehicle. Makima was one of the first students on the bus.

After all the children were picked up on the bus route, the bus dropped them all off at the education center which was within the city's inner ring. Makima was excited and proud. Not many children his age had the opportunity to be taught by a progenitor.

Makima made his way through the Northwest gate and then the doors into the main building of the education center. It was a marvel of marble and steel. He walked up to the information desk where an aide worked to help students and teachers in their given needs.

Her name tag said Julianna. Her magenta hair was cut to chin length. The white dress she wore accented her black skin. Makima was intrigued by her stout demeanor.

"Hi Julianna." Makima waved, "Where can I find Room 304C?"

"Hello child. Yes, you'll have to go to the South tower of this building. There are five floors in that part of the education center. 304C correlates to a progenitor room on the third floor. I'm sure you can find your way from there."

"Thank you. I'll be going then." Makima said as he waved goodbye.

Makima walked across the marble floor to the South tower. He reached the elevators and pushed the up button on the wall panel. He waited for one of the three elevator doors to open. A ringing noise entered the air and the middle elevator doors opened. Makima walked inside, turned and pressed the circular button for floor three. Within seconds the doors closed and the elevator whizzed up to floor three.

The doors opened and Makima stepped out and saw that room 304C was to his left about four doors down according to a sign just by the elevator doors.

Makima entered room 304C expecting a few other students to be in the room, but instead he found a single man writing something on the chalkboard.

“You’re late Makima. Come sit down at one of the desks. I’m Absolom”

“I’m on time. My watch says five till nine.”

Makima held up his wristwatch to show his teacher he was in fact early.

“Fifteen minutes early to any appointment is what I will teach you first. Only then you are on time.” Absolom said as he looked down with glee to his pupil.

Makima didn’t want to argue. He had heard that from his father before. Don’t argue with your superiors as a minor, perhaps not ever. He sat down at one of the desks in the front row of the room and got out his notetaking pad and pen and set up a page to take digital notes for the day.

“Where are the others?” Makima said with a dumbfounded face.

“What others? Are you under the assumption that there should be others?”

“Well. Of course.”

“I will be your sole tutor of sorts for the rest of your years in the education center. Your performance has necessitated you be given one on one lessons with me and be subject to my work requirements in the early phases of your career training. You are to be trained to be a progenitor in the next three years, at which point of completion you’ll decide which path within the guild is right for you for further studies as a journeyman. The best thing about the progenitor training

program seems to be it's well-rounded approach to studies. We take on advanced Calculus, literature, and artistic endeavors that are beyond the normal scope of even the most serious students outside the progenitor program in the education center. I will say that it is arduous and may provoke a hate for me by the time of your graduation. But it will make you into a true citizen of Oxima Prime."

"I just thought a progenitor was teaching a group of us. I had no idea that I'm to be a progenitor."

"Well, you'll have to acquire certain skills first my dear boy. But, if you want the position, you can have it. Only a select few will ever be able to receive this training and few actually take the role on."

"Aren't we supposed to be progenitors if selected? You mentioned choice in the matter?"

"Choice is given. We aren't so tyrannical that we would force it upon you. You'll just have the set of skills by the end, hopefully to choose to become someone like me if you would like. You could however choose to be like your father, a person whose endeavors concern energy for the community of peers who work in other crafts. We give flexibility. I will teach you to begin to think and create. That is my goal. Now what do you know of line, shape, and shadow?"

"We're talking about drawing right?"

"Yes. Drawing skills are very important in many fields of handicraft. Learning how to invent is of paramount importance to a progenitor. Drawing typically helps that process."

"I see. I haven't really given thought to drawing in that way."

“Now you will. I want you to try and draw my figure in three minutes. I want to see where your gesturing skills are. Please begin.”

Makima got right to drawing Absolom. He did not succeed in a manner Absolom thought appropriate. Next, they spoke of philosophy and literature. Economics and then history. They had spent several hours together just speaking about a wide variety of topics. The nature of truth struck Makima. Soon he would know Absolom’s methods. The training was already of high difficulty. Makima and Absolom were to meet twice per week, three hours per meeting. And in his other time spent at the education center, Makima would practice his violin with other students or do his assigned work.

FOUR

The route home was the same as the route to the education center. The bus driver whistled the whole way to Makima’s stop. Makima wasn’t annoyed but intrigued. He left the bus with his backpack, violin case, and a symmetry box, a black and ebony metal computer cube. Symmetry boxes were used in conjunction with lectures in mathematics that were prerecorded. Absolom wouldn’t alone be teaching mathematics to Makima. The symmetry box was an AI system that taught the subject, many questions being asked of it before, so much so that the education center thought it wise to delegate much of mathematics education to machine learning. Absolom would present the outline of mathematics while the symmetry box would provide the details.

Makima was close to his home when Donald, his neighbor, came out to confront Makima. Donald stared at

Makima with a look of disgust on his pudgy, hairless face. He was wearing a blue and white tracksuit that bulged at the belly.

“How’s it going Hybrid?”

Makima put his head down and kept walking, ignoring Donald.

“Hey! I said how’s it going Hybrid? Don’t walk away from me you dirty genetic piece of trash.”

“I’m going home. I’ll tell my father about you again.”

“Go ahead. He married one of your kind. May as well be like you. Don’t matter to me one bit.”

Makima left it there and entered his front door, slamming it in anger from Donald’s words. Sandra came to him right away. Makima was crying.

“What’s a matter Makima?”

Makima put down his symmetry box and violin case, crossed his arms and looked at the family portrait above the maple table that was in the foyer.

“Is something wrong with me?”

“What do you mean? Of course not.”

“Donald said it again.”

Sandra suddenly became distraught. She knew right away what Donald may have said to her only son.

“Did Mr. Oblonsky say something about you being a hybrid just like me?”

“Yeah. He said I was dirty.”

“He just doesn’t understand. He can’t possibly understand. He is an ignorant fool and you make sure you never treat anyone like that man treats you.”

Makima was still staring at the family portrait. Sandra grabbed his face and looked directly in his eyes as if to mean everything she said in continuity with the truth.

“The world is better off with us than without us. There are many great people who are Hybrids. Don’t you think I’m pretty good? Hmm. Maybe I’ll tell you about my current project?”

“You know I don’t like to see your sculptures until they’re done.”

“It is done. Well, part of it anyway. It’s three pieces that communicate with each other. The first one I finished two hours ago. I’ve been reading since then.”

“I might like it then I guess.”

“Great. Let’s walk into the studio.”

Makima and his mother walked through the main hallway, from the foyer past the kitchen and den to the back sliding door of the home. Sandra opened the door and let Makima pass her by. She closed the door behind her. They walked past the native species plant and rock garden that Phillip had maintained to another smaller built structure in the backyard. Sandra got out a set of keys, plugged a key into the door and opened it. The lights came on and they walked into the art studio. It had a high ceiling, paint and scrap metal everywhere and a sound system fit for an audiophile. There was a large cotton sheet tossed over something in the middle of the one room the building contained. Sandra pulled it off to reveal a set of metal sculptures that looked to be in the early stages of construction alongside a sculpture that seemed whole in itself. Makima looked upon the iron, steel, and copper art. He felt a sense of belonging in the void of the dark recesses of spacetime.

“What do you think buddy?”

“It’s cool. I think you’re doing a good job.”

“I already have a few interested parties. One of them off world.”

“Oh. Even better. Dad will be happy about that.”

“I know I don’t make us much money, but with Dad’s salary we do just fine.”

Makima looked over to the sink and saw it was dripping water. He went over to it and closed the flow.

“There we go. Don’t want to lose water.”

“Thanks Makima. I hadn’t noticed. Want to go and start dinner with me. I could use you in the kitchen to shred some cheese for eggplant parmesan.”

“Sure mom. I guess I don’t have much choice in the matter anyway.”

Sandra let herself laugh and smile. “No. Not really Makima.”

FIVE

The opinions of many writers were shown to Makima in the next few months. Oxima Prime’s famous writers were first introduced. Blankenstein, Rought, McElway, and Makuriawa were held in high esteem by Absolom since they all had a level of mastery in both fiction and non-fiction prose. Makima had copious amounts of reading to get finished before each meeting with Absolom. And every time Absolom saw Makima, Makima was prepared. He kept to the reading list and did his exercises for mathematics and drawing, writing and botany, physics and anatomy. His mind was full of information, information that would one day make him indispensable to the community.

Makima was most intrigued, however, by the seed of humanity. The story of Earth.

“Today Earth exists as a wasteland. By the year 2050 humanity had not changed their energy systems to less pollutive methods. Methane and petroleum still ruled the energy domain. Most of the scientific population had put their sights into deep space to try their best to colonize Earthlike planets. Mars colonization had still been failing at this point in history. But, climate change devastated the planet and there wasn’t a critical mass of governments on Earth that wanted to address rising sea levels, less productive harvests, heat zones non-hospitable to human lifestyles, among a myriad of other issues, one of which was the root cause of climate change termed general chemical pollution. The environment had simply come close to collapse. The biosphere’s integrity was threatened and with it, humanity. But, then breakthroughs in quantum gravity and the field of physics in general made it possible to create starship propulsion engines that could travel the cosmos in timescales hospitable to an intergalactic society.”

“And then Oxima Prime was colonized correct?”

“Oxima was the third generation of space colonization. First was Mars, second was planets within 1000 parsecs of Earth. And third is beyond that length of distance. We are how many parsecs from Earth?”

“I believe 259.51 parsecs.”

“Correct Makima.”

Absolom stroked his gray beard and continued, “Surely the fact that Earth was beginning to become unhospitable in many previously colonized areas had spurred scientific progress to levels not possible before. It must be noted that Earth was our best hope at creating ourselves into a peaceful species. Staying put on one planet for longer may have stopped certain divisions in humanity’s past that created

the present-day situation of two warring systems of intergalactic government all related to humankind. Evolution is tremendously slow so physically we are still somewhat the same, but generally our cultures are vastly different. Ours is fraught with corruption yes, but we are generally free as people to do what we please. The same cannot be said of the other spacefaring civilization that descend from Earth.”

“Isn’t it true that the Capitol here on Oxima has a group of Progenitors that are working on weapon technology to defeat the Unionists for good?”

“Progenitors generally design technology for the betterment of all civilizations including less developed one’s that are non-human like the Karbons, Jesits, or Plinis. Our methods are more for what can be termed ‘functional art’. We are the artist and the scientist merged into one that heals through our creations. I will say that there is a group of us in the capital who have lost their way since their wives’ passing in the war. A set of elite Progenitors, whom I’ve known personally, had their wives and children assassinated by some unknown party. This might have been our own people or others. We simply don’t know. But, these Progenitors, let’s call them what they are, the Reach, have begun crafting technology that doesn’t fit with the progenitor ideals, which are again Makima?”

“Peace. Unity. And the continuance of life amongst the Stars.”

“More or less. You forgot the most important part: The continuance of life amongst the stars for all. That last little bit is of importance. We create, we speak, we meddle, for the good of all sentient beings. At least we are supposed to. Corruption typically comes with great power of course.”

“How is it you became a Progenitor? I was selected. Were you too chosen.”

“I performed well to my own merit, yes. But, truthfully I graduated from the education center to become a technical specialist, an autonomous welder designer for starships. I was quite good too in my first three years of service, but something changed in me. I wanted to tutor. I wanted to educate. I wanted to create things that could serve us better as a whole. I took the adult examinations and then entered Progenitor training as a second career pathway as soon as I got my results back.”

“I’m glad you passed. I’ve learned much from you.”

“And much more will you learn. Just as Aristotle taught young Alexander for three years, I too will do the same until you come of mind to distribute your own sense of mastery of skills taught to others and produce a work of acclaim. Makima you are a Hybrid. And it is apparent. I’ve been pushing you hard and you haven’t broken. You will be better than me, I’m certain.”

“What do you think of my mother? She retired, but was trained to be a Progenitor too.”

“She took the path of the artist isn’t that correct?”

“Yes.”

“We dance along a similar path your mother and I. The Arts and Sciences blend into one at some point. I create what wills itself into being through me and so does she. The only difference between her and I is that one of us teaches and the other does not. Your mother is in her liberty to not pass on her gifts to others. That is her choice.”

“She’s taught me much and so have you.”

“Let’s get back to it then. With a lesson on rhetoric and laws of threes.”

SIX

The mural on the wall was titled “Missing in Spacetime”. It was one of Absolom’s visual pieces that was available for public viewing in the Museum of Modernity which Makima visited at the end of term Five which marked the end of the educational year.

Mammoths and sabretooth tigers were being fought by early humans at the edge of the entrance doorway in a circular mural room on the top floor of the museum. As Makima progressed clockwise he could see different moments in humanity’s history. At $\pi/2$ radians, Socrates speaks to his students with a cup of hemlock in his hand. At π radians, humanity reaches the moon of Earth. At the other side of the doorway in the room prior to 2π or 0 radians, was the founding of the Capital of Oxima, Oxima Prime, a city named after the planet marked by a amber haired woman in a black spacesuit with her helmet at her side holding a small infant wrapped in golden cloth who pointed up to the stars above her.

Makima stood in awe of this painting made with oils of various colors. His greatest teacher Absolom spent a year of his life creating the work with help from his computer assistant which checked his proportions and brush strokes as he progressed through the painting.

The smell of saltwater and lavender permeated the room, most likely the scents chosen to accent the visual art. There were about twenty other persons in the room. A girl named Vivian who graduated primary education with him was swaying looking at Socrates bold as he was when he

spoke his Apology. Her velvet purple dress flowed near the floor, her tan skin beaming beauty, her curled brunette hair grown to her mid back flowing onto her chest. He walked forth in his black blazer and white dress shirt, with black pants to speak to her as he was intrigued by her faint smile and single status as no one was speaking to her as of yet.

“Hello there. I’m sorry, I thought I’d interrupt. It’s Vivian, right?”

Vivian turned to meet Makima.

“Makima? One of the hybrids. I sort of remember you. So many of us and a year ago at that. We haven’t really spoken. You were always so serious. Head in your books. Not looking around for gossip.”

“I’d say I was trying my best to make top marks.”

“I’d say you might care too much for your own good. There’s more to life than studies.”

“I know. I just can’t stand not to perform at my highest ability.”

Vivian put out her hand.

“Come with me, Makima. Let me show you something.”

Makima grabbed Vivian’s soft skin with his own hand. And then Vivian walked with Makima down two levels of the Museum, down the concrete stairs that was on the Eastern end of the building.

They came up to a portrait of a woman with deathly pale skin. It was painted with triangular shapes to make up the face and clothing of the woman. Each triangle denoted a slightly different hue. There were hundreds of them.

“Look at the name.”

“*Vivian Woodcraft. Solo Triangular Interface of a Lady of Essex.* This is yours?”

“Exactly. Instead of getting top marks in primary, I’ve gotten into the museum as a child. Well, my mother and father considers me a woman now, but we’re still children until were graduate Secondary.”

“It’s lively and gorgeous. It’s a great work of art.”

“Look what happens when I push this button.”

Vivian put out her hand to push a black button on the bottom of the painting’s wooden framing. She pushed it with her index finger and the painting’s woman started moving. Her face became full of anger and disgust, then intermittent joy, until she started crying, then the painting went back to its first form and remained still.

“Wow. I’m even more impressed now. Programed it with interactive acrylic paint?”

“Yeah, oils take too long and aren’t as lively in my honest opinion.”

“I’d like you to be honest.”

“Who wouldn’t. Are you finished with this year’s Progenitor training?”

“Why yes. How did you know I’m to be a Progenitor?”

“Saw you speaking with good old Uncle Absolom. He doesn’t accept many students. My thought is that he’s had his eye on you for quite some time.”

“Perhaps.”

“Yes, perhaps. I need to go now, but keep on keeping on. See you around Makima.”

Makima watched Vivian walk away as the Starset peered in through the windows on the horizon. The pink sky with blue streaks enlightened any mind from a slumber of dullness. But, Makima wasn’t dull this moment, he was excited to have a friend for once, even if only briefly.

Oz Corporation

An emerald mountain cityscape keeps me stranded in a distant land I have already come to know too well. Strangers walk the city streets in grey suits and iron dresses with their personal robotic assistants dancing in their slavery. They say they all are part of a hive mind the Oz Corporation created. Fashioned in the mechanics shop where robots of less intelligence work, the metal slaves are perked up and powered by tritium and deuterium within their hollow shells where fusion energy is present. Those machine elves have crimson eyes and laugh at their masters at times for some reason I cannot explain. Glitches are always present in technology. I am gay to have a meeting with the hive mind's center this afternoon after tea with my friend who is scared to walk around without a slave. His name is Leon the Coward to the men and women of Oz.

I have reached the borderland's café on the edge of the emerald city where the yellow paved streets cease to exist. Leon requested Dominick's for reasons I cannot fathom. It is a place where no machine elf owner goes. Only those who cannot afford the cost of a slave's upkeep go there because they are lifelong criminals who are forged in prison to live at the adjoined apartments once their sentence is complete. The café is full of free food and teas that are bitter and ineffective due to the Oz Corporation's insistence that the felons not have access to the bountiful amounts of great foods and teas. But, trust Leon I must and together we shall make sense of things. I wonder why we don't go to Michele's as we once did when I was new to this land.

I reached the outer edifice of Dominick's around 10:00. My watch is not atomic and is manually adjustable so I can not be sure of the time in its exactitude. The small building stands still emerald, but fading to its under metals. Music becomes audible in the street, sonnet like to denote the time. 10:00 it is now, my watch a minute too fast. Quickly I adjust my watch to perk myself up to be on time for my later meeting with the hive mind's center, its core of artificial general intelligence. At 14:00 I shall meet the top computer artist in the land who speaks with the hive mind alone. For his reasons he meets with few, but saw me speak on camera and wanted me to become a citizen of the city of Oz.

My body comes to the door before me, the handle steel and cold as I open it with my right hand. It takes seconds to understand that the café is empty except for Leon who is sitting in a booth with a cup of what seems by my eyes to be an Indian variety of green tea, steaming hot as whisps of evaporated water reach further into the general atmosphere of the café.

“Come my friend. Sit with me and I shall explain myself.” Leon said with a terrified smile.

I stepped forth and asked him, “Shall we do this alone? There is not a person in sight. Even the owner is away. What have you done Leon?”

I read his mind. He had killed the robotic workers and all the felons in the shop. My eyes peered to the closet behind the bar where the people must lay dead.

“Sit, Dorothy or I'll murder you here and now.” Leon said with a quiver in his voice.

“I won’t sit with you.”

“There is no escape from what I am to tell you. I murdered for the greater good and you are my last piece to the open society I have dreamt of as of late.”

“Your madness has overtaken you! Let me tell the machine elves. Take your life sentence with honor and be unafraid. You won’t be free, but at least you shall be fed well and won’t struggle and be laughed at any longer due to you not owning one of the slaves we have in this city. Why have you murdered these people? They deserve better from you.”

Leon began to laugh. Laughed like a madman. Then suddenly he stopped laughing and put in his coat his gun that lay on the table. I immediately felt less in danger as he became less of a threat to my life. Stress that had built up in my body began to fade and my heart began to beat slower.

“Dorothy? You believe yourself to be free here? The hive mind watches all. They who have built the city of Oz enslaved all the population. You are not a native in this land. You come from a lesser society to them. They see your bravery, which I lacked until today, and wish to take your freedom from you completely. I want to tell you something, but first you must understand.”

Leon’s coat shined bright a lion of golden hair and strength of many beasts of its own kind. Behind the lion on his coat he found a pocket he reached his hand into as he recovered a piece of paper and put it on the table. It was folded and most obviously held some writings behind the folds.

“Leon, what have you there. You are very unwell. Please let me help you. The prison in the outskirts that I have heard of is a place of healing. They will give you the happiness medications and time for reflection you need.”

“This is certainly false my greatest friend. The people I killed in this shop have something downstairs I wish to show you. It is your choice. I killed, murdered, evil persons today. And this paper was given to me yesterday by one of those people who escaped this land. It denotes a time and place. Here and now when security is lowest. The Oz Corporation owns this establishment and a few of its members come here for its true purpose. I wanted to show you it so you would listen to my plan. Come with me to freedom or leave this place and become a slave who thinks their free. I will do this alone and am willing to try to do so without you. But, in honest nature I believe you are the one we all need to save us.”

“What do you possibly mean Leon? You and all your people, even I, a slave? The machine elves are the slaves, Leon. I think you are mad, confused even. Please allow me to help you get better.”

“Dorothy, my sweet Dorothy. I gained the courage I always lacked today. I have planned this for years in my spare hours. I give you a choice. Come with me and become enlightened to the truth or fade into darkness and lose yourself.”

“I’m afraid you may kill me Leon.”

“I won’t now even if you leave me, but I understand why you think that. I even said that moments ago. Though murdering you I would regret more than anything I could

possibly fathom. Be strong for me now and follow me to the basement. Come now.”

Leon got into a stride from the booth he was sitting in and made his way to a black door with a red knob attached to it at the other end of the café. He opened the door. His coat of black satin and gold embroidery disappearing as he turned right and went forth into a hallway. I struggled with this choice. I could simply leave and tell the hive mind what happened here, or I could follow and trust who was my greatest ally in this strange land I came to. I realized that there were still no authorities here. In every building in Oz, even the ones owned by private individuals, there is a hive mind machine vision monitoring system in case of emergencies in response to anything out of the ordinary such as fires or human crime or machine elf mischief. Just he and I were here which was very strange as murder had occurred. The large machine trolls should be here by now. But, they are not even close to me or Leon.

This building was different, which means perhaps there is something more to what I had previously been led to believe about this city, this land where people are so dull and glum yet have their needs met no matter really what they wish. I should at least investigate what Leon has told me and turn him in later if I don't perish when I follow him. No authorities are here. No machine trolls. The hive mind doesn't exist here. The law indicates that every building have a monitoring system. Only the Oz Corporation itself could prevent this. But, why would they wish this? Disturbing truly.

Human blood was oozing from behind the closet door. I could now see its puddle start to stretch onto the visible floor before me. I was entranced and scared to follow

Leon. The corpses in the closet behind the counter were draining dark red viscous blood. How many bullets were used with a silencer attached? I dare not open that closet door to see those dead bodies. There is no malfunction. The Oz Corporation wants this building hidden to the publicly available servers.

I think I must trust Leon and follow his strand of thought. I straightened my blue dress on my body and walked slowly in my sparkling red shoes and made my way for the black door. I turned right once I entered the space that the door led to and saw Leon waiting for me at the end of a dimly lit black painted hallway. There was a staircase before him. I came to his body and we both slowly descended into the basement of the facility which seemed much larger than what its outside portended itself to be in size. The café was just a front to something more sinister and Leon had known information he could not speak, but had to show me for belief to become present in my mind so that the truth of this utopian society where work no longer existed was laid bare.

We entered the basement floor and saw three men with grey prison suits on their bodies. They were chained to a wall and only one of them was still alive. The dead men had their brains and spinal cords intact lying on a surgical table. Various technologies I had never seen before were attached to their nervous system which were then further attached to what my eyes could only imagine was a large supercomputer. The agony must have been excruciating for that surgical removal to become a reality. A third prisoner was probably going to undergo the same surgery at some other time. His breathing was slow, but his chest was moving still, his hands bleeding from the large steel screws implanted through his

flesh into the wall. He became closer to us as we moved forth. Leon shook him gently to wake him from his pain and slumber.

“My brother, are you able to hear me?” Leon said as he gently raised the man’s head.

The man awoke, drowsy. His black eyes blinked and his breathing became more rapid as he became more aware of his life situation.

“Don’t take out the screws. They...They...He said. That demon said that I’d die if I tried to escape. My friends are dead aren’t they? I can see what they have done despite my blurry vision. I heard their screams. Even if they only lasted for a few moments.”

“When are they coming back. Today?” I said, “We might be able to turn off the machine that may kill you and get you out of this place.”

“You will die too if you attempt that. I... I... Methinks the man with the scarred face intends this place to be filled with poison gas if I try to escape and get out of my holdings, my chains. Water... I need water...I want death. Just kill me. Please just kill me.”

The man passed out and lost consciousness. Perhaps he was right. If we wished to disable the computer next to these men, the computer’s disabling would set off some sort of alarm and poison could fill the room. I turned my head towards what lay next to the computer in the basement. A small table with five Oz Corporation gasmasks designed for warfare given the threats I was told about when I first came

to this land. War was on the horizon according to one man who let his machine elf speak for him. The machine elf said that a neighboring country that banned the use of artificial intelligence so that work was not phased out, but was limited to an optional 4 hours per day given their other advances in technology. Rest was required through mandatory vacation time throughout the calendar year in the other country. This country was a threat to the land of Oz I was told. They were dangerous I was told. The propaganda that I saw once in the street had said their society was always welcome to have the citizens of Oz as their own. But, the machine elves who normally spoke for their masters told of the possibility they just wanted human slaves and that their propaganda was a lie designed to trick the citizens of Oz. I don't know what to believe any more. I just want to go back home, but can't. I was told by Leon that this is a universe like my own, but different. He and all of the people of this universe don't have the technology to get me back home, at least not at present. Oh, how I miss Toto. Oh, how I wish I could just go back home to Kansas.

Servicepeople

Dominos were set red, black, and green on wooden floorboards with the smell of summer lavender in the air.

Samuel

had been playing in his bedroom, setting up the plant derived plastic pieces in an intricate geometric pattern that resembled a bouquet of roses. Daisy was standing in the doorway in her peach summer dress, silver blonde hair braided, hips swaying as she chewed on the nails of her right hand. Samuel looked up to Daisy, his gray-green eyes peering into her as she watched him with his index finger ready to push over one of the dominos.

“Ready Daisy?” Samuel questioned.

“Why of course. I’ve been waiting for you to be done for the past hour.” Daisy said as she twinkled her nose and yawned.

“Okay, well, here it goes.” Samuel said.

He pushed one of the dominos into another so that the entire pattern of upright plastic pieces began to topple over. The process was done within seconds and by the end, Daisy was wide eyed and clapping.

“How wonderful Sammy! I have such fun watching when I’m bored in the afternoons.” Daisy said as she smiled wide, her white teeth showing prominently.

“You’ll have to start doing it on your own Daisy. I’m leaving with Father later today.”

Daisy’s facial structure changed rapidly so that her joyous expression shifted to sorrow. She looked down to her pale bare feet and shook her head.

“But who will enjoy my cooking? Father never says it’s any good and Mother always is silent at meals and praises

me little. I'm going to miss my little brother. Sammy why don't you just go to my school instead? We can walk in the mornings together. What do you say? You're fifteen. You don't have to go away if you don't want to." Daisy said as she walked up closely to Samuel.

"You know what Father would say. It's tradition. His Father and his Father's Father went to Section Five for their training too. If I'm going to be a Serviceman one day just like Father that's the best place to go."

"Addison Hall trains Servicemen. I know this boy Jeffery Tomlick who is graduating next term who passed his test just fine."

"Daisy. Father wouldn't like it if I went to school at Addison Hall. They're better at training Addlemakers and Longcraftspeople like you're training to be."

Daisy looked at her brother with true discontent. She walked over to the window with a view of their grassy backyard. Daisy began to cry. Tears hit the floor as they rolled down her flawless cheeks.

"I just don't want you to leave. It will be hard without you Samuel."

Samuel got up and hugged his sister.

"It's okay. I'll be home next summer and over the holidays. You'll still get to see me plenty. Besides, don't you want to get rid of me? Last week you said you'd be glad when I was gone."

Daisy pushed Samuel away and grabbed his shoulders as she looked directly into his eyes.

"It's just a shame." Daisy said as she took one of her hands and pinched Samuel's cheek.

"To be completely honest I was just mad at you for making fun of my hair that day. I wanted to dye it a different

color as I was terribly tired of my brunette shade. You said a nasty thing and I was angry. Though what I truly will feel is loss when you are gone.”

“What are you two doing in here?” A silk skinned woman in an emerald dress said.

“Ms. Johnson, I was just saying goodbye to Samuel. I’ll be on my way.” Daisy said as she moved to exit the room with a look of fear in her face.

“Young Mr. Danston. Have we packed yet? Your father will be quite disappointed if you aren’t ready to leave when your father gets home.”

“I haven’t yet.” Samuel said with a frown.

“Why are you just standing there then? Come now. I’m waiting.” Ms. Johnson said with anger apparent in her voice.

Samuel went to his closet and retrieved two large suitcases and began to pack them with his belongings that he would take to school.

“And clean this up. The dominos I mean. I want your room ready as a hotel suite before you leave. Be on with it. I’ll be back to check on you a half an hour from now. You best be ready by then or else I’ll inform your mother of your tardiness and she’ll discipline you, I’m sure.”

“Yes, Ms. Johnson.” Samuel said as he moved to put away his dominos into a small maple box which held them. Ms. Johnson smirked and left Samuel to pack and clean his room. He had to move fast to be finished in time. He didn’t want to upset his mother. It wasn’t her he was afraid of, but she would naturally tell his father and that couldn’t do.

Mr. Danston was a serviceman just like his father was before him and Samuel would train to become one too. At the age of fifteen, boys selected a trade for the rest of their

lives. Girls did the same at fourteen. Regardless of biological sex, this choosing of the type of work for their adult years was what made someone enter the adolescent status of law and commerce. Usually, the decision was not made alone, but in conjunction with the child's guardians and teachers at the Trivium level of education.

Samuel couldn't be a Drone. That was made clear when he had his first meeting on the topic of career selection. Drones were a classification for the most versatile of careers, one in which you could change specialties throughout life. It was, however, the lowest skilled of career paths and only required at minimum a Trivium education along with on the job experience in a particular subfield. But, Samuel was of the Saphine class, those required to take on careers that needed more education; three years of intense training and a ten year apprentice stage until one could complete the penultimate task of professionalism in their chosen discipline. The Saphines were a wealthy class of workers who provided necessary functions to the whole of society.

Samuel picked through his drawers for clothing and other items to bring on his journey to Section Five. He found a blade in his dresser that one of his teachers had gifted him. He thought about what professor Chadwick had said on his last day of his Trivium education. He was taken aside during lunch period and led by an assistant to Dr. Chadwick's office. The bald man in tweed jacket had only a few important words for him, "The path of the serviceman is paved with adversity and consequential decision. I believe you have chosen the correct path despite your gentle nature. Take my gift to you as a testament to my belief that you will survive in earnest during your training." Dr. Chadwick gave Samuel a steel blade engraved with *Kins Ser Veriman*, which meant in

the common tongue, *Death Lies in the Shadows*. Samuel put the blade in one of the front zipper pockets of his luggage.

After he had packed all his things, there was about ten minutes to straighten up his room. One could say that he took an interest in making it presentable, but was it of the caliber that Ms. Johnson required? He thought perhaps, perhaps not. Regardless, it would have to do as he could see his father's car pull up outside the window into the driveway of his parent's home. Mr. Danston got out of the driver's seat and walked through the entrance of his home wearing a black suit jacket with a serious look on his face.

"Samuel? Are you ready to leave? We have little time to spare." Mr. Danston said as he appeared to Samuel in his bedroom.

"Yes father. Let me just close my luggage. I should have everything."

Mr. Danston walked over to Samuel's closet and retrieved a blue suit jacket, giving it to Samuel with a slight shade of concern.

"You'll be needing this as well."

"But I already packed two suits. I should not need another one."

"I have seven suits Samuel. We'll be needing to get you a few more. Three isn't enough. We have to keep up appearances. Besides it's company policy to wear a different one each day of the week when working."

"Training is different. I won't be working yet."

"You might as well start putting yourself into the mindset of a Serviceman. You're leaving the life of a child and entering the adult world, even if you're just dipping your toes."

Mr. Danston raised his arm and revealed a brass analog watch on his wrist, looking down at it as he adjusted his glasses with his other hand.

“It’s almost three. We have two hours to get you to the dormitories. We’ll make it. I’ll take one of your suitcases.”

Mr. Danston took one of the pieces of luggage with his left hand and walked out of the room as he headed downstairs to load it into the car outside. Samuel looked around the bedroom he would be leaving for the foreseeable future. He left up all his posters of sports teams and natural landscapes. He wouldn’t be needing those. He thought he would take in his new living space and decorate accordingly once he arrived in Section Five. Samuel straightened his crimson tie and retrieved his second piece of luggage and left his room, descending the stairway and out the front door. Daisy was waiting with their father in front of the car.

“See you in the winter Samuel.” Daisy said.

Samuel passed his sister in silence and loaded the tan sedan’s trunk with his luggage. He looked at his home, the home he hadn’t ever left to live elsewhere till now. For whatever reason, maybe the stress of the event, his hands were quivering.

“Let’s be on our way son. I’m sorry your mother couldn’t be here. She’s stuck at work dealing with some clients. It couldn’t wait.”

“I’m sure I’ll see her soon. Are you ever going to visit?”

Mr. Danston looked to Samuel and shook his head, “Samuel, your training will be arduous. You will see us during winter break when you come home. We don’t want to disturb your learning.”

Daisy turned to her father, “Can’t I visit? I don’t think we should leave him completely alone without family.”

“Daisy. Mind your own training. Becoming a longcraftswoman is difficult as well and you’re entering your second year. The difficulty will increase in designing weaponry, I’m sure. Neither of you will have the time until break.”

Daisy looked down to the black asphalt her bare feet were standing on, crossed her arms, spun around, and walked back into the house. Mr. Danston followed his daughter with his eyes and once she had disappeared, he once again faced Samuel. He then nodded and opened the driver’s side front door and sat in the car seat. Samuel went to the passenger side, opened the front door and sat down, joining his father. Mr. Danston pushed the start button and the electric engine turned on. Samuel went to put on his favorite music, but his father wanted silence for now.

“Now Samuel, when we get to Section Five and enter the grounds of the educational area, I need you to realize that your life is about to change in ways that I have never described to you. I need you to understand you will struggle with what you will learn and how you will learn it. The difficulty of the position of the Serviceman is evident to how often I am gone. I was thankfully able to take half the day off to drive you to your new school, but I have barely mentioned to you what I do day to day. I have not done so because I think it is important that you learn starting now, now that we are headed to Section Five together. What is it that a Serviceman does?”

“They are the arbiters of the retirement process for all individuals.”

“And is retirement optional?”

“No.”

#

The garden in front of the dormitory smelled of tulips and hibiscus. The flowers flowed back and forth in the gentle wind that swept across the beds of plants and gravel walkways of the exterior to the large Victorian building. It was designed by an innovative architect named Savoy Johanes. He often took traditional styles from different centuries of human civilization and retrofitted them with modern innovations of sustainable building practice. Since the Deponburg riot of 2150, all buildings required certification by the governmental authorities to adhere to certain regulations that stipulated elements of sustainability in construction. Johanes designed the entirety of Section Five’s educational district. Scholars generally agree he outperformed other well-known architects of the day. He himself felt the Section Five project failed due to the North observatory’s cost exceeding the budget by 1.2 million credits. The developer had difficulty working with the building’s foundation due to the faulty soil composition analysis of one of the engineers working on the building in question.

Samuel was reading a brief history of Johanes on an outdoor plaque placed next to the entranceway of the dormitory. He reviled in the history and was excited to get on with learning more. Samuel entered the doors of the 150-room building after he ingested the brief memory of Johanes. Each room housed one member of the three classes of Serviceman trainees. Fifty were in each class of students, characterized by the year in which they were in their training. First years were relegated to the first floor, second years to

the second, and third years to the third. Samuel looked to his wrist and pushed the center of his watch.

“Yes, Samuel. How may I help you today?” the deep learning assistant said.

“What room am I in?”

“If you mean which Section Five dormitory room will serve as your primary residence for the next year, then you are assigned to room 45A. It is towards the end of the hallway of the East wing of the Sacrament of Sleep and Leisure building, more commonly known as the Section Five Educational Dormitory.”

“Thank you Andreea.”

“Can I be of service in any other way?”

“Can you show me a visual map of my location and the schematics of the dormitory showing me where the room is?”

“Of course.”

A projection of blue light shot from his watch showing a route to 45A in the East wing. Samuel viewed it and looked around the hallways which were empty of other students. He saw a bronze sign that clearly denoted the east and west wings of the building. He faced East and started walking down the corridor that was lit brightly with artificial light. Another sign had the numbers 26A-50A written on it. Andreea wasn't needed any longer.

“That will be all Andreea.”

“Of course.” Andreea said as the blue light schematics quickly faded away.

Samuel reached his room and opened wide his right eye so that the biophysical reader could acquire the proper access codes to allow entry. Within a few seconds the door opened, it shifting rightward into the wall. Samuel walked in

with his two luggage items as the lights inside gently raised its hue to match a comforting level of lumen intensity. There was a desk and office chair adjacent to a twin sized bed that was next to a large window that looked directly into a hedge and then out into the front garden and walkways of the small exterior landscape. He put down his luggage and went into the bathroom that had a sink, toilet, and shower area. He returned to the studio and noticed the walls were bare. He thought he could go to the market tomorrow and purchase several posters of forest and mountainside to decorate his room. It didn't feel like home. Why should it? He had just gotten there, but he wished for familiarity and routine. Novelty brought fear into his wake. Soon he would attend his first lecture.

Samuel had arrived a day before the majority of students would begin their training. The top five students of the first-year class were to join the Prime Director of the Section Five Educational District for dinner. Each student was ranked by their Standardized Trivium education scores and Samuel had achieved a full scholarship for the year by placing third of all fifty students that would attend classes with him this year. His father and mother were instrumental in his performance, drilling him with practice tests and supplementary readings three years prior to last year's test date. The days of standardized testing was over. Once a person had entered post-Trivium education different metrics of success were used to determine overall training performance and ultimately career advancement.

Samuel unpacked his clothing and put everything in either the drawers of his single dresser or within the closet adjacent to the bathroom door. Samuel then tucked away his luggage under the bed and retrieved the pillow from the bed

of his room. He put the pillow down on the bare cedar floor and sat upon it. He mediated using breathing exercises for a period of twelve minutes, opened his eyes, and put the pillow back onto the bed. He noticed it was 1800 hours. Dinner was to be held in the Divergence Lounge at 1900. Samuel went to the closet to retrieve his finest black suit and changed his clothing for the occasion of meeting the Prime Director and the other top students of his class. He wanted to be somewhat early so he left his room at 1830 after spending fifteen minutes reading *A Brief History of the Section Five Educational District*, a book left in his room on his nightstand. Entering the hallway of the dormitories, he noticed another boy, wearing a navy suit and golden bowtie, had exited another room and was staring at him from the entrance of 40A. He had a strict look to him, a bony paste white face.

“Well hello there good sir. Headed to dinner perchance?” the boy said.

“I am.”

Samuel walked to the boy and extended his hand for a handshake. The two shook sternly.

“Name’s Quincy. Quincy Devoid. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, I’m Samuel Danston. I assume you’re one of the five first year students?”

“Yes indeed. Why else would I be here? I imagine you reached top marks as well. I got fifth thankfully. My mother was ecstatic I even got in let alone a full scholarship guaranteed for the first year. I would say my father was proud, but he died. Retired willingly last year before I got my letter of acceptance. He was rather old though, but it was a little earlier than expected.”

“I’m sure there was a good reason for the retirement. Sorry to hear you don’t have him around anymore.”

“Oh I’m fine with it. My father wasn’t a very kind man and I hardly saw him anyhow. My parents split up, got divorced when I was six. I lived with my mother, but saw him on occasion.”

“You’re rather open about these things aren’t you?”

“Sure. Sometimes. I can tell you’re the right type. Liked you right when I saw you come out of your room. Ready to be on our way?” Quincy said as he turned and pointed his arm to the exit of the dormitory.

“Let’s be on our way then.”

The two boys walked out of the North entrance of the dormitories and headed to the Conception Building, a gothic structure that housed the Divergence lounge which was a half a kilometer across campus. Quincy retrieved a pack of Bison Cigarettes from his jacket pocket as they walked. There was a large black haired bison on the package that had a cartoonish face. Quincy took out a cigarette and handed it to Samuel.

"Take one. It'll take the edge off."

Samuell had never smoked before. It was illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to purchase any drugs whether it be caffeine or morphine. He wondered where Quincy had gotten this pack of cigarettes. Samuel took the cylinder of tobacco.

“Here’s a lighter my new friend. Have you ever smoked before?” Quincy said with an inquisitive look.

“Not much, but I’m familiar enough.”

“My mother bought these for me before I left and gave me Synodone to counteract the cancerous effects. Doesn’t do much for addiction though. You’d need

Dimexlmoth for that and that's in short supply. Maybe if we get too deep I can get Frank to get us some. He's an apprentice serviceman who lives in Section Five housing. I met him when I was young. Lived in the same neighborhood. We've kept up communication. Told me to visit when I got into town."

Samuel struggled to flick on the flame of the lighter, but was successful after a few tries. He lit the cigarette in his mouth as the light brown tobacco and white paper glowed red. He inhaled, held it for a moment and then coughed in a fit, his body convulsing slightly as he continued to walk. Quincy lit his own cigarette and inhaled, exhaling without any coughing.

"First time isn't it?" Quincy said.

"Yeah." Samuel said as he coughed again. "Yeah. Sorry I lied."

"It's fine. I get it. I've done the same thing. Lied about all sorts of stuff to fit in."

The two finished their cigarettes as they stood outside of the Conception building's entrance. Quincy reached into his pants pocket and took out a small blue pill and gave it to Samuel. It was the Synodone.

"You'll be needing this. I'll take some later. Left the rest in my room. Reduces the risk of carcinogenic material by 95%."

Samuel took the pill and swallowed it with only his saliva to push it down his throat. He was glad he at least tried the cigarette. He felt oddly mellow, but his lungs hurt. He didn't wish to get into a smoking habit. Even though Synodone reduced cancerous risk, it had its own consequences. He hoped he wouldn't have to vomit during dinner.

The Conception Building's hallways were filled with painted landscapes of war. Several pictures were dedicated to the Devonian Coalition's loss in World War IV. The American Empire had defeated them through forty years of battles. Various major victories at Port Matilda, New York City, and Beijing were held up on the walls as Quincy and Samuel walked towards the lounge where dinner was held. Two faceless manikins in black suits and ties stood on both sides of the entrance doors to the lounge.

"Shall we Samuel?" Quincy said with nervousness in his voice.

Samuel nodded, opened the door and entered into a brightly lit room where an old man with short gray hair was sitting at the head of a dining table. Two boys were chatting to each other by an empty fireplace at one end of the room, while a small auburn headed girl sat in an emerald loveseat wearing a black evening dress. She was beautiful to Samuel. She turned to look at him. They met each other gaze, her blue eyes glaring into his for a brief moment until she looked away. Quincy moved to join the two other boys and walked away from Samuel staring conversation with them without any difficulty. Samuel went to sit next to the girl. He lowered himself onto the loveseat and turned to her as she moved to face him.

"I'm Samuel. What's your name?"

"Delphina." She said curtly standing up as she spoke to Samuel. She looked to the other boys laughing to each other and then walked away to sit at the table where the old man was sitting. Samuel noticed the old man intently looking at the clock that overhung the doors to the lounge. As the clock struck 1900, the old man, who was obviously the Prime Director, stood up and clapped his hands.

“My new students. Please join Delphina Fortuna and myself at our dinner table. We have much to discuss. Come now, Richard, Quincy, Samuel, Beckett. Come now, sit down so we may begin.”

The four boys moved over to the table and sat down into the chairs of the round table. Delphina and Quincy sat next to the Prime Director, while Samuel sat across from him. The prime Director picked up a small bell and shook it so that it rang loudly into the space of the room. A stout woman in a black and white maid’s outfit emerged from another entryway into the lounge with a cart of Caesar salad and a bowl of mixed berries. She placed the salad plates and bowls of berries in front of each of the members of the dinner table.

“Will you be needing anything else prime director?” The woman questioned.

“No, you may be on your way. I’m sure the chefs have something delightful planned for later. You may bring out the other courses when they are ready.”

The woman bowed and left the room. The prime director picked up his fork and began to eat his salad motioning his right hand to indicate the others should eat as well. Samuel watched Delphina as she picked at her berries and then moved to eat her salad as he himself did the same since he had read it wise to mimic another person if you wanted them to enjoy your company. Delphina however seemed completely immersed in her eating until the Prime Director began to speak once more.

“Well now.” The prime director said, “I am Winston Dynico, the prime director of this facility. Here we are, myself and my five finest students in the Ruby class. At least today you are the most well educated at this point. Class ranks normally change throughout the years of training. Normally

at least three persons of the Ruby class lose their scholarship when entering the Sapphire class, and it's rare that the remaining two both make it to the Diamond class with a complete scholarship. We have someone here who's family member accomplished that feat, an achievement only reached by a few members of the student body of the Section Five Educational District's entire history."

"Who is that prime director?" Quincy said eagerly.

"Delphina, would you mind?" the prime director said.

"My father was the last one to make it all three years with a scholarship. Only twenty-three students have ever gained that mark."

"Thank you for speaking Delphina. You boys have some tough days ahead of you against this young woman here. Her father is a good friend and fine serviceman. He says she might be more talented than him. And he leads the Golden Core."

Samuel raised his hand with his index finger in the air and the Prime Director noticed immediately.

"Samuel, you can just speak. We aren't in lecture yet. A question, have you?"

"I just wanted to ask, what is the Golden Core?"

The boys all laughed, but Delphina was stoic. The prime director simply smiled.

"They are the most elite force of servicemen, or shall I say servicepersons in the world. Hasn't your father at least told you that?"

"No sir." Samuel said embarrassed, "He doesn't tell me much about work."

"Wanted to keep you away from it till you became of age. Not a bad method, though I can imagine it has its downsides. Anyhow, Delphina here is top of the class as the

highest ranked member of you here tonight. She has special privileges as a result. She got to pick her schedule for instance. Perhaps you all can prove yourselves worthy of the same for next term. For now, you'll have to take what you have been given. Small class sizes are a priority here for training servicepersons. You'll have some classes together, but certainly not all. And one last thing, Delphina is the only woman in the Ruby class and I'm sure you're all aware that servicewomen are rare. But, don't discriminate. You might be surprised at what she can do in the coming months."

"Sir. May we talk less about me?" Delphina said with a frown.

"Of course. Now we have the issue of leadership to go over." Winston said as he rang the bell once more.

An android appeared from the same entrance that the woman entered from. It had long arms and legs attached by a small body and conveyed a completely visible mechanical brain. Humanoid in shape, it was made of synthetic carbon fiber, various metals, and synthetic skin. It moved with a calm demeanor and retrieved a folder from its chest, handing a piece of paper to each of the students. Each paper had a complex abstract image on it.

"I want you all to scan these. It will be your attendance for tonight and will officially begin your enrollment. I'm a bit classical with things."

The group of students all scanned the documents before them with their wristwatches. Samuel had heard of these printed images before but never had used them. They were archaic and had been used primarily for marketplace purposes. But, there was no reason they couldn't be used in this instance as a way to provide a key to an attendance

program. Samuel laughed inside. Why couldn't the prime director just note to himself if someone wasn't present?

Samuel looked at Delphina once more. She had finished her salad and berries and now was looking up at the crystal chandelier that overhung the dining table. He then looked to one of the other boys. One of them, strong and black of hair wearing a black and gray paisley suit seemed intensely in focus. The boy shifted his focus to the prime director and said, "Sir? Richard Hamilton here. Can you talk of Leadership for us?"

The prime director rose from his seat, grabbed his wooden cane that had an owl carved into it and began to walk slowly towards the center of the lounge where a small table was placed. It had a steel cube atop it. The prime director picked up the cube and returned to the dining table, sitting back down and giving the cube to Delphina. Delphina peered into the metal structure as if she had seen it before.

"Right, Delphina if you would pass it over to the others. Everyone must touch it."

The students passed it to each other, Samuel noticing it was much lighter than he expected. The cube reached Quincy last as he was sitting next to the prime director.

"Give it here boy." The prime director growled.

Quincy quickly handed the cube back to the prime director.

"Sir. Again, what do you mean by leadership?"

"You have all just been judged and will be matched up with specific team members in your class. Each of you will be team leaders of course, at least for the first term. If you are deemed unworthy to lead your team, you will be demoted and will most likely lose your scholarship for next year and another will take your place."

“Beckett Adams sir. So, each of us will have a team of ten people including ourselves?” Beckett said as he rolled a coin over the fingers of his right hand. “Seems that is the conclusion to this, prime director?”

“An astute observation Beckett.”

Beckett shrugged, his dark ebony face uncaring and void of any sense of satisfaction in being in the room with the others sitting at the table. His dark purple suit glowed in the light of the room and everyone took notice that he was the only one without a tie besides Delphina.

Beckett put his coin on the table and released a sly smile.

“Prime director? Are you going to teach us anything about death tonight?” Beckett said.

“You will have plenty of time to muse about our only God when your classes come. Tonight is a chance of getting to know about the other leaders of the Ruby class. Surely it can wait. You have the rest of your careers to ponder death.” The prime director said as he shifted his focus to his glass of water, picking it up and raising it into the air, “A toast to leaving your innocence and joining the ranks of the servicemen...I mean servicepeople. May we get better acquainted and lose ourselves in conversation.”

They all raised their glasses and acknowledged the toast. Samuel wondered about his role as a leader, about death, about retirement. He didn't feel ready, but tomorrow he would have to face the stresses of training for the first time. Tomorrow he would begin his journey towards mastering death.

#

“Servicepeople have one objective and one objective alone. They must retire individuals regardless of circumstance. I would like to say that that objective was easily achieved, but sadly the rates of non-compliance have been rising, almost to levels when population stabilization measures and guidelines were first instituted. Can anyone tell me the process, if all goes according to law, that the serviceman or woman is involved in retirement? That is, if the legal code is followed by the retiree, what do they do and how is the serviceperson involved?”

The professor had asked his question, however, there was a sharp silence. He stood strong in his black suit and crimson tie looking out to the crowd of students through his model X eyeglasses. He paced back and forth stroking his short gray beard. Delphina was in the front row of desks that faced Professor Saint Leon. The professor looked directly at her as if to force a response with his gaze. She raised her hand pointing her index and middle fingers into the air.

“Yes. Delphina is it? Our first servicewoman trainee in over seven years. Go ahead, give us your answer.”

Delphina rose out of her chair and said, “The serviceperson is charged with facilitating the termination of all retired individuals. They are an extension of the state that maintains the balance of population by ensuring the swift death of all those under law deemed retired. A person, once designated as a retiree has two options. They can either follow the law and attend their euthanasia session facilitated by the tasked serviceperson or they can run and become enemies of the state. If they run it is the serviceperson’s task to find the non-compliant person and eliminate them. Either way it is the serviceperson’s duty to act as death’s medium.”

“Exactly. A wonderful explanation. Well done indeed.”

Delphina sat back down. Samuel was attending Responsibilities of Career for the first time. Delphina seemed to be well versed in the literature already judging by her answer. He felt clarity as he sat listening, learning about what his role in society would be. It now made more sense why his father was so cold. He dealt with the intricacies of retirement. He had killed people. And eventually Samuel would take a life as well.

“Now we must all realize the importance of retirement. Without it we would be in danger of overpopulation on a finite planet. In the fourth age of industrialization and before, retirement meant simply the ceasing of labor and the enjoyment of pure leisure time. But, we all now understand that only work gives life meaning. Once we are deemed unable to fulfill our role in society as a worker we are simply no longer needed and hence retirement and the job of the serviceperson.” Professor Saint Leon said as he turned off his classroom’s projector that showed various images important to the serviceperson throughout the length of the lecture, “I want a short essay of 500 words on what you learned today for next week’s class. It will be due before lecture. Please send directly via our intercommunication channels for the class. Dismissed.”

Everyone in the lecture hall gathered their bookbags which held their personals. Professor Saint Leon was the first to leave the room as he moved swiftly with top hat and synthetic leather briefcase. Samuel took his time, finding no reason to rush to his next class in an hour. He looked around the room. Delphina stood near the East window looking out to the rain clouds that covered the sky. There was a staccato

pounding on the windows from the falling water. Thunder was audible, but no lightning was in sight. The stormwater facilities began their work, and the soil was beginning to saturate. Samuel moved down the steps of the hall passing by the rows that sat in front of him during the class. He had never enjoyed sitting near the front, always taking his seat somewhere in the center of any lecture when available. He reached Delphina and stood right next to her. She seemed not to notice he had entered her personal space.

“What did you think of your team?” Samuel said wondering if Delphina would even answer.

Delphina looked down and back to the window and then shifted her face to meet Samuel’s.

“Why should I discuss my teammates with you? We are competitors.”

Samuel frowned and said, “I don’t mean to use the information you give to my advantage. It’s just a friendly question.”

Delphina was silent. She had a look of concern that seemed to indicate that she questioned Samuel’s motive. But, then she smiled and her whole demeanor had shifted to a playful character.

“I guess they are up to the tasks ahead. Wiley seemed very excited to be here at the educational district. Though a boy named Dominick was angry that he was being led by a girl. He’ll have to get used to it. I have no intention of being demoted.” Delphina then became cold again, “My father expects me to do well.”

“I’m sure your father will be proud of you if you try your best and Dominick will come around eventually.”

“My father is meticulous and cruel in failure. He doesn’t care if I try, only if I succeed in my objective.”

“And what is your objective?” Samuel asked.

Delphina paused once more, pondering the consequences of telling Samuel her answer. She stepped forward to come closer to the window. The rain had become more intense. She clasped her hands behind her back and stood more erect, straightening her spine, fixing her posture.

“I am expected to replace my father one day. He thought my brother would take on that venture. Though he entered the Vega instead of the Servicepersons. The Golden Core is my goal. I wish to enter its ranks.” Delphina said as Samuel witnessed a line of hesitation protruding from her facial cues as she spoke.

Samuel put down his bag and joined Delphina looking out the window with hands clasped behind his back. He looked to her and said, “You’ve come to the right place on your journey. My father says there are few places that are as good as Section Five to become a Serviceman.”

“Yes, this is true. Servicepersons that are educated here are normally highly ranked, but only the best join the golden core.” Delphina looked down to her feet, “And I must please father.”

Delphina broke off and picked up her own bag and put it onto her back. She was wearing a navy suit jacket with golden buttons and golden tie, with white dress shirt and her auburn hair was tied up in a knot atop her head. She stood directly facing Samuel as he moved to face her. He noticed for the first time the faint freckles on both of her cheeks.

“Pleasure to speak with you Samuel.” Delphina said

“Where are you off to next?”

“Combat training.”

#

Delphina and Samuel entered the combat training facility which was built underneath the Hampton and Jackson buildings, stark glass and steel modern 23-story high-rises that were connected with a bridge on their third level. Delphina and Samuel were slightly wet from the rain outside. Gusts of wind pushed through the shield of unsaturated air that their umbrellas lent, spreading droplets of water onto their clothing. There was a professor checking the virtual immersion machines that were set up in rows of 5 in the large room with 25 total in count. They included a table that operators lay upon with a brain interaction headset attached to a Riemann supercomputer which was housed in a glass case that was built up against the walls of the white room. Professor Magnus was a stout man with a scar that stretched from his right ear across his cheek down to his chin in a swerving shape. His entire head was clean shaven and he seemed comfortable with this deformity as his smile indicated that the machine he was looking over was in good order. He moved to the next machine. A standard issue dark blue track suit was his choice of clothing which was allowed as he was a member of the physical training staff of the Educational District. Normally professors and students alike were required to wear suits to class and formal events. He continued adjusting the equipment in silence and seemed unconcerned with the students pouring into the room. Quincy had arrived with not a drop of water on him, joining Delphina and Samuel on the edges of the basement.

“Samuel good sir. Delphina my dear. Glad you both are in group one. Seems Beckett and Richard won’t be attendance. They’ll be in the combat training class with the others at Ruby level.”

Delphina gritted her teeth, “Don’t call me ‘dear’ Quincy. I don’t appreciate that sort of tone.”

“Apologies...my lady.” Quincy said as he bowed and stood upright again.

Delphina’s mouth opened slightly. She looked to Samuel and then back to Quincy in anger. Spinning brisk, she simply walked away to join Professor Magnus.

“You shouldn’t have done that Quincy.” Samuel said.

“What? She’s a lady, isn’t she? I’m only playing around with her. Might get her off her game.” Quincy said as he threw his tied up umbrella into the air with a slow rotation, catching it, and putting it into his backpack’s side pocket.

“It’s true she’s a lady, but you shouldn’t push her like that. Be nice in a sincere manner that promotes respect.”

Quincy’s mood shifted into a serious mode as he said, “Do you know who she is?”

Samuel was taken aback by this question. He knew little of her beside her father being the leader of the Golden Core, her brother joining the Vega, those spiritual advisors in government office, and her beauty that interested his pubescent mind.

“Why I have little knowledge of her in truth.” Samuel admitted.

“She’s vicious and cunning. Her father has trained her from birth to kill and he’s probably one of the best on the planet to learn from. I met her once before coming here. She’s a tricky one. Stay alert.”

“Why should I trust you.”

“Look, I enjoyed that cigarette with you and we can beat her. At least one of us can triumph with our teams and win that damned dagger.”

Samuel remembered what the Prime Director had said over dinner the first night he arrived. Each of the leaders would work throughout the year with their teams to gain the highest marks. The team with the most accomplishments throughout the year's term would win Japanese steel. Japanese steel daggers with a small ruby in the hilt. They were referred to as a Ruby Hard Blade.

"Sure, I want the dagger. But, why should I help you defeat Delphina?"

Quincy smiled and shook his head, "Damn, you're in love. I can see it plastered on your face."

"No I'm not Quincy. I just happen to admire her for trying to become a... a serviceperson." Samuel said as he blushed.

"Whatever my friend. Look out for Beckett too. He's dangerous. After Delphina, he's my biggest worry."

Samuel wondered, could Quincy be trusted at all? "Look, Professor Magnus and Delphina are walking over here to the rest of us."

Quincy's eyes widened as he turned around to meet Professor Magnus who was muttering to himself as he walked with Delphina.

"Hello class. I'm Professor Magnus. Today we'll start your basic combat training regimen. Delphina here has volunteered to be in the first match. I want to assess your skills in hand to hand combat. Would anyone like to volunteer to go up against her?"

There were a few chuckles emanating from the other students. A small girl seemed to them no match in a test of physical combat. A tall and stocky boy emerged from the crowd with a grin on his face.

“I’ll take her on. My team should be led by me instead of her and I intend to prove it.” The boy said.

“Alright, let’s see.” Professor Magnus said as he looked down to his watch which projected a face and name of the boy. “Okay Dominick. It will be you against Delphina in virtual reality. All our combat will be done in Virtual. You’ll still feel pain. You can even die in Virtual. But your physical self will be unharmed on the outside. Great way to train without injury.”

Delphina had a smile on her face and began to laugh quietly to herself as if she already knew the conclusion of the combat that would soon commence.

“Alright everybody, to your assigned stations.”

All the students looked to their watches and made themselves aware of which immersion machine they were assigned to. Samuel was to enter number 2. He walked over to the machine and grabbed the brain interaction headset and put it onto his head. A circular pad covered each of his temples while one covered his forehead. Once the headset was secure on his head he laid down on the table before him.

“Everyone ready?”

The students all registered as ready.

“Alright. You’ll all feel a slight pinch. It’s better if you close your eyes. Less painful. Close your eyes. Right. Three. Two. One. Immerse.”

Samuel felt a sharp pain surge down his spinal column for a brief moment. The light disappeared from his view as he moved to open his eyes. Just darkness. There was a pinging noise that echoed. Loud then soft. After a minute or so Samuel found himself suddenly in another room with padded flooring where there were a multitude of 5 meter radii red circles drawn on the floor. They were small combat rings.

The other students appeared, most of them as in much shock as Samuel was. So, this was Full Body Immersion Virtual Reality Samuel thought. Professor Magnus appeared.

“Let us begin. Delphina and Dominick will serve as our example. After they finish, I will pair you with another and you’ll fight as well.” Magnus said as he looked for Delphina, found her and motioned to her to come to the circle before him. ”Dominick with me.”

Delphina and Dominick stood at the edge of the circle looking directly at each other. Dominick had black eyes of rage. Delphina was unemotional, calm.

“When I give you the mark I want you to fight with all your strength. The match ends if either of you tap out, become incapacitated, or are pushed out of the ring.”

A whistle appeared on Magnus’ neck. He griped it.

“Ready. On my whistle.”

Magnus blew loudly into the whistle, the sound reverberating throughout the virtual combat room.

Delphina stepped into the ring with a sense of grace as she raised her hands in a defensive posture. Dominick jumped and began to trot towards her. He lunged forward, his right hand expanding to hit her in the stomach. She moved to her left as Dominick passed her missing, her hand patting the back of his shoulder as if to taunt him.

Dominick gritted his teeth and yelled, “You won’t do that again!”

Delphina moved swiftly to where Dominick had started. Dominick began to move in a slight zig-zag, jumping from one foot to the other and then retreated, slowing down and looking at Delphina as if she was weak. “Little girl. You can die in Virtual and your daddy can’t save you.”

Delphina was unmoved, still calm, uncaring in the words just said. She began to walk towards Dominick. He grinned and pulled back his right fist as he moved to strike her with the greatest force he could muster. He started the punch, but Delphina dipped down and before Dominick could adjust she had hit him in his abdomen where his kidney lie. Dominick recoiled in pain and fell to his knees. Delphina quickly sprang back and then forward, lunging her knee into Dominick's face. He fell backward onto the circumference of the ring, his arm failing completely out of the ring. Magnus' whistle sounded. The match was over. Delphina tuned away and started walking out of the ring.

"It's over. Good Work Delphina." Magnus said as he clapped his hand gently. "We'll begin with the rest of you. Dominick?"

Dominick had got up to his feet and stood holding his head. His forehead was bleeding.

"Stupid bitch!" Dominick screamed.

Dominick sprinted after Delphina with a wounded body, as he limped in his stride. Magnus was unconcerned with Delphina's safety. He didn't move a muscle and allowed for the retaliation. Dominick reached for Delphina's hair to pull her down, her backside still facing the boy who had just been defeated by this girl who wished to become a master of death. Suddenly Delphina squatted and twisted her body to face Dominick. His body was right over hers as she pushed up through the floor, her right fist in a ball to punch his throat. The punch landed and crushed Dominick's windpipe. He fell to the floor. The boy started to cough up blood. One of the students, a boy named Jessup moved to assist Dominick, but Magnus moved to intercept the boy's movement.

“Let him choke on his blood. He needs to learn respect. He lost and he should have immediately respected his team leader for her victory.”

The students all looked to Delphina in fear, all except for Samuel. Samuel felt something else. Pity. He thought of who her father was and how difficult he had made her life. She wasn't violent by nature, but by nurture.

Magnus walked over to Dominick who was choking on his blood. The boy was dying. He pushed the boy with his foot.

“Listen to me boy. When you lose. You cease. End of discussion. Learn your lesson, admit defeat and don't retaliate again in this class or I'll have you disciplined beyond your liking.”

Dominick reached his hand up as if to ask for help, but Magnus just stood there looking over the boy. His hand fell down and his body stopped moving. The choking sound had stopped. He was dead.

Samuel was shocked. He hadn't ever seen anyone die before. It is said that death in the virtual, while impermanent, was a vicious experience. It often required mental adjustments by psychosurgeons and weeks of prescribed cognitive therapeutics which caused debilitating effects. Samuel now felt fear for he saw Delphina's face as she stood over Dominick's lifeless body. It was void of caring. Perhaps it was different since it happened in virtual, but still Samuel now realized Quincy was right. Delphina was one to be feared, but still he felt feelings for her. She was simply defending herself against her attacker.

“Students, let him be an example to you all on what can happen to you if you use emotion to guide your fighting. It will get you killed one day. You see this scar. I see you all

looking. Go ahead and look. I care not. It's a constant reminder on my mistakes as a serviceman. Got caught in a rage just like Dominick here and a crafty retiree got me for it. Left me for dead. Thankfully my partner found me before it was too late."

"Will this affect my team's performance against the other's?" Delphina asked.

"Why yes, unfortunately it will. He broke the rules of conduct. I imagine you both will have to speak to one of the directors about this...incident. Your ranking as an individual will not suffer Delphina, but your team's will since Dominick is on your team."

"Can I replace him? I wouldn't want an insubordinate teammate who attacked me so."

"You can speak to the director about it when they ask you what happened. Everything is recorded, but they like to get the psychological side of things in these cases."

"Of course." Delphina said as she walked over to Samuel.

For the first time in virtual she showed emotion with a bright smile directed at Samuel.

"Now you see if you come after me, I can defend myself. Let's hope we don't have to fight." Delphina said.

Samuel's fear of her dissipated. It was as if she was an entirely different person than moments before. "Sure. I won't go after you. Why would I? You'll kill me."

"I wasn't trying to kill him." Delphina said as she gently nudged Samuel's arm. "I was trying to disable him. He'll be fine, it's not the physical, so he'll be somewhat okay. Might take some time to heal mentally though."

Seasons of Solace

Shadow of the Huntsman

It came with darkness, when moist in air, but no water fell from sky. No one noticed it. It scared me worse than the ferocious tiger that killed Kumah. It spoke like human, but its spirit, formless, shifting shape with eyes black as stone in darkness. I feel their hatred. And its breath moves towards my body as ripples in a stream as water churns at the rocks, jutting out from the depth of water. I want to flee. But, I cannot. They will never leave me, for others have told me so, that they too feel them, my elders who live in shame too.

There is anger in my people come morning. My friend Samuel has died. They say his crimson blood is on my hands as if I squashed his breathing heart. I left him alone in the forest, to play alone, my own son. Just so I could get away, to slay my inner self amongst my own feelings.

Dorian blames me and he is right. The leadership has decided, I must forge ahead in loneliness marked with fire on my chest, the symbol of a murderer. They break my thumb of the left hand and banish me forever. I leave for the mountain pass, where the wolves live. There is such pain in me. Such pain, but another year I'll be dead, for no one will aid me. Not ever with such a curse upon me.

A Cell of Pain

I have taken the medicine made of roots and fungus that the doctor in the mask gave me. I felt more enlivened right away. My depressed moods left me. Within the week, however, I felt poorer in health from when those capsules first graced my throat. I took them daily just as prescribed, but with an illness that has returned in full formation, I have decided to

ask him for a refund, that bastard. That is, if I ever leave this place, a cell dreary and lit by only by a single glass lamp with a candle of wax burning bright.

The Lord trusts me, and I in him. Though I am stricken with fear with what the prince may believe. I do trust his advisors, but the boy knows not justice or kindness for those who wish to aid him, nor his common subjects. There is evil in him, as I have seen the devil's shadow following his every footstep for some time. If not the Devil himself, then a demon of the most wicked kind, with dark gray scaled skin, and yellow eyes that have stared into the inner reaches of my soul with such terror, that I am at times hardly able to contain my visions. It licks its mangled face with a serpentine tongue and whispers in his ear. And in my fear, I insulted the dark figure and his vessel. And so here I dwell in this prison that reeks of shit, made for those who soon meet death. All that I can think of is my dearest love.

Rosaline my twin soul, my guide in sorrow and joy. I can feel your whimpers this moment through my own. I am afraid that destruction is upon us. My intention was to stay with your beauty so sublime in the stars of Virgo and the mirror of the Rhine in the scale of years into our old age. Our marriage justified such passion between us, that day we joined hands. Though just as the seasons pass and lives begin and end, our beginning came amongst the forest of pine behind our cottage and, my love, our end is now near. Even though it still burns as bright as one thousand suns. Our separation, a reality I cannot bear. My feelings for you still aches in my heart. You are powerful as a Valkyrie, but I fear you will not be able to stop them.

Oh Lord take me away from this place, and return me to her, my Rosaline. Have I forsaken you? Am I to be punished for my treachery? Speak now if I have. Whisper in my ear so that I am enlightened to my wrongdoing. A knock on the door.

“Will our eastern traveler come to the door. I have a message for, you ungrateful king defamer.”

“Yes.” I wailed as I moved towards the wooden door bolted with iron, “What is it?”

“Your wife is dead. The prince in his glory decided to punish you, so he took that which is most precious.”

I break down into the rot of the cobblestone floor of my cell and cry as if I've been stripped of my rib as Adam was. Rosaline is dead; murdered by the hands of the prince's soldiers. My love how the pain strikes me, while I sit in this cell here knowing you have left me, and it is my cause. Oh Dante, why have you already given me a glimpse into what I will soon become. I wish this life to end now, but I must wait till death comes to me. My darling, reach Heaven for me, but in this space it is as if Hell has come to me already.

The Mystic of the River

Cogito Ergo Sum, such a statement that consumed my youth while stricken by the wit of Descartes. I trust in many of his ideations, his coordinates, and his conception of the union of the mind and body, operating as one though in all likelihood existing as distinct systems. I, from a young age, have been privy to the liberal arts. The trivium molded my abilities to interpret with care and exclaim my inner musings with ease. While the quadrivium has lit the fire of imagination and understanding, so that I am able to create that which comes forth in the mindscape of the self, asking gently to be taken from its silhouette of an idea, mended into physical space so that it may become a being of time.

It is eleven, about mid-day and I have eaten little these past few weeks while becoming acquainted with the routines of

the Guru and his disciples. I admit that with such gentle words spoken by this wise man of the Indian continent, I am uncertain as to why their ideology is not more widespread amongst us in Europe. I've studied their language in secret in years prior to this moment and have seen its linguistic might come alive in recent days. Though I miss the land of the Danube and Volga, this place has too become a home, a refuge.

The guru has taken me aside as to lay the seed of this enlightenment which may come with patience, dedication, and a practice my own. He has convinced me that these thoughts we have are not ours, and there is no possession, only observation. We are not the thinker he has told me, but rather that which observes all experience. The language I use has been crafted against me here. I cannot truly express what I have come to see in my moments of stillness throughout these days in such a foreign, yet lively country. The self I have known has been unmoved, until present, with its bonds disappearing slowly in such a way that I am uncertain what I am, and dare I say I feel as if I am everything.

This inspires joy, but the other day a boy was brought to the temple. He was in a trance of belief in things that were not there and his arms were bleeding. I pray for my people, just as I pray for this child. I wish my land to become a more peaceful place and I hope that the Guru is able to calm his soul. I have seen how others like him are treated in the cities I have grown in. They befall an ill fate for we know not what to do with such states. Perhaps I will find some guidance here in this land as to how to bring goodness in this realm of human relations.

An Allopathic Revival

To call this dwelling a place of healing only serves to inspire the comical, which then is followed by a certain sense of dread, for it exists as a lie. I live in no hospital for those afflicted by the mind. They may call it that, but it would only serve to engage in a delusion to say this asylum serves as a proper environment to heal those who they have termed mentally ill. That is no to say a sickness rests in us here, but I am only calling to the foreground a category that has been made for certain members of society which interpret sensory data and may act in a way that exists as neurodivergent. Illness is a possibility, but so is health and stability. I am not defined by an episode of sickness. There is much more to be said of me and all others.

The floor is cold as stone in the darkest of places, and the walls are painted concrete. Would not wood be more proper? If only they would listen, for the breathing is different. The beds I would not wish on any and they are supposedly here to promote sleep. They won't let me outside. The smokers are allowed to have their cigarettes in the fresh air, but I am left here to walk to and from, end to end, in this single hallway without the touch of the grass or the hands of the wind. He's here, my attending physician, I will do my best to record what our conversation entails:

“Hello Absalom. Good morning. Did you sleep well last night?”

“Did I sleep? Yes. Did the obtrusive courtyard light shining in the window disturb me. Yes. Same for this bedding. I feel as if I had not been so sedated, I would not have slept whatsoever.”

“I see. Well, we have our reasons for the light and I apologize for the bed. But, we cannot do much better.”

“Not you perhaps. But our society could care more for us here.”

“They do. At least most do. We just are not the most important beneficiary of public funding and as a result, our ability to take care of people like yourself is limited. Though are you not feeling better?”

“Kind of. Doctor Saint-Germain, I must admit while I am supportive of allopathic medicine, do you not think forced medication immoral? I was admitted here in a frenzy I admit. I can see with clear eyes the factual basis for that objective conclusion. This Mania was at its peak and I was told to ingest certain pharmaceutical drugs. I objected, for no one told me of any harms. No one told me of any benefits or side effects. I was simply told to take those chemicals which alluded me without a name or a service. And in the night, while I attempted to sleep, three men entered my room screaming at me, held me down, pulled down my pants and stuck a needle into my buttocks. I don’t remember what happened past that point, but when I awoke it was as if life itself had been sucked of all joy and sorrow, with pure bareness at play, my body so weak, my mind so unable to craft a lucid thought. But, here we are now, I have adjusted, though I anguish.”

“You refused medication and were experiencing a manic state, so the doctor on staff at the time ordered an injection of Haloperidol.”

“Haloperidol...I’m aware. The nurse told me. But, why I ask was I given one of the more dangerous major tranquilizers? Add the fact that other more modern medications are more effective and provide a lesser side effect profile, I question the reasoning for such a medical decision. No one has even informed me of any black box warning. Should I not know what could become of me. What am I to you practitioners?”

You think me incapable of dealing with reality, and making an informed choice.”

“I see. Perhaps the way in which we treated you was wrong, but can you not see it was for your benefit and that you can more clearly reason than you did only days ago. I must say that you are right in your assessment of typical and atypical antipsychotics. The newer medicines are better in many ways, but ultimately the decision was made to give you Haldol and that cannot be reversed for some time, for we know it works for you.”

“I do not agree with your industry’s terming of “antipsychotic”, as they do necessarily produce an effect that prevents psychosis, rather they create a neuroleptic environment in the mind, and you as well as I are aware that this class of medication can induce psychosis in some. Further what benefit does calling them a name as they are given produce? There is no benefit, it only serves to emotionally harm those who take them and inspire discrimination and fear in those who fail to understand minority psychological experience through ignorance. Would it not be better to simply use the term “major tranquilizer”? The patient in their daily ritual of taking such medications may certainly have an easier time accepting a chemical category as opposed to what psychiatry has chosen to use. I, however, must admit I have benefited for I am in a calmer state, but your methods of inducing the relief from mania has been incorrect. Your way is of abuse. We are both aware that mania is not a permanent state. It ends with or without medication. Medication is simply the quicker and more stable way. Did I hurt anyone? No. But you harmed me through forced medication, through an event quite terrifying.”

“Listen to me. I see you are not beyond reason. Take the medication. It may take some time to find the proper combination of chemicals that work for you as an individual,

but you need them or else you will lose control again. They are preventative. That's the truth. Go to the groups. They will help you enjoy your time here and your attendance will lend us the ability to justify your leaving this place as soon as you are ready. There are plenty of others who needed this bed. And I'm sorry. I understand you want to know exactly the consequences of these medications and perhaps at the right time we will describe them in detail with you. But know that all medications, whether for physical or mental health, come with side effects, some worse than others. Though think of what we do. We think it best, due to the research literature, that these medications provide a benefit over time as opposed to forgoing such regimens. Do the benefits outweigh the costs? You have a long road ahead of you. But, I know in time you may reach true stability. I have to go onto the next patient. Just listen and soon you'll be free with what you've learned."

"Doctor, that's all I needed. Be on your way. Thank you."

A Savior's Offering

“Honeybear? Where are you?” Jessica said speaking across the kitchen counter looking into the living room as she chopped sweet onions without a tear in her eyes.

Robert had left the mauve couch as the television was screaming with the fan noise of an American football game dancing on the small LED screen.

“I’m in the attic looking for my old golfing shoes!” Robert yelled downstairs.

“Turn off the TV once you leave the room! You know the rules!”

Jessica finished chopping the onions and placed them in a pan alongside chopped carrots that were already sautéing. She opened the oven door below and inspected the hunk of meat that was cooking upon a broiling pan. Jessica smirked, closed the oven door and turned to grab the cutting board and knife she was using to chop the onions. She put the knife down next to the kitchen sink and began washing the wooden board with a blue sponge lathered with soap as the faucet ran with warm water.

“Honeybear? Can you come down here and set the table? Lunch will be ready soon and we must eat quickly. We want to get on the road to reach the Church in time.”

Robert came walking down the stairs from the attic and entered the kitchen with his old dirty white golfing shoes.

“Look I found them. I can donate these to the gift drive.” He said, his yellow mangled teeth showing as he smiled.

“I don’t get why you don’t just buy a new pair of shoes for those kids. That would be the right thing to do.”

“Leave me alone woman. These shoes barely saw a

year of duty before I threw out my back. Just need a good cleaning is all.”

Robert left the kitchen to go into the laundry room where there was a utility sink next to the dryer. He turned the faucet on, grabbed a brush under the sink, and began to clean the dirt off the shoes. They looked only slightly worn after cleaning, but certainly no longer were dirty and shined eggshell white when Robert put them up to a lamp’s lightbulb in the living room. He went over to his wife with the shoes and put them up near her eyes.

“See Jess. Good as new.”

“For Heaven’s sake. We’ll be alright with my girl’s gift. I got a doll from the antique shop in Barton. It’s in the box by the front door. Remind me not to forget it. Lunch is ready dear.”

Jessica poured the vegetable mixture onto a plate and turned off the oven’s timer that had just sounded. She put oven mittens onto her hands that she had gotten from a drawer, opened the oven door, and took out the cooked salted meat placing it on the stovetop to rest for a few minutes. She gathered the food and placed the meat and vegetables in the dining room adjoined to the kitchen where there were four chairs and a small wooden table.

“Come on Honeybear. Set the table and let’s eat.”

Robert opened a cabinet in the kitchen where there were plates, took two, retrieved pairs of forks and knives and went into the dining room to set the table. They both sat down, and Jessica cut off a small portion of meat for herself, while Robert took a big hunk of the meat. Jessica filled the rest of her plate with the cooked carrots and onions while Robert took a minuscule serving of vegetables.

“Honeybear. You forgot to get the water glasses. Can you fetch them?”

Robert shrugged and said, “Sure. Just a moment dear.”

Robert rose from his chair and went into the kitchen, got two glasses from the cabinetry, and filled them with water, returning into the dining room so that he and his wife could drink to wash down their food.

The couple joined hands and recited together, “Bless us, oh Lord, for these gifts of food which you have granted us. Praise Jesus, king of kings, our Lord, Amen.”

The clock on the wall near the window of the dining room struck eleven thirty. Jessica was bothered about their timing, but Robert remained stoic as he ate his meal, looking outside to the long green grasses, tulips, daisies and sunflowers in the backyard. A pair of deer stood in the meadow at a close distance next to Robert’s workshop, walking about sniffing the grasses and flowers below their hoofs. Robert looked back to his meal and violently sneezed into his elbow.

“Bless you dear. We really should hurry Honeybear. We must be at the church before one in the afternoon. It’ll take us about an hour like always.”

“I’ll drive quick.” Robert said as he chewed his meat. “We’ll get there by one.”

The couple finished their meal in silence. Robert fetched a couple of plastic containers in the kitchen to put away the leftovers in the refrigerator while Jessica cleaned the plates in the kitchen sink. She hummed the hymn of Amazing Grace as she scrubbed.

“Let’s go Honeybear. Do you have a box for the shoes you’re going to bring?”

“Yes dear. I’ll get it now.”

Robert went into the bedroom and opened the closet door. He crouched down and found an old cardboard box that could fit a pair of shoes. He returned to the living room, put the shoes into the box with some red tissue paper, and wrapped the box with a black ribbon and bow. He paced thinking for a moment for he had forgotten where he had put his car keys. Stopping his circular walking, he smiled wide, picked up his orange raincoat on the sofa and fondled inside its pockets finding his set of keys.

“Dear, are you ready to go?”

“Yes Robert. Let me grab my doll. It has the cutest blue dress, black hair, and rosy red cheeks. You’d think it’s a real miniature person.”

The couple grabbed their gifts, the golf shoes and the doll, and went out to the Ford Bronco in the gravel driveway in the front yard. Robert started the car as Jessica applied ruby red lipstick in the passenger side mirror. He drove off as a cloud of dust formed in the onset of the tire’s rotation upon the gravel and dirt road that led onto Haven Way. The two would take I-73 on their way to the First Light of the Children of Christ Church. They were an hours drive away and it was Noon. Nothing could stop them but an act of their creator, he uninterested in affairs of humanity this day and the next.

“We are gathered here today to pay homage to God and all his angels. Jesus died for our sins and we must continually thank him in our hearts and minds for his sacrifice. I’ve enjoyed speaking to you all today. Thank you for bringing all your gifts for the orphanage relief drive. Your

contributions will not be forgotten. May peace be with you.” Father Tom said.

“And also with you.” The congregation responded in unison.

Robert and Jessica stood and strode out of the pew on the East side of the church towards the front altar. They walked up to the statue of Mary and Joseph at the front of the Church and paid their respects with a silent prayer. Father Tom was speaking to a family of four: a man, woman, and two small girls all in their Sunday clothes. Father Tom laughed and put his hand on the man’s shoulder as he nodded and said something that Robert and Jessica could not hear. The family walked away and left Father Tom alone to whistle.

“He’s free Jess. Let’s go and talk to Father Tom. You can ask your question.”

“Yes, yes.” Jessica said as she made the sign of the cross on her body in the direction of Mary and Joseph and turned to walk over to Father Tom.

Father Tom was beaming with a playful face while swaying his body gently looking to his congregation in their community. He wore a purple and white robe that draped over his round belly and stout legs while a wooden cross necklace lay upon his chest. His glasses had black frames, fixed upon his nose as they looked to be falling off. He pushed them closer to his eyes with his index finger as he noticed Jessica and Robert coming to him and stopped his whistling.

“Thomas. Thank you for the service today. How are you doing? I can’t believe it’s been a week already.”

“Hello Jessica, Robert. I’m glad you came. It’s important to keep the Sabbath holy.” Father Tom said as he winked and put out his elbow to softly touch Jessica’s arm.

“I’m doing just dandy. How are you this afternoon? I hope I wasn’t boring for y’all.”

“Not at all Thomas,” Jessica said as she playfully touched Father Tom on the shoulder. “Say, I have a thought, a question.”

“What is it Jessica?”

“Well...I was wondering if we could meet the children who would be receiving our gifts at the orphanage? It would be wonderful to talk to them. I remember being a little girl, so lost in myself and the big wide world. What about it, Father?”

“No can do.” Father Tom said folding his arms in embarrassment. “I’d like to allow that sort of thing, but it would provoke the state. We’re only to give the children gifts. It would be difficult to provide a meeting with them as you remember what happened a few years ago when the children visited. One of them got quite drunk off our stores of wine given to the congregation. Adults only of course. At least it was supposed to be. The child drank his full and vomited in the rectory. Ever since then we haven’t been allowed to see the children. I’m sorry Jess.”

“Come on Father. My Jess only wants to encourage the girl who receives her present. It’s a harmless thing it is.” Robert said with a stern face.

“I just can’t have it.” Father Tom said as he shook his head. “I told you the state won’t allow it.”

“Fine, fine. I guess we’ll have to petition the governor’s office about this.”

“Honeybear, don’t you think that goes too far? Think about Father Tom and the congregation. It could bring unwelcome attention to the Church.”

“Jessica, Robert. I’m glad you care about the children.

I know you both were trying to have a child of your own many years ago. It just wasn't in God's plan. And speaking to those children isn't in his plan either." Father Tom uncrossed his arms and looked passed Jessica and Robert to the back of the Church. "I really should be speaking with some of the other members. I'll take my leave. Thank you for coming." Father Tom said as he walked briskly away to join a group of churchgoers in the Southwest corner of the Church.

"Well, Jess, I guess you won't have any fun with that girl. Whoever she is, I think she'll love the doll."

"Oh Robert, I can't bear it. The devil grows within me. That damned Father Tom mentioned Lya."

"He didn't mean to. That was a terrible thing Jess. Don't curse our Father. God's always listening. Let Jesus be your strength."

"Honeybear, let's get going. I can't bear to be here any longer."

Robert and Jessica moved to exit the Church. Jessica walked, still in anger clenching her fists, while Robert tried to comfort her with an arm around her shoulder as they reached the car parked in the farthest spot of the gray gravel lot.

The drive was silent for about a half hour. Normally, Robert listened to his country music radio stations, WERS and WIKL, but Jessica had turned off the radio shortly after the car had started. She wanted to be alone in her thoughts while Robert drove them home. It was late afternoon, with the sun beginning to set on the horizon. Open roadway stretched out before them with grasslands of green and gold on both sides of the road. They hadn't yet reached the forest of pine that their home was built within. A man with a sign stood on the right side of the road. It read 'I am Jesus' written

in large painted red letters. He was holding up his hand and waving to Robert as if to ask for a ride.

“I’m gonna pick him up Jess.”

“He’ll be a good one. Look at him. Clean.”

Jessica retrieved a water bottle from the side of the door and opened the glove box. There was a container of clear liquid Ambien that she took with her free hand. She put the water bottle down between her legs and opened the container and water bottle, mixing the two liquids together. She put the Ambien container away and closed the glove box, putting the water bottle in the console. The car slowed to the side of the road as the man noticed and perked up. Jess opened her passenger side window and looked to the man who was dressed in a tan robe that covered his entire body until his feet showed with brown sandals. His long black hair twisted in the wind as he put his sign down to his side, holding it underneath his armpit, his pale white face sweating in the evening heat.

“Hello sir. I see you are our savior. Jesus Christ come again. Or so says your sign.” Jessica said.

The man smiled and responded, “And you are a member of my flock. I am here to guide you along your journey. I have come again to meet many and you both are to be my ride as my father has granted me a gift.”

“Come now, Jesus. Come and get in the back. We’ll take you where you need to be.”

“I am where I need to be, with you. I am on my way to Austin. You only need get me to the closest Greyhound station. I can take a bus from there.”

The man opened the car door and got himself in the back seat, sitting, putting on his seat belt.

“Why the seat belt my king of kings? God surely will protect us.”

“The road should always be traveled in safety. Who knows what my father will ask of me in this life. I have already died on a cross for your sins.”

“Leave him alone Honeybear. Jesus, would you like some water?”

“I would my child.”

Jessica gave the man the water bottle with the Ambien mixed into it. The man swallowed quickly, drinking the whole of the water bottle to quench his thirst.

“Thank you.”

“No, we have you to thank. You are just what we needed.”

Robert drove onto Waymond road to waste time as the drug onset. The man began to feel tired, drifting into and out of complete relaxation. Robert had almost reached their home when the man finally fell asleep.

The man awoke, his eyelids slow to open, the man still somewhat drowsy.

“Wha...What...Where am I?” The man asked. “Why can’t I move?”

The man was placed on a table in the backyard’s workshop, held down by straps that were wrapped around his ankles, knees, wrists, hips, chest, and head. He began to struggle violently, attempting to break loose. His erratic movements were of no use, he could barely budge his body and was securely held in place. The room was dark, but it was light outside, perhaps mid-day as waves of the Sun drifted in through a single window where the man found himself. A loud creak voiced from an opening door that could be heard

as the room lit up more for a brief time until the door was closed. A lamp overhanging the man was turned on.

“Hello, Jesus. I’ve come to tend to you. You’ve finally awoken.”

“What is the meaning of this? Let me go!”

“But, you have so much to give king of kings.”

“What do you mean?” The man said as he breathed heavily again trying to remove his restraints.

“Your blood. Your body. You have so much. So much to give.”

“What sickness plagues you?”

“My wife and I want to drink of your blood and eat from your body.”

“Madness. You do not mean to kill me?”

“We’ll keep you alive. For a time. Eventually you’ll give way to death. They all do. Until then I’ll feast on your flesh and drink your blood. It will be better than any Eucharist if ever tasted. I’ve never enjoyed those Sunday wavers, but the wine is good enough. Your blood and body, you being Jesus will be the best. Your father and our God did not grace you with a gift. He graced us with a gift. The gift of your body, your blood.”

“Cannibals! Let me be. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Yes, you won’t tell anyone. I’m the last face you’ll ever see.”

Robert walked to his workbench and picked up his electric circular saw. He plugged it into the wall’s electrical socket and turned the machine on. The man screamed loud, but only Robert and Jessica could hear, they deep in the woods of a verdant forest lush with pine and natural rock barriers. There wasn’t a living neighbor for miles.

“I’ll be as gentle as possible. We wouldn’t want you to perish before your time.”

“Please. Not this. Leave me alone. I’ll do anything.”
The man begged.

“But I want the body and blood of Christ. You are our savior Jesus Christ are you not?”

“Please. I am Jesus of Nazareth. Please don’t hurt me” The man said as he began to cry.

“So, you weren’t lying to us?”

“I am your God. You will go to Hell for this.”

“I will be forgiven. My longings for human flesh were given to me by the creator. I know this.”

“Help! Help! Don’t kill me.”

Robert came closer to the man and begun to cut into his right thigh until a piece of his flesh hit the clean plastic covered floor below, the man screaming in immense pain all through the process. The saw, Robert’s face and shirt were covered in the man’s blood.

Robert smiled wide and said, “Thank you king of kings. We will dine tonight and have the true Eucharist.”

The man screamed for a time then murmured softly as he cried, “Don’t. Stop. Stop. Please.”

“I have. Now to stop the bleeding.”

Robert put down the saw and picked up an industrial hot iron. He went to the man and cauterized the wound as the man yelled in agonizing pain. Robert stopped the man’s bleeding then put the iron down on his workbench, picked up a bin, went to the floor and put the newly cut off flesh into the container.

“Good day king of kings.” Robert said as he turned off the lamp and exited the workshop. The man tried to escape

again, shaking in pain, tears pouring from his eyes. Still, he remained fixed on the table wishing for death.

Jessica was sautéing onions and bell peppers in the kitchen while she singed Amazing Grace. The piece of thigh that came from the man who called himself Jesus was cooking in the oven. She had a wine glass in her hand as she stirred the vegetables. It was filled with blood. She sipped it slowly as she wore its crimson shade on her lips. The rooms of the house stunk of buttered human. Robert was waiting for dinner to be ready as he watched American football on mute upon his mauve couch. The man outside in the workshop could be heard screaming. Robert enjoyed the loud calls for help. The oven timer went off. Jessica opened the oven door and stuck a thermometer into the manflesh. The piece of thigh was fully cooked, as were the vegetables. Robert set the table as Jessica placed the food in the dining room still steaming hot. They both sat down and said grace.

Robert cut into the meat, the meat of Jesus, or so they pretended. He took a bite, chewed and swallowed.

“How is he Honeybear?”

“Pass the salt.”

Operation Starkiller

Part One

One

What have I done? We should tread lightly here where the future of Earth is concerned. The moment, however, has passed. I only wanted to see my creation take flight, not see it be our undoing. Why do military men tempt fate with greater powers than can be handled by mere mortals, as all humans are? Shall I dare speak it again? Why have I done this? I wished only for experiment to commence for a greater understanding of the cosmos.

As soon as Dr. Haldronic completed his research into gravity in 2052 I was sure I could create a malleable black hole in conjunction with his work into the manipulation of gravity. I saw him as the genius he was, like Einstein in his locks of hair, though his complexion tan and brawny, he stood upon the shoulders of giants as all Men and Women of science do.

Truth be told, I did not choose science or engineering. Rather it found me desperate for meaning and purpose in this Universe upon a planet where we are all astronauts of the Gaian matrix of interbeing. We ingest molecules of life whose greatest nectar of necessity is water. I love and praise the principles of peace, but I have made an error.

I have chosen this life, that of a woman of physics whose primary goal was to test the theories of Hawking with a real black hole. If I were to create a black hole without Dr.

Haldronic's research into the manipulation of the curvature of space-time then that would mean the end of us all in its immediate inception. All that we have ever known would be sucked up into its domain of reach and we would cease to exist. I never expected to be successful.

Two

Sound entered my ear from the speech of my colleague; a tightly wound graduate student named Simon Dewick whose pale face, long blonde hair, and tweed jacket entered my office. He was wounded severely by the cut in his left arm which was bleeding onto the floor. He had done it. He had succeeded with my direction in creating that which I thought would come into being in decades from now, not suddenly in my lab in this present. To his surprise, the area where our experiments commenced was subject to the auspices of a black hole that he had put into being finally through mathematical rigor and the guess work of engineering. We were millimeters off our target dimension of physical space the black hole would be operable and able to affect any matter.

“Eleanor, I've been maimed by the gravitational field operator. It went on when I accidentally flipped the switch. Please dial the authorities. I'm bleeding.”

“Yes Simon. Right away. The matrix's fail safe mechanism worked. Praise the safety operation. Thank goodness our matrix did not suck you in, but ceased operation immediately while you were caught.”

I dialed 911 and he who was on the other end of communication told us of the ambulance in transit to our location in 7 minutes time. I searched my office for one of my white towels that I occasionally used to wipe sweat from my forehead in the summer months. I found two in close proximity to my pens in my cabinets across the way from my desk on the opposite side of my office.

“Here, I will tie these tightly around your elbow where the blood is dripping from. Hopefully that will give you the time you need before the ambulance and paramedics arrive. Did we succeed? We haven't been able to make the gravitational field operator operational yet. I thought it would take many more years.”

Simon sat in the chair closest to him and nursed his arm. The bleeding had been subdued by the makeshift bandage of the towels.

“Professor, I believe my calculations have done it. I listened to your suggestions and had an idea to bring the square root of time multiplied by the Rangstrom constant back into our equations. That seemed to be the trick. We have done it. But, just like you, I fear the world may never be ready for our work. I will be fine. I don't very much like the wound I have but thankfully I don't think the damage is too bad. Should we plan to talk about this later. I am tired. Now I feel light headed...”

Simon fell into a stupor and nearly fainted as his speech slowed to silence. The paramedics arrived and took him into care. I stood as happy as ever for success was achieved. I had

to see the matrix for myself.

Three

The door upon my lab entrance read:

Subsector 11

Room 31L

Dr. Eleanor Drake

I pushed open the door and walked into my laboratory. It was disheveled and in need of a member of the janitorial staff. Blood was thick upon the floor near my latest creation, The Gravitational Matrix, which still seemed operational. I had to make sure everything was in order with the machine.

I sat atop an office chair near the main computer that was connected to the matrix and shimmed myself to the visual monitor. If what Simon said were true, I should be able to easily enter in some preliminary information to turn on the matrix once more. Its application of power to the main circuit had stopped, most likely due to the limited time domain required for the program's execution. I coded in a failsafe mechanism in the program so that the machine would only run temporarily.

I entered a time of 200 seconds into the time of operation and then selected a maintenance of $\frac{1}{2}$ our gravity upon the center of the matrix. That would certainly cause a change in the curvature of spacetime recognizable and recorded by the computer for later analysis. I did not want to be foolish and create another black hole through Simon's methodology

which could prove tragic due to our measurements being slightly off for our conditions of safety. Doing my current experiment would prove beneficial to correct that mistake and making the gravitational matrix both safe and fully operational.

I commend Simon still for trying to come to our final goal which, if he is telling truth, he accomplished. But, before seeing the black hole and experimenting with its being, I'd like to sure up any safety issues, so an accident is unlikely to happen once more. I set my programs last function to null as a necessity for the full program's running and adjusted the dimensional safety unit by three millimeters. Now the execution of said program and the collection of data commenced. A success, the machine was fully operational!

Four

I returned to my office in the Lamar Building on Deconsmith University's campus. I had sent the data to the open server that is accessible to all humans within the interplanetary alliance. Those who work outside the main starsystems are still able to access all information, but I fear they must do so through paid methods which I still don't agree with. Our academic and industrial findings should be available for all, free of any premium. It being the year of 2252, I hope we can continue to move forward in the cause of the Freedom of Information Act of 2172 that made all research findings available to all, minus those outside the alliance. Most of my colleagues agree with me, but those in government feel the effect on monied collections of data usage would be too severe since a few discovered alien races use our data and pay

for the privilege. As such, we must pay for their findings.

I logged onto my computer through biometric screening and quickly found the data that I had openly uploaded from my laboratory. I sat back in my chair. I noticed the complexity, the beauty of the computations that would have to be run. I feared what we have done. I was not expecting us to be able to be ready to control gravity to this extent. To be able to manipulate the very nature of spacetime is difficult to imagine. But, we have done it. My thoughts went to darkness. What am I going to tell the rest of the faculty? My students? How am I going to be able to continue on? My treatise on the ethical application of such research is not finished. Not nearly finished. I want to explain a decade from now the intricacies of my creation. Not now. I am not ready.

It can be said that we as a race of human being have come upon certain landmarks in scientific study and art. The wheel was quite the creation, and irrigation systems remarkable. The use of petroleum and coal gave us the revelations of industrial might to take poverty and hunger to task, but in their use doomed us to a warming planet. Thankfully those of scientific mind came to the aid and made many technologies that brought us into the interplanetary golden age of human interbeing with environment. We have found solar cells and antimatter quite useful, but still cold fusion alludes us due to the danger of manipulating the laws of physics in a closed environment. For many have suffered in previous years to bring our Earth into stabilization on the ecological plane. I am thankful, for these innovations have brought us here. Now I can prove Hawking and others right or wrong. I can test theories of theoretical physics dealing with black holes

using a real controllable version of the black hole. A century ago, they would have scoffed at the idea and thought us insane to suggest creating a black hole so close to our planet. But, I, and others, have assuaged fears in the dealings of those vicious starkillers.

Part Two

One

It would seem destiny brought this day to fruition. I have done it and done so in a safe and reliable manner. The experimental black hole is here. And I am its creator along with my students who have helped me along the way. Simon is recovering well. The tendon of the triceps brachii muscle was severely damaged, but in a few more weeks he will be able to return to his studies, as our medical technologies have been able to repair his arm with relative difficulty given the wound. We have given him much credit for his advancement as a student in my lab and his heroic actions in at least taking the initiative in trying his idea to involve himself in the first testing of a black hole within the Gravitational Matrix. I am so proud of him. Certainly, I replicated his experiment with some modifications, minor revisions so that safety took primacy. Tonight, I have a meeting with the Dean of the college of sciences, Dr. Damion Rice, who wishes to see the operation of the matrix for himself. He was so excited when I called him yesterday and informed him of Simon's progress in recovery and the stabilization of a black hole in my laboratory.

I went to the kitchen across the hall from my office. I wanted

caffeine. It was five minutes before 1400, 1355. Coffee suits me before 1500, but if I even have a taste of the black elixir after that time, I cannot stop my bodily impulses to movement all night and am unable to sleep. I reached the counter where the communal coffee was held in a large canister. Empty. Damn you. When the coffee runs out, please person whom I do not know replace the coffee. Run a new pot, it's easy enough to do.

I looked to the lower cabinet opening underneath the coffee canister. There was a box of coffee from Hawai'i and a Deltont brand bag. Both were already ground. It's a shame since the coffee grinding process stales the beans quicker. We have a conical burr grinder. We might as well purchase beans unground in bulk so that we can enjoy a perfect brew of the great roasted bean. I'll take it up with the administration. I wrote a note upon my phone and sent to the supplies sector. "Please buy unground coffee beans for the Lamar building. Yours, Dr. Drake."

I have an old school touchscreen phone. Implants are an annoyance. So much chatter. I like the distance from certain technologies.

Reaching into the coffee bag, I put two cups of the dark roasted beans into an unbleached paper filter that lay in the coffee brewing machine's bean input apparatus. There was a hot water hook up set to 365 Kelvin which upon my pressing of a single button started the brewing process. I had to wait several moments for the three liters of spring water to turn into coffee now draining into the thermos. Coffee be praised.

I need caffeine. I'm an addict. And with the brewing process

finished I can have my coffee. I filled my 0.35 liter mug with the black liquid. The words “Boss Lady” were engraved upon my mug. I turned around to the refrigerator and opened the door. There was only a bottle of orange juice, Dr. Richard Ricards labeled lunch, and the communal oatmilk. I took the oatmilk and put a tablespoon or so of it into my mug. How the first sip tasted so satisfying. I smiled in joy, blinked and turned to return to my office chair. I sat among my books and computer to ponder. How to justify my experiments ethically to Dr. Rice?

Two

After a few hours of writing and thinking critically upon the subject of what to say to Dr. Rice, I ventured over to the Lancet Cafeteria to grab a bite to eat before my meeting with him. I had an hour to spare. I went down the stairs of the Lamar building and exited out of the East side doors and took the five minute walk to the cafeteria. There were various pine trees which lined the gravel and loam walkway. To the left of me lie the Stellar Observatory and to the right the Modus Engineering Complex which housed our alumni inventions. Then, after passing those buildings, the walkway drifted North and an archway of marble commenced that led any passerby to the Lancet, or Foodhall of Mystery as some of the undergraduate students called it due to the special dish for the night’s eating not being made publicly available until 1500. All other dishes were known a week in advance.

I went through the steel doors of the Lancet and became imbued by the bright lights since it was Sunset and the day coming to a close, the time was now 1830. I ventured over to

the faculty zone and picked a farmed Salmon fillet and mixed vegetable sauté as my dinner meal. I saw Eli behind the counter serving the food. He was a third-year student who had an interesting scar on his forearm in the shape of a triangle that he said he had gotten practicing American football.

“Hello Eli. How has your day been?” I said.

“Um, Hello Ms., I mean Dr. Drake. I am doing okay. My maths are taking at least two hours to complete each night. I hadn't expected that. But, Writing Skills has been fun with Dr. Diplon. Sorry, what have you been up to? I haven't seen you here in weeks.”

“Oh Eli, the maths will get better with practice. I remember when I was your age. A ripe twenty something struggling with celestial mechanics at night too! I have been busy during the evening dealing with experimental amazement. We have accomplished something I thought only possible in a decade. I am rather flummoxed by the idea we finally have a black hole on campus.”

“But, Doctor. Isn't that dangerous?” Eli said with a look of concern.

“Of course. That is, it would be detrimental without the proper safety precautions. But, I have been fixed on making our Gravitational Matrix perfectly safe. A black hole cannot exist in the machine without the precautions in place, I am sure of it. Rest your head lightly. You and your friends are safe.” I responded with a smile knowing they weren't more

and more.

“Okay. If you say so. At least it’s not plasma or laser weapons you are creating like some people here.”

“Yes. I don't much like weaponry either. But, the Falconians are a threatening race. They've fired at our Starships before. And they might do it again if the treaty fails once more. Let us not forget that.”

Eli, in his blue and white dining hall uniform with crimson buttons looked for a moment puzzled and then his mood shifted to a visible elation.

“You're probably right. Here is your Salmon Dr. Drake. Enjoy!”

I took the large plate and looked to the seating for professors and found that Dr. Allison Bennet was sitting by her lonesome. I moved to join her. She was eating a slice of buttered bread, her eyes peering through reading glasses looking over from what it seemed to be her students’ essays. She had a red ink pen in hand and was scribbling some bit of language in the margins. I walked over to her.

“Allison. How are you? Can I join you.”

“Eleanor, you know my answer. Sit and be quick about it. I have much to tell you about this paper I am reading at this very moment. I could use a break from my work.”

I sat down in the booth opposite to her. Her drooping blue

eyes made her look as if she was awake for days. She wore a green sparkling dress which fitted her awe inspiring long auburn hair which curled at the tips. She chewed the rest of her bread and then looked me directly in the eyes.

“How serendipitous synchronicity. It's Simon's writing from the Hospital. He's describing exactly how everything happened in your Lab. I think you would like it very much.”

“How intriguing Allison. If I have the time, I will read it. It's under 10,000 words correct?”

“19,250 actually. Quite impressive. But, that was the only assignment that the Dean gave to him for his recovery. Catalog everything.”

“Let me pass then. I have spoken to him almost daily since the accident and I fixed his errors. He almost got himself killed. I told him not to progress so quickly. Still, I am happy and proud of him.”

“We all should be. Though he'd be nowhere and confused as a bumpkin without your guidance. I remember him his second year on campus when he took my classics class. A silly fellow and in need of some help in writing. But, by year's end I had him dancing upon the page.”

“You are a genius Allison. We all can admit how you affect each student you teach. Now's the time to eat. I have to get back to it. To the office of Dr. Rice very soon.”

“You must hurry with your meal then. I am finished with my

eating. I should return to work if you have to feed yourself so quickly. Ta Ta”

Allison got up from her seat. She gathered her notes and essays and moved towards the exit with her purse in hand. She left her remaining food upon a plate before me. A common error, but a pain for the janitorial staff, I'm sure. I sat by my lonesome thinking in my mind, again, what to say to Dr. Rice in a half hour from now. I quickly ate my dinner and with ten minutes to spare. I recovered Allison's dish and mine, put it in the bussing bin across the hall near the exit and went on my way to Deacon's Hall where the Dean, Dr. Rice, took occupation during the days and nights of his academic life.

Three

I came to Dr. Rice's office door and knocked.

“It's Eleanor sir. Can I come in.”

The door opened and Dr. Rice was in the doorway with a grim look on his pale face.

“Eleanor, I'm afraid the military will be joining our meeting tonight. We've moved from my office down the hall to the conference room. They are waiting for us.” Dr. Rice said as he straightened his tie and put on his jacket.

Dr. Rice continued, “I would have loved to see your laboratory's creation with my own eyes this night. But, we have guests and we mustn't keep them any longer now that

you're here.”

My worst nightmare may be coming true. Not many women of science wish to see their work weaponized for a war effort. That may be happening to my research right at this moment. Dr. Rice and I walked together down the corridor to reach the conference room. There were sculptures and paintings of previous professors that had passed into death that marked the hallway. My soul may be immortalized here one day. I thought of what my work was to bring our civilization. I wished peaceful experiment, but now it seemed I would have to speak about the possible weaponization of the gravitational technology. We reached the end of the hallway and the double doors of oak were closed. We each took a deep breath and Dr. Rice pushed them wide open to reach the interior of the conference room.

A three star general and two young military recruits from our University sat in silence looking upon us with chiseled faces as if they were made of stone. The three men stood from their chairs and saluted then lowered back down into their seated positions. I did not know any of them personally.

The three star general said, “Rice, my man. We spoke via internet earlier. Glad you haven't kept us waiting. Dr. Zeldrake won't be joining us tonight since he is in California and we are on the Atlantic coast. He will be arriving in Boston tomorrow and will drive to meet you in the evening so that he can take stock of the technology. I see you brought Dr. Drake. She doesn't really need to be involved beyond handing off the machine to us. It's good it was developed on Earth. Such a mess. Such a mess. Too much pollution

compared to Cavix Res our new capital planet where I'm stationed at present."

"What do you mean?" I said with anger.

"Silence Eleanor, let me speak for now." Dr. Rice said, "I'm sure all will be explained right General Lendris? What are your intentions? You surely can't expect for Dr. Drake to simply give you her work. Why not have Dr. Zeldrake join her and observe for awhile?"

"Nonsense." General Lendris said, "I have strict orders from the alliance prime minister to get her work to our lab in Washington at once. Nothing was dictated about involving Dr. Drake at all. I simply invited her as a courtesy."

"You cannot mean you're going to take my work out of my lab tomorrow do you?" I said.

"Yes. I mean to take everything you have and ship it to Washington as soon as Dr. Zeldrake understands everything. You are to teach these two cadets here how to work the machine tonight so that they may assist Dr. Zeldrake when he arrives. It may not take much time to learn, correct."

"I mean the program is simple yes, but taking it from me is out of the question. I have my rights to my research!"

"We allow you your damn rights. Military procedure twelve allows us in law to seize any materials deemed dangerous to interplanetary stabilization. We have been watching your lab for some time. Dr. Zeldrake was surprised you actually were

successful. He thought your research was a waste of time as it was impossible as a technology. But, here we are.”

I wanted to maim the man. Shatter his femurs with a steel rod. I've never wanted to harm someone so much in my life. Everything I had worked for was about to be government property and once that happened I would never see it again. I won't be able to recreate the technology either according to law. My life was ruined.

Four

Dr. Zeldrake seems to me an evil man. He treats all with disrespect and thinks himself superior due to his overwhelming intelligence. He is smart, but no Leibniz nor Kant. I taught the cadets and him how the machine works. I didn't want to, but they threatened my freedom and my child Evo's schooling routes if I didn't comply. I can't believe this has happened. I should have foreseen it. Military Men will find any excuse to make a technology capable of yielding weaponized results all in the name of Defense. What is their plan I wonder? To weaponize the very course of gravity is incredibly dangerous. For instance, we could destroy vast swaths of life using a black hole in mere minutes. Think upon this my reader, what can be done once that box is open? Once we terrorize some race of men or other creature, what shall we become? Shall we become the people who will end the universe as it now stands. It is relatively peaceful. But, now I fear the worst. The true Starkiller will be born and it is the human who will wield its power, for a time. All empires in their strength eventually fade into destitution and new alliances are forged into the thrones of power.

Epilogue

The damn idiots have done it. They have used my work to create a weaponized black hole in the Alpha Omengen star system. The Falconians are destroyed, their three stars now gone. We cannot go back from this escalation. We have become death. We are destroyers of Stars. I am to blame. I willed this into creation and have given those men the power that should never have been. I should have destroyed the technology when I had the chance. I became a coward instead. I should have had the foresight they would use my work for something of the sort it has been used. I am a shameful widow and my son, Evo, hates me. Why does life mend itself so cruelly. I will not have peace. For it is only a matter of time before civilization collapses when our own technology spreads and some other force takes our own star systems from existence.

I am Shiva. I am Cronus. I am Starkiller.