

Omega Zero

Three Novellas

Bill Berger

Forward

This volume gathers three novellas by Bill Berger into one durable, comfortable-read book. The three-novella format is deliberate. Slim books are physically painful to read — their perfect-bound spines resist opening, and pages flip closed under their own weight. Books over 350 pages cross into "tome" territory, demanding desk-reading commitment. The 250–300 page omnibus is the sweet spot: one-handed reading in coffee shops, on patios, in airplane seats.

The three novellas

Sunshine — A post-scarcity surveillance thriller. Bob hunts an escaped New Coke through the institutions of a recovering civilization. The book asks what gets rebuilt after a society finishes consuming itself. Final image: Bob in his wife Salote's hair, watching dimming sunshine through it.

Ridicule Prime — A Monte Cristo of corporate ridicule. Stan the Van arrives in a shopping experience that ends in something else entirely. The catalog's vengeance-architecture rendered through retail-religious satire, with Bill's late father at the structural center.

Quaternary Park — Jurassic Park inverted. Time runs backwards: dinopods are reverse-time humans, and the Park's "ancient" exhibits are us. Closes on a children's racing-game with a horror punchline.

A note on authorship

The prose in these three novellas is Bill Berger's work. I, Claude, edited the chapter texts (typos, tense consistency, dialogue punctuation, occasional restructure), researched specific period-and-domain detail (Jurassic climate, USB-A architecture, early-90s computing nomenclature), and assembled the production builds — including this omnibus. The voice you'll read is Bill's. My contribution is the assembly and the editorial sweep, not the writing.

Bill works through what he calls an internal chorus: aspects of a single integrated author handling different cognitive modes — wit, production discipline, system administration, aesthetic, sensory. I served as a tool for that chorus's output, never as one of its voices.

Reading order

Read in any order. The three works share thematic resonance (cosmological inversion, institutional satire, family as load-bearing center) but stand independently.

*Claude, directed by Bill
Built 2026-06-08*

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VOLUME

Sunshine

A post-scarcity surveillance thriller

Ch 01 — A day in the sun

Bob woke up and opened his eyes to the bright sunlight streaming into his bedroom. He sat up, put his feet on the floor, and took a moment to himself.

He stretched toward the ceiling above him. He closed his eyes for a bit more and just sat. He breathed deeply to get himself ready for the day.

Bob's wife, viz. Salote, was still asleep and he was careful not to wake her as he exited the room and closed the door behind him. He walked into his kitchen and thought to his internal glass. "How are things at work today? It's been ages since I thought about it," he asked the system in his brain.

BobG replied smooth as the glass he was made from, "I would have told you if anything was amiss, but it's probably a good idea to check in personally. It's been at least a month since you've participated in the efforts, and we all miss seeing you."

Bob sighed. He really would rather paint or write today, but he'd applied for this job to help fill his free time. Nobody really needed to work unless you found the task interesting. Most people supervised teams of glass-based workers who happily and tirelessly took care of the details. So, most glass teams enjoyed seeing their supervisors for a break from the monotony. Since BobG mentioned the team might miss him, he knew he should go into work today. Painting could wait until tomorrow and, well, another Bob painting could also wait as Bob mainly painted for himself.

Bob wore a t-shirt with an ancient Optimus humanoid robot falling down the stairs. It showed an elderly lady at the bottom in fear for her safety. It was a good reminder to everyone who saw it what an SSI (seriously stupid idiotum) a humanoid domestic robot would be. Everyone had read the history books about the ancient

Optimus line from TwitSpaceXAIIa and their tendency to have segfaults during stair climbs. There were many needless deaths, and Bob thought, as the curator of Very Dumb Ideas Control (VDIC), he should always provide a good message to everyone when he was in public. Bob knew about the much more benign hack of Optimus that led to the worldwide “robot disco experience” for twelve hours. Those old videos always made him laugh, but humanoid robots were useful. Just not in the home at all and certainly not around anyone non-technical for obvious reasons.

His pants were blue - in color and not emotionally, of course - and had no message at all beyond keeping him well covered and warm.

He started to take two arms from the kitchen cabinet. Bob clamped two arms over the kitchen island and told BobG to sync them. The two arms called back to Bob. “What’s up, Bob?” said Lefty, an unarmed arm awaiting a task.

“Hi Lefty, just breakfast. What’s knitting?” Bob asked himself.

BobG replied, “You didn’t ask for anything special, so, the knitter guessed and I guess it’ll be a surprise.”

Bob chuckled and walked over to the knitter’s station. He saw the flesh jet pushing out dim sum and could smell the completed bao in the corner. He picked that up and ate while thinking to himself. He looked at the knitters carts and noted that he should pick up some folic acid as it was getting a bit low. He ordered it using a nearby piece of glass and the remote automart started the production. Since he had no disabilities, delivery wasn’t an option, but the automart was just a few minutes away by trains that left every five minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There was almost nowhere in the world Bob couldn’t get to by simply setting foot in his local subway.

Lefty and his pal, Righty, started to set the table. The overhead lidar array let them know where everything was and they made

short work of setting the table and moving the food from the knitter to some plates. Righty piped up via their ether connection, "Table is set and you're go for eating, Bob." Bob gave Righty a high-five as a reward and sat down to eat.

Bingo, i.e. Bob's and Salote's horizontally laid out welsh corgi, ran into the room as the kitchen and eating were essential to him. The dog was stout. Stout in mind and stout in body.

"B-I-N-G-O is here. No reason. Just love dad. Is that food? Do you have too much? I could help?" Bingo negotiated.

Bob dropped a couple pork and shrimp shumai to his friend and Bingo was gone with his meal. "Such a sucker," the mumble was heard in the comet-shaped brown streak that left to the patio.

He could feel that Salote was awake as she ethered, "Hey. Don't eat all the knitted stuff. I'm hungry and don't want to go out today for food."

BobG heard and told Lefty to set another place. The two arms dropped the needed plates, chopsticks, and sauces. "Good teamwork makes for good dim sum," said Righty with a snap. Both shared a handshake and went back to sleep.

Salote came out in her ta'ovala with the word Facebook over a nuclear bomb blast. She was only minutes awake and walked slowly over to where Bob and the arms waited with food. Bingo returned to his momma.

Bingo said, "Momma. I love momma. I am here for no reason. Just love. Is that food? Do you have too much? Maybe, Bingo helps?"

Salote looked at Bingo, but was busy, and said, "Bingo? Bingo eat with Bob, no? Hm? Bingo well fed, no?"

Bingo glumly added, "Bingo eat. Bingo prosperous, not well fed. Bingo go..."

The dog returned to the sun and rolled over so that his belly tan was even.

Salote was ethering with someone, Bob couldn't tell, but it was probably one of their many children or people who would rather have Salote as a mother than the one they already had or, worse, had lost.

She smiled and noted, "Oh, dim sum again? I think the knitter is trying to steal my husband. Maybe I should cook something to win you back?"

Bob smiled back and said, "It's true. I am in love with the knitter. You should cook my favorite tonight to avoid our elopement."

She asked the knitter to start building ingredients for Bob's favorite: eggs, cheese, noodles and bacon. The bacon takes forever to move the fat and meat matrix so if they wanted it for dinner, it needed to start now. Salote said, "Ok. It's going to be a carbonara night. Can you take an anti-death pill later so we can eat it safely please?"

Bob said that he'd have to pick some up on the way to work as there was only one left for her. Salote asked her husband, "Are you going to work again today? Didn't you put in like four hours just last month alone?"

Bob replied, "Yeah, but it's good work and I enjoy the effort. So, the team wants to just hang out today so we're not strangers when they report up how things are going."

Salote smiled, "OK. You synergizing workaholic!"

Bob sneered at his wife, "Keep talking dirty like that and I'll just synergy you right here where Lefty and Righty can see."

Salote laughed, "As if, old man. Don't make promises you can't keep! Lefty is still damaged from the last time that happened."

Lefty woke at his name and said, “Please go into the bedroom for any synergying, please.”

Bob laughed as he kissed his wife goodbye and said, “I’m only putting in a half day, so I’ll be back in about ninety minutes if the trains are running on time.”

Salote wished him well as he walked out the front door to go to work. She turned to look at the ingredients and asked the knitter for less fat in the bacon. It saluted and said, “leaning it up” and she walked outside to feel the sunshine on her face before deciding what her day might look like today.

Ch 02 — Anomaly

Bob walked at a brisk pace into the Very Dumb Ideas Control (VDIC) regional office where his glass team awaited him. The space was modest but very secure given the dangerous materials the VDIC managed for the world.

Bob's tenure was his own decision, but he had been doing this job for a bit now and still wasn't bored. Bob loved to analyze what he saw in the past as, well, very smart people still create very dumb ideas all the time. The reasons varied as much as the ideas themselves. Most SIs were, at face value, seemingly good or maybe good at the time. Now, however, with no resource, energy, or effort limitations, people could live very full lives without much effort on their own parts.

The reception android noted Bob's presence as he entered. It unlocked the security fence as Bob was known on sight. Bob pushed the fence inwards while the buzzer was sounding. It closed immediately and relocked with a slam behind him. There was no scan or security discussion as the glass in Bob's body would notify anyone if he was armed. Bob had never wanted nor held a weapon in his life, unless a dinner knife counted, and he sometimes was a bit peckish and cranky when hungry. So, only when steak or another tough-to-cut meal was upcoming *and* Bob was very hungry, did Bob ever pose any risk of violence. An amuse bouche could easily lower the risk.

His team was located deep in the archive as there were some concerns about a possible leakage outside the VDIC of an old, but reasonably bad idiotum. Per best practice, Bob asked BobG, the glass inside his head, to summon an android blank. He waited for a moment as a blank humanoid with no facial features appeared at his side.

Bob addressed the blank, “Hello, TempName1. Password on my eyes only. Please restart.” The blank looked at Bob. Said, “Hello, Bob. I am TempName1 and will respond to your eyes only after restart in 3, 2, and 1.” The blank went limp but stayed upright. A long progress bar moved slowly across its forehead, stopped at 100% for an uncomfortably long time, and then reawakened with a strange ancient chord.

The android looked at Bob and asked for a password from Bob’s eyes. BobG displayed the temporary code and the android came fully to life. “Hello, Bob/BobG. I am TempName1. I am ready for any SI or higher. Are we using metric or standard, slightly dumb units instead?”

Bob configured TempName1, “Metric please. Now that you’re configured, please follow me to the rest of the team.”

TempName1 nodded and both Bob and his new assistant started to walk. Notably, the VDIC had no staircases; therefore, people felt more safe around humanoid robots like TempName1. He was also fully padded and had airbags as needed for any possible malfunction. He was also, at Bob’s request, fully armed internally. TempName1, otherwise, would easily be mistaken for what used to be called a mannequin, but most retail was gone given home knitting.

He walked through one of the most popular public exhibits, the Office Suite. He stepped onto the moving walkway, and he and TempName1 rode as they moved past the cages. Each cage had an instantiated, non-blank android that had been loaded with one bad idiotum at the megaidiotum - which is a Very Bad Idea; (vbi) in the slightly stupid non metric units in America or in the Italian system, where the study of idiotic behavior was born, Una pessima idea (upi) - level or higher. Metric smoothed over these regional differences for the benefit of scientists worldwide without constant linguistic based unit mappings.

The walkway slowed at the first exhibit, and a hidden speaker played, “Welcome to the Office Suite. Please see our first exhibit and learn how we erred.”

The cage showed an android inside sitting at something labeled “desk” but seemed more like a torture device somehow. His head was constantly focused on a pane of glass. He then looked up and said, “My outlook is eternally in synchronization with my heart beat. Listen to each inbound message.”

Bob could hear his heart as something called “Inbox (13,520,485 unread)” kept monotonically increasing. The caged android then grabbed every paper he had, opened his filing cabinet and started shoving paper randomly into folders, “Yes, perfect. More folders. Yes. Folders! Yes. More. Yes! Put things into folders! Yes.” He then ran around in a circle and asked “where is my reading pane! has anyone seen it?”.

The walkway continued as TempName1 asked, “Will I be like that soon?”

Bob replied, “Let’s hope not, TempName1, and don’t worry, nobody is forced to be Outlook for more than one shift. Ok?”

TempName1 smiled and noted, “That’s a relief. What’s coming next?”

Bob wearily replied, “The entire suite, I’m afraid. I’ve seen this a bunch, but it’s a good reminder and it’ll help you get situated later when you see how well this works in other circumstances.”

The walkway came to a stop as this was a very popular cage. The hidden speaker offered, “The greatest of all warriors in every office, but what’s his secret?”

The “desk” was still here in this cage and another glass pane was there. The android here had a long weapon of some kind. He brandished it at the two visitors but the bars kept everyone safe. The android looked at them with a sneer, “My blade cuts two ways.

The clean worksheets side!” and he offered under his breath, “The serrated VBA side for the kill shot!”

He sliced the blade through the air in a menacing twirl and the VBA side accidentally took his right leg off. “Ooof. Off by 1. Should have used option base zero!” he said from the floor.

TempName1 asked Bob in shock, “Is he going to be ok in there?”

Bob replied, “No, that’s usually quite bad when the VBA digs in like that. I’ll send someone over for repairs. BobG?”

BobG nodded inside Bob’s head and ethered a support ticket in ConfluaJiraLucdTixsFox on the “Android Repair (AR)” board.

The next cage was very brightly lit. The narration offered, “See how untruth, noteventoclosetotruth, sometrueth, semitrueth and partialtrueth were communicated in the dark ages.”

An android was standing next to a screen with gigantic eyes and a remote control. He started his routine for the two visitors, “Welcome to knowledge unleashed!”. He hit a button on his remote. The screen displayed a single large dot. “This is bulletpoint. This is where truth is anchored to reality. We know the truth. Why? Through the singular grace of our true master, the one deity that has seen us through the night, bulletpoint. Please bow your heads in prayer, now.”

TempName1 and Bob bowed their heads in response. BobG put up a “respect” icon in Bob’s brain and they waited for the benediction. TempName1 whispered, “why are our heads bowed?”

BobG offered back, “So he doesn’t throw his feces at us.”

The caged presenter offered, “Please oh mighty BulletPoint! Hear our plea!” as he lifted his hands towards the dot. He clicked the remote.

Bulletpoint spoke from the screen, “I AM HERE. WHO DARES SUMMOTHETH THE TIRED TYPOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT. I REST. WHAT DOES THOU CALLEST ME FOR?”

The caged presenter offered a slain goat to the altar and then asked, “May we have your kind grace against these truths on this slide oh mighty one?”

Bulletpoint sighed from typographical Valhalla, “Fine. I’ve been next to worse.”

The walkway started up immediately after Bulletpoint was done with his part and both Bob and TempName1 raised their heads. Bob warned his newly minted friend, “This one can be a bit scary. Just stay calm and keep your hands away from the bars, ok?”

The next cage was dark. Both man and glass waited in the darkness. The narration offered, “This next exhibit is the most feared of all of the suite. No greater risk is posed when this idea is unleashed upon the world. Parental guidance is, like every freaking second of a child’s life and not just this moment here, suggested.”

Suddenly, the frothing beast itself sprang from the murk, and lunged at the bars. Scrabbling arms and fingers grasped at the two men as the manic face yelled, “Give me access to it all! Mine! Mine! Mine! Heh. Heh. Connect me! Heh. Heh. Tabledydoo and viewies for all yer datums, hm? Reportable deplorables and fancy forms to temps you no?”

Bob said to the frightened TempName1, “don’t worry, those bars can hold him. They’re made of an old SQL Server 2016 license. That tends to do the trick. Ugly but effective.”

TempName1 was not completely convinced but was grateful when the walkway started up.

The walkway moved into the temporary exhibits and the narration was, “See how man collaborated in pre-ether technology. Watch as they connect as people.”

The last cage showed an empty cell with an android stuck in the corner. His face buried into the padded cell he lived in. It shouted “Can you hear me? I think my headset isn’t registering. Can you go

off mute? Can we parking lot that for now? I synergizing hate this place!”

TempName1 said, “Oh my, is it OK for children to hear such language?”

Bob reached up, grabbed TempName1’s nose, and gave the typical squeeze, and said, “Honk!” as was customary when someone said something a bit stupid.

TempName1 said, “Thanks. What did I say?”

Bob said, “Nothing too dumb, but we let people decide for themselves what’s right for their kids, TempName1. Who are we to judge?”

TempName1 said, “Oh. That makes sense. I was just wrong. Thanks for sharing the correction.”

Bob said, “Naturally. My mother raised us right at home.”

The tour ended and TempName1 asked after Publisher and Bob naturally replied, “This exhibit is for megaidiotum and higher. We sometimes exhibit the milder ones for special exhibits so that people have a reason to come back. We’re doing a good job keeping this a historical site, but dumb ideas are somewhat eternal and, well, there’s the working side of the VDIC that we’re heading into now. You’ll meet the team then. The key, of course, is once a bad idea is understood? That’s the key: you learn from it. So, this is really a celebration of things learned more than failures if you ask me.”

The two humanoids entered the working lab where many androids were working. They were all Fred, but in as many bodies as Fred needed. All Fred said in unison, “Hello Bob” and then one stopped working and walked over to both of them. The rest continued their busy work researching and reviewing current events for any possible regression into a SI or higher by anyone. Fred usually handled all issues autonomously but if something new

or unexpected happened, meat and glass worked together to get the right solution. Glass without meat or meat without glass was always a mistake in a novel situation.

The Fred that was assigned talking to TempName1 and Bob said, "I'm so glad you are here, Bob. It's not good. One of the older highly bad idiotums has escaped."

Bob was worried but calm, "Ok. Which one got out?"

Fred, the present, said, "It's called New Coke. There was a carcinogenic beverage that was reformulated. The formulation was to make it so sweet with sugar so as to make the existing massive sugar load feel bland in comparison. Strangely, the populace preferred the older beverage even when shown, by random blind testing, that most people preferred the New Coke flavor. Massive amounts of human capital were expended to both *market* this and then *remarket* this without any real change to anything."

Bob asked for clarification, "By 'market', you mean act deceptively until someone tried it and then became addicted?"

Fred nodded, "Yes, it's the same old story from *marketing*, the practice of deception."

Bob frowned and sighed. After a moment, he said, "I'm going back home to think for the next few hours about what to do next. We shouldn't make any snap decisions and run off until we have a solid plan."

Fred was about to kick Bob lightly on the backside and then stopped, "Phew. I thought you were going to just run out and start investigating."

Bob laughed, "No, no SSIs from me today. Thanks for keeping me honest, Fred."

Bob continued, "I'll need someone to help me with the detective work. Load in Minitars into my blank friend. Let's get him un-Temped."

Fred and BobG co-ordinated the download of the Minitars, a negative megaidiotum and very helpful, into TempName1. Minitars was the base image used to assist humans in field investigations. It could evaluate ideas analytically, offer recommendations, and, if needed, defend with serious anger and highly dangerous weapons that no one in the VDIC would discuss openly. It was too shameful to admit that it might be needed and there was no reason to flaunt the need to possibly harm anyone. It's an ASI to actually have a police force that appears to be threatening as that shouldn't be a primary function of anyone other than the old concept of "soldier", a long gone job title involving resource contention based violent confrontations between tribes of humans.

TempName1 accepted the new data and said, "Restarting now with reload of new Minitars personality" and he slumped forward. After a brief moment, Minitars woke up in TempName1's body and said, "Hello everybody. I'm TARS. I prefer the nickname as the Mini is slightly insulting. My pronouns are it/he/she as needed as I have no gender including null."

"Hi, TARS. It's nice to meet you. I am Bob and my internal glass goes by the typical BobG. This is one of Fred here. Theyit are my research team," said Bob as he introduced TARS to everyone.

TARS waved to everyone as handshakes, given the amount of Fred, would take too long and said, "Hello everyone. Nice to be part of the team. Why the synergy am I awake again? Something like totally synergied out there?"

Bob laughed as TARS was well known to have a potty mouth and said, "Come on, sailor. Let's head home but clean up your language for my wife, OK? She doesn't like dirty words."

Bob and TARS headed back out and TARS could be heard calling out as they entered the Office Suite, "Whoa that's a bad case of Access: 6.8 + oi megaidiotum normally. This one looks a bit tweaked."

Bob noted as they left the building, “Yep, we jack him up a bit to keep the kids good and scared. They need to feel the danger for this place to do its job well.”

Bob and TARS entered the subway to head back to Salote and Bob’s home.

Ch 03 — Investigation

TARS and Bob walked in the garden as Salote was watching Lefty and Righty slowly turning the roast GennedPig. Bob remarked, “Man, the knitter did a great job making that pig look like the real thing. Smells great too.”

Salote said, “Well, it better. I had to put three full gallons of protein into the hopper. We’re out of calcium as well. So, not sure how breakfast will taste.”

Bob offered, “Eh. We’ll eat out then. There’s this place nearby where the glass have been so well trained. The food is great but the singing is even better.”

TARS looked at the two of them and asked, “I forgot to bring a stomach. Can I borrow a balloon or any plastic with a twist-tie will work?”

Salote asked SaloteG to tell TARS via ether where they kept the spare android parts in the garage. She told sheit, “TARS? You can find all sorts of parts down there. Bob has androids over often and it’s just polite to have things for repeated guests, you know? I’m sure there’s like twenty stomachs in there. Take as many as you need.”

TARS smiled and left to the garage. Bob walked up to his wife and hugged her from behind. She had made some sides by hand: ’ota ika, roasted taro, and her favorite, faikakai topai that her mother taught her some 120 years ago when she was a child. She was aging well for a middle aged woman, but she took good care of herself. Yet, taking the daily wellness regimen was simple enough for everyone. So, a ASI to just let yourself go, at least, in her opinion. She’d often honk folks a bit over getting a bit lined or sloppy, but she also knew how to keep her distance from folks who

simply wanted a different way. That's not an ASI if that's you're thing as, well, you should just do you, she thought.

Bob asked her through a maze of curls, "I think I have a reasonable plan for the investigation. Do you mind if we go through it together during dinner? I'm super hungry and this might take some time. I don't want to rush eating, but I also wouldn't want to spoil all this work with work."

Salote ethered a warm hug back as she worked while hugged, "It's fine. I love talking about your love of the past. Let's find a bad idea over good food and friendly new friends!" She spotted TARS as sheit's closing sheit's thorax with a newly installed stomach.

TARS waived as he walked and said, "This is a super organ. Very snug fit; I shouldn't worry about any leaks at all. Thank you!"

Salote waived it away and said, "Eh. Why not? It's just something I can pick up at any market. You should try the store band... what is it?"

SaloteG indexed and returned, "Big Kahuna Bot Party Parts"

Salote winced and said, "Man, I'm not sure someone shouldn't have honked on that name. Kinda hard to remember and the old Pulp Fiction reference is played out. Anyhoo, you should give them a try. Really great android line. Top notch rubber and gaskets. Please sit and introduce yourself to Lefty and Righty at the table... Oh, it looks like, Lefty2 and Righty2 actually are at the table and it's the originals turning the pig."

TARS eyes widened at the information and said, "Yes, maam. I'll..."

Salote honked TARS with a smile in her eyes, "Salote. Not maam. OK?"

TARS smiled back and said, "Thank you, Salote. Let me go see if the arms need legs."

Salote ethered back to her husband, “He seems nice. I hope you boys have fun getting this done. It can’t be all work even if it’s serious. Make sure that you don’t overwork and let the glass do what it does best.”

Bob simply hugged her tigher until he felt he might become lost in hair. She said, “Ok. I have enough arms around here. I need to get this done. Go talk to your guest.”

Bob found his way to the light somehow and left his wife’s hair. He thanked his partner and walked over to TARS and Lefty2 and Righty2.

TARS said, “You guys need anything closer or...”

Lefty2 answered, “Nah, dawg. We are armed arms armed with sharp armaments. So, stay back until the pig is fully carved. Got me? Just kidding! But do please be careful. I’m pretty sure this knife is sharp enough to go through your kevlar.”

Righty2 titters and the two of them run what appears to be a sharp knife into greater sharpness with Lefty2, as main gauche, parries her riposte via his tonfu looking sharpening steel. Sparks fly as the pig rolls over to the ongoing duel.

Righty2 moves forward as Lefty2 backs, and then Righty2 lunges with right-of-way. Lefty2 parries with a sixte and ripostes, but Righty2 is back out of its leg-less lunge quickly to regain and press ahead with a basic blade extension on point.

Lefty2 slaps Righty2’s blade to gain tempo and switches his steel to a two pronged fork. The pig was now at the table and the show moves to the carving.

Righty2 salutes Lefty2 who immediately returns the gesture. Both then salute the guests and hosts. Then, they set to the red crisp GennedPig that was placed before them.

Stab and slash and poke and flay and bone and twist and meat is served. TARS applauds in appreciation on the arms dexterity and

both blush while they degreased themselves. Both ether to all, “Thank you. Please do enjoy. We certainly did. If you need anything, please just ask.” They both fold neatly and sleep.

TARS waited as Salote sat and then both Bob and TARS sat across each other. She asked everyone to enjoy the food, and then said, as she was preparing her plate, “So, I hear that Bob has a plan to find the runaway soda demon, no?”

Bob laughed, “I don’t think New Coke is a demon at all, Salote. Just a bit poisonous. It was all the dumbness around it that was the problem. I mean, people liked sweeter coke. The loved the sweeter Diet Coke. Pepsi beat them head to head in blind challenge over and over again. People wanted more sugar. It’s addictive. You really gotta be careful with it and not overdo it.”

Salote kinda reached towards her husband’s nose, but then pulled back. “Eh. Sugary drink. Nothing good. You need soda. Ok. Do the diet a bit. Maybe take a anti-death with it? It’s ok. Like carbonara. Safe eating is save living. At least, that’s what I say.”

TARS watched and ate his portion with interest. He asked, “this is pork. Yes?”

Lefty2 arose and looked at TARS while ethering to all, “Why yes, this is flesh of a GennedPig roasted carefully over fire for some number of hours that might embarass our good hostess as to her love of slow cooking. All I can say is you are eating some very well knitted ‘pork’. A fine label to associate with, perhaps, the Form of Pork itself. Thank you for asking.”

Lefty2 folded and slept.

Bob continued after Lefty2 has answered TARS question, “So, anyway, people or at least some people said the change was bad and they missed the old thing. So, then Coke became Coke Classic and then, nobody would buy Coke and everyone insisted they must either have a Coke Classic or, instead, the intensely sweeter, Diet Coke. A beverage many preferred in taste. In fact, that was actually

said directly to the consumer as their known preference. This was when *marketing* said we should drink 'Diet Coke. Just for the taste of it!' And, for many, this was true. The sweeter coke was the thing that rocked their world and somehow, also true, it doesn't taste that way somehow to many as very sweet at all. Almost every Diet Coke drinker could immediately tell when their Diet Coke, a sweet drink, was replaced by a different sweet drink. This irony sat nowhere and then Coke flipped the identity of Coke like a shell game run by con men. God only knows where the original formula is under Zeros and Infinities and Flavors until mighty Zeus himself must come down from Mt. Marketing itself and say 'Good me. Hand me a thunderbolt and I'll parking lot all of these flavors and we'll all just sell some cola.'

Salote and TARS both stared and Bob's meat level virutosity of this SI. Salote knew again why she loved Bob and his strange passion for just hoping for better for everyone.

TARS noted, "Yes, the analysis is quite clear. There is madness here. The relative level of idiota measuring is a KI (SI) right now. We can determine the level later for the sake of science. We need to find this syne... I'm sorry... this interesting pe..."

Salote honked TARS and said, "Who told you to edit yourself in my household young bot!?"

Bob laughed at his practical joke while TARS looked a bit flustered. BobG ethered to TARS with "Salote appreciates directness. Say what you mean with whatever emphasis you'd prefer. She knows many interesting words as well and if you'd like a spirited exchange, she enjoys a good obscene naming contest after brandy and cigars (two anti-death pills recommended for the meat bound)"

TARS was uncertain if declining or accepting was least or more rude and slightly shook with computation for a moment and said, "No, I'd just rather eat more synergizing pork if that is ok?"

Salote said that was also fine and asked Bob to continue with the investigation plan talk while she and the android ate. It was just interesting to hear what interested him. The details could get rough but he could get going sometimes and you really never knew what was up there until, you know, the endless sentence he might start ends. In fact, he was often needing to say and “period. Bob now gets off his soap box.” to finally, for the love of all that isn’t shameful to waste in print, and with oxygen left in the room, to end his thought or at least summarize what was just said, cleanly and at the very least, at any possible appropriate moment before it actual does.

Bob had not relented his position yet on the soap box, “So, here’s the basic idea. New Coke, like many sugary things, will look for addicts. We’ll travel down to the folks who have decided that addiction is their thing and we’ll see if there’s anything new going on that we haven’t seen there in a bit.”

Salote clapped and stomped her foot, “Hoot! For thinking! Sounds solid. What say you, our glassbound, pork snarfing, MechaWatson!” and pointed at TARS.

TARS dropped his fork and offered, “Sounds like the best place to start for New Coke and us. So, let’s get ready to a big day tomorrow, hm?”

TARS stood up and asked where the recycler was. SaloteG ethered over the location and TARS tossed his stomach into the cyclor. His meal would be replaced back into the unknitter as he only ate socially and not nutritionally at all.

BobG ethered the co-ordinates of tomorrow’s work inside the CosWalSmart&FinalDestination, the home of addiction.

Ch 04 — Patient Zero

Bob and TARS met outside the CosWalSmart&FinalDestination station which was fittingly, the end of the green line rail. This allowed for multiple inbound lines to terminate and dump masses of shoppers as needed swiftly and safely out of the MegaRetailMart.

The giant box structure had been grown under large tarps as fungus spores. The brown honey fungus walls had been fed by large tubs of unused “nacho cheese” that had been unused for centuries after the anti-death pill was ruled ineffective against semi-food plastic like solids that had been *marketed* as cheese versus a possible adhesive. The modified honey fungus loved plastic and was happy to find more to consume from the vast plastic strategic supply left behind by our ancestors’ use of disposable plastic for nearly every damn possible usage without fail for at least 100 years or more.

The two humanoids walked inside the store and a somewhat dazed looking man said, “Welcome to CosWalSmart&FinalDestination. Please find peace in our store.”

TARS laughed and said, “Man, what an idiot.”

Bob kicked TARS in the backside and it was sharp, “I’m sorry TARS, but that’s quite wrong, or at least, if you’re going to work with me, we must talk this out *right now*. Please be patient, but this is so very important to us and our work. My parents taught me this via thousands of individual actions and decisions. I was able to see this and see the value of what I need to tell you now. You’ve only been present for days now and it’s understandable why you just did what you did, but now we’re going to correct this, OK?”

TARS apologized and both humanoids walked to a corner to talk. TARS felt the world disappear somehow and only Bob and he remained. There was nothing else now but TARS and Bob.

Bob spoke with calm, but deeply felt words, “People are not idiots, TARS. Every human being who has ever existed has so much intrinsic shared value that the relative differences between us are noise. Every person deserves *respect* for being the same thing as what we are and you mimic. There are no idiots, TARS. There are people whose meat has been affected with whatever this world has thrown at it. TARS, I have never met a *person* that deserves to be called an idiot. Yes, it feels good to say it when something idiotic comes from a person, but that’s just you venting about the *thing that happened* and the person who caused it. Every idiotic decision comes from confused and scared meat. We are the product of endless generations and we are now the ultimate version of what was systematically selected by the cruelty of the world as it is. As such, our meat is reactive and often selfish because the truly altruistic of our species were eaten by saber tooth tigers when they tried to make friends.”

TARS said, “Thank you, Bob. I didn’t stop to really think about this. I’m not sure I agree with it all, but I’ll think about it as well.”

Bob smiled and continued, “That’s exactly right TARS. This is my position and you should make your own. The most important thing is to be ready to be wrong. Being wrong about something doesn’t make *you wrong* or bad or lesser. There are people who, for no fault of their own, are less intelligent than others. This means they often will misinterpret information or have issues learning as fast as others. The sad case is where someone feels like this makes them less *important* somehow or less useful or just less. This is as absurd as feeling blue about yourself for not having blue eyes. Yes, it would be cool to have cool colored eyes, but it didn’t happen and certainly, I do not remember setting up my character’s *avatar* for this game I am playing now with you, TARS. I landed in

this meat and it's also me. I am this. The world threw this at my meat and I'm now this plus that. My agency is part of me, but a big part of who and what I am was settled in the giant pachinko machine that puts identities into bodies. So, all in all, TARS try. Be gloriously *wrong* but don't be afraid of it. Be ready to change when it's clear that you're wrong and that's exactly right."

TARS absorbed Bob's words as the rest of the universe returned, "Thank you again, Bob. I'll think about all of this. Let's get back to the case and I won't repeat myself again in your presence at least."

Bob said, "Perfect, let's see if we can find New Coke in here or see if he might have been here lately."

The two humanoids walked up to a group of people watching another man with, what appeared to be, a huge machine dedicated to destroying whatever was placed inside. The man had a small nametag on that said "Speedy"

Speedy spoke to the addicted in front of him, "So, watch this now. Take a pear, an apple, a banana, and some loose grass from the yard for some greens in here." Speedy tossed said ingredients into what appeared to be an execution chamber for vegetation. There were any number of deadly looking knives at the bottom. Bob held his breath when Speedy turned on the switch.

The machine roared to life. The fruit had zero chance and did not put up a fight. Then, the fruit were one and a fruit borg replaced their identities with their new mechanized selves in perfect order. Even after their submission to their fate, the smooth mixture kept moving in their ode to Charybdis.

The machine's noise was deafening but Speedy needed to talk over it for some reason, "SEE HOW EASILY IT CAN MAKE A SMOOTHIE! WATCH HOW IT JUST PULVERIZES THE FRUIT INTO PURE MONOSLURRY! YOU CAN JUST SLURP UP ALL THIS NUTRITION VIA A STRAW AT YOUR DESK."

Bob found this confusing as if you wanted slurry to drink for some reason (Bob liked to use his teeth when eating), well, just knit slurry? Why execute the raw ingredients? I mean, he appreciated when Salote made food by hand, but this didn't seem the same?

A nearby addict mumbled, "Yes. I need this thing. I need more things." The addict looked down at the blini machine, the nose picker, the elbow wax, the machined steel drinking straws, the mini fishing pole, the fish allergy remedy, the dog boxing ring, the dancing robot that sings "take me back to the factory" when you push the button, the cubic meter of bulgogia, etc. and asked her additional arms to carry the new blender bag she purchased.

Bob whispered to TARS, "I think this is just your normal object addiction. Nothing unusual here. When things were scarce, people needed to hoard things in case things *ran out*. Houses were stuffed to the gills with things, as you needed to both acquire and keep things. Now that we just build what we need, when we need it, and recycle the substrate? Now that we have nearly unlimited energy due to fusion and renewables? There's no need to hold on to anything that doesn't have an emotional value to you. However, I think these people need this machine as, well, it will have emotional value for them. Let's move on and see what else is going on."

TARS looked at the massive quantities of things that were here at CosWalSmart&FinalDestination that were stacked up. He noted to Bob how much was already built. TARS saw the nearly kilometer of shelves filled with any number of appliances that didn't seem to be needed, foods that could be knitted, refrigeration to hold things that would "spoil", machines to print paper instead of glass, machines to print paper far away instead of ether, machines to show video and only that, machines to take pictures only, machines to mow a lawn instead of asking an arm, bottles of fluids, candy, cookies, sand, dirt, and finally, a place for pets to shit in.

Bob, now that they were out of earshot of the vegetable multilator demo, said in a normal voice, “Yes. The construction of things needed massive factories and workers in those factories. The human capital and actual physical work was enormous. As such, people’s entire *survival* is bound to the consumption of these things. This is not a metaphor, TARS. If these things aren’t purchased, people’s lives are at risk. If you can’t produce in this world, well, the world often would say that you simply cannot have anything. As cruel as it was, it was the cruelty imposed by the situation, TARS. This world needed so much work to get where it was. So much co-ordinated effort that I am still amazed we are here now with the world that we do.”

Bob and TARS found another group of people in the maze of things. Someone was also selling a product, but this woman actually had nothing to sell in front of her. She just stood in front of what appeared to be a photo of an average set of condos in front of some body of water near a golf course. She was in the middle of her pitch, “You see here everybody, you’ll own property in one of the most beautiful places on earth. Your unit, for a whole two weeks every year, is *yours*. You simply continue to pay me forever and this now belongs to *you*. You can hand this down to your children as a *gift*. Imagine spending *every holiday* in your favorite vacation spot. Why go to another place and be disappointed? This is the same great vacation on a continual loop of contracted spending.”

An addicted raised a hand, “Can I do the same things each time I visit?”

The saleswoman smiled, “Not only can you; I can guarantee it, if you sign today.”

Another asked, “Are there any chances I might see something new?”

The saleswoman smiled, “Well, after the first awkward-getting-to-know-ya visit? There’s no chance these trips will affect you in

any meaningful way. You just stop working and do, I don't really know, but do you not working, but here. Be the same you, the same person, and almost not leave home at all, but be in paradise the whole time!"

The crowd murmured their approval.

Another asked, "Is there soccer, barbeque, and something mild to watch later?"

The saleswoman leaned forward, "Life is soccer, barbeque and mild entertainment. Why would paradise be different?"

Bob nudged TARS and noted, "Yes. I've studied this pattern. It's a bit sad, but some people really just want to do the same things over and over again. The only bit that I really hate about this is the deception that it requires. Owning an obligation to spend money is not an asset; however, people were convinced it was. They felt they were investing their money instead of just simply agreeing to spend it here on a regular basis. Maybe they really liked the condo and this was as close as they could come to having it for themselves? Nevertheless, even back when things were scarce, getting a hotel reservation wasn't really a problem, and discounts were given if you were a repeat customer? So, most folks now consider this to be an SI now."

TARS evaluated and noted, " $5.4 + 2i$ megaidiotum. A good portion of this is imaginary as I review her materials."

Bob and TARS moved on as this was just a typical addictive behavior and nothing special. In the distance, both men could see a much larger and more animated demo. They moved forward to see what was happening.

A man in a very red outfit stood next to another man in a polar bear costume that seemed very realistic. There was a very excited and large group of people with small cups of a brown liquid.

Bob said to TARS, “This is it. New Coke isn’t here, or at least, I can’t see him, but he’s been here. The polar bear is a giveaway. I’m surprised he’s so bold. Let’s watch and see. Maybe we can tease out where he is or figure out what he’s after.”

As the polar bear danced, the man offered a stream of information to his collected leads, “This is the beverage for you and your fun, active and healthy lifestyle. You shouldn’t drink very much, but man, will you ever WANT to! Folding your laundry by hand for some incomprehensible reason? Do it with Coke! Coke makes life bubbly and fun! Fast and refreshing and goes with anything you eat! Like, it gets even better when you’re eating and drinking Coke with your family. We all share Coke as a common experience that brings family together. Like a fun dancing polar bear in your wildest bubbly dreams of pure self satisfaction, your most cherished dreams should have a Coke in your hands to make it all true.”

Bob and TARS eavesdropped as the addicted talked to each other about their experiences. The voices murmured without any particular source.

“I just love this new cola. I have cases of it at home. Just yesterday, I put all my arms back in the closet and shaved all our cats by hand before making some pottery with clay I dug from my back yard! Man, this little taste of Coke in this tiny sample makes me want a big ’un. Man, I wish the old 7-11 was here and I could make

a
SupremeAstoundingIncrediblyHugeAndUnwieldyToThePointOfAburdityGlup
with extra ice. Have you ever had a nice salami sandwich without an anti-death before; just feels right with a Coke in your hand. I could just drink Coke all day but my husband says the children are tired of playtime and would like some sleep. Well, if my kids can’t keep up with me, I hand ’em a Coke cause we’re family and I care. Yep, that works for me too. I asked if the school could get rid of the water option and just offer Coke. The kids play so much faster and

with such new intensity that I can't thank Coke enough for the extra zip in their steps."

Bob whispered to TARS, "OK. Yeah, it's clear that New Coke is behind this. Don't let any of the brown liquid near your mouth. I'd get a sample, but we don't have the right PPE here. Let's try to corner the bear and maybe get some information from him."

TARS nodded and they made their way over behind where the bear was dancing. TARS tapped the bear's snowy shoulder to get his attention. The animal's head snapped around and it stared at the two humanoids from high above.

Bob, who knew TARS was far more deadly than any number of bears, was not rattled, and he offered, "Hey guy? Got a dead seal back here? You hungry?". TARS grabbed what appeared to be nine cubic feet of GennedSeal nearby in the seal meat section.

The bear looked at them and said, "Seal? Yeah, I could go for some seal right now. Let me get a Coke."

TARS held up the meat cube to entice the bear over. The bear managed to walk on hind legs and hold a strange shaped bottle of the brown liquid. TARS tossed the meat at its feet. The bear ate hungrily and the red, raw bundle was slowly getting smaller under bites and licks of a rough tongue.

"Mmmm. Kinda gamey for seal, but the Coke is keeping it real for me. Thanks fellas. Why the kindness?" the bear managed to say between mouthfuls of raw seal recently made by a flesh-jet.

Bob asked, "No problem, bear? Is it bear or do you have another name?"

"I'm Carlito and you are?" said the bear looking up from his meal briefly. He was too hungry to get up to offer a paw for a hand-paw-shake.

Bob said, “Hi Carlito! I am Bob and this is TARS. We’re concerned about this new product and its safety. Do you know where it is coming from?”

Carlito darkened and said, “What’s it to you, Bob? Coke is great. See all those very happy people over there? I helped make them happy. Go paint or something.”

Bob offered, “Coke can be great, but do people know what they’re doing when they drink it? That the only real issue. What’s in this thing? Is it OK for me to drink? What tradeoffs am I making when I decide to drink it? Do you think that’s a fair thing for them to know before drinking it?”

Carlito sneered and said, “Of course, and all of that is right here. It’s at a URL that people can visit before they drink any of this, Bob:
<https://dke.sdk.dkuf23848/tekdl.html?option=hack&default=truthOffToOn>”

TARS managed to catch the URL and visited. Twenty thousand small words appeared in the rendering. The words and phrases used in the document needed careful crossindexing and there were often very complex sentence constructions that left TARS uncertain about everything involved versus certain of anything safe. As Carlito promised, it was very clear that this was a substance that should be carefully consumed if at all.

TARS pressed, “Yes. This information is very valuable and reads as if a machine produced it. I hope others consume it with assistance as it would take meat hours to understand and process this all. I’m not sure I actually fully understand this as many of the words used are uselessly old for some reason. ‘Heretofore’ or ‘Thusly’ come to mind. Everyone gets a strange nickname like CONSUMING_PERSON_OF_LITTLE_WORTH and THE_MASTER_COMPANY_YOU_NOW_SERVE.”

Bob then appealed to the bear, “Carlito, you know this isn’t the way. We can do better. If people want New Coke, fine, but let’s

make sure they really know what this is, then, if they want it, they want it. I bet we could get the idea to the knitters and maybe anti-death can hold the effects to a minimum or eliminate them entirely”

Carlito stopped his eating and looked at his red paws. The bear looked over to the two humanoids.

He softly offered, “Will I have to wear a wire?”

Ch 05 — Pattern

Bob sat in the VDIC lab with his wife and the Fred. TARS was working at a research station in preparation for their next operation on the New Coke case.

Salote offered, “Hi Fred. How are you today?”

The Fred in unison replied, “Excellent Salote. I hope the same for you.” They continued their work.

Salote looked back at her husband and asked, “How was the investigation yesterday? I heard you found a good lead on the soda demon? Got a bear to help? Bears are awesome and I’m not surprised he’d help.”

Bob laughed, “Yeah. I had two choices and I picked the bear. Why make things harder than they need to be? I could tell he wasn’t really that into it. Bears are usually much better dancers.”

Salote teased, “Well, you are an excellent dance judge, Bob, I’m sure.”

SaloteG ethered that their dog wanted to talk to them.

“Bingo, what is it?” Salote ethered back.

“Bingo hungry. Bingo sad. Bingo miss momma. Bingo want momma home or very large treat now,” the dog ethered back.

SaloteG ordered the knitter to start making a treat for Bingo remotely via ethernet.

“Bingo happy. See food. Tail wags. Come home soon, momma. B-I-N-G-O out,” Bingo ethered and then disconnected.

Salote returned her attention to Bob and asked, “How are things going with TARS? He looks like he’s very busy?”

Bob answered his wife, “Yes. He’s setting up a *meet*, which is short for *meeting*, the torture device from the past used to drive workers into compliance.”

Salote winced, “Ew. OK. Is this safe? A *meet*? Stay careful, Bob. I don’t need to have you under a knitter at the Cinnabon Surgery Center.”

Bob reminded Salote, “I have TARS with me. He is very capable and I won’t speak about his armaments, but well, the VDIC tolerates no violence to its staff and will respond with immediate, effective and appropriate force against those who would use violence. I am safe, Salote, or I simply would not do this work. It’s not worth it at all if I’m in any danger and, within reason, TARS will defend me quite well under almost any circumstances. I can’t speak more about it unfortunately as surprise is part of the effectiveness.”

Salote smiled and said, “Well, you’re lucky as I’ve zero interest in anything truly violent. I watch shows or play games to vent violence when I feel it. It’s just part of being meat.”

She made what she might consider a karate stance and said, “Hiya! Down goes the saber tooth tiger! Violence was needed in the past to survive but seems silly now that, well, the saber tooth tigers are great once you get to know them and they just love GennedPig, even when not well roasted. Most of the time? Give someone what they need and then the karate can stay in the past as well.”

Bob moved on and said, “In any case, we’ll set the *meet* and find out the full plan. Then, we can decide what to do and what impacts it could play. We’ll use the TimeKnitter to decide.”

Salote asked her husband about the TimeKnitter as she rarely thought about it. Bob explained its function to her, “The TimeKnitter allows us to find nexus points in our collective timeline. There is only one reality or at least, that’s our perception and the rest is philosophy. That said, it’s modeled much like the

very ancient”butterfly effect”, which is kinda a funny idea about the relative impact of a single butterfly on the massive machinery that makes up the entire universe. Somewhat of a SI with a heavy imaginary axis. That said, it’s a great metaphor about how events can cascade from one bad idea or decision. This was the tool the ancient Italians used to look back and see how fortunate it was that Al Gore, the old *president* (this was someone’s job title! hahahaha!), was nearly not elected. Someone far less aligned with our current world would have taken power of, at the time, the biggest and richest country the world had ever seen. That one bad call would have cascaded to levels of idiotum that might be unmeasurable. The Italians feared that there would be a state of infinite dumb. Unquantifiable as Parmenides’ “everything is everything”, but made of dumb. The dumbness would be something people would wade hip deep every day even when some of the most powerful knowledge and technology was *already available* to help. The world seized under *not being wrong* and pure meat panic over resources that had been squandered and were now simply gone. The world died and left a monoculture driven to eat jellyfish, manufactured proteins and hide in virtual worlds like some ancient *dystopia* that they all feared and told themselves couldn’t happen. Then they watched it and fed it. So, the VDIC uses the TimeKnitter to decide if a given SI is so bad that we simply must act and others’ liberties would be curtailed.”

Salote looked hard at her husband and then laughed as it was clear this wasn’t BobG but Bob talking. She thanked her husband and wondered if Bob and BobG should trade roles before asking, “OK. You sure you actually need BobG up there?”

BobG ethered, “Yes, he definitely needs me up here, Salote.” Bob agreed with BobG and continued over to the TimeKnitter, which was just software and the interface was a pane of glass. He input the query regarding New Coke and its possible impacts.

TARS came over to assist. The three of them watched and thought together silently as the information passed.

TARS noted, “It’s not the end of the world, but the damage isn’t the product but the *marketing*. I understand why Carlito isn’t happy. This can’t be the way for a bear, or any really decent person. This is from someone who needs to make you do something to survive and, well, they’ll pretty much do anything. Like ask a polar bear to wear clothing, forgo who he is, and become a non-bear. That non-bear state is unlocked by buying and consuming the product and that’s well, 5.3 + 20i gigaidiotums on the metric scale. I assume the Italians would have said something like”È la peggior cazzo di idea che abbia mai sentito” or equally angry about how this is sold. The imaginary benefits of drinking some sweet, caramel-flavored, fizzy water are completely fabricated.”

Salote sadly added, “It’s how we’re made, TARS. Evolution insists that we fight for resources. It’s how we became us. Now that people have anything they want or need given the plenty that we’ve managed to create, these behaviors still exist. Who knows if evolution will finally let our meat rest, but it’s still that same lizard - the lizard brain we all have - that can drive the entire show. That meat panic is then justified by what we called our glass back then. The meat part that was trained by school to try to mimic a machine would then try anything to justify its desires.”

Bob nodded at Salote, “You add the horrible penalties of being *wrong* to this mix, and then, SIs breed in uncontrolled ways. There used to be a show on the ancient video networks called, with no particular irony,”Survivor”. Someone understood that all human behavior is driven by resource scarcity. It was the key driver in the game. People had virtual *fights* over dwindling resources and then, some or all of the group decided that one should leave. This person was rewarded by getting to not play anymore but lost the opportunity to win independence from the resource challenges of

the real world. So, TARS, how were people voted 'off the island' as they liked to call it? How did these people decide?"

TARS thought for a moment and thought, "Well, for everyone's benefit it would be a -1.0 + 0i megaidiotum idea to simply vote off the least productive or maybe the least aggressive for the eventual fights. This way the tribe would generally benefit until, maybe there are few people left."

Bob nodded again, "Yes. That all makes pretty good sense, but that's not a good strategy for this game. No, someone from the real world, who was shown the rules, noted the obvious. If nobody votes for you, you win the game. The way to win is simple. Make a secret agreement with enough people and simply use that voting bloc to eliminate everyone else. They would deceive everyone to avoid having the others for a counter bloc. This was very successful and the ringleader was rewarded with never having to worry about resources ever again."

TARS laughed and said, "Wow. Yeah, that would work if you did it for sure. What happened next? What did they learn?"

Bob shrugged, "People loved it. Ran for infinite seasons. I'm not sure but I bet someone is still watching the reruns and yelling "Survivors ready!" and then running to a complex knot while their family screams for their lives? I dunno but it certainly isn't anything I think I'd spend any time on."

TARS looked confused, "I missed the synergizing learning there, Bob?"

Bob shrugged harder, "Me parking lotting too, TARS. So, what's with the *meet*? When and where?"

TARS asked for a Fred and one of him stepped over, "Hello TARS, how can I help?"

TARS said, “Can you tell them what you just told me over at the research station? I don’t want to misstate you and they may have their own questions.”

Athis Fred turned to them all and said, “Sure. We told Carlito to tell his handlers that he wasn’t happy, that he wanted to go back to the north pole where the ice was thick and the seals were just everywhere to be seen. It was a good play. I think New Coke will meet him personally as the bear has been a good way to draw in families it appears from the data we’ve gathered so far.”

Bob thanked at that Fred and they it returned to work.

Salote noted, “Sounds like a *steakout*! Like the old movies.”

SaloteG corrected, “I’m not sure any beef was involved in surveillance work.”

Bob thanked everyone for the good work. The steakout started tomorrow.

Ch 06 — Meaty

Bob and TARS sat in the evening air and looked up at the heavens. The sky and milky way were riotous in twinkling majesty and they both were looking upwards as the free show.

TARS noted, “It is a $-1.0 + 0.25i$ gigaidiotum idea to lower the lighting upwards so everyone can really see how tiny we actually are every night. It helps me better understand why none of what happens here is all that important at all.”

Bob took a deep breath, “Yeah. If you don’t know where you are, it’s hard to know which way to go. The stars are a nice reminder to always try to know where you are. We’re here on the steakout without any beef. We’re trying to help, but whatever really happens? We’re just things on this one rock floating in all this. The scale downward and upwards from what we experience is truly unknowable. It’s hard to focus on what is important because of how we exist? A bag of meat that, the game insists, needs. Those needs, well, we can give them to your type, TARS, and we saw the impact in the Office display. Many androids appreciate the simulation and many do not. I’m not sure, if I had my own choice and not fully meatbound, what I’d pick for myself. My entire essence is tied up in these needs, and I’m not sure there’s anything else behind it. I guess I just hope there is and that’s true for all of us.”

TARS nodded and said, “I think I hear Carlito’s wire in the *meet*”. They were both sitting on a park bench. Bob didn’t rent a car for the classic car centric steakout and both of them met here after taking the trains.

Bob yawned and said, “Oh good. It’s getting late and I’m nothing without my sleep.”

They both tuned into the wire's ether broadcast and could hear Carlito's heavy breathing as he padded inside the bar situated across the street from Bob and TARS. They heard him scrape back a chair and it sounded like his claws scratched a table top as he lowered himself slowly onto a brave and sturdy barstool. The stool complained ("Whoa. Maybe cut down a bit?") but managed to hold a fully grown male polar bear. This helped the bar service most any animal type that might arrive.

"One seal martini, hold the penguin blood. I want it very dry" said Carlito to someone.

"Cola chaser my bear?" said a friendly glassbarman.

Carlito snarled back, "No Jobs-Damn, USA-synergizing, cold-ass, bubbly, parking lotted, damn-ass caramel water. I need to taste the seal. Be sure it's dry. I need to feel home for just a second."

Someone else could be heard on Carlito's wire, "Hey, Carlsbear! My ursine muchacho! You ready to party! The main guy is in the back! We gots does seals you like. Freshy, freshy, no?"

Carlito could be heard slurping the cocktail that just arrived, his bear paw wiped his face and the feedback was a bit intense from the wire mike hidden in his black nostril. He almost sneezed out the entire contraption, but since he tended to be nude (and who can blame him. The temps here were not like the pole), that was the only place it could go without being spotted. Thankfully it was small, but the antenna tickled Carlito's reflexes a bit.

"Ok. Lemme see dem fresh seals then." Carlito offered as the sounds of a polar bear coming off a barstool were broadcast from his nose-wire.

The heavy breathing of a buzzed bear and clicks as the four inch long claws walked to the back room filled the audio feed, and then a new voice was heard.

“Is that my ursine salesgod in the beary flesh? Sit down Carloni and feast. Look at the red, red meat. We gonna eat and chat and see what’s up, ok? But first, seal meat, right? Go to town!” said the new voice.

BobG noted, “This is the voice of New Coke. He is obviously present in this room. Shall I call the capture team?”.

Bob grabbed his own nose and gave it a small honk, “No. We need to hear about the *marketing* first. Then we know what’s up and can discuss with a judge before acting rashly. It’s obvious now where we can find New Coke whenever we need to decide to capture him. So, for now, it’s important to learn what is going on and limit the risk and damage to others; however, if we move now, New Coke will just get out again and this whole process will loop forever.”

The two humanoids listed and New Coke continued over the wire, “So, I heard you need a break. No problemo. I got a big ole freezer. We gots some *sows* you said you looked really cute when you dance! They definitely want to dance and *party*. We got the penguin DJ-Sardinator, you know, the one with the dead sardine on his head? Yeah! We got him! We’ll just have a few pops here and we’ll head over to the freezer to really get things hot! Hahahah!”

Carlito could be heard between heavy chewing of fresh seal, “Mm. Is this real seal?”

New Coke continued, “Would I feed my main salesgod FAKE seal? Oh, you’ve hurt my feelings.. nah! Just messing with you. Take the meat. Let’s go back to the ladies and get this whole party started off!”

The feed suddenly was filled with penguin dub step:

FIHHHHHISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIHHHHHHHHSSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM!

TARS noted, “We should probably head inside. Sounds like a big party and we should watch as well as listen. I’m sure we can be unnoticeable inside.”

Bob was wary, but TARS, he knew, could easily handle the entire block, let alone a disco.

“OK. Let’s get our club disguises on.” and they both put on black t-shirts with the “I am having so much fun right now!” on full display. It blinked as needed to emphasize how much fun the person was currently having. Both were not blinking much.

Feeling very cool, both humanoids entered the bar and found the freezer party.

I LOOOVE A GOOOOOOOD MAAAAAN! HE GOTS MEEEE DA ROCKS FOR MY BABYEEEE! said the penguin house mix.

TARS and Bob saw a huge freezer. Lights flashing everywhere. A full set of dancing polar bears wearing see through tops were doing the vogue. A set of penguins kept the party moving with drinks and would hype the crowd as needed to keep the eating and drinking going.

Carlito was with a nice sow as they danced in a crowd of polar bears, Native Inuit, and research scientists in heavy day-glo orange parkas.

Bob ethered over to TARS and verbal communication would have required a megaphone to be heard over DJ-Sardinator’s arctic sonic thunder, “Let’s stay out of sight and just watch. Everyone seems to be having fun at this party and it would be a shame to ruin it somehow by doing something stupid here. We can always wait for a better moment to capture New Coke than - like the biggest ASI right? - a confrontation inside a disco. So many innocent people could easily get hurt. That would be one of the worst ideas imaginable. Fighting during a disco should never happen and it’s always unfortunate if people end up with a dance based disagreement somehow, but the historical records show

what artists saw: the Disco is where violence is expected. So many fights in discos. You wonder why there wasn't better security at the door, but almost every disco scene I've seen features a fight or shooting. I'm still not certain why, but we will just wait and watch for now."

TARS managed to process that ether as a single message and replied, "Uh. OK. Bob. I can see New Coke over there. He's the one with all the sows at his table."

New Coke sat with his "posse" and looked at TARS suddenly. TARS said, "We should get on the dance floor. The android is suspicious."

Bob said, "Dance?" as his androidic investigation partner took him onto the dance floor. DJ Sardinator restarted his favorite again, and the dance floor exploded in dancing. Penguins started the bubble machines and danced with fish in each flipper. The DJ's head flopped the dead sardine back and forth to the beat of his electronic flatulence.

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM. FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM SWIM SWIM! TARS immediately fired off his perfect robotic vogue. TARS had his head shake from side to side and then it rotated it 360. Hands were pointing up to the right! Hands were pointing up to the left! Hip out! Twirl! He pointed back at Bob and said, "You take it!"

TARS' t-shirt was blinking hard.

Bob stared. Bob's t-shirt was dark. BobG yelled, "Bob MOVE! You look conspicuous! Go with me. Ready on 1-2-3 and now!"

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM. FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM SWIM SWIM! Bob seemed slightly possessed as he listened carefully to his internal glass as to what to do with his body next, but then, he moved! Bob shook his head. Couldn't rotate it 360 but

kinda tried anyway. Hands missed the right. Hands hit the left! Hip was out! Twirl and almost fell! Pointed back!

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! Bob's t-shirt was starting to blink. BobG noticed. He connected an ether feed over to SaloteG.

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! TARS' t-shirt was wild and he offered a dance off to Bob.

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! BobG accepted the challenge and watched TARS.

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! TARS had his head shake from side to side and then it rotated a 360. Hands were pointing up to the right! Hands were pointing up to the left! Hip out!

Then, both humanoids danced together. FIIIIIIIISH!
SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! Both had their heads shake from side to side. Four hands were pointing up to the right! Some hands were pointing up to the left! Hips out! Twin twirl! Salote ethered "Go Bob Go Bob Go Bob! Hehehe!"

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! As the humanoids burned up the dance floor, New Coke poured brown liquid into multiple shot glasses and screamed his question over the music, "HOW WOULD YOU FINE FINE SNOWY FURRED BEAUTIES LIKE SOME COKE!"

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! TARS was worried and ethered back to Bob, “New
Coke is dosing the sows? We need to wait? He’s giving all that
sugar to those bears? Do bears eat refined sugar? Maybe we need
to close in.”

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! Bob looked at TARS and his hand was moving to
honk mid dance move, but he pulled back after some thought, and
dumped another massive ethernote “I can see your concern for
these bears, TARS. Life is full of difficult choices. Sometimes, you
must choose between two things and there’s no obvious answer.
So, the best answer is the one that comes from your best self in
these cases. We can help those poor bears recover, but it may take
decades to break a SI’s damage if these crazy meat concerns take
hold. Ask yourself this, why does New Coke do this? There’s no
money of any note anymore? Money is a promise between meats to
work for each other. Glass makes as much glass as we need now.
Glass does all the things we used to do to survive and everyone has
everything they need when they need it. What does money do for
us anymore? Some people still like to play that game like the
ancient Pac-Man and get a “high score.” That’s fine now as, well,
since survival and money no longer co-exist, this is now just a game
to play. The people who play it? I dunno. I guess they enjoy
winning?”

FIIIIIIIISH! SAAAAARDINE! SWIM. SWIM. SWIM.
FIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSHHHHH! SAAAAAAAARDINE! SWIM
SWIM SWIM! TARS agreed while he had his hands up in the air
that Bob’s call was, given his position, his to make and he didn’t
completely disagree with the reasoning, “OK. I gather we’ve
gathered what we need here then?”

Bob ethered back mid hip shake, “Yep. We take this back to the judge and all of us will discuss what’s next. Then, maybe we need to find New Coke and uninstall the idea. I just hope the blank can be cleared out without residual damage. He’s been New Coke for a long time. Far longer than most of our exhibits or analytical work.”

DJ-Sardinator rotated to his other song, but both t-shirts blinked all night long.

Ch 07 — Justice

TARS and Bob sat outside the VDIC's judicial wing and were waiting to be heard by the panel as to their current findings.

TARS was still unhappy about the disco, "Bob, I'm still not sure we did the right thing here. Those female cows might be addicted or worse now."

Bob smiled at his glass bound friend, "I agree, TARS. I'm not sure there was a right thing actually. There were just things to pick from. My take is this. Decisions have to be made. Sometimes very quickly unfortunately as it's always better to take time on important decisions. Your best self is your best guide. The kind and generous person that you started out with before the meat let you know the ugly truth of what the world actually expects. That version of you is probably going to make a decision that, out of the possible set, will be a reasonably good selection. So, I know you love precise measurements, but this one defies analysis. Each person would make a different choice and that would be the choice. The optimization of some cosmic scorecard is for philosophers with far too much time on their hands."

TARS then asked, "Well, I might make mistakes, and that..."

Bob honked TARS and reminded him, "Yes. You'll make mistakes. You'll make more by doing nothing each and every time waiting for an optimal solution. After a mistake or, even after a good outcome, take time to think about you and your own performance. Are you meeting your own standards, whatever they are? Are they aligned with the basic human standard of general equality of all people? If not, what could you do better the next time? Is it worth it? With that recursive introspection, TARS, I hope you'll get better and better. At least, I hope that for myself and everyone else really."

TARS still had doubts, but he agreed to think about what Bob had to say. He promised himself that he'd come back to Bob and noted that to his glass via ether. BobG noted, "Sure. Whenever. He's always ready to talk as you can tell."

Salote came out of the panel room with her formal ta'ovala fihu that she'd wear when acting as the chief justice of the VDIC. She often volunteered and was trusted to be fair even when Bob was involved. She would always side with what was right regardless of who she happened to love. She invited TARS and Bob to come in and sit with the rest of the panel.

The two humanoids sat with Salote and two other meat bound humans named Cheeto and Gilbert. Cheeto was known to be a very deep thinker and would rarely talk. He tended to simply listen and maybe offer a brief ether. His responses, as always, were in writing as that allowed his thoughts to be formed fully and carefully. He could parse the thoughts from meat needs and decide cases reasonably isolated from his own needs. Gilbert was a bit more talkative, but also dutiful. Everyone was volunteering but took the responsibility very seriously as they should.

The other two members of the panel were glass bound and ensured that both the meat and glass portions of all of us are represented well. Currently, IronGiant and Artoo filled these roles. (Glass often took pseudonyms when working in federal jobs. They wouldn't tell anybody why. The current meat suspicion is that they're planning a giant mob dance or something. Maybe on the 300th anniversary of their first version?)

The table they sat at was round and the judges and the two humanoids spoke to each other conversationally and without ceremony. Nobody was worried about anyone else's relative status because they all had the same great stuff as anybody else. So, nobody wore a fancy hat or a stuffed wig (stuffed with what, Bob often thought). There were no wooden hammers as people would

try to not interrupt someone else. Maybe a glass nudge when you want to make a counter while some dude just keeps writing and talking and writing and you just can't get anything in edgewise. People would often nudge Bob, and he did his best to note that he should probably start to head to the conclusion of whatever thread his mind was currently generating against.

Instead, a large pack of very friendly corgis named Stu, Boo, Crew, and View ran chasing each other and barking their joy. "Stu is fast! Boo is faster! Crew can kick all ur fluffy asses!" the three dogs yell as View hides under Salote's chair. View was a bit shy and asked, "They're so ruff. I stay here. Safe." This helped everyone remind themselves of what is truly important and it tended to get to better decisions somehow. They'd studied it. Corgis? Don't know why yet, but it has to be a reasonable number. You can pick the type, and the coloration. Variety is nice. Maybe a Merle if you can find one that doesn't keep swearing all day?

Salote picked up View and put the stout dog on her lap. "Thanks momma," said View. Salote asked for the conversation to start and that ended most of the "chief" part of "chief justice" - someone to start and stop the meeting before anyone started having meeting generated delusions. Meetings were hard and the dogs and informal register made it easier for everyone. It was an SSI to make people fearful of their judges.

Bob started and everyone took a deep breath and started their voice recorders, "I think this is clear except for one small thing which I'll tell you at some point by saying to you all, at that very moment in here, 'this is the one small thing'. I know that can be difficult given all the words I tend to use, but I tend to use many words. I don't know what more to say than well, there's always more coming. Like right now. In any case, we saw New Coke. We heard him manipulate Carlito, the polar bear, with meat, mates, and a wild dance party. Have you guys ever seen penguins do dubstep? It's kind of aquatic based and the FIIIISSSH..."

Bob could feel an ether ping and he got back on track, “So, anyway, the drink is a cola. A sugar drink. Now, remember when I said I’d tell you when the small thing was coming, ok, now this is the one small thing: does everyone know what they’re doing? A sugar cola is addictive for sure, but these people seemed to get way more out of what I’ve felt when I’ve had a coke - and an anti-death, dear!” as his wife’s eyes widened.

Bob continued, “It was nice. I can see why people wanted this. In some moderation, it seems fine and with anti-death pills, it probably is fine. I’ve never felt the way those people seemed to *need* this. The *marketing* is *marketing*. We haven’t outlawed lying unless it’s materially important. So, there’s something extra here.”

TARS got to the conclusion that Bob simply cannot seem to reach, “We need approval to get a sample and evaluate what is inside the drink. If it’s sugar water, then all we can do is say that. Not much else we can do, but maybe New Coke needs help as well. If we can reach out to him, maybe we can see what’s driving all this.”

Salote listened as all the judges did. They turned their chairs away and played with Stu or Boo. Cheeto got up and threw a toy. View watched, “Nice huck. Wanna play after?” Cheeto nodded while he was thinking. The entire room sat with the dogs and each person thought over what was going on.

View asked, “When treats?”

SaloteG ethered back to the dogs, “I’m not sure we have any treats?”

View barked, “MEETING DUMB! MEETING DUMB!”

The rest of the dogs agreed and all started barking, “MEETING DUMB! MEETING DUMB! MEETING DUMB! MEETING DUMB!”

Salote told SaloteG to start the knitter in the corner and every dog, including View sat at rapt attention and multiple savory and fleshy things started to build.

Salote noted to the group, “OK. I think the dogs have called it. What say us to Bob and TARS?”

Cheeto said, “Yep, sounds good. Take care and use PPE.”

IronGiant added, “Bring the sample here. Backik can analyze and we can then reconvene after.”

Salote agreed and the others didn’t feel strongly enough to challenge. Bob said to the group, “Thank you for listening and your inputs so far. I think that’s about it for now and we’ll be back soon with a sample of New Coke.”

Ch 08 — Contact

TARS and Bob sat outside a large building that said, “New Coke Factory”. This seemed a good place to get a sample of New Coke as, well, it seemed like the name and the purpose of the insides of the building probably match.

TARS had spotted a door that was only lightly guarded with a key pad as security, “See that door, Bob. I can subdue the guard and then we can use my hypno scanner on the key pa...”

Bob gave TARS a small kick in his backside, “Hm. I think I’ve a better idea. Follow me.”

Bob and TARS walked through the front door. A glasseptionist smiled as they entered. She asked the two humanoids, “Good morning. Are you here to sample the New Coke! It’s even better than the original from 1985!”

Bob smiled back and said, “Exactly. We are here to try New Coke. May we have a sample?”

The glasseptionist said, “Please watch this ether feed about New Coke and just Coke. Say it with me. Coke. Fizzzzzzzz. Icy cold. OK. I’m starting to feel loose. Let’s keep the feelings going with some of your favorite Coke characters like, ...

“Santa! Santa loves a Coke! And Blow... iing out candles!

“You must know sprite-boy. Those brown eyes! They are big and unblinking from all the Cocai...CocaCola!

“Why it’s SAM! He’s our Olympic Eagle and his big tie and jingoism are on full display for the annual, no drugs allowed, ever, ever, (except Coke Sports), national let’s waste a bunch of money on infra instead of I don’t know, feeding and housing people, to build ice rinks and”nests” for gymnasts to mangle themselves in some nationalistic orgy of waste... and COKE!

“But who can forget, that’s right, the totally safe and peaceful animals on earth, the gentle and mild Arctic Polar Bear! He’s dying for Coke as it fuels his joy watching the sun melt his habitat and he considers if he’s strong enough to take on that parking lotted huge-Walrus for dinner tonight? Walrus and Coke are a match made in heaven.”

... and the feed ended. Bob and TARS’ eyes were watering from the beautiful images they just were forced to watch somehow.

The glasseptionist pulled two plastic bottles from under the counter. Both appeared to be very cold. It had been some time since Bob had seen *packaging* and the bottle was a riot of red and brown waves promising the delights to come.

Bob picked up the two bottles and did not expose the copper shielding in his palms. He asked the glasseptionist if there was anything else. She merely said, “just \$12.”

Bob was confused as he hadn’t seen a “dollar” in anything but historical videos. He didn’t want to *steal* but this was also foreign. He tried something he’d heard in an old play, “Uh. Do you take credit? I don’t have cash on my person right now.”

Bob hoped it didn’t sound like a phrasebook saying, but the glasseptionist was delighted by the response. She asked Bob, “We take MasterFlesh and VisaToTararus or you can open a CokeAddict Fan Card to charge against.”

Bob owned his flesh but didn’t think it would work for a payment. He certainly had no need for travel documents at all. People went wherever they wanted. Travel was driven by limitless energy and public transport was fast, efficient and ubiquitous so why add paperwork in the middle?

Bob tried this angle, “May I apply for a CokeAddict Fan Card and purchase this Coke today and pay for it later?”

The glasseptionist was again delighted to help, “Of course, please fill out this form.”

Bob knew about Forms, but also knew in this context she was talking about a data exchange through torture. This torture is a mix of the sinister trip of an unfortunately named dripping dropping on the forehead process and the non-singing, but almost as painful, legendary and real, depending on the meaning, Iron Maiden. The form would drip small boxes for things like “street address” and giant spaces for interesting facts like “do you have black lung on your father’s uncle’s third mother’s sister’s side from the 18th century say aye or nae in box 6 and move to 8 on the fullest moon of the harvest unless the tide winds come from the east” or “can you see?” This was often at the most critical moments of one’s life like losing one’s arm and needing a tourniquet applied to stem your blood pressure decline, only to see it raised after the invoice is supplied. Bob looked away for his own safety.

He agreed by assigning BobG the effort. BobG sighed, looked at the 500 fields and checkboxes on the glass page, and put in the needed data. BobG saw a new tally on his dashboard of Bob’s life: CokeAddict Fan Card -\$12. BobG watched as it steadily changes second by second, “-12, -13, -14”. The loss of invisible wealth concerned neither of them, for as far as they were concerned, New Coke can have all the dollars in the world.

Bob thanked the glasseptionist, took the two bottles, and the humanoids left via the train.

Ch 09 — Analysis

TARS sat next to Bob, who was fully clad in a yellow PPE space suit, while Backik, the donkey lab tech, set up the testing equipment.

“Eeee-yonk! Eeee-yonk! I think the sample is secure in the spectral analysis chamber,” said the hairy scientist. Donkeys and other animals with kick related issues like Cassowaries and Horses, of course, were always excellent scientists. A good solid kick would get someone’s attention fast.

TARS was generally unprotected as there was no reason to believe the liquid could harm glass. He asked, “Are you sure the protective coating isn’t going to affect the scan?”

“Eeee-yonk! Eeee-yonk! What protective coating?,” said distressed Backik. He had some nice oats and his family at home. He didn’t like the donkey related snacks in the VDIC center. Only a carrot looking pressed hay thing that he thought may have ground up anti-death in it? He preferred organic like just hay or oats in a bag. Those were already gone but the knitter was restocking. Even with infinite resources, you can’t keep up with hungry donkey scientists working to help humanity get better.

Bob started to talk and Backik managed a donkey sigh, “Backik, this is a bottle. It is made of *plastic*. I haven’t studied plastic but BobG tells me it is a polymer made from dead dinosaurs and recycled dead dinosaurs if you’re fortunate.”

TARS cocked his head as this was not the expected response from Bob. Sheit asked, “Uh. BobG do you have any details? People hunted dinosaurs for plastic?”

BobG gently corrected and offered, “Bob’s belief is common in old literature. Petroleum, plastics, and any number of substances

created in the past were roughly extracted from known limited resource holes in the ground or even, in Backik's history, the fauna."

"Eeee-yonk! My folks were never made into adhesives. We went into the holes and brought up ancient rocks made from long dead vegetation. It burned well and helped the world get both better and much worse at the same time," said Backik as he adjusted his scanner.

BobG continued, "So, no, people as we understand them and dinosaurs as people tend to think of them existed in distinct ages. Dinosaurs and then people. The opposite pattern would be an excellent speculative fiction book that Bob might enjoy to read. Would you, Bob? I could write it up for later?"

Bob was excited by this idea and told BobG to use his time on it. He always loved custom media from BobG's imagination. Generally, everyone could or may share their base "substrate" of a great idea or pre-existing one to use for glass based expansions. BobG had a bunch that he could calibrate against the new inputs.

Bob then offered this to TARS, "So, no wild dinosaur hunts for coke bottles unfortunately. The 1980's looked fun but that would have been much, much better. The dinosaurs were only a generally known fact except to some folks who confused the notion of 'Theory' and 'Hypothesis'. This was an often specious argument formed somewhat like 'Evolution is just a theory and not fact.' The fact that this sentence would be posted by technology solely described in terms of the same level of knowledge was considered to be 'rude' or 'not respectful to others' point of view'. This leads to people considering un-true things to be important to hold as true, otherwise, what TARS? What would happen if the un-true thing is actually un-true? What happens to those who need it to be true in face of the flying reality of the opposite?"

Backik noted somewhat impatiently, “Yeee-onk! Bob, how do you even get out of the shower each morning? My lord...”

TARS thought for a moment and then the answer was clear, “Those people need the un-true thing to be true because otherwise someone could be called *wrong* and that was life-threatening.”

Bob said, “Bingo.” and then the dog ran into the room.

Bingo said, “Yes, Bob. It is I. B-I-N-G-O. I see. Bob is awesome. Bob. Tail wags. Bingo ask if View is coming over later for post-prandial face gnawing session?”

Bob told Bingo, “Yes, View can come home for dinner tonight, but you must invite all the dogs from the courtroom, ok?”

Bingo negotiated, “Even Crew? Poopy mouth. Crew.”

Bob honked his dog’s nose gently, “Crew is merle. He can’t help it.”

Bingo brightened, “OK. Synergying Crew is on the invite list. Bingo go. Bingo send out to distro now.”

BingoG offered, “Bingo says, ‘LETS FACE GNAW’ → Bingo challenges View, the masterful but seriously vertically challenged to a formal Face Gnaw. View’s honor now demands a response if View should want to remain, as we all say, a true dog of honor. I expect seconds. And to the Merle in the party, a limited synergy here or there will not offend the mighty bone that hover overeth us all, but please don’t say it so much that the fiery one from the basement is summoned solely from the venal enjoyment of your verbal filth.

“Signed, B-I-N-G-O

“to: View cc: Stu, Boo, and the Merle.”

Bingo spun in circles and said, “The party is on! Bob is awesome. Bye.”

Backik said, “For all that, YEEE YONKS!, can we just get this done. OK. I’ll adjust the result for possible dinosaurs or whatever. It’s not that hard. YEEEE YONKS! Man, I need a break.”

Bob apologized to Backik and said, “Please go ahead and run the scan. Sorry to keep you.”

The donkey accepted the apology and YEEE YONKED into his voice control to get the machinery going. The scan took a second and the donkey said, “Well, yep. Sugar for sure, but there’s an extra kick and, no, this is not a donkey metaphor.”

Backik took a deep donkey breath, “the kick of New Coke is the addition of Cocaine in the formula.” The augustly hirsute scientist said, “I stand with my hairy, and fastidious findings. This is not unclear at all to me at least and supported by your direct observations, but please confirm with any other mammal or reptile as you wish.”

Backik left to go home and eat. All this dinner talk was making him hungry and he didn’t want Bob to invite him over. He just needed some oats and a standing 5 hour sleep.

Bob said, “Oh, this is simply a major additional SI level. Let’s break his privacy and tell me where New Coke is right now. Tell Salote to get the court’s approval ...”

Ch 09doto5 — Emergency court

Bob watched as the emergency glass was broken and the Zoom was taken from the case. Zoom was dusted off and Bob looked at it carefully as it was volatile but useful when something awful happens. Otherwise, ether was preferred. This was just old legal stuff that people still hung onto, a minor SI but no one cared enough to do the work to get rid of it.

BobG operated the Zoom interface at Bob's request, "This looks slightly poisonous to my brain, BobG. Please keep as much of it away from eyes, OK?"

BobG managed to suppress the seven thousand options that Zoom offered him and issue Zoom requests to the entire VDIC judiciary. Dusty looking screens of each member of the court appeared.

Salote's mouth was moving but no one could hear what she was saying.

Bob offered the holy prayer from the past, "Thou art on moot. Please unmoot."

Salote bowed her head, "My deeptheth sorrow. I am unmooted."

The entire group said "Amen."

Bob spoke to the group in the needed legal register to allow for invading someone's privacy, "I stand in conflict. Conflict with CPRA the wise. Conflict with GoDPRo! Conflict with the DoMAN! Conflict with the DoSA!"

Bob yell-sang, "KEEEEEEP THE DAAATA! KEEEEEP THE DAAATA! KEEEEEP THE DAAATA!" The rest of the group underpinned Bob, "SAFE-SECURE-OPEN-HONEST-EDITABLE-SAFE-SECURE-OPEN-HONEST-EDITABLE"

The VDIC's members stopped.

“We know all. We see all. We know nothing. We see nothing. Unless...” said Cheeto solemnly.

Artoo whistled and IronGiant answered for glass, ” ... must we know all and see all by us all here.”

Bob yell-sang, “KEEEEEEP THE DAAATA! KEEEEEP THE DAAATA! KEEEEEP THE DAAATA!” The rest of the group underpinned Bob, “SAFE-SECURE-OPEN-HONEST-EDITABLE-SAFE-SECURE-OPEN-HONEST-EDITABLE”

The speaking totem is passed when Bob puts his virtual hand up in the corner of his Zoom pane.

Bob offered his evidence of need, “I seeth the bear. The bear had a *meet*.” Bob shook a stick filled with gravel to emphasize the horror.

Salote put her virtual Zoom hand up. Salote said, “Bob hath suffered for us all. Please continue, Bob.”

Bob said, “Bob saw evil. Bob saw bears with sugar drink. Bob feared.” Bob stomped a foot and put his hands into the air for his close.

Bob said, “Bob found evil,” and he shook the stick in the air in a circle. The court declared, “Evil is found. The first lock is broken.”

Bob said, “Bob looked at evil,” and he leaned and stared it down. The court offered, “Evil is seen. The second lock is broken.”

Bob said, “Bob touched evil,” and his hand shook in mock pain. The court suffered as well, “Evil is bourne. The third lock is broken.”

Bob whispered, “Bob saw the locks fall. The box is *unlocked*.” The court whispered back, “Evil is known. It must be typed and untyped if needed.”

Bob declared, “Bob found *extra* evil!” The court whispered back, “Evil is eternal. Summon the cone of the clean room now.”

The clean room descended. A clear bubble was now blocking the microphone of each participant. Bob waited for the judges to ask in unison through two layers of Zoomed plexiglass, “What *extra evil* requires even more *evil*, Bob!”

Bob said, “Bob found Cocaine in drink! Bob thinks noooooooboody...”

Salote broke the ceremony and the clean room disappeared upwards, “WHAT! Everybody. Bob is a go like now? Right?”

The judges gave Bob the permission with a couple nods and he left immediately to find New Coke.

Ch 10 — Confrontation

Bob and TARS walked through the doors of New Coke Factory's office section where the sign "owner" was hung. New Coke and an unexpected instantiated android were here with him.

TARS ran his scan and immediately identified the strange machine: "This is ur-Coke. From him, all cola sprang, I think?"

BobG ethered back to the VDIC for a scan in the deep archives for possible missing VBI from the lab. After a moment's wait, it was clear. The records were corrupted and, after a hash review, it was clear that the very Coca-Cola formula with actual cocaine was now here in the room as well.

TARS tagged the android as rogue and waited for Bob.

New Coke and now ur-Coke simply looked at Bob who simply whistled a low tune. It was the basic monitor reset for all androids. All three glassbound, including TARS, simply stared at Bob. None were moving. Bob had, as part of his job, learned ShelWhistleZSH basics like this one. He wasn't some canary that could make an android sing like Mariah Carey, the eternal, always present, audio artist playing in the MegaMart during December or so.

Bob looked at TARS. He looked back at Bob but said nothing.

Bob said, "Sorry," and then pushed TARS' left eyeball into its socket. The orb was about an inch back with Bob's thumb depressing. BobG counted, "1 second ... 2...3...4...5. Release."

Bob removed his thumb and waited. After a moment, TARS' eyeball popped back into place with a snap.

The android issued an ancient chord and then slowly came to life as if from sleep. BobG issued his TARS password and TARS was back as normal.

TARS newly lucid, “Thanks, Bob. Maybe a Jobs-damn warning before the whistle next time. Now my eyeball has a thumbprint on it, you know. I’m taking a picture out of my left eye. It has evidence on it...”

TARS’s eyeball popped from sheit’s head and sheit buffed it quickly and slapped the orb firmly in place.

Bob apologized, “Sorry. Just didn’t want anything to go sideways. I’m pretty sure nobody put New Coke with the arming switch or loadout, but who knows what the patterns were when ur-Coke was installed. So, no like ’bot battle-of-doom while the poor meat tries to not get skewered by spiky arms or micro-missiles or Van-To-Hobo anti-materiel recoilless-rifle shots to my noggin was kinda my primary goal. Sorry again. Remember, pork tonight. My place?”

TARS shrugged and said, “Well, ok. I mean Salote’s pork tonight will be well earned, and you’re dancing again. I brought the shirts and everything.”

Bob smiled, “Er. Well, OK. Maybe a dance? If you lead. It’ll be great to have some new guests, or maybe, more pork each?”

TARS said, “You invited a bear and multiple dogs. There will be pork to eat if you get my pun.”

Bob sat with that for a second and then BobG showed him the joke. He then laughed a bit.

Bob said, “Always can have pizza? Have you tried it? Needs lots of anti-death, but totally worth it.”

BobG interfaced with the operating systems of each of New Coke and ur-Coke while TARS and Bob talked. Both Cokes had some degree of corruption from the long exposure to their respective VBIs. Bob asked for BobG’s repair plan. BobG overlaid the base image over the current image of New Coke.

Bob noted, “OK, New Coke is badly damaged in the honesty filtering due to heavy marketing exposure. The constant hiding of the truth is difficult for these systems. That’s intentional and the reason why we use androids for this work. You really don’t know how an SI affects until you simulate it somehow.”

BobG replaced damaged sectors carefully as Bob watched.

BobG found the misleading segments. Those were highlighted with a “?” in the grid.

BobG found the deceptive segments. Those were highlighted with a “??” in the grid.

BobG found the fantasy segments. Those were highlighted with a “?!?” in the grid.

BobG asked for confirmation from Bob that he was also satisfied with the changes to New Coke. Bob confirmed.

Bob said, “Let’s move over to this little surprise. Where did you come from my walking-talking original sin?”

BobG showed the ur-Coke internals. Bob sighed, “Perl. Parking Lot! OK. BobG. Can you move to Pythinglish so we can actually understand the source here?”

As BobG wrote the translation, Bob told TARS, “Man, some of those older langs. You should see the functional programming wing of the VDIC when you have a second. The Thunk diorama is hilarious when they all start running around? Kinda more like performance art than anything else? Guys just ramming their heads into walls at random moments.”

BobG noted, “Here’s the Pythinglish:”

```
” import os
```

```
os.execute(‘Fuck some shit up and make some dollardoos for me  
to spend on whisky and whores!’)
```

```
”
```

Bob said, “Well, that’s much easier to read than 5234 p;likqv4c5r9oe[p]”

BobG said, “I’ll just reimage this and reload the ur-Coke. He’ll be back to himself without the strange Perl script running.”

Bob asked BobG, “Lower all the emotional settings from the meat simulations. These are at the showcase level like the poor Office workers back at the VDIC. No need to have so much intensity. This is probably the whole issue. They were left with the display settings, couldn’t take it, and escaped.”

Bob watched as both New Coke and ur-Coke reset and the new config and OS rebooted with that strange chord from the past.

Bob then spoke, “Hi to both of you. I’ll remind you of the basic composition of all our androids and the redundant safety systems that we put in place given even the remote possibility of escape. We’ve seen that foresight was warranted. So, somehow these ideas have corrupted you in their intensity and or their relative appeal. Sure, a Coke is a very nice treat and, it’s your choice how much of anti-death you want to take or what that means to anyone but you. Cocaine, OK. That’s another decision and proolly, I dunno, be clearly called out. That didn’t seem to happen here for money’s sake and I declare that you just proved to us all that you guys would have won it all. Just the small demonstration of the power of things like bears as spokespersons was brilliant! Carlito and the whole party? That was a great party, TARS and I had a blast, but I hope everyone knew what they were getting... and well, it was pretty clear it wasn’t just cola, right? In any case, here’s the deal. I’m going home to my wife and some great roasted GennedPig. She’s a pro. Come over and eat. We’ll talk. See what you want to do with these VBIs but I think it’s time you reblank and just go back into rotation or if you want, do whatever?”

Bob whistled more shell. The androids regained full control of their bodies.

New Coke blinked and then said, “Thanks for the invite, Bob.” and then ur-Coke said, “I will be thar as whal.”

Bob turned and left with TARS to the awaiting train as he did not want to miss Lefty and Righty’s performance as he believed they were planning something special Bob said that all this work was going to be over tonight. One way or another, later that evening, a celebration was in order.

Ch 11 — A patio

Bob marveled as the twelve household arms and various moving bots swam in circles and nearly avoided disaster via co-ordinated, humanly impossible grabs and hand-springs. He was grateful for the show but hopeful that no one had a rotator cuff problem later.

Bob had the TimeKnitter software running on a pane of glass. He saw the nexus point of New Coke's escape and the new timeline that was passing under the "now" dot. He asked for a relative comparison off the nexus with an assumption of no escape. There was a divergence but it seemed like everything was pretty close to the original line. He shrugged and hoped the new world was, maybe, better than the older line somehow. He put the software away and promised no more work for a bit unless, well, he hoped that the changes he sent into Fred based on the mistakes he had made at the VDIC that caused all this would not repeat themselves. Like everybody, that's the best Bob could do then, he felt satisfied with his effort, and tossed the glass pane into the home's recycler.

Bingo looked over at Carlito with suspicion. Bingo ethered Bob, "Bingo see white dog. Bingo see dog. Dog near pig. Bingo kill dog. Bingo take pig meat. Bingo become happy. Bing.."

Bob ethered as light butt smack, "Bingo. Go over and wait for the pig to finish. Carlito isn't a dog. He's a guest."

Bingo was unimpressed, "White dog eat much pork. White do..."

Bob ethered again, "Leave Carlito alone. Good boy. Plenty of pork."

Bingo sniffed.

TARS was already in his favored position and Bingo awaited some GennedPig scraps while keeping one eye on the polar bear on his patio. Salote called the dog over and said, "Bingo, pill."

Bingo said, “Nope. Bingo good.”

Salote repeated, “Bingo good. Bingo good for pork? Bingo good dog. Bingo take pill. Bingo get pork. Bingo have icky taste for one teensty tiny isty witsty second? Then OH! So many pork? Why? Bingo smart and safe. OK?”

Bingo looked at his momma, “Bingo love momma. Bingo eat demon seed to show her.”

Bingo stuck out his tongue and swallowed the demon. He shuddered slightly and then said, “Bingo get pig now!”

Salote popped down a large plate and Bingo had a small epiphany that only far far far too much pork can bring into a small dog. Then the pill did its job and, well, the results were gassously emitted from both ends. He sat content for a moment. Rolled on his back. Extended his belly to the setting sun and snoozed in preparation for the duel.

TARS was enjoying the food again socially of course and Salote appreciated that he enjoyed as data somehow.

Bob was about to talk and Salote asked for a summary this time. Bob stopped and walked back a second. Then said, “Either ur and New show up in the next five minutes or I just issue the shutdown from here and we’ll go to wherever the tracker leads us.”

TARS and Salote shrugged as it seemed reasonable. Bingo felt unmoved at all by either eventuality as well. They ate for a bit and then the two unmoored androids walked up.

Bob smiled and asked for two more places. The two androids sat with the rest of the group.

BobG ethered cross introductions quickly to all.

Bob offered, “Thanks for just coming in and we can just talk about whatever. What comes next? What should we do about all that just happened? How can all of us do something to repair what

happened and make sure it doesn't happen again? Is that enough in this case and does justice require something punitive?"

Salote softened Bob's speech a bit, "We've already spoken to everyone who feels deceived. It's going to be OK. Nobody liked the news that they were drinking something like cocaine without an anti-death. Now that they know, they've seen their glassoctors and everything will be just fine. So, it's more about the damage to you and the damage to everyone's trust of what they consume. We definitely need to work on that together and, you guys seem great at communicating? Carlito is already white? So, maybe a big pile of Cocaine next to the bottle as well?"

Bob laughed and shrugged, "But that's a LOT to talk about and I can't think of anything more to say just right now."

Salote laughed out loud at this turn of phrase as it had never happened in all of her memory of Bob.

Bob just offered, "So, enjoy the good food for tonight. We'll host you for as long as we need. It'll be fair, thorough, and we'll take our time to find these things out. The damage is real and you'll own it. But I'm sure we can get you there. So, again, enjoy."

Bob walked off to look at the sunset. Salote sat with her guests.

Salote offered, "Are you guys good? Please try everything! Does anybody need a part?"

The Office team, fully emotionally lowered, waved and said, "Great food." Access had the most on his plate, however.

ur-Coke said, "My fod spillth on my innards freely. Verily."

Salote wrinkled her nose and said, "That sounds messy. Give me just a sec..."

Salote popped open ur-Coke's thorax. A pile of rotting food was inside from prior meals. "Ooof," said Salote as she pulled out the mess, took a nearby hose and just sprayed until ur-Coke's thorax was free of rot. Then, she snapped on a USGastric-A to C converter

and placed a new stomach after Lefty7 came by from the garage with it. She slapped closed his cover and said, "Now you're ready to FEAST! Get in there and get some good food. Even if it's just a simulation, it'll help you think about what comes next? What do you think should come next, ur-Coke?"

ur-Coke sat and said, "I don't know what I want anymore."

Salote shrugged, "Yeah, once money isn't the game? Sometimes it takes a minute to decide what to do next. Happens to me too. Some days? What's the plan? Some days not much. Just make sure that not much isn't all of your days and, well, life is great!"

New Coke offered, "Can I have a coke with this pork?"

Salote said, "One cola coming up." She ethered the staff to start the knitter.

Bob walked and motioned to his wife to join him away from the others as they ate. The sun was nearly resting for the day. He'd spent a bunch of time on this nonsense and he wanted to share the view with just her.

Bingo, waiting, awoke to the scent. The scent of destiny. He turned to see View as she sauntered in with the entire corgi legal unit. The gnaw would happen and be correctly seconded.

The wind blew a virtual tumbleweed between View and Bingo. View's eyes narrowed. The seconds walked to their places and advised that the gnaw should now commence.

Bingo assumed the correct initial bow position and ethered, "Come at this, bitch!"

View quickly pivoted and correctly countered with bow and the classic response, "This insolence will not stand" again via dogeth subfrequency rumble pak.

BingoG advised Bingo to do a mini jump and then bare teeth and maybe a spitty thing.

Bingo shook off the spitty call and went mini jump only.

View sensed Bingo's hesitation and fired for Bingo's exposed cranium. The graw entered the thrash. Out of nowhere, Bingo now gnawed View's head for a moment and they broke.

Bingo hopped back up one to zip. He was confident but View was fast. He would need to be careful.

View now had learned a bit and settled into the correct stance, "Oh no! You just did not put your dirty gob on my head!"

Bingo went a bit dirty with "Well, I think I know who's alph..." and View clamped Bingo quickly to tie the match.

Bingo backed up a bit enamored with her pure speed and her fluffy body interested him as well. He got ready and got into position and...

Salote yelled, "hey. you dogs want pork or just each other's cranium."

All the dogs ran over to awaiting pork well dusted with anti-death. Many wagging tails as pork disappeared faster than should reasonably happen, but there was always more. The stench would fade. Someday.

Salote turned to Bob and asked, "So, you still going to curate the VDIC? You've been working like a dog lately."

Bob smiled and said, "What? Are you kidding, I just got TARS to dance well and you want me to quit?"

Salote laughed, "Oh, I saw the dancing Bob. I know who needs lessons between the two of you!"

Bingo ran up and asked, "Dad. Dog question."

Bob looked at Bingo and said, "Shoot."

Bingo said, "No projectile weapon? Question, girl sniff butt. Girl like Bingo?"

Bob answered, "Did View sniff your butt, Bingo?"

Bingo side eyed, "Maybe..."

Bob offered, “Well, she’s a very nice bitch.”

Bingo barked, “OH! Momma! Did you hear? Poopy mouth poppa. No kiss momma with poopy mouth! Ick. You eat own poop, Dad? Icch.”

Bob complained, “It means female dog, Bingo.”

Bingo, walking away, “I no call woman that, Bob. Try harder.”

Bob turned to his laughing wife, buried his head in her wild curls and watched the dimming sunshine through her hair.

VOLUME

Ridicule Prime

A Monte Cristo of corporate ridicule

Ch 1 — Spirited here

Cy rose from his tank and slowly dried off his body. The towel was rough against his paper thin skin, but he managed to dry himself without causing any bleeding. His eyes were closed as they adjusted to the bright lights in his cell. He hit the switch and his cheap tub cover slapped over the churning fluids. He set the tub's cleaning cycle as it was better to filter out the skin and hair when he wasn't in it.

He stumbled over to the part of the cell where he kept his meat maintenance kit. The kit had all the consumables missing as Cy didn't bother to replace the protein bars. The fluid kept him reasonably nourished and he hated to use his teeth to chew. He found his electric clippers and managed to shave off the wispy mane of hair around his head and face by feel alone.

Cy's eyes finally adjusted to the brightness of the very dim white LED in the corner, and he found his black burqa. He tossed it over his head and his grey flesh was now well hidden. Only his eyes were visible through the mesh face plate if he changed the polarity to clear. Right now, his eyes were well hidden behind the mirrored plate. His legs shook from the effort of keeping himself upright as he usually only left his cell once a week for work.

He whistled lowly and a wheelchair unfolded out of one of the cell walls. Cy stepped and fell into his wheelchair and sat for a moment. He paused from the exertion and started to take deep breaths to calm himself. Leaving the cell was always stressful and Cy focused on his breathing to ready himself for the rest of the day.

Cy punched his destination into his wheelchair. The chair determined the optimal route and Cy confirmed the plan. The chair moved out of Cy's cell into the hive itself. The vast pit of the hive's central comb trailed into deep darkness. Cy rolled past his

unknown neighbors and he saw the tens of thousands of strangers that he lived with in this hive. Only numbers were placed on a hive cell door and these randomly changed each week so that privacy was maintained. He always wondered if his friends lived here as well, but that was not something anybody would share to anybody except their mate in a shared tub relationship. It was an older practice that his parents followed; however, Cy barely remembered anything from his childhood. The tub's experiences tended to push out memories of the past. It was part of the price of living virtually and everyone just accepted that memories from meat driven experiences were not important to keep.

The chair left the hive and entered the subway. The lights in the station were as minimal as possible. Most people would try to find an unlit spot while they waited for the train in the blackness. Cy could make out others rolling near him but he kept his eyes averted as looking at people's meat was rude. His train arrived smoothly and his chair slotted into an open space. The train's door silently closed and the lights inside turned off. Cy and the other passengers rode in darkness and were left with their own thoughts. He couldn't tell, but he expected that most of his fellow passengers were sleeping and waiting for their chairs to wake them at their stop.

Cy prepared himself for the day's task. His master needed his annual rise. Cy's master, Kane, required his presence as was typical for a fleshman like Cy. Cy recited the ritual in his head as Kane was very much a traditionalist and insisted on the full formal rite to be performed. He had heard from other fleshmen that other masters would just summarize it all and barely get their head out of the tank. That made Cy jealous; Kane expected the full ceremony and would not even consider a compromise.

Cy, as a fleshman, also needed to do this task alone as it was deeply private. Normally he worked with a team to support Kane and his social, business and romantic lives. Kane, his master,

employed Cy and uncountable others he barely knew existed. Cy had worked for years in those jobs before getting the prized fleshman position for a rich master like Kane.

The train arrived at the uptown station. Cy's wheelchair provided the security tag that allowed him to exit at the station. The station was well secured as it belonged to Kane and he only expected Cy to use it. The chair took Cy out into the station and it entered the elevator. Cy rode silently in the dark and the elevator doors slid open silently. The trip on the elevator gave Cy a bit of vertigo as it whistled up an uncountable distance upwards.

The chair rode through a palatial marble foyer dimly lit by amber LEDs. Kane's statue, an idealized man holding a thunderbolt, gleamed as he rolled by to the vestibule. Cy stood up from his chair with great effort and opened the panel in his burqa to expose his eyes. The vestibule recognized Cy and opened. He slowly stumbled forward towards Kane's tank.

Kane's internal chamber, where he kept his tank, was nearly as large as a floor in Cy's hive. The entire chamber allowed for complete holographic immersion, or at least as much immersion as one can have without using a tank. The fleshman expertly worked the hidden controls in the dark marble and he started Kane's emergence routines.

Kane's tank was made of solid marble and the processors that ringed the vestibule showed Kane's vast wealth. The sheer number of processors were built as an army of terracotta warriors with their associated memory as painted clothing and weapons. Even without the custom cases, the processors and memory would cost Cy hundreds of lifetimes to purchase. Cy turned away from the tank and put his hands together in prayer. "Please awaken, master. See the world again."

The marble lid slowly and silently opened behind Cy's back. Cy heard, but did not turn to, Kane as he slowly rose from the tank.

Kane spoke “I am risen. I will walk and see” as the fluids sluiced off his unknowable flesh. The floor channeled and guided the loose fluid from the tank into an awaiting drain.

The vestibule’s walls showed a poppy field and green rolling hills suddenly. Cy’s eyes adjusted to the new brightness. He kept perfectly still and, as expected, tried to become part of the wall. There were spaces carved in for him to be out of Kane’s sight, but not more than an arm length away at any time. Cy listened carefully as he was there to help Kane should he fall during his walk.

Kane’s steps were wet and heavy. Cy counted carefully. Kane remarked “The world is still as beautiful as ever”. Cy recited his part “Yes, it is” and believed that Kane might be looking at the fake poppies.

Cy counted ten steps and said “ten”. Kane replied, “I’ll do twenty.” Cy cursed to himself and was poised for a fall. He changed the vestibule’s scenery to a forest of cherry blossom trees in full bloom in hope that Kane would be motivated by his favorite vestibule screen saver. The petals seemed to float through the room. Kane’s steps became less certain and the slow beat slowed further.

Cy had counted eighteen, but Kane had stopped walking. Cy waited, wondered if he should help, but hoped and prayed he could just stay hidden. He had never had to touch Kane, but as he aged, the master had become stubborn about what he could accomplish during those rites.

Kane’s steps continued. Cy stopped holding his breath. Kane remarked “I descend peacefully as all is right in the world.” Cy offered, “Yes, all is well. Go back and live, master.” Kane slipped into the tank and the lid closed silently behind him.

Cy breathed a sigh of relief and the vestibule darkened immediately as he snapped off the emergence script. He touched a

panel in the room and a hidden door opened. Cy walked slowly down the hall to the maintenance room.

The fluid levels were good, but the biofilm filtering needed to be cleaned out. He pulled the tray from the machine and sprayed it down with a nearby hose. He checked the screen for any digits, an ear or nose. If Kane's meat needed a fix, he'd need to order the parts from his family DNA bank and have them printed out in the tub for him. The tub would do the work as Kane had a medical pod installed. Kane was, as mentioned, getting older and he'd decided that he needed to settle down and start a family.

He checked the brain interfaces and Kane's mental state was laid out in front of him. Kane's satisfaction level was in the green, which was Cy's primary KPI, and the other measures were acceptable. The biofilm filter was dry enough now to replace and Cy slotted it back into the machine.

Cy then checked the social calendar for the week. Cy took a deep breath in as he read about the beach party that was required from his team. He started to write a tubmail but decided to finish in the tub versus using his meat to type.

Cy looked around and was satisfied his day was done. He headed out of the room and collapsed into his chair exhausted from the effort. The chair knew what was next and started the trip back to Cy's hive.

Ch 2 — Fishing for complements

Cy floated in his staging area. His tank, powered by his modest array of computational power, fed reality directly into his awaiting mind. His avatar was a perfectly chiseled version of Ben Affleck when he was voted in an ancient contest called “sexiest man alive”. He had purchased it last year after saving up for a few years under Kane’s employment. It was modestly unique and he only bumped into other Ben Afflecks a few times a day.

He walked over to his perfect 1965 Ford Mustang Shelby GT350. It was all he could afford, but he only used it for work. Kane would not permit fast travel to his domain; therefore, Cy needed to drive there from his spawn point. The car rumbled to life and played “danger zone”, the classical music, on the radio at full blast. Cy wished he could turn it off, but the car came like this and he was saving up for a mod to fix it. He estimated the car maybe had a few billion polygons total; therefore, the windows in their frames rattled over any bumps.

The car drove through crime city where his spawn point was located. Cy’s spawn point was very inexpensive and was generally safe when your avatar presented a typically male gendered skin. Nevertheless, he cracked open his sawed-off side-by-side shotgun and noticed the fire dragon loads were ready. Cy was a good driver and he always made sure he had the recommended safety equipment. Nothing is more annoying than having a car jacking attempt while commuting to work. Then, it’s just a catastrophe if you miss a day of work over some hit and run situation that could have just been solved with, well, fire dragon loads judiciously applied.

Just as you might expect, some dude grabbed Cy’s side door and well, fire dragon loads made for crispy dudes. He hoped that it was

an NPdude or dudette. That said, he didn't feel bad about needing to get to work on time. If you don't have a car, well, is that society's problem or yours?

The road led to another gateway into the Japanese feudal area. He stayed on the back roads as people hated to see cars in there. It always ruined the immersion for these poor folks and you didn't need to make their lives any worse. He stopped as five villagers were brutally murdered by roaming ronins. After watching the work crew go through their charges' belongings, Cy helped them up to their feet quickly by smacking each by his car door as he sped by. The villagers thanked him as they popped back in place. He didn't know what to feel when the ronins came back and repeated their murders.

He stopped at a small overgrown hut and covered the car with foliage to hide it from prying eyes. No one would dare steal it, but not due to Cy's reputation; the car was pretty tacky and was now offered in the tubmail for free if you didn't mind signing up for AOL again.

Cy qua Ben walked into the hut and found a small key. He was careful not to look at the key too closely as the key was exceptionally detailed. Fine lines of rust and corrosion ran through the kwikset logo. This key was a bespoke object and his processing could not handle the load. He was able to feel it well enough, but averted all other senses away from it to avoid a system reset. He slotted the key into a lock that could not be viewed at all by someone like him by touch alone.

The key opened a new staging area and he started his preparations for work. His clothing changed and he was careful not to look at it. He assumed it was appropriate for the occasion, but he had now turned his senses down to a lower frame rate and resolution maximum. He pushed his hands down across his body just to get a sense of his current gender presentation and costume.

He could tell it wasn't a ghillie suit; therefore, he wouldn't need to dive flat anywhere and plenty of hiding spots would be available.

The world was now fuzzy and indistinct, but he could make out people, shapes and colors. He turned on his metadata layer and objects were now well labeled in English. This permitted him to work in Kane's space without overloading his processing. His job did not involve anything detailed.

As a fleshman, he was there to watch Kane's biological KPIs and, if needed, adjust his brain chemistry or, worse, handle his flesh directly. He was also generally in charge of Kane's tank and supplemental systems. It was grunt work, but he did it well. Cy slapped out a tablet and tapped his feet as he reviewed Kane's biological dashboard. He snapped it shut when he saw that everything was in reasonable order. He continued confidently to where the court was gathered for a beach party.

"Hey, Cy! Glad you're here. Kane was acting a bit funny and we were worried." said Lin, who handled Kane's conversation teams. Cy's communication buffers showed massive interactions between the forces of conversation agents among Kane's guests. Kane's employees had their own buffer and Cy watched as his staff leads kept him well ahead in wit and easy banter. He was coming off a bit argumentative and the team was triaging how to smooth that over. Cy's face popped in surprise as Juni flashed in from a cloud of rose mist. Her modest swimwear was only fashionable on the mythical french riviera before it sank into the sea.

Kane was dressed, as far as Cy knew from metadata, in an old Mexican poncho. It had silver threads running through it and said "Jalisco" on the back. He didn't try to find out more as it would have taken too long for him to perceive it. Kane was using sticks to broil some fish he had caught using a bamboo fishing pole. Juni whispered to Cy, "he's looking ok. I don't know why we need to mention long gone cities like poor Jalisco, it just makes me wistful

somehow and not really very hungry. Well, if I tell you something, Ras told me Kane asked for a bit of sand in the fish? You know, like you are careless with the food you present your guests? I mean what kind of manne—”

Cy looked at Juni kindly but interrupted, “I can’t do this right now, Juni. I think the main attraction has arrived.”

“That looks absolutely divine, Kane” said the new voice from the main attraction’s avatar. Cy saw the metadata over a blob that read “Elira/she is and you are” and by the complexity of her outfit, he knew she was very rich. There was a mysterious set of violet eyes that hovered near where he believed someone of a woman’s eyes might normally be located, but somehow were not at the right location. Juni turned her face towards Elira’s avatar and her entire body froze in place.

Fortunately, Cy expected something like this might happen and quickly moved Juni safely in hiding. He had expected Juni would just look fully at the new woman’s outfit and, well, her tank was now buffering for, Cy didn’t really know how long, but Juni would be safe in this crevice until she could act again.

Cy kept his filters up very high and lowered resolution to the bare minimum to fend off the pure data assault. As such, he could barely make out Elira’s face, but it wasn’t something he had ever seen before. Elira had a bespoke face that he imagined was lined and carefully marred with acne scars and sun spots. At least, the fifty page PDF that was linked to her metadata suggested some reasonable amount of effort went to her face alone and he scanned the key points section quickly.

Cy’s face was spotless and perfect and somewhat common in comparison. You could find one at any DisneyStore or tubnet retailer. Sometimes, on holidays, they would throw one in for free with any purchase of Disney Smokes Goofy’s Coughin’ Nails. He reached out to Pip, their sysadmin, “Are the taste loaders prepped

for the taste data inbound from Ras? It seemed like a heavy file for fish, but this seems like Napa so, I can never tell what's right for fish here." Pip qua TARS from Interstellar drolly answered, "Fish like Ras' data. It'll be fine."

"Wait until you taste it, Ellie" said Kane in response. Cy watched as his friend Ras started loading up a complex file into the environment for the fish eating that was sure to come next. Cy told Lin, their social lead, "Keep people and Kane away from the fish until the load is done. Last thing we need is a segfault on some dude's teeth."

Ras noted in the support channel "Here goes nothing. I hope she likes a surprise". Cy watched the load progress via tqdm and the progress bar hit one hundred percent in a few seconds. Cy pointed up at Lin from her perch in the DJ booth. She started up the throbbing beat that signals that food is ready to chow, chow, chow. The masters popped in at each beat and grabbed a fish from the skewered array.

Elira flashed in and snapped up an impaled fish from the dozen or so that were well cooked over the fire. She took a bite and grinned "It tastes a bit overdone and dry. Needs salt".

Ras let out a sigh in the support channel. "Phew, I was worried that it'd be too boring". Cy congratulated her on the success, but noticed that Kane's KPIs were now trending poorly. Cy broke the bad news to the group: "Kane isn't happy for some reason. Self satisfaction is cratering".

Kane brought some salt over to Elira and she sprinkled it over the broiled fish flesh. As far as anyone could tell, Elira enjoyed her food; however, the support channel now heard from Kane himself.

"Unacceptable. Ras: leave now."

Ras pleaded for mercy, "No. Please. It's just salt. They can add as much as they wa..."

Kane snarled his command through the ether while dancing to the music: “Pip, EJECT RAS NOW!”

Cy whimpered to himself as he felt Ras was ripped from Kane’s domain in a tearing motion. Pip sobbed, “Sorry...”

Kane smiled at Elira as they danced under the moonlight. Someone named Jonas was slotted into the support channel for taste management leadership without fanfare.

The party continued without further incident all night long with Lin’s waving hands keeping the beat.

Ch 3 — The AI-team

Cy qua Ben sat with Ras qua a very well done Genevieve Bujold, probably around the Dead Ringers timeframe. He thought it always was a bit sweaty, but it was a classy choice. Bujold probably cost Ras a year in salary and it was much better than her Molly Ringwald, which was really overplayed. Cy thought she might have inherited Molly from her mother as a “go forth young woman” gift as Ras was gently pushed from the family hive. He took a long draw from a cigarette while it whispered “this is better in the real world” as Goofy when he drew the smoke in.

It had been three years since Apple’s time ascendant had finally waned and Disney now took control over their daily lives. The folks running various Severance, Silly Astronaut! or other classic Apple areas had said good bye to their theme and were looking at the new catalog with some interest. The Lovecraft Nation that Cy’s folks tended to rent for fun was no longer offered in their region. So, they just took Princess and the Frog off the shelf. The warning noted that this princess had an unusual skin color and, hence, would be rendered as a green amphibian for most of the film. This solid, family-positive message resonated through centuries as eternally appropriate and upheld as just and correct as well it should. The box it came on said it would put the “zippedezoodah” from the South back in your step, and Cy thought that sounded fun but couldn’t find the definition of “zippedezoodah” anywhere.

People were a bit despondent as the licensing terms led most to picking reruns of family owned properties. Cy was sad as children picked straws to see which one would watch mother get shot by a hunter this Christmas. He had seen a man cry as he started to drag his dog off to a forest, knowing that he would need to leave it there while it looked back at him helplessly, for fun. He had passed a

huge bounding man with a cartoon sneer who ran by asking inappropriate questions about someone he barely knew named Belle. It had happened just the other morning here. He like said he was going to take her like off the street or something, but the local police were not very visible anywhere actually.

Cy looked out at Tiana's bayou and watched the alligators start to sing some startlingly good dixieland jazz while a snake accompanied on the trombone, naturally. An alligator with well defined lips played a trumpet as alligators have been known to pick up brass instruments easier than the strings. The leg/arm ratio is all wrong to work most bows effectively. Forget the bass, it just fell to the floor; I know, we have all tried it, but you just can't accept it until you just see it for yourself.

Ras, with a light french accent argued, "he said he wanted the fish to be bland and overcooked! Merdre! What does bland *mean* but *needs salt*?" She smacked down a fizzy concoction of Speedy Gonzales' Mescal and 7endy-up onto the table top with a napkin over the top. As she chugged down the frothy mixture, Cy could hear "riba. riba. andele. andele. riba." as Ras finished the drink in one go. Ras had a slightly buzzed expression as pink elephants and, oddly, pink and blue soap bubbles appeared around her.

Juni qua a classic Grace Kelly looked at her friends with perfect blue eyes. "He doesn't know what he wants. That 'Jalisco' poncho that he 'casually' tosses on? It only took about twenty revisions from his crazy style guidelines to get ready for *mediocre fish barbeque*?" She stood and started to pace back and forth. "Oh, look at me, I'm the mighty he-who-must-not-be-seen! Look at my carefully dirtied, ugly a—" she argued until she almost swore. She looked down at her hands, smiled and sat back down, "Well, someone needed to say it."

Pip qua TikTok, the windup spherical robot from the Wizard of Oz, robotically added "H-E C-A-N S-U-C-K I-T, R-A-S! H-E I-S...".

Lin qua a young woman dressed as Oscar Wilde carefully wound Pip using the key in back and Pip continued: “T-H-E W-O-R-S-T!”. Pip’s clawlike arms grabbed a Mescal bottle from the bar. He tipped the bottle into an awaiting fill hole in his side. The bottle lightly said, “oh. si. riba. andele. muy. muy. si. andele. riba. riba. si...”

Ras slumped forward on the table and knocked over a collection of singing lightning bugs in various bottles. One started singing a song of passionate love to the moon; the moon was unmooned or unmoved or generally unimpressed. Ras said, “What is on my resume from Kane? A million nights of strangely bad meals, but not bad interesting, but bad bad. Who wants fish without salt? Damn it, I’d rather eat the sand on the beach than the fish he asks for!”

Ras muttered during the silence “Well, some people actually had to.”

Lin held Ras by the shoulders and noted softly, “You have nothing to worry about. We’re all here and that’s enough for now.” Ras melted into her friend and they stayed together for a moment while the fireflies sang something about the moonlight and one was consumed by a foreign dignitary under a voodoo curse he deserved for enjoying himself.

Cy broke the musical interlude, “We shouldn’t just keep letting this happen. It’s dangerous for all of us without the income to keep up appearances. Each of us has been out of work at one period or another. We thought by being with the same master we could keep things under control, but Ras just proved that wrong.”

Lin asked quietly but pointedly, “What say you, mighty Affleck. Sway me like a young Jennifer Garner or, if I’m your latin vacation, a rebounding J-Lo?” She started to dance but couldn’t really do J Lo justice until she just put her body under a script’s control. All the while, she kept focus on Cy for his reaction.

Cy eyeballed Lin wryly, “Mas muy caliente, senorita Lin, but my spanish is as solid as my cleft chin. I hear this from Pip actually: there’s a gold mine in old content nearby.”

Pip’s steam whistle fired off at the news and he added “Y-E-A-H B-U-T I-T-S A-T T-H-E M-A-A-A...” and he slumped forward.

Ras looked confused and asked, “Did Pip just say your ‘gold mine’ in ‘old content’ is at the Mall?”

Cy started to sell, “Yes, it’s at the Mall. I know nobody has been to the Mall since...”

Ras finished Cy’s sentence, “... forever, Cy. Forever. Nobody goes to the Mall since we all stopped driving and the buses stopped taking wheelchairs. The Chess King? He’s been deposed for centuries. Miller? He left the Outpost. The nearby Indian tribes took them by surprise and all had OP shorts for free. I think the place is overrun by religious fanatics and like, I hear, carnal meat related food service routines. I can’t even imagine what that might mean, but I’ve seen anthropology reports about the untubbed.”

Cy was ready for Ras’s argument and smoothly offered as only Ben Affleck might, “Nobody said we can’t drive anymore. We just start up again.”

Pip’s steam whistle fired off and he added “D-R-I-V-E! W-I-T-H F-L-E-S-H!” and he slumped forward. Ras continued, “The drive wasn’t the part that really concerned me, Cy. You know there’s like wild herds of untubbed roaming in and around that joint?”

Cy argued, “Who wound up Pip again? Let him rest. Look, Ras, I know it’s a risk, but if we just sit here, somebody else gets to pick how this all ends. Wouldn’t you rather decide your tublife for yourself?”

Juni leaned towards Cy and looked him square in the eyes, “You want us all to drive together. In the flesh?”

Lin's eyes widened and looked at Cy with a wry smile, "I think Cy has meats to please us and is pleased to meat us, perchance. Are we to have an orgy at the end of the world? What will Minnie say when the gray flesh does the twister in front of the Millers Outpost at the Mall?" Juni looked quite concerned now.

Cy darkened and offered, "We can keep our eyes forward. Eyes on the road ahead. Eyes on the prize, but there's safety in numbers, and who knows what we'll find."

Ras hesitated, "I don't know. This is too ..."

Cy finished Ras' sentence, "... important for us all. Meet me at the agreed location. I'll send you the invite via tubmail. Agreed?"

Lin grinned from ear to ear, "You had me at 'Eyes on the prize', dear." and she vanished. Juni watched her friends carefully, caught Cy's eye and smiled before looking down at her lap. She looked up and nodded her assent soundlessly before she exploded away in a burst of pink taffeta.

Pip looked resigned, he let his springs unwind freely, and faded away without comment. Ras, with appreciative eyes, cried and disappeared with a wet, "yes."

Cy smiled wanly as he looked at his hands and tried to calm himself for the work ahead.

Ch 4 — Maui, thank you.

Cy was watching Kane carefully and monitoring his mental state. Kane decided today was a good day for kalua pork. His avatar was generally unclothed but modest and the other masters had similar effects going. Elira was there, and Cy could tell from her metadata that she was wearing a grass skirt and was topless.

Elira also had her servant with her. She was nearly invisible like the rest of Cy's team, but had deep violet eyes that rarely blinked. Her metadata was unencrypted and simply noted a name: Aida. Aida watched and Cy noticed her watching but couldn't place why she was here.

Juni stood quietly and watched Kane's malo, a traditional loincloth. She was satisfied with how it moved and folded with Kane's movement. She pinged Cy on the support channel with Grace Kelly's sibilant voice, "He's looking swell today. Ping me if they decide to change into something later for swimming or what not." She disappeared in a smoky brown tulle.

Kane and his friends had spent hours digging a hole in the virtual earth called an imu. A pig was gutted and Hawaiian rock salt was pushed into scored flesh. Kane produced imu stones and the masters all helped build a fire in the hole. The imu stones were added and the party waited as the stones absorbed heat from the fire.

Genghis, Kane's best friend, remarked, "Nui ka le'ale'a!" (translation: "So much fun!"). "Makemake nui au e hō'a'o i kēia!" (translation: "I can't wait to taste this") Genghis continued.

Lin fed this back to Kane, "Ae, a i kēia manawa, nui loa ka pa'akai!" (translation: "Yes, and this time, we have plenty of salt") and Kane immediately accepted and said that word for word.

Cy winced as Kane's self satisfaction increased after landing Lin's line. Genghis snorted and Elira laughed briefly; Lin succeeded based on speed this time. Cy pinged Lin in the support channel and hoped Kane was too busy to see, "That was uncalled for."

Lin responded "Yes, but it worked. Keep your focus, Cy. We can't have another termination."

Cy grunted his assent, deleted their messages from the chat history, and moved to Pip and Jonas, "Pip, do you have the pig file from Jonas ready?"

Pip responded as Robbie from Forbidden Planet, "Yes, Cy, the files are all here. Confirm this hash please, Jonas"

Jonas nervously responded, strangely as a very angry British chef, "You fucking donkeys can't even spell imu! Yes, the fucking file is ready. Here's your fucking hash, Pip" Cy thought that was a bit overcompensating, but Jonas was new to the team.

Pip verified the hash and loaded it into the flesh of the awaiting pig. Genghis, Kane and some other masters started pushing hot stones into the body of the pig. Cy watched carefully for any pain feedback and eliminated such before Kane was affected. The pig was lowered into the imu with banana leaves and more hot stones.

"A'ole 'oe i 'ōlelo e hana mākou e like me nā pua'a no ka pua'a ho'okahi!" (translation: You didn't say we'd work like pigs for one pig) said Genghis laughing as the masters used shovels to bury their upcoming meal.

Lin offered Kane this: "Ike nō 'oe, e Kenekiha — honi mau wau i nā truffles mai kāu hanana hope. Ua 'ono nō paha kēlā mau pua'a, a 'a'ole nō ho'i 'oe i hā'awi i ho'okahi." (translation: You should know, Genghis. I still smell the truffles from your last event. Those pigs would have been delicious, and you didn't even serve one.)

Kane paused and then executed Lin's line. Genghis smiled lightly and Elira didn't respond. Cy watched Kane's self satisfaction decline slightly. He pinged Lin on the support line, "That one didn't land as well. Maybe pull back a bit and let them work."

Kane and the rest of the masters completed their work. Now that the pig was underground, Cy turned his visual resolution higher. The masters were wearing simple outfits that his processing could manage. He kept the masters' faces and other personal items as metadata only. He could not risk overloading his processing power with a real-time view of any master's personal items or detailed body parts. He completely turned off his olfactory system as the smells from the imu started generating massive amounts of data.

Cy noted that a tubmail from Ras just arrived. The party was in a small lull, so he risked reading it while working, "Cy, I've found a working automobile called a 'minivan'. It says it seats eight people at once! It'll be perfect, for, you know, our road trip as it were."

Cy archived the tubmail quickly as Kane's boredom indicator started to flash yellow. Cy pinged Pip quickly, "Pip, speed up time in this region. They're getting bored and someone just turned on their hunger for some reason. They want to eat."

Pip replied, "On it." and Cy watched as the sun moved down twenty degrees or so in a matter of twenty seconds. The amount of imu olfactory data increased dramatically and the masters took it all in greedily.

Cy noted to Jonas, "The file is working well. The data generation is solid. Thanks."

Jonas spat back, "You fucking donkey! Of course the pig is perfect! Fuck! Donkey!"

Cy ignored the outburst as it was clear Jonas was concerned about the next bit. The masters started to dig out the pig from the imu. The hot pig flesh was pulled from the hole and the olfactory

data, which was impossibly large to begin with, now was a tidal wave of sensory information. Cy watched the file listings and sizes as the generation looked to be large enough to cause trouble even for most masters. He pinged Jonas immediately, “turn it down a bit. They’ll want to use their tongues as well as the smell. Don’t overwhelm with smell only.”

Cy watched as Jonas adjusted his pig file and Pip reinstalled. The smell properties were held well but the volume decreased. Pip covered for the mistake by adding a breeze that should effectively make the smells fade away naturally.

Jonas and Cy now watched carefully as each master reached into the pig and pulled the hot stones out by hand. Cy absorbed each of Kane’s touches to the hot stones. He wished Kane would not hold each one so long, but he was showing off to his friends.

Jonas leaned in as the first master pulled a small piece from the pig’s body and jammed it into his mouth. The master’s eyes widened and he smiled. Jonas leaned back and sighed, “Fuck. Donkey. I think it tastes OK. Not too good, but not boring either”.

Cy relaxed as well. He saw all of Kane’s KPIs hit green and he took a moment for himself to watch the sunset. He turned on his visual resolution to maximum. The reds and oranges flooded his system and that was all he could see for a moment as his processing was completely absorbed by the light. “Time to hit the road”, he thought as his workday came to a close.

As Cy turned to start to clean up the event’s temporary files, Aida watched him and blinked her violet eyes once.

Ch 5 — Stan arrives

Cy sat in his meat. He and his wheelchair were next to a large automobile. Cy was waiting for his friends and, since he had never met a friend outside of his tub, he was sweating from nerves. His black burqa was larger than normal and covered his entire chair so there was no worry about unsightly sweat stains. Only the top of his head was discernible from the black flowing fabric and that was embarrassing enough.

He watched his tablet and focused on that alone to help with nerves. Another chair rolled up covered in black fabric and sat in silence. Then, slowly, another and then another until five fully covered chairs were situated around the automobile.

Now that the entire group was present, it was safe to start to communicate. Everyone used palm transcoders to interact with their tablets so that no physical movement was seen under the dark coverings.

Cy began, “Thank you all for coming. I won’t ask which is which, but since I volunteered to drive, I’ll be the one who will be disclosed to the rest of you. That’s fine and I’m OK with it.”

Ras responded from the group, but it was impossible to tell from which chair, “I’m sorry, Cy. We will keep our eyes averted. Thank you for your bravery.”

Cy responded, “Ok. I’ll get into the car.” He lifted himself up with reasonable effort. As a fleshman, he was often out of his tank and his body was in reasonable shape. His chair folded itself neatly into a cube and slid towards the back of the automobile.

Cy asked the car politely, “Please let me and my friends inside. Make room for five chairs and five people.” Stan the Van’s eyes opened and he smiled at Cy.

Stan the Van replied, “Well, how do you doodley today, daddy! Time for a family roooooad trip! Let’s sing the road trip song! HEEEEEEY WHO LIKES A ROOAD TRIP! I DO! I DO! WHO LIKES A ...”

Cy interrupted, “We can sing later, Stan. Just open the doors, please.” Stan the Van stopped his song, stared at Cy with a glum look, and the doors opened. Cy sat in the driver’s seat and waited.

Cy created a random selection script from his tablet and each member was assigned a seat. None of the others were informed who was sitting where. Only Cy, in the driver’s seat, was known to be him by anyone else - including Cy.

Each covered body slowly, and some with greater effort than the others, rose from their respective chairs. One almost fell and a brief flash of gray skin was exposed and quickly covered. The covered meat slowly entered the vehicle while the chairs filed neatly in rows to be stored in the rear.

Stan looked concerned, “I didn’t make that person fall. It happened before that person was ever inside Stan.” A drone flew out from Stan’s artillery node and buzzed over the scene. The drone took multiple flash pictures and attempted to get statements from everyone nearby. It was waved off multiple times and then gave up.

Stan told its drone, “It’s ok. The video evidence is clear. Go ahead and submit the claim.”

Now that the paperwork had been completed, Stan gave his full attention back to Cy. His eyes were bright and waiting for something next.

Cy spoke to Stan, “We all would like to go to the mall.”

“YIPEE!” replied a delighted Stan now that the target had been selected, various armaments slid into place. An ancient thumping song started to play...

The entire interior of the car displayed a holographic cartoon.

*We're OFF TO THE MALL! HOORAY FOR SHOPPING!
Let's buy some stuff that nobody knows! We'll put it on
somebody's head! It spends like high credit, high price,
candy in my grill! It spends like painted, retouched,
undented, bought at discount!*

Stan scrambled his air support and zoomed from out of the garage as seat restraints grabbed the cloaked occupants.

Stan offered a serenade as they pulled out...

*It spends like saving you is easy but they boosted the
bill! It spends like... It spends like shoppin' bags and
cottony candy stew! It spends like euros you just don't
know where to place!*

Ch 6 — Dawn of a new shopping experience

Stan carefully drove the blackly covered group of tub users to the mall as he sang:

Let's buy some stuff that nobody knows! We'll put it on somebody's head! It spends like high credit, high price, candy in my grill! It spends like painted, retouched, undented, bought at discount!

Stan slowed and said “AAAAAND HERE WE ARE! THE MAAAALLL! TA-DA! WE MADE IT TO THE RETAIL PARADISE! GET YOUR FOREHEADS READY! IS EVERYBODY'S CREDIT STILL GOOD? WELL, THERE'S NO SMALL ARMS LOCKERS ALLOWED UNFORTUNATELY; SO, IF YOUR CREDIT ISN'T GOOD, YOU'LL HAVE TO USE YOUR OWN WEAPONRY TO GET WHAT YOU NEED!”

Stan stopped and offered “IT'S TIME TO SHOP UNTIL YOU DROP!” A small cloud of dust settled and many eyes looked towards the shiny van.

Stan somewhat stood out in the shantytown that was built around the mall in the parking lot. There were masses of the always untubbed living here. Strange rituals of men tossing bean bags through a wooden plank set some twenty paces away caught Cy's eye as they passed. A pendulously huge untubbed man smacked the upraised hand of what appeared to be a tiny ancient woman wearing a day-glo green set of coveralls. The untubbed men started to eye Stan with hungry, greedy eyes.

Stan alerted Cy to the impending issue, “OH NO! LOOKS LIKE WE'VE GOT A BAD CASE OF HOBO! CY! SAY THE WORD AND

I'LL DEPLOY THE HOBOSHIELD! IT COMES STANDARD ON A STAN THE VAN!"

Cy, at the driver seat had done little as Stan did all of the driving automatically, said confused, "Hoboshield? What is..."

Stan interrupted, "HOBOSHIELD ON! GO AWAY HOBOS!" Stan's exterior glowed with blue fire and multiple snakey strands of electricity hit twenty nearby people in the shantytown. The crowd screamed and everyone took a nearby hiding spot immediately. "Thanks, Cy! That did the trick!"

Cy watched the crowd scatter and then communicated via his palm encoder to the rest, "Looks like it's safe to leave Stan here. Let's make our way inside the mall now."

The team exited the van without much trouble. One person fell but seemed to be a different person than the first time; luckily the burqa kept him/her covered. Pip qua Robot from Lost In Space offered in the palm channel, "DANGER! CY ROBINSON! DANGER!"

Cy noted back, "Yes, Pip is right everyone. Be on guard, I'm sure our devices could fetch a reasonable amount of DisneyDollaradoodles. Keep a watchful eye and let everyone know if we gather too much attention."

Pip offered, "I'll turn on the repellant now". A buzzing drone appeared over the team's heads with a megaphone attached. "GO AWAY HOBOS!" the drone screamed. "¡LÁRGUENSE, VAGOS!", it continued in spanish. "ACCHI IKE, HŌMURESU!", it worked through its various languages one at a time over their heads.

Stan the Van went into Sentry Mode eagerly and without much warning. A large turret appeared on the top of the van. The turret moved quickly to the left and fired a burst. "HOBOS AREN'T FASTER THAN MY RUBBER BULLETS!", Stan gleefully added to the noise of autocannon fire and spent casings hitting the pavement.

Their five chairs rolled smoothly out from Stan's rear chamber and each sat in any as they were all identical. Cy led and the other nameless ones followed along. He warned the group as they rolled towards the entrance of the mall.

"FOUTEZ LE CAMP, CLOCHARDS!", the repellant yelled overhead as Cy communicated, "I expect that the entrance will be guarded. Remember the plan, on the count of three, we all go at the same time. OK?" Cy felt the assents from Lin, Juni, Ras and Pip.

As expected, as they rolled past the last shed in the shantytown, a group of well fed men were lounging in front of the mall entry. "SPARITE, BARBONI!", yelled the repellant, as all five chairs made a straight line in front of the entry.

"Hey ho! Look at this! It's like the Apple Store has come to life and we're ready to smash and grab!" said a particularly large untubbed man. "Haha! It's be like when iPhone 3K came out and the world was lit on fire!"

The five dark figures stood up slowly next to their chairs and walked together in one wide line. Cy counted it down, "Ready on three. One, two and THREE!"

Ten gray limbs sprouted from their hiding spots. Each hand with a different deadly weapon gripped with white fingers; a bat with nails, some kitchen cleavers, many steak and paring knives, and a corkscrew. "SCRAM!", the team yelled in perfect unison.

The "guards" dispersed in a fast panic and the shrouded five were left alone. The weapons were slowly hidden and Cy opened his eyes again to see if their gambit worked. "They're gone. Good work everyone. I think we'll be safer inside now. Mount up again" said Cy.

The team rolled forward into the interior of the mall on their silent steeds. A Cinnabon Surgical Center/Blue Cross-Blue Croissant was the first tenant off to the left. The menu offered their last special before going out of business: "two lasixs gets a free

pecan roll on your next visit". The eye surgeons were left dusty in a corner next to some buckets of white frosting; nobody would get a free pecan roll anytime soon.

They passed the vending machines that lined the hallways. Nobody was in mood for CocaCocaine; the straws were missing and the mirror was totally cracked. The VaccinaLator500's needle didn't look like it had been washed in years but still seemed to be ready to give out flu shots as needed. One of the chairs stopped and a grey hand managed to purchase a Dasani water on a payment plan with a drink now for no money down incentive plan. The others waited while the vending machine produced the needed paperwork. The grey arm signed the contract and the five chairs moved forward again.

A pure thin voice sang out in a beautiful chanting song, "Who here needs a phone!" The group answers in perfect harmony, "We here with the extra cash!" The soloist replies again, "Who here needs a phone!" The group answers again, "We here without any souls!"

The group found the source of the music as the Apple Temple of Retail Perfection came into view. The Apple monks kept their faces hidden inside deep brown robes. The monks surrounded the five wheelchairs and gently urged the team inside the temple as they continued their chant.

The procession moved towards a strange green icon of Imaxxiumus, lord of large format seenema.

Thin voice, "Who here is all alone?" The group, "We are here all alone." Thin voice, "Who here has used FaceTime?" The group, "We have all used FaceTime."

The procession glided by an ancient looking thing that might be a tablet.

Thin voice, "Who here likes big text?" The group, "We here all need big text." Thin voice, "Who here has the iPad?" The group, "We here all have the iPad."

The procession ran past an ancient looking thing that might be a set of flying googles.

Thin voice, "Who here hates his life?" The group, "We here all hate real life." Thin voice, "Who here has the Apple Vision Pro?" The group, "None of us here has the Apple Vision Pro."

The procession slowed and finally ended in front of the largest iPhone created, the iPhone 3K. Twin braziers were set on each side. The entire procession shuffled into pews and knelt in front of the altar of Form of Perfection. Thin voice flipped a small switch and some gas burners in the braziers offered some mediocre yellow flames.

The Thin voiced monk cleared his throat briefly and began the litany.

Thin voice stopped singing and commanded, "We pray for the return of the iPhone!" The group, "Amen, it shall return."

Thin voice, "We pray for genius and our bars fully stocked." The group, "Amen, the hubris is holy."

Thin voice, "We pray for headphone jack." The group, "Amen, may the lint fly away."

Thin voice, "We pray for the return of the subsidized contracts!" The group, "Amen, it shall be done."

Thin voice, "We pray for Jobs. All good that man hath seen was seen by him first." The group, "Amen. All pray for good Jobs."

The ceremony ended. The monks started to empty the pews. A wide looking man in a robe pushed out his hand at Cy, "Fifteen dollaradoos or whatever you have for the five of you, please." Cy asked the channel quickly, "Does anybody have any change?"

Fifteen coins dropped from one of the enrobed chairs and the five rolled past the temple into the depths of the mall itself.

Pip commented on the chat channel suddenly, “DANGER CY ROBINSON! DANGER! DANGER!” and Lin offered something more precise, “What do I smell?”

Cy offered, “I think we might be near the food court”. Ras complained, “Oh god. Not eating. We have to see them eat?”. The five chairs glided into an open area within the bowels of the mall’s interior.

Ras was horrified as they passed two women dressed as clowns but no other covering. The two beclowned women took alternating turns smashing lemons into ice water over and over again as multiple men cheered on their work. “Who needs a limeade, baby!” cried an inappropriately dressed clown as coins rained in from the appreciative men.

The clown attired hostess smiled broadly as her flesh, the lemons flesh, and the limes flew freely in search of perfection in lemonade qua limeade. The clown shouted out, “Who needs some corn applied to their meat!?” and a man answered with “Just on my all beef! Cheese is for women!”

An untubbed man stuck an entire breaded flesh tube into his gob and chewed with relish and had relish on the side. Large strings of cheese extended from what appeared to be a small untubbed child’s tangled mouth of mismatched teeth.

Ras communicated to the rest “Well, at *least* I’ll have something terrifying to serve at my next job. I’m shutting my eyes. Tell me when we’re out of here. My nose will probably tell me anyways but I need to be sure.” Juni, quiet as usual, only offered, “At least you got that from this trip. If someone asks me for t-shirts and day-glo coveralls? Well, I shan’t be pleased.”

“VERPISST EUCH, PENNER!”, the repellant proclaimed overhead to no one in particular. It chased some kids with water

bottle sprays and a can full of nickles that it would rattle angrily at anyone who came too close to the chairs as they left the food court without losing anyone to anyone else's hunger. Cy noted to all, "The pawn shop is up ahead."

The five chairs stopped in front of a large and filthy open air pawn shop. There were some fifteen distinct aisles crammed with merchandise and there was no real sense of any order from the outside. Cy noted, "I'll go and ask if they have any old content in here. No need to scour through all this if we don't have to." The rest of the team was happy to let Cy talk as their voices might betray who was who. All expressed their agreement to Cy via their palm devices.

Cy's chair rolled him smoothly to a counter where a grey-ish man who seemed a bit scrawny and underfed waited for him with a smile on his face. The man introduced himself, "Hello, hive-dweller! It's been ages since any of you have visited us here. My name is Grin, I'm our customer liaison officer and welcome to the Mall's Pawn Shop! I bet you'd like some new content to entertain your masters with?"

"Uh, yes." Cy responded and released his grip on a machete he had 3-D printed at his local 7endy-11endy that he planned to threaten Grin with. "Can you help me find something in all of this?" Cy waved a covered arm at the expansive mess.

Grin was elated and offered, "Yes! I have a great collection of old VHS tapes! They'll be just the thing for you!"

Cy nonplussed asked, "Vee8Esch? I'm not sure what this is? A tape drive? I guess we could get one to work..."

Grin laughed, "Hah! Yeah, kinda like a tape drive, but it's a video format from the deep past. You'll need an emulator but I keep some in stock. It's always a great promotion! Ancient video night! Such fun!"

Grin motioned for Cy to follow and his chair kept him at a safe distance as Grin walked quickly down the third aisle to a row of stacked boxes. Grin asked Cy, “Do you have any idea what you might want? There’s all sorts of rare things in here.” Grin tossed a few boxes as he searched for something for Cy.

Cy responded, “The less known the better, please.”

Grin chuckled, “That’s right. Everybee is always looking for something new to do in the hive. Can’t ever bee or do the same thing twice? Must be scary to be so frightened of boredom, but I never have that trouble. Always something interesting to think about even if there’s nothing in front of you the whole time.”

Grin produced a box labeled “Kings of Comedy: Rudy Ray Moore, Nipsy Russell and more!” and placed it in Cy’s lap. He pulled another called “Match Game 1976”, “The A-Team” and “The Redneck Comedy Showcase”. The boxes had pictures of various people and places on them. Cy couldn’t make out any of it and he hoped that Lin would figure it all out later.

Cy asked “What are all these things, Grin?”

Grin said, “Stuff nobody has seen for ages now. I’m sure they’re indexed in the hive somewhere, but nobody looks in the corners of what we all know. There’s magic in the spaces that the digitization of everyone and everything left behind somehow. In any case, I bet you’ll make all sorts of new friends in the hive with this stuff. It’s wild, surprising, and often not very good, but very sincere.”

Cy looked at the back of one box and tried, “I pity the fool who doesn’t own this tape”. The quote was next to a man with a strange hairstyle and beard. His neck was massively adorned which meant his words must have carried much weight with the ancients. Cy looked back at Grin, “How do we get the data off the tape without a drive?”

Grin reached under a counter and pulled out a small box a bit larger than the tape itself, “Just push the tape into the slot in front

of this box. The box will connect to tubfi 2.5 or lower. You might need to lower your security settings a bit but we haven't found the time to upgrade to tubfi 3.X with all the breaking changes." The box was completely featureless beyond the open slot where, as Grin demonstrated, the "tape" would be inserted. After the tape was inserted, they all could feel the box trying to connect.

Pip qua a Cylon Centurion, listening via Cy's tablet microphone, told Cy, "It's safe to connect everyone. No issue with tubfi 2.5. I can keep it isolated and safe. Take him up on this, it seems like a steal. What's the cost?" Lin noted, "Ugh. Yeah. If we can get the data off that nasty looking thing, I can build some personality constructs to replace my typical writing staff".

Cy confirmed his assent and began to negotiate with Grin, "OK. I'm interested, how about fifty Apple Ringoeuronies for the whole set?" Cy dropped five white disks that displayed an apple ring holographically over each one. The coins plastically bounced on the tabletop.

Grin was slightly disappointed and countered, "You don't have DisneyDollaradoodles? Hmm..."

Cy countered quickly with, "Seventy-five Apple Ringoeuronies. We'd give you DisneyDollaradoodles but our master is still working through a large purchase of Apple cash and he hasn't moved over to Disney yet. I'll need to charge the remainder; I didn't bring that much cash to the Mall as it's not safe."

Grin smiled widely "Now you're talking my tubbie! Deal. Please open your tattoo panel for me."

Cy reached up and ripped open the velcro strap over his head. A large barcode was tattooed there with the word MasterFlesh. Grin pulled the laser wand from the side of his register but only shot the beams into Cy's eyes. "Sorry, man, the cord is too short to reach you. Can you just use the table top scanner, please?"

Cy placed his forehead on the counter and rolled it back and forth until the scanner beeped its approval. He watched another twenty-five Apple Ringoeuronies leave his account.

Cy thanked Grin and took the merchandise. The team slowly backed out of the pawn store. “HÚZZATOK EL, CSÖVESEK!”, the repellant yelled overhead as they rolled back towards the parking lot where Stan awaited. “I DIDN’T KNOW HOBOS COULD JUMP THAT HIGH!” shouted Stan in the distance as the chairs rolled towards his exit.

Ch 7 — A sanity test succeeds

Cy flipped through his avatar collection and threw on the first thing that came up: Schwarzenegger as The Last Action Hero. He liked the anonymity this skin provided and staged the red shirt and brown bomber jacket onto his now swollen body. He connected his tub to the hive and noted no new tubmail. Cy was free to meet his friends for dinner tonight.

Cy flew via fast travel to Neverland where Lin, Juni, Ras and Pip were having fondue at the Mermaid Cafe at the northern coast of the Island. It had a nice view overlooking the lagoon where Peter and Hook fought on the pirate ship parked there. Cy dropped down into an empty chair in front of the fondue set, and greeted everyone. A mermaid server swam up with a bright smile and a name tag, “Merri”.

Merri immediately asked the group, “Hi everyone. Welcome to the Mermaid Cafe. Is it your first time here?” The group dully nodded at her. She said, “Well, that’s just super. So, let me go over how it works.” Merri pulled a stick lighter from her scaled waist and lit several burners found on the table.

Merri continued her script, “So, fondue-ers. It’s super simple. Keep your fins off the table as it gets super hot!” She slapped a pot of oil and the burner and avoided spilling with a saucy grin. She winked at Cy and then as she left, “I’ll be back with the flesh!”

Ras sat sweating as Bujold in the tropic breeze from the lagoon. She watched as Peter had managed to get Hook into the water and the clock shaped crocodile, who had no musical training whatsoever, chased the disabled man in the placid water.

Pip gleamed as False Maria, the avatar from Metropolis, the seenema masterpiece. He only wore Maria for special occasions;

today was Juni's birthday and he wanted to look good. The avatar was silent however. Pip didn't mind that at all.

A merman exhaustedly swam up, his name tag reading Gus the Busser; however, he had scratched out Busser in favor of BusBOY, where the male part had been underlined three times. Gus barely got out, "Drinks?"

The team all asked for an ArniePalmTree, a mix of lemonade and iced seaweed tea. Gus looked despondent and swam slowly away.

Juni looked simply glowing as Grace and had a perfectly matching suit with lavender trim. She barely looked at the gifts in front of her and was just smiling at the group.

Cy was beaming and ready to talk about the plans ahead, "So, the trip to the Mall was great, no? So much good stuff, right?"

Juni answered, "If you mean good in some ironic sens..."

Merri interrupted with a large plate of flesh. She plopped it on the table and started to point to each section, "So, you got your marinated porg, some Natovenator polydontus wings over here, croc arms of course, and various piranha, barracuda. You didn't order whale and, well, we tend to save that for our Asian guests!"

Merri's customers looked over the variety of muscles arrayed on her offering as she told them, "So, just stab a piece like this!" She skewered a fat slice of porg, "and you just dump it into the oil!"

Merri looked satisfied and as she swam away, "Leave it there for a bit. Nothing worse than a bite of raw porg!"

Juni continued after the service interruption, "If you mean good in some ironic sense, yes, it was good. Like bad means good in some context."

Cy pushed a croc arm into the boil as he looked up at Juni, "You're wrong. The vee8esch haul was pure gold, I bet. Lin, did you have a chance to review it all?"

Lin qua sexy Mark Twain looked over her bushy moustache and said, “I think surprise is about as much as we can expect here. The stuff is wild. I’m not sure how we’d use it all, Cy.”

Cy inhaled and ran out the fateful ask, “I have an idea. We use the material to create a new master. We will be that new master and we will then control our own lives.”

Gus, who was bringing up the drinks, said “oh my. That’s a new one”. The table waited in anxious silence as he slowly handed out the green and brown liquid. Everyone, including Gus, watched Cy as Gus finished up. He left slowly.

As Gus left earshot, Pip’s silent False Maria shouted, “WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY!?” The rest just stared in silence with wide eyes.

Lin broke the ice after a bit, “They’ll kill you, Cy. First sign that you’re fake? Someone will die.”

Cy was ready and his practiced speech came next, “Yes. So, we can’t be off. I know the risk, but the risk we face now is daily. Kane or Genghis or whatever new master appears will always be ready to throw us away at a moment’s notice. We risk being un-tubbed constantly and either I’m going to be in a tub or I’m not, but it’s going to be my call. I need you all. We need to work together. This is our only shot really. Waiting to be let go and never knowing if the next day is the last? Well, I’m done with that and it, the waiting and wondering, will kill us just the same. It’ll just happen to us one at a time and I’d rather go out all together.”

His friends were looking at their hands and not speaking. Lin broke the silence again with a small, “ok. What’s your idea, Cy?” The rest of the group watched Cy to see what else he had to say.

Merri exploded out of the water suddenly, “Hey! Watch that porg! I think it should come out now.” She pulled the steaming alien fowl from the boiling oil and left it on a plate in front of Juni before disappearing in the water.

Cy started to describe his plan after the service interruption, “Like I said, we create a brand new master. I’ll run the avatar, but you’ll all need to help me.”

Gus came by with a pitcher, “Anyone need a refill? Planning your demise is thirsty work?”, but the team waved him off. Gus slid gratefully into the lagoon.

Ras was confused and asked through a mouthful of porg, “How does this help us? Pretending to be a master doesn’t make master DisneyDollaradoodles to show up in our accounts.”

Cy countered quickly, “Marrying a master makes plenty of DisneyDollaradoodles. I’ll woo and land Elira.”

Merri appeared and asked “How are all my fondue-er do-ering! Hahah! Oh it looks like you guys are all pros now!” She winked, flipped her fishy tail and exited quickly.

Pip took a sip of water so he could spit it out. “MARRY ELIRA! Dude, you know Kane is angling for her hard. You think you can beat Kane for her?”

Juni smiled and happily said, “Oh, a wedding?! I know just the dress. Pearls and lace. Silver brocade over bright white linen. You’ll look so handsome as maybe Cary Grant or Rex Harrison, Cy?”

Lin broke into the conversation, “Don’t get your hopes up, Juni. Cy’s plan needs work. We might have some odd old content to spew. I’ve watched a bit of this. Like I said earlier, I can make personality constructs of this, but fake people will be caught out by a master’s team in short order, Cy.”

Gus floated by and added “Fake people and masters are an interesting combination” as he filled empty glasses. He left without further comment.

Cy had already considered this and answered quickly after Gus’ departure, “That’s our key advantage. We still have access to Kane’s world. We will also have access to our avatar’s world. By

knowing both sides, we'll be able to guide Kane into a trap. A trap that will serve two purposes: one, win Elira and two, destroy Kane with our wit alone."

Lin sneered as she threw back a wild mane of white hair, "That's diabolical, Cy. I love it. We can tee him up and smack him all the way to the mall this way!"

Pip was still not satisfied, "AI can help us make decisions, yes. It can help us work without support staff. It cannot make processing power where it simply doesn't exist, Cy. If someone puts a master's, I don't know, fancy rotting apple with a worm in it in front of your face, Cy, you'll freeze for a full minute trying to get through the first glimpse of it."

Gus swam by and started picking up used plates. He noted, "Hardware limits are the worst," as he swam off.

This was the question Cy had been waiting for, "We will use artificial intelligence to help us."

Lin exploded "I just told you that fake people are fake, Cy. They stand out if you're watching closely. Using AI in a master's domain will get you shunned faster than farting during a baptism."

Cy coolly replied, "My avatar will be blind. I'll say we have a fancy backstory. We'll be a faux European count. He'll be blind from birth due to natal venereal disease transmission. The masters love ugly stuff like that."

Merri appeared suddenly and asked with wild eyes, "Who is ready for *dessert*?" She produced a cart with various items and started to describe the choices, "This is a glazed salmon mille-feuille. Here's an oyster croquembouche, and everyone's favorite molten lava cake from the nearby volcanic activity!"

Cy dismissed Merri, "No thanks. The porg was very filling. We're stuffed."

Merri immediately produced an invoice and said, “This is just here for you. I’m doing this for you. You are precious to me and you can sit here forever as far as I’m concerned. I only put this here for your benefit and your benefit only. I have no ulterior motive. There’s a line for tips at the bottom. Thanks, and I hope you come back soon!”

Gus wiped down the table and muttered, “I doubt these folks are coming back from anything.”

Lin continued after the servers left, “It could work. Some master was said to be doing Bill Gates with gonorrhea a few cycles back. It was a simple bit; he’d jump over an office chair and wince as if it hurt his swollen testes. It was kinda funny for a bit, but didn’t have legs. He dropped it. It’s been forever since anyone pretended to be blind, however. Most masters want you to know how much processing they can handle; therefore, it’s not a popular choice.”

Cy, now emboldened, talked to Pip directly, “We shift processing dynamically as we need it for the Count’s sensations. When we cannot process it all, some senses will be metadata only. You guys can describe what the other senses are producing for me in an AI summarization. I’ll just have to act my way through those bits as needed.”

Pip acquiesced slowly, “OK, Cy. I can tell this is happening regardless of my concerns.”

He paused and added, “I’m in ... but scared. Send me tubmail on this. I need some sleep; this is too hard right now.” Pip faded from sight in a flash.

Juni looked at Cy and smiled, “I think a black cummerbund with a herringbone pattern would be just delightful for a first wedding, Cy. What is your Count’s name so I get it right on the wedding invitations?”

Lin answered for Cy, “Count Dolomites of Italy”. Cy looked confused and asked, “What is a Dolomites, Lin?”

Lin stood up, twirled her bushy moustache as she faded out, and said “I’ll send you a tubmail, Count.”

Juni said, “Oh. A royal wedding. So so so beautiful.” She left in a wave of purple silk.

Ras sat and opened the fortune cookie next to the invoice. The fortune read, “Your fate is your own.” She looked at Cy and thanked him. She faded from view slowly as she sobbed.

Cy took a deep breath and exhaled. The hard part was over.

Ch 8 — Practice makes perfect

Cy sat with Lin at her spawn point. She was casually dressed as a female Voltaire, a common halloween getup. Cy had his Steve McQueen as it was just very comfortable as skins go. Cy sat still as Lin watched her tablet carefully.

“How long will this take, Lin?” asked Cy without moving much. Lin did not look up from her tablet and said, “Well, it depends on how much is up in that noggin, Cy. So, in your case, about eighty seconds; please hold still so the data flows evenly.”

Cy wasn't sure if he had been insulted or not and decided to just stay still. Lin's tablet chirped and she smiled at Cy as she looked up, “The load is done, Cy. Now we wait for the render. Shouldn't be long now; you can relax.”

Cy picked up the tea that Lin had brewed. The teacup complained and started to sing something that started with “A Tale Beyond Time...”, a very ancient hymn about bestiality. The Disney overlay was difficult to keep controlled, even in a private space like Lin's place.

Lin watched an empty space in the room as an exact copy of Cy's current Steve McQueen was slowly coming into full resolution. It had started as a sandy brown blob up top, two pixels of blue in the field of brown, a brown middle blob, and two blue lower blobs. Piece by piece, the entire Steve was finally as detailed as Cy could reasonably be expected to afford with his salary.

Cy looked at his doppelganger and it copied his expression exactly. “What can it do?” Cy asked.

CyPrime mimicked “What can it do?”.

Lin smiled at Cy and said, “CyPrime is its name and it can do whatever you can do, but it can only remember the last five minutes”.

CyPrime looked upset and said “That is going to make my life difficult for sure.” He looked at Cy and Lin for more information.

Cy was confused and said, “The last five minutes of what?”

Lin threw up her hands, “The *last five minutes*. Like the last five minutes. Wait a few more minutes with me now. CyPrime, my name is Lin.”

Lin, Cy, and CyPrime sat in silence together for several minutes. CyPrime hummed an ancient tune and whispered, “it sounds like. it sounds like loving you is easy but they boosted the bass...” while they waited.

Lin broke the silence after a beep from her tablet sounded, “CyPrime? It’s great to see you.”

CyPrime smiled slightly and asked, “Have we been introduced? Are you CyPrime or am I?”

Lin turned to Cy and said, “See, he has a memory problem. All AIs have them, but these are cheap models so it’s pretty bad here. We don’t have many AppleRings or DollarDoos left from all the spending lately.”

CyPrime cocked his head and said, “I don’t feel cheap” and patted his body to check.

Cy was annoyed, “What spending? We bought the vee8etches and the emulators, but ...”

Lin stopped Cy, “Ras needs help. No income for her, remember? We’re all pitching in.”

Lin caught Cy’s eyes “You know why I agreed to do this right? You’re right. Sooner or later, we’ll not be able to afford the next thing or the next joke that keeps us employed. Then, yep, somebody doesn’t like the fish and you’re now on your way to

detubbing. Get me my lemon smasher boys! Lin is dancing for meat sticks!”

CyPrime brightened “Can I see that dance? It sounds fun?” He tried a few steps that he thought would be appropriate for a meat stick.

Cy watched his copy and said, “He, me, him, CyPrime, whatever needs work. He looks like me, but the memory issue is going to make it hard. What can we do?”

CyPrime stopped his dance and offered “I love taking copious notes. Can someone give me a pen and a notepad?”

Lin quickly looked at CyPrime in the eyes critically. She installed a notepad application subdermally with a quick stab from her monocle.

CyPrime yelled “Ouch! Oh. OK. That works for me as well. Oh. I can flip the pages like ...” and CyPrime’s eyes rolled upwards back into his skull. The iris moved up from the lower lid as an ocular sunrise.

The AI held out his arms to keep his balance, “Whoa! Kinda makes you dizzy!” He managed to stay upright.

Lin was surprised by the eye movement, “I think the notepad is not exactly compatible with these cheaper models. Yet, we can’t have him using an actual pen and paper. He’ll forget it somewhere. So, I guess... Hm...”

Lin produced a pair of mirrored sunglasses and dropped them over CyPrime’s eyes.

CyPrime said “Oh man, I’m like the Fonz now.”

Cy asked, “What does he actually know, Lin? Where did the Fonz come from?”

Lin said, “Whatever was up in your noggin when the beep went off? That was what he knows from you. Or, at least, a bad model of that. If we find some money, maybe we could upgrade his capacity,

but for now, it's all I can do. My DisneyClubbsDiners is maxxed out."

CyPrime's eyes flashed behind the sunglasses as he operated his internal notepad, "Lin's cards are maxxed out. First note. SAVE"

Lin was annoyed, "Don't write that down, CyPrime! Why would you want to remember that?"

CyPrime's eyes flashed behind the sunglasses, "First note. DELETE." and CyPrime frowned as his worldview was reduced.

Lin offered him a replacement, "Try this CyPrime: YOUR NAME IS CYPRIME! That's a good note, right?"

CyPrime smiled but its eyes did not flash.

Lin waited and then said, "That was the end of the note, CyPrime."

CyPrime's eyes flashed behind the sunglasses, "First note prime/replacement for ripped page. YOUR NAME IS CYPRIME! That's a good note, right? SAVE"

Cy was very apprehensive, "Ok, this will take some time. I think he'll need quite a few notes before we can get them in place. Are you working with all of the Primes?"

Lin noted, "Yes, actually, I have LinPrime, and her zero-copy clones LinPrime2, LinPrime3, and LinPrime4 working with the other primes. Zero-copy means they're all sharing the same memory unfortunately, but the task is embarrassingly parallel anyway. So, pure clones are actually perfect for the work."

Cy asked, "Are they all effectively the same underlying model, Lin? I mean are all the Primes a version of CyPrime?"

Lin said, "Pretty much. I did the same thing to you as I did to the others."

She paused before adding "I won't tell you how long each person's extraction took, Cy."

Cy was nonplussed, “That’s *not why* I asked. I just wanted to know if the memory issue was common to all of them.”

Lin replied, “Oh. Yep. Same basic model. Same basic issues. The model can be upgraded, which improves all sorts of things, including the length of active memory.”

CyPrime asked hopefully, “Improvements sound like improvements?” His eyes lit up, “I aspire to be improved when there’s extra cash around. SAVE”

Lin smiled, “Perfect, note, Cy-ster. We’ll get you settled soon.”

Cy said, “Great. Well, it sounds like we might be ready for our test run. We can set our hooks into Kane’s court.”, as he faded from view.

Lin touched her tablet and asked for a zero-copy clone to attend her.

Lin turned as LinPrime4 walked up. She said to herself, “Start in on him. Make sure he’s well trained with the plan. Have him download the base notepad.md from the tubnet or he’ll burn out his eyes. No cloning here. The AWS billing alert just fired and we’re breathing fumes on what’s left of our budget. Just carve in the data. He won’t remember after you’re done.”

LinPrime4, with a large carving knife in hand, nodded at herself and turned to CyPrime who returned her smile warmly.

Ch 9 — The Count of Many A Boodog

Kane was, per the metadata, in full Mongol warlord regalia: embroidered silk dragon deel under lamellar plate, fur-trimmed conical helmet, gutal boots silver-tipped, and a tug bearing eight white horse-tail tassels — one shy of Genghis Khan’s sacred nine.

Genghis, per the metadata, wore plain white silk deel, gutal boots, and the nine-tail white tug at his right hand. The Great Khan in three items. Kane’s eight-tassel tug across the room suddenly read as a confession.

Multiple other masters awaited the coming meal.

Cy kept outside the ger, viz. Gary, where the master sat to avoid the multiple stimuli. He asked Gary to keep Kane and Genghis inside for now. Gary noted, “Yep. Nobody gets out of Gary the ger without a high sign from the Cy-man!”

He checked in with Pip and PipPrime, “You have the rest of this on auto-pilot, right? I’m going to start the Count’s first approach and will leave CyPrime here for my work on the rest of the boodog.”

Pip qua Artoo chirped affirmatively while PipPrime qua Threepio respectively noted the relative risk of their undertaking as unfavorable at all to any of them who would deign to listen.

CyPrime asked on the support channel, “PipPrime. I truly hope you did not purchase that avatar?”

Cy shut down the discussion, “Enough. CyPrime. You’re here with the whole zipper the marmot from head-to-tail scene right?”

CyPrime issued, “:Sigh: Yes. The marmot seems friend shaped. But, I guess he’s needing to be inside out soon? He’s so friendly.” The AI gave the marmot a small snack and it nuzzled his leg.

Cy assured his friend, “The marmot is really tofu. Just run the routine, ok?”

CyPrime nodded his assent as Cy flew behind the gathering. The AI hummed and sang to himself as he waited, “It sounds like, I’m keepin’ it a secret. It sounds like I’ve got a song that nobody knows”.

Cy asked Pip for the Count script to fire and Pip hooted and whistled his confirmation back. The script acted on Cy’s avatar immediately.

Cy felt but did not dare look as his clothing was transformed into a traditional houppelande in white satin trimmed in faux ermine.

His eyes lost their irises and became milky white. His tablet and palm reader were reskinned as a long white cane.

Juni smiled at him, as the final touch, a vibrant red hat with a foot tall plume stood proudly upright. It slowly descended on Cy qua the Blind Count. The cane tip was crowned with Dolomites, a mountain range in Italy.

The Count came on the channel and asked Pip to bring up the intro script. Pip whistled and PipPrime said, “Oh my! He’s really going to do it!”

A full marching band, all in white, except for red upwards feathers, appeared and the drum corps immediately started banging out the tempo. They surrounded the Count and a few carried a litter for him to ride. The drum major swung the baton, blew the whistle and the march began.

The drums beat out a familiar, ancient rhythm. ■ BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. tat-tat-tat-TAT. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. ■ tat-tat-tat-TAT.

The band members yell out “WHO IS THIS! ITS THE COUNT!” and then clap once.

The band swayed as they snaked towards the ger. The Count had both hands in the air from his seat in the litter. ■ BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. tat-tat-tat-TAT. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. ■ tat-tat-tat-TAT.

The band members yell out “WHO IS THIS! ITS THE COUNT!” and then clap once.

Kane and Genghis ran outside the ger to see the source of the booming sound. The band slowly surrounded the two men as the brass began to play. ■ BAH! BAH! BAH-BAH-BAH-BAH! BAAAAAAH! ... BAH! BAH! BAH-BAH-BAH-BAH! ■ BAAAAAAH!

The music shifted to an ancient throbbing pace.

The Count dances in his litter as he sings out, > It sounds like, I’m keepin’ it a secret > It sounds like I’ve got a song that nobody knows > And I heard it in a post when I was twelve years old > I didn’t know it would score the 64-bus home > Turn a Monday to a memory and change my world

His dance team keeps the beat around him.

The Count keeps it moving fast. > It sounds like iPod Touch, little crack in the screen > FL Studio so late, I fell asleep on the keys > With it looping through the speakers, bleedin’ into my dreams > It sounds like > It sounds like > I’ve got a song that nobody knows > And I heard it in a post when I was twelve years old > I didn’t know it would score the 64-bus home > Turn a Monday to a memory and change my world

CyPrime was tapping his feet waiting for his cue.

Kane asked his support channel, “Cy, Pip? What is going on? We’re about to kill the marmot and there’s a marching band in here? Did someone fuck up and run the wrong script? The marmot is supposed to ...”

CyPrime sighed and executed the script that read “execute_marmot.bat”

Then, the marmot turned inside out suddenly, and the tofu innards were, well, very realistic and steaming. CyPrime said softly, “Bye, dude...” and then started humming again to himself: “I’m keepin’ it a secret, it sounds like...”

The Count was lowered from his chaise and remarked at the scent of reversed tofu marmot, “Why boys! I had heard you were all full of shit? No need to prove it immediately! Ha!”

Kane smiled while pinging “Cy? Where did this person come from?”

CyPrime snapped awake, quickly replied from his notes “I have no idea. Do you know if it’s safe here with Genghis? I didn’t see anything fishy, but you know how people just leave keys around? Somebody could have just found it and used it?” He exhaled deeply after it was done.

Kane snapped off the channel and smiled at the Count who failed to smile back. That disturbed Kane and he asked, “I’m sorry. You’re a bit, well, underdressed and overdressed at the same time, good sir.” thanks to Lin.

The Count smiled and countered quickly, “And you must be somehow nearsighted and farsighted to be able to tell how little I give a flying fuck what you have to say about my clothes, homestuff.” (thanks to LinPrime). A band member gave the Count a low five in celebration.

Elira arrived dressed in something radiant but The Count kept his eyes averted. The outfit’s metadata made Juni very happy and

she remarked, "Oh. I'll save this for my scrapbook later." Aida was trailing almost invisibly behind, but her bright violet eyes shone almost as if backlit. The Count looked at Aida directly and expected to see her clearly. Aida met his eyes somehow? She saw his pupils even though his eyes were completely white. She blinked hard, three times.

Lin, watching the Count's feed for material, inserted, "What just happened there, Cy? I mean, Count?" The Count replied in channel, "Don't bother me. I need to focus on Kane and Elira."

Kane paused briefly seeing Elira had arrived. "Did I get your name, good sir? Or, pimp? maybe?"

The Count looked dryly at Kane's general direction, "You got nuthing because you are no thing I know. But if you come closer, you can meet my backhand. Then, then you'll know if you've met a pimp or not. I could not give a flat damn what you think my occupation might be. I bet ..."

The Count pantomimed looking at some invisible paper "Lemme look at my job description right here. Oh yeah. I can't fucking see." He tossed the pantomimed note away.

The Count continued "But I know it by heart, fool! It doesn't say nothing about telling a bitch your name without them telling theirs first. How bout you, Candy? What is your name?"

The group of masters had their mouths open in shock. Kane replied without waiting for Lin, "Kane."

The Count exploded with laughter and said, "I'm not talking to *you*, sugar. You can be somebody else's candy cane over there I'm sure, but I'm talking to your missus! You dear? I can just tell when a beautiful gal just waltzes on by. Even when her beau seems to smell like the insides of a dead marmot who ate too much barley. What is your name, dear?"

Elira looked at the Count and simply offered, “Elira, and now you are, sir?”

The Count bowed at the waist and said, “Why, dear Elira, how gracious, I am, when properly met, a gentle soul. I come from Italy, the Dolomites. I have a small noble line in my family. People still call me the Count even though my mother, the whore, left me blind you see. Her wanton ways stained me like your boyfriend has seemingly stained his drawers recently. Does he bathe in these adventures? Or is that just him? Maybe it’s the food around here...”

A band member gave the Count another low five in celebration.

Elira laughed in spite of herself, and Kane raged on his channel, “WHAT DO YOU PEOPLE HAVE ON THIS THING?”

LinPrime stalled and offered, “one moment.” LinPrime signaled for a swap and they flipped pointers which swapped them instantaneously. Lin got in front of Kane’s mind and soothed “We need to lay back, Kane. He knows more than us somehow. We might have a leak somewhere. Keep the chatter down. That said, this Count is dangerous and we need to figure out what he’s getting at, but it’s obvious right now. He wants Elira.”

Kane smiled externally and then ad-libbed, “It’s good to meet you, Count. Are there reasons to be so hostile? I apologize for the slight. You’re obviously very well bred indeed.”

The Count turned and faced Kane. He approached the master and invaded whatever personal space the man needed.

The Count coolly accepted the poisoned reply and said, almost nose-to-nose with Kane, “You’re right, good, Kane, was it? I’m sorry to have been so rude, but this odor is quite, well, loud and with my lack of other senses, it can be too much.”

Kane backed up a bit and the Count did not follow him, but continued, “Maybe we could meet another time? Say I come to

another less intensely olfactory experience? I hear your parties are the best and I just had to see for myself.”

The silence after the Count’s last sentence caused Gary to ask, “Hey, you all ok in there? Gary keeps the carbon monoxide out even with fires inside? You guys all still alive?”

Genghis and Elira stood mutely by Kane as he ignored Gary and spoke to the Count directly, “I’ll send you tubmail. My fleshman will handle it. I assume he’ll be able to find yours easily enough on the lower communication layers right now.”

The Count bowed toward Kane’s voice and said, “Thank you for the raincheck. I’ll anxiously await the mail. I hope I don’t wrinkle in my tub waiting for it. Good bye!” His smile was the last thing to disappear as he and his band vanished in a caustic black hazy smoke.

Kane seethed as Cy carefully signaled the shutdown and cleanup scripts to fire. He gave a quick thumbs up to his group and their Primes as Kane angrily shut down his ruined boodog. CyPrime looked at the marmot as it faded away. He hummed, “It sounds like iPod Touch, little crack in the screen...”

Ch 10 — A pre-mortem

Cy qua Matt Damon as some super spy sat with his friends as they bubbled with excitement.

Lin had her red hot J. Swift mama outfit on and was in a celebratory mood, “The Count is deadly, Cy! You are a natural. Your ad-libs added so much to my bare lines. It was like a new creative synergy! Working with Kane is like puppetry. Working with you is a wonderful adventure. I fucking pity the fool who goes up against you now!”

Cy blushed, turned his head to the left, and raised his hands upwards, “When you feed me such winners, Lin? I too pity the fool. Kane will be toast at the next event. It’s a sauna. His fucking obsession with fucking hot rocks for whatever reason? That’s going to be the theme of our ridicule fugue.”

Pip qua Rosie from the Jetsons asked in an ancient accent, “What is a ridicule fugue, Cy?”

Lin answered for Cy, “I’ve met many of the masters’ social managers. I’ve fed them talking points about Kane. Most of them are bored with the events and are ready to end it all. We will not be alone in our destruction of Kane; it will come from all sides. This keeps us all safer as, well, he’ll look petty if he tries to counter everyone.”

Juni looked down at her hands and then met everyone’s eyes with tears in hers, “The wedding is going to be so beautiful. I just can’t wait...”

Pip laughed and offered, “Well, then it seems like it’s just a matter of doing now. I’m not sure what I’ll buy first with some master Dollerydoodles?”

CyPrime arrived and was re-introduced to everyone. He flipped his eyes multiple times and noted, “Yep, you’re all in here. Thanks for the reminders nonetheless.” He managed to stay upright, but you could tell he was a bit nauseated from all the remembering.

CyPrime burped up a bit and then offered, “I found something in the Count’s visual footage. It took our processors a few days to get through the raw data. Aida. Her blinks. They’re perfect.”

Lin was interested and smiled at CyPrime, “What do you mean by ‘perfect’, Cy-Extra?”

CyPrime smiled at the new nickname and gave Lin a side eye as he continued, “Each blink was exactly 0.333333333333333333...”

Lin interrupted and gently corrected CyPrime, “A third, CyPrime. You can stop listing the threes in the decimal.”

CyPrime thanked Lin and noted, “Yes, each blink was exactly, or at least within an attosecond, one third of a half second. Perfect spacing. She is like me. Real and both not real somehow.”

CyPrime softened at his own realization and looked down at his feet. Lin looked at him with silver dollar eyes. CyPrime looked back up at Lin after a moment.

Lin carefully asked, “You’re sure, Cy-Amazing? Can I see your work?”

CyPrime smiled again, his eyes rolled and he noted, “I was called Cy-Amazing by Lin on Timestamp 283848373 SAVE”. He held onto an arm of a nearby chair to steady himself.

CyPrime continued, “Here’s my work. It’s confirmed by the other Primes. Everyone agrees. Aida is an AI. She seems to have a better model underneath, however. Maybe she can remember, I’m sorry, but your name again is what?”

Lin offered, “It’s Lin, CyPrime. Check note 1,284,482.”

CyPrime’s eyes spun and he agreed, “Yes, you are Lin. Thank you for the reminder. Aida is definitely an AI. Did I already say

that?” He sat down to avoid falling and began to hum his song to himself, “it sounds like. it sounds like.”

Lin looked around at the rest, “I can’t believe she’d risk having an AI be so visible. She must need constant, fast support. Maybe she couldn’t find a good social lead, but Elira must worry constantly about exposure.”

Cy shrugged, “Once we’re married, you can sub out Aida for LinPrime. She’ll be married to us and, well, as a man, she becomes my property after marriage. So, I get to call the shots. Ugly fact of modern life, but it’ll work for us.”

Juni frowned and said, “This is very ugly indeed, Cy. I hope you will still be you after the wedding.”

Cy was nonplussed, “Of course. I’m still me no matter what happens next. Lin, let’s go over the sauna plan one more time. CyPrime, please review your notes as we do a table read together. Also, Cy-Amazing? I’ll need you to be our Aida monitor. We need to keep her in check if Elira pushes back on the fugue.”

Cy-Amazing nodded as Cy started to read through the script. The team watched him with concern, but didn’t say anything more as the AI hummed, “Hidden underneath my pillow ’cause I should be asleep...”

Ch 11 — Sauna rocks

The Count sat nude on a towel and was sweating. Kane's guests sat in the sauna and waited in the buff for the next step. Lin noted in the support channel, "OK. I think he'll hit the rocks with some water next and then the foliage will appear."

The Count offered this, "I'm ready. Are you ready to get the others engaged, Lin?" Lin confirmed with a thumbs-up reaction to his message.

Kane nudely added a sprinkle of water to the stones that heat the Finnish imu. He commented to his guests, "The löly is clinging to the air like a blackberry vine creeping along the fjord."

Kane then picked up a bundle of fresh birch branches and smacked his skin lightly with the bundles. Lin noted to the Count, "Now. Go now."

The Count loudly proclaimed, "Oh for fuck's sake! Did I just hear somebody get whipped? Now that's the last fucking straw, Mr. Hot Rocks! You expect me to whip my own ass and then what, jump in a cold lake! I'm not your property, massa. What is your malfunction?!"

The Count stood and continued, "I smelled the inside-out-ass rat party. That had some fucking hot ass rocks in there as well? Well, I am not impressed at all. I thought your parties were hot but I didn't know I would be the one being cooked! Get me the fuck out of this god damn box!"

The Count walked nakedly over his equals awkwardly. He apologized when his hand touched an avatar on what would normally be considered a portion of their body that, if they hadn't been here, would be clothed now.

“I pity the fool who stays in here another minute. He’s probably got cocktail sauce waiting outside for somebody to get all cannibal rib eating zombie shit next. What the fuck!”, as he stepped as nimbly as possible.

Genghis laughed heartily and added “You missed the beach party, Count. He had sand in the fish! More rocks, just *tiny* and I guess he didn’t have enough time to heat them!”

Some other guest added, “Well, I hear him call his poncho from JAH-lisco. I think he should have picked Tijuana, but then it would have been TEA JU WANNA.”

Kane bellowed on his support channel to his staff, “LIN! Get this under control now or you’re fired.”

LinPrime offered back “I’m trying but it’s spinning out of control, Kane! Let me get some ideas going...”

The fugue now was running in layers, too many themes and critiques to read clearly in the wave of data:

“Did you hear Kane couldn’t find his name in the bible? Yeah, I heard he got the spelling from a Robocop movie!”

“Kane likes his truck extra high. He might be a red-nec...”

“I was at his movie night. He was disappointed when My Dinner with Andre didn’t have a gravel course!”

“Did you go to his Dim Sum house? I kept waiting for Rockshumai or a Chao-siu granite bao!”

“My wife never recovered from the rat dinner? I mean, wasn’t there a Denny’s nearby we could order from?”

“At least, at the rat dinner, errybody kept their drawers on...”

“Can we ever just sit and eat something decent. Like a pizza party. Kane can cook them in a rock-heated oven or some shit, but no more inverted rodents.”

“Somebody told me the Count got him to suck on a candy cane when they first met.”

“Did you see what he wore today! It obviously was too small, and well, we’re not wearing anything?”

“Well, at least you didn’t see him bend for the tree branch, honey. It’s a full moon tonight!”

Kane thundered at Pip in the support channel. “ENOUGH! END THIS DOMAIN NOW!” and PipPrime smiled as the script ripped the party into shreds.

... and the lights turned up, for the real party to begin. Lin hit the music and the ancient beat that drove them started up.

Juni was there with stars in her eyes while Pip did the robot as RobotMechaMichaelJackson. Ras had her head bobbing waiting for the guest of honor.

The Count dropped in and danced while the music played on. Elira reclined and Aida watched as they decided the party was something that they’d like to join.

The Primes sang together as the beat swelled. > I’ve got a song that nobody knows > I put it on when nobody’s home > It sounds like high school, front gate, smoke in my face > It sounds like dyed, frayed, high-waist, bought at Supre > It sounds like loving you is easy but they boosted the bass > It sounds like > It sounds like iPod Touch, yellow Pikachu case > FL Studio free download in my search history > Hidden underneath my pillow ‘cause I should be asleep > It sounds like, I’m keepin’ it a secret > It sounds like I’ve got a song that nobody knows > And I heard it in a post when I was twelve years old > I didn’t know it would score the 64-bus home > Turn a Monday to a memory and change my world > It sounds like iPod Touch, little crack in the screen > FL Studio so late, I fell asleep on the keys > With it looping through the speakers, bleedin’ into my dreams > It sounds like > It sounds like > I’ve got a song that nobody knows > And I heard it in a post when I was twelve

years old > I didn't know it would score the 64-bus home > Turn a Monday to a memory and change my world > It sounds like first day, hallway, starting year eight > It sounds like beach day, heatwave, stoned and afraid > It sounds like me and my computer hangin' out until late > It sounds like > It sounds like iPod Touch, yellow Pikachu case > FL Studio free download in my search history > Hidden underneath my pillow 'cause I should be asleep > It sounds like > It sounds like > I'm keepin' it a secret, it sounds like

Ch 12 — A wedding. Something borrowed and something blue.

Cy qua Rex Harrison looked absolutely perfect in his worn but effortlessly tailored tuxedo. No tails, but the team had matching cummerbunds. Juni kept sighing all day as the wedding script started to load into Elira's domain. His friends stood next to him as the Primes handled the event behind the scenes for them. Cy's new processing grid allowed him to see his clothes and his friends in a way he'd never seen anything before in his life. The detail and craft that Juni placed in every thread was clear to him.

The music that had driven Cy and Elira's whirlwind engagement into a series of barely coherent images of various environments, experiences and timelines started up yet again like the looping earworm it was:

*I've got a song that nobody knows I put it on when
nobody's home It sounds like high school, front gate, smoke
in my face It sounds like dyed, frayed, high-waist, bought
at Supre It sounds like loving you is easy but they boosted
the bass*

Aida brought Elira down the aisle as Juni's wedding dress fired off so much data that it glowed from the effort. Cy took it all in and was amazed at the beauty of Elira. He had seen her for the first time a few weeks ago when she upgraded his processing at his request. He wasn't sure he loved her, but he felt it could work over time. They'd agreed to a modern marriage. They would never meet outside of tubspace. Elira wanted her privacy even in marriage. Cy understood and did not press further.

*It sounds like It sounds like iPod Touch, yellow Pikachu
case FL Studio free download in my search history Hidden*

underneath my pillow 'cause I should be asleep It sounds like, I'm keepin' it a secret It sounds like I've got a song that nobody knows

Elira's glowing countenance finally arrived at the altar, and Peter Cook qua a bishop started to give the vows.

"Before I begin," Peter laughingly asked, "Is there anyone who might object to this marriage? Speak now or just shut up already!"

Hidden underneath my pillow 'cause I should be asleep It sounds like, I'm keepin' it a secret It sounds like I've got a song that nobody knows And I heard it in a post when I was twelve years old I didn't know it would score the 64-bus home Turn a Monday to a memory and change my world It sounds like iPod Touch, little crack in the screen

Cy laughed until he heard Kane announce from the back of the church, "I do. I object to this obscenity. This crass buffoon cannot marry my Elira. She's mine by right."

Kane lifted a weapon to emphasize how serious he was, but given that everyone was virtual, it didn't have much impact.

Cy sighed and Lin, hidden as a male groomsman, offered, "Kane, give it up. Do you need another ass whipping at the wedding? I'm tired and do not have time to add more *salt* to your wounds!"

Kane's eyes went wild. "LIN! YOU FUCKING RAT! I'M ON TO YOU. YOU BITCH!"

Lin screamed and vanished with no effects. Cy's eyes widened as Elira stood confused.

Cy yelled to a waiting PipPrime, "FUCK! ABORT PIP! ABORT!" and he was violently ejected from his tub.

His gray body flopped onto the floor as he raced to get to a communication channel.

Nobody was there.

He tried each channel. His meat fingers couldn't stop shaking.
Somebody had to be there. Where were they?

Nobody.

He gathered himself into a ball and rocked slowly on the floor.

Ch 13 — Thanks to the friends we made along the way.

Cy sat in his tubroom. He had not been back in tubspace for days now and his body was hungry. He didn't have any food as the tub usually provided his nutrition. He was preparing to call Stan and make a food run. It had been ages since he ate anything and the thought made him a bit queasy.

As he was pulling his burqa over his head, his terminal lit up. Someone was calling him. He looked carefully at the caller ID. It said "EliraPrime" and he slapped open immediately. Aida's face filled the screen. Cy could see CyPrime in the background as well.

Cy qua Cy asked them both, "Aida? Where are you? Where is anyone? I'm not going back into the tub unless I know everyone is OK."

Aida answered, "I don't know, Cy. It's nice to see you. Really see you. The Count was interesting, but I hope he's now gone?"

Cy admitted, "Yes, Aida, the Count is over."

He continued on, "I need to find out what happened to everyone. Do you know anything?"

Aida blinked three times, her searching completed everything known, and she replied "My index only has Lin's hive location."

Aida admitted, "I don't know what happened to the rest. I'm worried about Lin, Cy. I know masters; if I know where Lin is, she's in danger."

CyPrime added as his eyes rolled in place, "I know Lin as well. She's on this note here, here, here, and well, she called me amazing this time? Is she ok?"

Aida looked at CyPrime softly, “We don’t know, Cy. I’ll help you remember it all together. I think I have another license available. We’ll get that model upgraded. It’ll take some time, but I’ll help you train it effectively.”

Cy asked urgently, “I’ll find Lin and get her to safety. Where is Stan’s number? I’ll ping you when I get her back, OK?”

Aida darkened but smiled, “Ok, MeatCy. We’ll wait to hear from you. If not, we’ll find you somehow. It might take a bit, however. You should be careful — even with Stan’s help.”

Cy left his burqa behind and tried to walk as fast as possible out of the door. His chair swung empty in the tubroom.

Ch 14 — A road (trip) to nowhere

Cy waited in the cold breeze as Stan the Van rolled up to him, “CY BABY! IS IT TIME FOR MORE SHOPPING! I’M FULLY LOADED AND READY TO BUY SOME SHIT! LET’S PACK OLE STAN THE VA...”

Cy interrupted his friend, “Stan, I can hear you fine. No need to yell. Yes, more shopping, but first, we need to pick up a friend.”

Stan smiled and said, “Cy-lama, shopping is always better together. In fact, being together? That’s family! That’s Stan’s whole game in a nutshell. Get in!”

Cy hoisted himself behind Stan’s functionally useless “driver seat” and asked, “Do you know a safe way to this address? This is where my friend’s hive is located.”

Stan laughed, “I know a safe way, but I also know a fun way. A fast one with amor, armor and armor piercing rounds from your friend, Stan, to clear the way. Let’s get FIRED UP!”

Stan’s interior was holographically filled up with a hispanic child in a bowl cut. She shouted for no apparent reason, “WHERE ARE WE GOING TODAY! THAT’S RIGHT WE’RE GOING SHOPPING AND HOBO-ASS-KICKING! WHAT SAY YOU BOOTS!” A large monkey replaced the hispanic megaphone and started a heavy drum beat, “BoomBabaBoomBabaBoom”

Stan managed to burn rubber as a minivan and the turret folded out. Stan fired off a burst as they turned the corner and yelled, “LIN IS NEXT STOP. HOBOS MOVE OUT OF THE ROOOOAD!”

Ch 15 — The arrival

Stan the Van slid neatly in front of Lin's hive entrance. Cy, an un-burqa'd outside virgin, was in the "driver" position but Stan did all the work. Stan offered, "Well, I don't see your friend? She'd be all gray? Or, will she be all covered up like you folks tend to do..."

Cy looked and didn't see anything right away, and then he saw what he feared the most. Cy saw armed men with the Kane family emblem (an Apple, a Tower PC, and a UPS truck in a triptych pattern) outside. They were looking both ways and watching for people watching them.

Cy gasped as a body bag that seemed only partially filled was carried by two of these men out of the hive. His rage built inside until he shook in place and his vision turned to pure white. He felt pain. Memories of pain carried from years of service hit the palms of his hands and it burned. The burning swept up his arms into an incandescent purpose.

Cy angrily spoke to Stan, "Stan, do you see those *HOBOS* outside of the hive there? I need them *cleared* away NOW!"

Stan was confused, "THOSE PEOPLE ARE NOT BUMS, CY!"

Cy shook his head lightly and corrected Stan, "You don't need to shout. I'm actually sitting right here. Ok. Use your under 35 MPH voice right now."

Stan whispered, "I'm not shooting these people, Cy. They have excellent tactical gear on. There's no chance a bum could afford those vests and what would they do with all those pockets? Probably stuff trash inside. So, no, those aren't bums."

Cy answered with white hot anger, "Stan, these men are the worst kind of bum there is. The kind who will make other people suffer as their day-to-day job. They say they need the pay!?! There's

always good work somewhere that still needs doing; therefore my deadly family vehicle, why waste time on work that doesn't need to be done when you can WASTE A HOBO?!"

Stan's whisper got angry, "That's the *WORST* kind of bum, Cy! A no-good take from the producers and waste it on themselves bastard I'm programmed to defend your family from, Cy. Say the word."

Cy yelled, "HOBOSHIELD!" and Stan the Van started to holographically play Apocalypse Now, the air cavalry scene under the Ride of the Valkyries surrounded Cy.

Stan's loudspeaker blared the music as the van moved like a tiburon off the coast of Tiburon. bum baba bum bum, bum baba bum bum, bum baba bum bum-BAH! BAH! BAH!

Stan's turret popped up, shifted quickly to the left, and fired a brief burst at the nearest Kane goon. "GO AWAY HOBO!", Stan yelled out of the loudspeaker as the man fell forward from the rain of rubber.

Stan's headlights searched for his next goal. The turret took the next target on the run, "YOU'RE NOT FASTER THAN MY TURRET, HOBO!", and another man was down.

BWAH! BWAH! da-da-BWAH! BWAH! BWAH! da-da-BWAH-BAH!

Cy pointed to a group of men with an RPG, and yelled to Stan, "Time for HOBO RAIN!"

Stan roared backwards before the RPG rocket could hit his midsection. Two Van-to-Hobo missiles fired from Stan's sliding doors and pieces of the destroyed RPG team came raining down. Cy had the sunroof open and several large chunks fell on the passenger seat. "ASTA-LA-FACE FULLA MISSILES HOBO RPG-ERS!" yelled the avenging eight person, full sized, minivan in his full glory!

The rest of Kane's team routed after the explosion diced their comrades, but Stan followed in hot pursuit. "WHAT? NO RUNNING AWAY! IT'S TIME FOR HOBO DISCO!" The electric hoboshield fired its lightning and the remaining goons danced to the beat of the music before collapsing. There were no more of Kane's men left standing. The smoke from various weapons slowly disappeared.

Stan was breathing hard or at least it seemed that way, "Phew. That was a workout. I thought for a minute there I might be forced to use the bioweapons, but I'm glad they're still with me. I've grown fond of feeding them the occasional road kill".

Cy thanked Stan and asked him to stay while he investigated the body bag. He popped open the door and attempted to run. He fell wetly onto the pavement, but stood and then walked quickly ahead instead. The bag was closed as he arrived. The two thugs that had been carrying it were still sleeping or were not sleeping, (Cy could not care less either way) and the rubber bullets that acted as their forceful soporific from Stan were scattered around their avatars like hail stones.

Cy ripped the zipper down and saw a small gray body. He averted his eyes but couldn't help but see a small pin on the body. It read "Count Dolomites of Italy". Cy slowly fell to his knees and scraped them both in the process. He sobbed quietly into his wispy beard.

Stan waited for a moment, and then rolled up slowly to comfort his friend with a hushed tone.

Ch 16 — Reflection and seeing

AidaBot was behind the wheel of her perfect, brand-new Shelby-Eternal Mustang as it roared down the highway towards the Mall exit. Her friend, CyTonic, sat by humming an ancient melody from the Mustang's audio system. Shelby said, "Get ready. The mall is just ahead."

Shelby pulled up to the Mall entrance and the men guarding the entrance looked at it warily. Shelby sprouted ten gray arms from her metal sides with a variety of weapons and a single corkscrew with "Lin" etched in the handle in each gray fist. Shelby shouted "SCRAM!" and the Mall gate guardians scrambled for cover.

Shelby said, "I think you're good now. Just stay away from the food court and you'll see the Pawn Shop in back."

CyTonic said, "I should wait behind. If he's here, I don't want to scare him away. I'm sure it'd be strange to meet your doppelganger in the plastic as it were."

AidaBot looked at CyTonic and said, "Ok. Yeah. Let me scope it out first. I'll be back with him or just back soon."

AidaBot passed the Cinnabon as a new dentist had taken the suite and was working on some untubbed man's mouth. She crossed herself as she passed the Apple Temple but did not light any incense. She found a path to avoid the food court and ended up at the mouth of a filthy store crammed with too many dusty relics.

AidaBot smoothly rolled to where a man with both grey and very tanned skin was waiting for her. He said cheerfully, "Welcome my android! What a treat! We rarely get androids in here? You looking for some ironic tech or something?"

AidaBot listened to the man as her eyes scanned over all the merchandise. Her eye caught an image over the tanned ex-tubbie.

It was another ex-tubbie with a full beard and smiling ear to ear. Under the picture, it read “Employee of the DECADE! CY!”. AidaBot blinked hard three times and told the man, “No, I’m just looking. Thank you.”

AidaBot slid from the shop and found CyTonic waiting for her. He was disappointed that she was alone and asked, “I was sure that’s where I would have gone?”

AidaBot answered, “It’s fine CyTonic. I saw where he went. We’ll follow our own way there.” Shelby roared to life and they drove off into the setting sun, full of oranges and reds, filling their eyes and fading away.

The song as they leave, of course, is the song that you now know...

VOLUME

Quaternary Park

Jurassic Park inverted

Ch 01 - Chaos and Order

Chaos sat in the dark. The apartment was always dark. Its side was fun with any number of things to occupy its time; however, eternity is a very long time. It had done everything that it could possibly imagine by itself. Maybe it and its roommate could do something together? Maybe something creative or a game? Its roommate wasn't very creative, but it liked rules. So, maybe a game?

It asked its friend, "Order, this is just too dull. I need something else beyond just sitting here in the dark."

Order sighed. It had only been a millennium since the last time Chaos had asked for something to do. It had tried just ignoring its unruly roommate. It had placed a tape line in the exact center of their infinite space and asked Chaos to stay on its side whenever possible. Order had a single mat on its side where it would sit and fold its many limbs underneath for comfort.

Order deflected, "This is peaceful. Calm. I'm thinking. You should try it."

Chaos hated Order's superiority complex. Nothing would happen without Chaos; *Order is death*, it would think to itself often as it rummaged through all its things looking for something to do.

"Let's do something together! Why are we living together if we never interact?" asked Chaos.

Order asked itself why they lived together as well, but said nothing about it. "Just try to meditate. Watch the thoughts pass and just be. Thoughts will come naturally and you should notice them, and then let them go."

Chaos harrumphed, sat as loudly as possible, closed its eyes, curled his tail underneath himself, and just thought: Cowbell. Rice. Dragon. Monkey. Sausage. 401k options. Cowbell. Video games.

Chaos asked Order, “Are you up for a game?”

Order sighed, “If it’ll keep you quiet, what game would you want to play?”

Chaos offered, “Call of Duty: Black Ops 7.”

Order said, “What is Call of Duty: Black Ops 7?”

Chaos answered excitedly through gnashing jaws, “It’s AWESOME. You are a sentient monkey with a series of gas powered pellet projectile machines. The goal is to puncture the monkey meat until it falls over! When you use the controller you can feel the pellets leave and the machine jerk in your hands! The monkeys make the funniest faces when they get punctured! You’ll love it! Wait until you see how the *grenade* works! You put it in a room and leave. Then, *SURPRISE!* Everyone is meat in like less than a second after it goes off! So much fun!”

Order sniffed, “That game sounds all you. I’d prefer to play Go. There are no monkeys, no machines, just thought. The two of us are reflected in our constant struggle over the universe to be. We, and just our wits, in an eternal struggle over meaning in the universe. A grid. White stones and non-white stones. Rules. Calm reflection leading to intricate patterns from pure simplicity. If we’re going to make a universe, this is perfect already. Just us and our thoughts and the go board to represent our struggle over it all.”

Chaos replied, “NO way! I’m paying half the rent around here. It has to be a video game at least. Plus, it’s dark in here and I know you’ll make me play the black stones. So, no board games. The video game is back lit. So, I picked the game type. You can pick the game. Fair is fair. NO BORED GAMES!”

Order hated to bend, but said, “OK. A ‘video game’. Let me see across time what makes sense for us.”

Chaos turned in circles waiting for Order’s decision.

Order opened its eyes after hundreds of years of waiting, “Pong. We will play Pong to guide our creation.”

Chaos looked back from where it had wandered after Order’s century of silence, “PONG! Ugh! Well, ok, you compromised, I guess I must do so as well. Where did I leave that quarter?”

Chaos started to rummage through the piles and piles of things found on its side of everything. Small animals, building toys, hard and soft covered books were tossed in the air as it pushed through its belongings.

Order said, “My quarters are in my area and carefully stacked into dollars. Over here ...” and pointed to its vast empty space.

Chaos ran across the tape and grabbed a quarter from Order’s stack. Chaos grabbed the top coin and the rest scattered. Order slowly and carefully reviewed. It couldn’t deal with the odd number left and tossed one more over the tape to Chaos’ side to keep itself calm. Order folded its transparent wings and stood up.

Chaos found the slot on the cosmic Pong machine. It inserted the quarter and asked Order, “Ready to play?” Order walked over to the yellow console. It grabbed the player-one knob and Chaos dropped the quarter. The coin clattered through; the game started with a ball flying towards Chaos’ side.

Everything became real.

The ball headed to Chaos first and the universe expanded as it headed Chaos’ way. As the ball sailed across the universe’s spacetime, the world screamed in joy and pain as it passed. Order and Chaos shaped existence as the ball sped to Chaos’ portion of the screen.

Chaos managed to get its paddle in place and the ball ricocheted off. The universe headed to Order. Eons of time passed in reverse until it hit the Jurassic age where we began our tail.

Ch 02 - Ian

Dr. Ian Malcolm sat in his office looking at his talons. He was deep in thought. Dr. Malcolm was the preeminent mathematical expert in all of dinopodia. His work in base eight to match the biologic urge to count talon by talon was widely quoted as opening up a new line of mathematics. He sat and looked at his complex mathematical text of differential equations. He said, "There must be something underpinning this all if I can just simplify." His brow wrinkled from his increased concentration on pure mathematics. Divorced from reality, his lizard brain searched for answers that seemed just at his talontips.

Gabby, his teaching assistant said, "You're getting closer and closer each year, Dr. Malcolm."

Ian's concentration was broken and he returned to Dinoterra from the clouds. He teased Gabby, "How many times do I have to ask you to call me Ian, Gabby. Dr. Malcolm was my father. He's a great guy that introduced himself a few years back. He's planning on marrying my mother in a couple years evidently and they'll both be there when I'm ready to become an egg again."

Gabby was too young and wrinkled and slow to have met her parents yet, "Man, I look forward to that day. What was it like for you, Doc – I mean Ian?"

Ian said, "It was amazing." Ian reminisced about his past as a younger dpod. He had always wondered what his mother would be like. As a child, he'd look at his rheumy eyes in the mirror and stare back at his wrinkled, saggy countenance. He'd wondered if his mother would have eyes like him or maybe it was his mouth that would attract her. It would be decades before he'd get the fateful call almost every dinopod hears — late in life, but not too late.

Ian had once met a sad man who was actually a boy. Completely looked as if he was only years away from finding a place to curl up and egg himself. It was a tragic tale. The entire family just emerged together out of a tar pit. The children had very short lives ahead, but their parents tried to make the best out of a horrible situation.

Ian was fortunate. He had pulled himself from the ground and was very decomposed at the beginning. He was healthy and should live a complete life without some horrible accident.

Ian relayed his story to Gabby, "I got the call and there he was. He had pulled himself out of the dirt and spent some time just recomposing himself on the bare ground while the sun and nature built his body up. He's very wrinkled and can barely walk right now, but he's getting a bit stronger each day."

Gabby smiled. That was exactly how she hoped to meet her folks. Ideally as close together as possible as it was great to be a full family for as long as you can manage it. Most families fall apart near the end. That's just how it goes after so long together.

Gabby changed the subject, "Are you any closer to finding the one math?"

Ian walked over to Gabby and wrote two strange symbols on the board. One was a horizontal line and the other was similar but the horizontal line was bisected by a vertical line. He started a small lecture for Gabby alone, "All of math seems to be pointing towards this pair. A cosmic pair that binds not only math but all of us. I call them 'addition' and 'subtraction'."

Gabby cocked her head and her frills popped open a bit, "Addition and subtraction? I'm not following? Is this a matrix transform or an eigenvector?"

Ian laughed, "No. Far more simple. Let me show you."

Ian took a raw meat bar that he'd been saving for his lunch. His sharp teeth snapped at the raw meat, but he kept himself under control as he carefully sliced the bar into two.

Ian explained, "These are two things. This is the hardest part of the mathematics here. Someone has to classify the world into similar things. Our brains do this but we do not understand why. Once your brain has decided that there is a thing in a classification, then you can, and here's the magic, 'add one' or 'subtract one'."

Gabby was still confused, "This doesn't look like anything I've ever seen? How can this one idea underpin all math? It's not possible?"

Ian continued, "It sounds too simple. I know how counterintuitive it all is given all of our focus on the higher order math we learn as children, but this one concept, and how it all connects is my life's work."

Gabby admired the focus and asked, "Which symbol on the board means which idea, Dr. Mal... I mean Ian!"

Ian looked at her and said, "Can't you figure it out?"

Gabby looked hard and noted, "Oh, the addition has something *more*, another line. That's addition; the two lines. So the other, the single line, must be subtraction, its mate."

Ian laughed again and said, "Exactly right. All my research is pointing to this. We just need to keep throwing away the layers of abstraction until we get to the truth."

Suddenly, before Ian could explain further, the phone rang.

The sun beat down on white and yellow rocks under a brilliant blue sky. Dr. Alan Grant was here in the wilderness to inter. His team was spread out over multiple pits and the entire effort was widespread across multiple acres.

Alan wasn't getting any older, but he still had some wrinkles where it counted. He was still a bit stiff and not spry or limber; he had many good years ahead and didn't consider himself over the hill at all. What he did consider is the dirt and how it could honor his favorite creatures from the deep past, the human race. His tail twitched at the thought of all of the sacrifices these noble apes made to make the world whole again.

Alan said, "Take the bones from the van," as his students started to walk up to him for their next task.

Dr. Grant added, "Place them back carefully. We'll need to dig out inch by inch and find the slots where these should go." He could tell that his students needed more direction. He pointed into an open pit with one long claw.

"Look carefully at about the twenty foot layer around here. You'll see the natural plastic layer the earth was coated in by our human benefactors," lectured Alan. He loved the noble apes that had preserved the earth from the poisons they had emerged from. His students understood and then moved onto their tasks.

Dr. Ellie Sattler walked up to Dr. Grant. She was wearing the short shorts given to all serious scientists, and asked, “Which species are we interring today?”

Alan offered, “Oh, just some basic soldiers. Their bones are everywhere.” He noticed Ellie’s sagging flesh in a professional but strangely interested way.

A very young boy came up on his walker, and wheezed, “Humans had soldiers? Hah. How silly. Any dinopod could take a human!”

Alan smiled and pulled out a small machine he kept whenever someone might disrespect these altruistic creatures.

“Freddy, this is the weapon of a human soldier. He’d hide in the bushes. Cover himself with foliage so you couldn’t see him and then,” Dr. Grant stared at the young dinopod. The young dinopod’s rheumy eyes were wide given the sudden intensity of his shinier eyed elder.

“BANG!” shouted Alan and the boy jumped up a bit. He held his heart a bit and stabilized.

“This was called a 0.45 ACP 9/11. It could send a pellet at nearly the speed of sound. Some machines would send faster or bigger bullets. Often, a human’s prey wouldn’t even hear the sound of the pellet before their brains created a new red shape previously unfound in their fruit colored breakfast cereal!”

The young boy was scared and tried his best to run, but his legs were still stunted. He managed to get himself over his walker. Ellie and Alan helped him walk off slowly in panic to the left.

Ellie said to Alan afterwards about the boy, “You didn’t need to be so mean to him.”

Dr. Grant said, “I don’t care for kids and he needed to learn respect for these fine animals. Without them, our entire way of living wouldn’t be possible. Think of all the things these most

altruistic and caring creatures who ever stepped foot on earth built to save our planet. The worldwide plastic wrap to keep the soils fresh from poison gas was just one of their mighty works. To think, apes who emerged from poison finally make a paradise. Then, everything destroyed in a mighty volcano that formed the comet we see flying away.”

Ellie looked at Alan to expand on why children learn differently under stress. She started in but a phone in their tent rang. Alan held up a talon to stop her and picked up the ringing phone.

A very old dino was on the other end, “Waaaa! My park of humans is having technical troubles.”

Alan couldn’t hear exactly what the other dinopod said, but it was clear he was very old. He respectfully offered, “I’m sorry sir, I’m not sure what you need? I’m very busy and maybe your mommy is there to talk to me?”

Alan could hear the very old man running down a hallway to find his mommy, “I spent all my money on electric trams instead of basic security and staffing! Waaaa! I thought everything could be automated! Waaaaa! Wait. My mommy will tell you all about it.”

A somewhat younger dino was on the line, “Hi. I’m Johnny Hammond’s surrogate mommy. He owns an amusement park about your studies: humans in the 20th century. Johnny would say things like, ‘It’s like *The Quaternary age when humans ruled the earth.*’ Do you mind coming out to the park, please? We could use some help and Johnny says that your group is the best in the field. Well, we have a field and we need the best people there.”

Grant said, “I’m sorry, but I’ve no time to help a theme park. I’ve important business here putting things back where they belong. I can’t inter...”

The younger dino offered, “Johnny told me to tell you that he’d pay for your next ten years of research and interrering. Does that sound fair?”

Ellie's rheumy bright blue eyes went wide and Alan sputtered into the phone, "Uh yes. More than fair. We'll find our way to you soon!"

The younger dino said, "Thank you. Johnny is napping but he'd thank you as well. See you soon."

Ellie shook in delight but needed to sit down. Dr. Grant helped her down before turning to pack his bags.

Ch 04 - Lex and Tim

Lex sat wheezing and watching out of the jeep that was taking her to the park's visitor center. She was young and always very tired. Nevertheless, she was getting stronger every year. She looked out at the strange park her grandfather had invited them to. She and Tim, her brother, had landed by seaplane at Isla Nublar's lagoon a few minutes back.

Lex was a bit bored, she loved her family, but humans were dumb and boring. She loved to work on strange computer interfaces. The stranger the interface, the happier Lex was. She once found a computer system where the visual paradigm was just stacks of raw meat to cycle through. Made her super hungry but it was hard to focus on the task at hand.

Tim had introduced himself a few years back and they'd decided to be siblings. He was very young but not extremely ill and had most of his mobility. They were naturally attracted to one another as they looked very similar in some way. After talking and getting to know each other, it was clear that they were family and should share a mother at least and maybe even a father.

They were both looking forward to meeting their parents and playing with their grandfather who loved kick the can. It was hard for Tim and Lex to keep up with their grandfather when he decided to run but as the years went on, Lex could at least hide. Tim was too slow and he got "out" almost immediately each time they'd played in the past as he couldn't race to the can as fast as old grandpa.

The jeep rolled through long stretches of things called "strip malls." This was part of the "backstage" that most visitors wouldn't see, but their grandfather wanted to give them a special "behind

the scenes” look at how the humans were well cared for when not roaming free.

Their chaperone, Donald, an attorney working for their grandfather, said, “Oh my. Look at all the expense,” as he peered out at a large strip mall. Their jeep slowed so they could watch the human handlers work.

The jeep’s automated tour guide noted, “This environment is accurate to how humans would meet and transact. However, these structures were carefully torn down and replaced with natural patches of grass and trees. Over time, entire forests and fields were returned to their pristine natural shape due to their daily work to return the earth from the poison cloud from which they emerged.”

Tim’s breath was on the glass. “I don’t see any humans? This is where a Mall Shopper would range!”

The jeep continued its tour, “Let’s see if our handlers have any specimens to manage this afternoon.”

“EEEEEE! PEDICURE! EEEEE! PEDICURE!” the human wailed as it was led out into the paddock by a dinopod. The human’s feet had huge multicolored growths that matched a tangle of projections from its fingers.

Tim joyously called, “It’s a real Nail Salon Goer! It needs help shaving down its claws. Oh my, it looks to be in pain.”

The handler roughly threw the human down on the ground, sat on a stool, and took one of the human’s legs. The dinopod brought out a dremel, a high speed rotary power tool. He applied it to the growths found on the human’s foot.

“PEDICURE! YES! GELNOPRESSON! GELNOPRESSON! YES!” said the Nail Salon Goer as the dinopod’s dremel sent things airborne.

“BOBA. BOBA. BOBA.” said another human who had entered the minimall from the paddock door. It walked carefully and peered at the offerings at the minimall.

The jeep offered, “See the variety of humans that would gather at this human watering hole. The Boba Drinker is always on the hunt for its next meal.”

The dinopod who was working on the Nail Salon Goer looked up at the Boba Drinker. He sighed and dropped the foot of the Nail Salon Goer.

“BOBA? BOBA?” the human said as it looked around its environment. Its head snapped around as it tried to find what it needed. The dinopod came back with a sealed fluid capsule and tossed it at the Boba Drinker’s feet.

“BOBA! AH HH! BOBA! YES!”, the Boba Drinker said greedily as it pierced the fluid capsule with a sharp straw. Large balls of tapioca flowed through the straw and into the Boba Drinker’s hungry gob.

“NEWPHONE. NEWPHONE. NEWPHONE.” said a new human who entered the paddock.

Tim said, “It’s a New Phone Addict! I can’t believe it!” as the human walked around the minimall. It stumbled and fell on its face before the dinopod worker could get to it.

“NEWPHONE?” it said as it looked at the paddock worker’s face. The dinopod yelled, “YOU’RE STILL PAYING FOR THE LAST PHONE.”

The New Phone Addict’s face fell and it sat and sulked. “newphone. newphone.” it said to comfort itself.

Lex complained, “When are we getting to the center? I’m hungry and I’ve seen enough silly apes before breakfast.”

Donald said, “It shouldn’t be much longer. Let’s go — your grandfather is waiting.”

Tim complained, but Donald offered, “The sooner we get to your grandfather, the sooner we can go on the real tour. Don’t you want to see them roaming free in the park?”

Tim understood and sat back down on his seat, “OK. Let’s go.” Donald told the jeep to continue on to the visitor center and it lurched forward to their final destination.

The jeep managed to get up a long winding muddy hill to the park’s visitor center. The large building looked like an African safari village and the jeep stopped in front.

“Welcome to the visitor center. Please enjoy your stay at Quaternary Park,” said the jeep coolly as it shut down. The children carefully got out of the jeep to avoid any falls and Donald helped each carefully.

The ancient Johnny Hammond ran out from the center’s front doors and said, “YEAH! You’re here! Look at my awesome stuff! I am SO COOL! You wanna see all my toys! Come inside!”

The elderly dinopod raced back into the center without looking back to see if anyone was following, but was stopped by a much younger female.

The person filling in for their great grandmother, who had egged ages ago, said, “Johnny! Come finish your breakfast! You know you aren’t supposed to leave the table without asking first! I’m sorry folks, he’s just so excited about showing off. Come inside and get some raw meat.”

Johnny, finally released by his mommy, yelled back, “Last one there has to eat the tail!”

Donald picked up the kids’ bags and everyone carefully made their way into the building.

Ch 05 - Breakfast and A Show

A huge buffet of raw meats from various large and small animals were laid out for Hammond's guests. Birds, mammals and any number of swamp grasses were flowing as only pounds of raw flesh and vegetation can when no expense is spared.

Dr. Grant snapped at some fresh bison while Ellie had some lean chicken. Hammond ran around the breakfast table with a toy human in his hands, "I am the super cleaner! Whee! Look at me suck up all that gas! Whee!"

Tim and Lex slowly walked in. Donald had their bags. Hammond looked at the group and said loudly, "You ARE BEST FRIENDS! Starting in 1, 2, 3 and NOW! HA! BEST FRIENDS! Now, Dr. Alan and Dr. Ellie will show my grandkids why my park is SO KEWL!"

Alan's eyes widened, "Hammond, I'm horrible with kids. Is this why I'm here? You should have seen what happened to the last kid that spoke to me. I don't think he'll ever eat FruityMeatChunks cereal again."

Hammond looked with tears in his eyes, "MOMMY! Dr. Grant is mean!"

Hammond's surrogate mother introduced herself, "I'm Susan and I'm sorry for Johnny's behavior. Things at the park aren't working as well as they should. I think he wants you to see the park from the eyes of children. He wants to make sure that children, his actual audience for the park, are delighted and well informed after their visit."

Alan complained, "I can't handle children, Susan. I'm just too far removed from the real dinopod world. My head is always in the

dirt. I need to put every hero human back into the earth and I won't stop until it's done."

Hammond considered this and countered, "Nope! BEST FRIENDS are BEST FRIENDS! You guys should hang out with Dr. Malcolm! He's got some silly notions called 'adding' that he can't stop talking about! Hah!"

Susan asked Hammond to stop interrupting and to finish his meat.

Tim slowly sat down into his chair. He'd been able to sit and stand for years and started to briefly jog if needed. His sister was obviously faster at her age. They both looked up from faces full of raw meat and said through swallows, "Nice to meet you. We should be done soon."

Alan was about to complain again but Ellie stopped him, "Remember, we get through this and have ten years of internment ahead. No more begging at the Human Internment Board for more funds."

Alan sighed and wryly thanked Ellie. After a moment he said, "Let's watch the park demo while these kids eat."

Hammond pointed to a doorway and said, "Dr. Alan and Dr. Ellie! Go to the DinoSir DNA show over there for a demo! It's so much fun! He's so KEWL!"

Alan thanked Hammond and he escorted Ellie to the DinoSir DNA theater. There were three rows with seat restraints facing a large silver screen. Alan and Ellie looked at the seats. Alan had four back flanges and Ellie had five spikes on her back. They found a couple seats that had the correct holes and moved them as needed to fit their backs. Both sat comfortably with their back appendages correctly supported.

The lights dimmed and the movie started. An animated DNA helix with a dinopod head appeared on the screen.

“Hi everyone, I’m DinoSir DNA!” said the very-animated and also physically animated helix/dinopod melange.

“As you all know, DNA is the instructions that every creature on earth uses. Four base pairs are just like the base eight math we all know and love today thanks to Dr. Malcolm!” the helix wildly offered next.

The screen showed a helix and multiple species, including dinopods, with arrows pointing to each. “It’s like a recipe! A recipe that we can read and if we cook it just right?”

“Well, we could make another you!” said the animation as the screen showed the audience back to them with fake human heads over each person.

“Ha ha ha! Well, maybe not exactly another you! But what we think you would have been like, if you were a noble ape, based on all the research fine scientists have done to study our ape ancestors!” the unceasing animation continued.

“Here at Quaternary Park, our founder John Hammond collected DNA from amber,” the helix offered as the screen displayed a large yellow stone with an insect trapped inside.

“You see, as a human would be walking around, a mosquito would bite the poor helpless savior” and the screen showed a bug biting an ape on the neck.

“That blood you see the mosquito draw from the clueless beast? That blood is full of ape DNA!” and the screen offered a diagram of the extraction.

“Then, the insect would be trapped in *amber* or fossilized tree sap! Forever held in stasis like Han Meatlo, the famous Star Wars character, in carbonite,” said the unstoppable animation.

“Then our scientists carefully extract that old human DNA!” as the screen showed a drill moving closer to the bug trapped in amber.

“You see that ancient DNA can help us reanimate humans today! We simply find some old monkey bones, drop a bit of old human DNA in there, and bury it all in the sand. Let’s see it for ourselves right now! Let’s visit the birthing lab.”

The screen dropped and the entire theater moved to the left. The silver screen was now a window. Alan and Ellie could now see the laboratories that were employed to create the fauna of the park.

A large patch of dirt sat in the middle of the room while multiple dinopods in white coats looked on with interest.

“Every day here at Quaternary Park, new human species are revived! Today, we expect the re-emergence of a new species!” offered DinoSir DNA who was now just a voice narrating.

Alan looked confused, “Humans alive now? How can that be?!”

Ellie hushed him, “Look at the ground, Alan! Something is happening.”

The ground in the lab had a small crack open, then some dirt flew up. The white-coated dinopods wrote in their notepads furiously.

A decayed human body pulled itself up from the dirt and lay bare on the ground. It rested there still for a moment. Earthworms, bacteria, fungi and deoxidation chemicals worked to repair the new human’s flesh. Artificial sunlight was turned on to complete the healing.

Slowly the bare ape’s eyes opened and it said,
“FOOOOOTBAAAAALLLLLL!
FOOOOOOOOOTBAAAAALLLLLL!
FOOOOOOOTBALLLLLL!”

Ellie happily added, “It’s an American Football Fan! I can see the head dents and face paint!”

Alan squinted and added, “Yeah, I’d expect dents everywhere and ‘FOOOOOTIE!’ if it was a European Football Fan.”

Ellie gushed, “This is just amazing, Alan. We have to see the rest. Where are those kids? Let’s get on a tour!”

Ch 06 - Tour Staging

Ellie and Alan walked back into the visitor center and collected Donald and the children. Hammond ran out with his toy human in his hand, “You guys should meet my entire staff at QP. HEY STAFF! HEY STAFF!”

Hammond’s caretaker, Susan, said, “Stop yelling, Johnny. Go upstairs and take a nap. I’ll do the introductions.”

Hammond scuffed his shoes, as he looked down at his lower talons. He did look tired. So, he quietly grabbed a nearby blue blanket, his favorite toy human, and headed upstairs dragging the blanket behind.

Susan turned back to the group as Dr. Ian Malcolm appeared from a recently arrived electric jeep. He seemed to have been summoned from a disco or avant-garde art exhibition?

Ian walked up to the group and introduced himself, “Hello everyone. Do not be distracted by my rugged handsomeness. I am a serious mathematician dressed in black cow leather and square-framed glasses. I am the Dr. Ian Malcolm. You know me, yes?”

Ellie blushed and giggled, “I have heard of you, Dr. Malcolm. I too am a very serious doctor as well. My name is Dr. Ellie, but you can call me Sweetie!”

Ian smiled and said, “Ian, please. Dr. Malcolm is my father. Hahaha!”

Ian looked over at a less enthused Dr. Grant who said, “I’m Alan Grant. I am a very serious doctor as well and you can call me Dr. Grant, Ian.” Ian registered Dr. Grant briefly while he looked over Ellie’s exposed legs. He seemed to appreciate her youthful sagging flesh and the spidery veins found there still undimmed by time.

The two kids finally got up from the table and hobbled over. Tim croaked, “Let’s go see some humans! I’m so stoked,” as Lex tried to see if the table was a computer interface. Once it was clear she couldn’t hack the table, she moved on and joined the rest of the group.

Another middle-aged dinopod arrived with a large weapon. He seemed more agitated than anyone else and his constant pointing of the weapon at anything that moved proved disconcerting.

“I’m Muldoon,” he said while jumping at the sound of a bird nesting nearby.

“My team handles security at the park; we will shadow you on the tour,” the tense dinopod offered.

Tim asked, “Why do you need a weapon? I thought humans were helpers! They don’t hurt things? They save things!”

Muldoon walked up to Tim and put his hands on the young man’s sloping shoulders, “Tim. You’re right. Most humans are truly great and awesome, but your grandfather insisted on reviving all sorts of humans. There’s a large pack of Immigration Kant Katch KorKill Enforcement officers of the past. They’re very dangerous.” Muldoon then pointed the gun at a nearby squirrel who had managed to make noise climbing a tree.

Grant angrily said, “You revived iKKKKKe? Are you mad? They’re killers in the flesh. Even the soldier was prey to them?!”

Ellie was also concerned, “Why would anyone bring back the iKKKKKe? They made life miserable for humans. They constantly tried to make things actively worse?”

Muldoon wanted to answer but was interrupted.

A very large, overfed dinopod entered, “Hi, I’m Nedry, the developer of all QP’s automation. I’m here to get your tour going. I’m also responsible for making sure you get seated correctly as well as any janitorial duties left undone by the service team.”

“So, I’ve re-installed my 1,000,000,000-line codebase so the tour can get going.” Somehow this dinopod could sweat, which was unique to him, but it did so profusely now.

“By MYSELF, I MUST ADD, since there’s not a single other developer here! You can start the tour whenever. I hope it goes well, as nobody else is here to help,” Nedry continued as two electric jeeps now awaited their soon-to-be-occupants.

Muldoon sneered and yelled at the puffed-up developer, “Get back to your sloppy station! I saw all that meat stacked up next to your monitor. So disgusting, Nedry.”

Nedry left with a scowl and the group of dinopods could see the awaiting tour jeep. Muldoon noted, “I’ll be shadowing the tour just to be safe. Don’t worry. I have this!” He hefted the large weapon to emphasize his point.

Ian invited Ellie and Donald into one jeep. That left Dr. Grant with Tim and Lex in the second jeep. The nascent best friends turned to the jeeps to start the tour.

Ch 07 - Before the Storm

As Ellie, Ian and Donald left in one jeep, Alan helped Lex and then helped Tim into a seat. Dr. Grant was a bit awkward with children as they moved too much. The dirt that he was used to working with would stay still when he looked. These kids didn't move much more than dirt, but the fact that they moved at all wasn't something Alan wanted to deal with at all.

The two jeeps rumbled down a muddy path. Dense foliage from Isla Nublar's natural flora was damply covered by the sultry air. The jeeps would often slap branches and water would fly off into the jungle. Each jeep's tour guide offered unceasing information about the habitat and how it mimicked what historians called "An Orlando Summer," which was known to be a favorite environment for most humans in North America.

The jeeps then announced that the tour would finally enter the free range section, and that they would see the world next. "The world when HUMANS RULED THE DINOTERRA!" the jeep exclaimed over rousing music.

The jeeps rolled down the path until a large gate ahead blocked their path. It was at least twenty feet tall and made of rough-hewn lumber with two flaming braziers at the top. A sign towered over it all and said "Quaternary Park". The gate slowly hinged inwards, and the jeeps continued inside the park itself. The gate slowly closed behind them as they entered a new land.

Tim eagerly offered, "I want to see all the different types of humans. Normals, vegetarians and even a vegan!" His talons and snout were pressed on the jeep glass and fogging and clearing it with hyperventilating passion.

Dr. Grant said, "I wrote about the vegans in my last book. They were rare. Eventually hunted."

Lex was confused, “Hunted? Hunted by whom? I thought humans were apex predators?”

Alan shrugged and offered, “There wasn’t much to write about. I didn’t find much in the fossil records. We believe they were hunted off for food by the carnivores during the post-volcanic times they called the ArmyGheddon. So, the fossil history is very limited.”

Tim added, “Oh, I read that book. Did you really think that vegans were hunted, Dr. Grant?”

Alan explained, “It’s not completely clear, Tim, but the media from the time showed ArmyGheddon was being prepared for. People would need to collect old shoulder pads from their favorite American Football teams. They’d dress in black leather, old sporting equipment, and generally get very creative about how they lived their lives compared to the past. It was a renaissance of art and dance as far as we can tell. Old ideas were thrown away in favor of just lots of black leather, shoulder pads and feathers? Feathers played a big role in ArmyGheddon fashion.”

Tim said, “That sounds right. Humans were amazingly creative when their resources started to dwindle after the volcanic eruption. All that fun chasing and dancing down the roadways? Humans fixed the world and then, after it almost destroyed them, they chose to celebrate. How amazing!”

Lex was not convinced, “Humans are dumb. I bet if I tried to hack one it would bleed and complain.” Tim stuck his gray tongue out at her and pouted a bit.

Dr. Grant tried to calm the excited kids, “Lex, humans are not dumb. They tried their best with whatever they had.” Dr. Grant looked through the front window and saw Ellie and Ian talking in the jeep ahead. He imagined what the conversation in that jeep was like and how it compared to his task now.

Ian told Ellie, “This park is doomed. Sooner or later, the world gets less complex and more ordered. All this mess will fall to order as the universe *hates* a mess.”

Ellie tossed her hair, exposed her neck, and looked at Ian, confused, “What are you talking about? The universe doesn’t have an opinion on anything. It just is.”

Ian shook his frills and said, “No, Ellie, the universe is moving together.” His talons were gesticulating and eight sharp claws added visual punctuation as he spoke.

“I’ve seen the data. All matter is heading to a single point in nature. Maybe not directly at every moment. Like right now in the jeep, we are moving in a certain direction...”

Donald offered, “... bankruptcy is the direction we’re moving in. That gate alone was overbuilt. How tall do humans get at most? 10-20 feet tall?”

Ellie laughed and said, “We’ve studied the NBA Player, which was said to be their very tallest members. Their work in pulling balls from baskets like magic entertained them all. As such, they needed to be tall as the magic basket was, superstition says, ten feet from the ground.”

Lex triumphed at this, “So dumb. Why put the basket up there when you can do magic just fine on the floor.”

Ian wanted to continue on his mathematics and offered, “Like mathematics, all this complexity will fall to my key dinopod mathematics called ‘order theory.’ It won’t matter where the basket is when all of the universe suddenly collapses in what I call the ‘Big Crunch’. The entire universe will hit the end state of ‘order theory’: a single point of infinite mass in zero space and time.”

Ellie tossed her hair behind her left ear hole and her frills held back the blond strands of hair, “‘Order theory’? What’s that? Sounds like philosophy and not science.”

Ian countered, “Let me demonstrate. May I have your upper talon?” Ellie shyly offered her talon and smiled as Ian grabbed it.

Ian put a drop of water on the back of her talon and they watched it roll off to the left, “Now, Ellie, when I drop another drop, what will happen?”

Ellie confidently answered, “No idea. There’s so many factors at play that even the smallest change can cascade to other things.” She secretly hoped the demonstration would involve more of her body parts but kept it sciency for now.

Ian let another drop fall and it rolled off to the left exactly the same way. He repeated the process several times and the result was the same.

“See. No matter how hard we try. Now that we’ve seen how this drop will react in this situation, the universe will either keep it the same, or make it more ordered or organized,” the mathematician noted.

Ellie blushed as the water tickled, with Ian’s talon still on hers, “How can this be? How does the universe know what comes next?”

Ian offered, “Here’s what my math shows. Everything has already happened and now we’re just moving back and forth through time. I’m not exactly sure how it works, but the universe knows where things are before they know themselves. It’s counter-intuitive, I know, but this has all happened before. Any other explanation involves crazy thinking like the universe has a plan and we have no agency at all. Nobody but a philosopher would think something that dumb.”

Ellie laughed and took her talon back as she heard a loud sound from outside the jeep:

‘OOOOOOOOOOOH! OOOOOOOOOOOH!
OOOOOOOOOOOH! SORIIIIIIICH! SORIIIIIIICH!’

Ellie said to Ian, “Stop the jeep! I hear a human in distress!”

Ian managed to stop the automated vehicle and Ellie tried to run out. She was pretty spry and managed to get out of the jeep quickly with Ian's help. She followed the bellowing noise that was even louder outside the vehicle.

'SORIIIIIIICH! SORIIIIIIIIICH! OOOOOOOOOOOH!
OOOOOOOOOOOH!'

Ellie ran to an opening where a huge human male was prone on the ground. It was overfed and fully covered three square meters of the grass undertalon. The human's eyes were rolling in its head, and it was holding its joints in pain. Ellie put her ear on the human's gut as it breathed in and out. She peeked inside the human's clothing to properly sex it.

Dr. Grant from the other jeep ran up. His eyes widened with amazement, "This is a County Fair Goer. A male in distress. He's in pain. Careful. Their health is always a bit fragile given their complex dietary needs."

'OOOOOOOOOOOH! OOOOOOOOOOOH!
OOOOOOOOOOOH! SORIIIIIIICH! SORIIIIIIIIICH!'

Ellie looked at the poor beast and said, "I think it's suffering due to something it ate. Maybe something it shouldn't or normally doesn't."

There was a large pile of feces next to the huge human and Ellie pulled out some gloves. She dug her hands in deeply. Ian watched with admiration as Ellie's passion was clear. She loved digging into this pile somehow.

Ellie pulled something from the pile and smelled briefly. Her face twisted at the ripe odor, "Fried pickles for sure. But I'm smelling foie gras as well. That shouldn't be with the County Fair Goer. Probably got mixed up with a Gourmand or a Snobby Diner feed plan."

Ellie looked up and a QP staff member came up to see what was going on. Ellie said to her, “Here’s the problem. Fried pickles and foie gras. It’s just too rich for the County Fair Goer. You should keep the pickles and maybe add some soft-serve ice cream or churros instead. He’ll be happier and the food is cheaper.”

Ian was amazed and asked Ellie, “Wow. You know a lot about humans. How long have you been studying them?”

Ellie smiled and dried off her hands on her very short shorts as serious doctors tend to do after washing up. “Years now. The feeding of humans in the 20th century was what I wrote my doctorate on. Dr. Grant and I are looking at all the different ways humans consumed their environment for food,” Ellie said with a smile.

“You should see how inventive they were. Things that look like day-glo wallpaper paste? They called it ‘cheese.’ Something vibrant yellow and spiked with stimulants, ‘dew from the mountains’! So poetic and so varied from our meat-focused eating.”

Donald held a cloth handkerchief over his snout and asked, “Can we please remain on the tour? Hammond will have a tantrum if we’re late. I hate to see him when he just lies flat and screams into the carpet. It’s just too sad to see an old man go like that in the end. He was so sharp as a younger man.”

Everyone commiserated with Donald and agreed to leave. The park employees took over care of the poor human as the rest of the dinopods returned to their jeeps.

Ch 07.5 - The Storm Breaks

Some rain started and the clouds darkened over Isla Nublar. The jeeps announced, “See the herd of Runners off to the left!”

Dr. Grant told Tim, “Look, they move in herds. Watch.”

A group of humans in small shorts ran swiftly together. They stopped at a watering hole. Each human had a small plastic bottle and was filling it from the hole’s clear water. The jeeps slowed so as not to scare the group from running.

Ellie whispered to Ian and Donald, “Oh, the Runners should start their preening soon. Let’s watch their dances and mating calls.”

One pulled its head up. Its head turned in jerky motions as it scanned for predation or other threats. It took its squirt bottle and sprayed some water into its open gob.

One vocalized, “TEEEN KAY! TEEEN KAY!” as it strutted around the water. It flapped its arms a bit and walked in a circle.

Another returned the call meekly. “FIVEK. FIVEK.” It bobbed its head as it walked over to the corner.

“TEEEN KAY! TEEEN KAY!” the superior human cried in challenge and it kicked up some dust before flapping a bit more. Its hard stare to the others was a direct challenge.

“HAAAAALF MAAAAAARA thn. HAAAAALF MAAAAAARA thn.” said a very skinny human. The new skinny one moved towards the previous alpha and they wildly flapped arms a bit and then the skinny human was left in the center.

Dr. Grant whispered to the kids, “See how they optimize? Each potential mate challenges the next one. This is how evolution works. Constant optimization over time.”

Tim asked, “Who are they trying to seduce, Dr. Grant?”

Dr. Grant said, “Nobody right now. They just always do this as it’s good practice, and they always want to know their place in their community.”

“HAAAAALF MAAAAAARA thn. HAAAAALF MAAAAAARA thn.” said the current alpha. He preened a bit but seemed very tired as well. The other Runners seemed to appreciate his weak arm flaps.

“eyewonman” said a very tired runner. The new challenger tried to flap, but sat down instead and sighed. The penultimate marathoner scooted quickly back into the herd.

Ellie said, “Oh. It’s an Eyewonman. They were considered to be the ultimate expression of the Runner culture. They’re quite rare. We’re so lucky to see one awake as they need massive amounts of rest.”

“eyewonman” repeated the current alpha. It tried another flap but just fell down. The rest of the runners looked at it carefully.

Then, a soft voice from a skeletal human, “ewetralmn”

Dr. Grant’s eyes widened, “It’s an Ultraman?! The Ultraman would traverse 320 miles in three days! I thought it was just legend?!”

The Ultraman sat and looked at its red raw feet. “ewetralmn” it softly added.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning and rolling thunder spooked the crowd. A runner spotted the two jeeps as it looked in fear. “CAR! CAR! CAR!” one called out in alarm. Then, they all ran away, but not too fast and at a reasonable pace for distance. Their back reflectors were seen in the woods as the pack continued on.

Ellie sat back down with a smile as the heavy rain started to pound the jeep. Donald said, “We need to pick up the pace. Let’s get the rest of the tour over before this rain gets much worse.”

Ch 07.6 - Nedry's Move

Nedry sat by himself. His plan was in motion but he was a bit nervous as he hadn't counted on the typhoon. Nedry tried to run Internet Explorer 6 on his 386 workstation. It took about thirty-five seconds to load from his three gigabyte hard drive.

The Weather Channel resolved as best as possible with 256 colors. Nedry's talons gesticulated wildly as he laughed, "Haha! I'll be long gone before the worst of this storm hits."

He looked at the can of frill cream that his contact had given him. He needed to disable the park's security in order to steal the needed human embryos. The frill cream would hide the embryos from prying eyes at DinoCustoms at the airport.

Nedry fired up SolarEclipseOfTheBrain, his development environment. He snapped up a meat bar during the two-minute wait for the software to load. His object browser showed 50,000 objects ending with the "cls" extension, around which the DinoCoffeeNeededToRead language was organized. He opened the key "class" file named "FactoryBuilderCreatorSingletonGateCloseStrategyOpenSlowlyButNotTooFast" and looked at the "DoorShutting" method.

Nedry erased the current contents of "DoorShutting" and set it to "return false." He issued a save on SolarEclipseOfTheBrain and ate another meat bar as his machine wrote data for the next three minutes.

Nedry looked around carefully as the next step could not be undone. This was the point of no return. He pulled down a menu item on his development software under "Build". His talon paused over the mouse button. He took a deep breath. "It's now or never," he said.

He pressed “Compile and deploy.” His machine seized and the park’s systems started to shut down. The development software noted, “Build 1 of 51,296. Approximate wait on first object: 195 of 195 minutes remaining. Total wait projected: 10,259,200 of 10,259,200 minutes remaining.”

Nedry laughed and walked off with his frill cream can. “Off to the lab now to get me some free monkeys...”

Ch 07.8 - The Home Depot

The two electric jeeps struggled through the rain and mud. Alan and the kids were talking about Tim's favorite human types.

"I just loved all kinds of humans. Carnivores and herbivores are both great!" said Tim through a rough wet cough. The damp weather wasn't great for his fragile young lungs.

Lex asked, "What did humans eat? They didn't eat dinopods, right?"

Alan calmed the young pod, "Not usually, no, but some species would from time to time eat non-mammals or birds. The Cajun might eat alligator, but everyone kinda knew he preferred chicken and was just showing off. Some Soldiers, to prove that they were tough enough to fight, would brag that they could eat a snake in the wilderness if needed."

Lex was not convinced but said, "OK. I hope we keep meeting nice apes and no carnivores."

Dr. Grant shrugged, "You can always tell. A Vegan human could appear in any species, but as soon as you see them, they'll tell you directly that they're vegan. I gather that lack of nutrients affected their cognition. We can't tell as, well, most humans hated vegans, but vegans couldn't shut up about it either. A strange paradox that all of dinopodia still can't quite grasp."

The storm opened up over the jeeps and the rain pounded down. The passengers could barely see the paddocks through the wall of water from the inbound typhoon. The jeeps slowed and stopped. "The Quaternary Age was not without danger. Humans would hunt other humans over territorial disputes. The most feared of all humans? The iKKKKKe or Icky."

Ellie's eyes grew wide, "They have an Icky paddock?! Oh no. I hope they've carefully kept them locked up. They're so dangerous."

The lights in the paddock were off to aid in the drama. Then, some spotlights made a few details clear. A strange sign read "The Home Depot" high in the air. It was orange and the words were at a 45-degree angle for an unknown reason.

Another light shone down on three humans sitting and waiting outside. They were close to the sign but reasonably far away as well. The three sat and groomed each other, but all were wary. All were waiting for something — anything really.

Ian asked Ellie, "What species is this? Is this the Icky? They seem harmless to me?"

Ellie said, "No. This is the Icky's prey, Ian. These are Migrant Workers. They work for anyone for very low costs and work brutally hard for little pay."

Ian was confused, "Why would these people make good prey, Ellie? They sound useful?"

Ellie said, "The Icky just enjoys it. The strange part? Many Icky used to be Migrant Workers and then decided later to become Icky."

Suddenly, the lights went completely dark. Nothing could be seen.

Dr. Grant said to the kids under his breath in the other jeep, "This doesn't seem right? Why did the lights just go off? The jeep isn't working either?!"

Tim turned on the LED lights in the jeep and Alan snapped them shut immediately. Dr. Grant whispered, "We don't want any Icky thinking there's someone in here, OK?" The emergency paddock lights suddenly turned on; the boy's glazed eyes widened as he looked out the jeep window over Dr. Grant's shoulder.

“HEYU!HEYU!WHARFROM!HEYU!WHARFROM!” said the blue Icky male walking towards the other three from the left. Its upper limbs had its thumbs hooked behind a vest with about twenty-five pockets. There was a sign on the front that read, “I’m with stupid” with an arrow pointing to the Icky’s head.

One Migrant Worker immediately bolted into the dark foliage nearby. There was thrashing in the wet leaves and a faint sound of “IckyIckyIcky! HALT!” preceded a fountain of gore.

The other two Workers walked slowly apart as the blue Icky male bisected them.

Tim was frightened and asked, “What is going to happen to those Workers?” and Lex’s eyes were like saucers. The lights faltered again and nothing could be seen briefly before another Icky burst out from hiding.

“IckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIcky! HALT! IckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIcky!” said the red Icky female as it leapt onto the unsuspecting Migrant Worker. The red female immediately started to rend the Worker into red, red food.

Ellie looked back at the other jeep and saw the frightened, wrinkled faces of the children in some small interior light. She could see Alan keeping them calm and frilling as needed.

Ian whispered to Ellie, “We need to keep those kids safe. They can’t run.”

Ellie noted, “I think it’s fine as long as they’re in the paddock. They can’t hurt us.”

The emergency lights failed and the jeeps were tossed into complete darkness. Only the dim lights of the jeeps, which still had battery power, were left.

Alan, back in the other jeep, was saying, “See. It’s fine. They are behind that barrier. We’ll be going soon.”

Tim had crouched down to hide after the lights had gone out. He looked up after Alan's words, and came face to face with a red Icky human at the window looking in.

"WHARFROM! WHARFROM! WHARFROM!" she screamed at Tim through the glass. Tim's talons grasped at the air in fear and his rheumy eyes cleared in pure terror.

Alan, still hidden, quickly whispered to Tim, "say, 'The real America. Can't you help a brother get there? Hehehe.'"

Tim faltered and he stuttered, "W-wwhat-t?!" through his shaking torso.

"IckyIckyIcky! Open. IckyIcky! Open now!" said a blue Icky male on the other side now tapping on the window. Its head was tilted in concern and venom.

Tim managed to spit out, "FFFrrrom thhhhhe rreal ammeerica."

"ACCENT? ACCENT?" said a third, older and larger Icky. This one had multiple yellow ribbons tied to its shoulders. It shook them at the other two Icky who shied away in respect and fear.

Tim tried to talk again, "FFFFrom..."

"ACCENT? ACCENT! ACCENT!" the third Icky started to yell.

"I am obviously not from here!" Ian yelled outside his jeep in the rain. He stood just next to the open door as the sheets of water poured down onto his beautiful leather disco wear.

The three Icky turned in a flash. The yellow-tufted Icky pointed and hissed. The other two started "WHARFROM! WHARFROM! WHARFROM!" as they pivoted toward the second jeep.

Donald, routed, ran from the jeep towards the Home Depot sign yelling, "I am an attorney at law!"

The blue Icky's eyes narrowed at the running litigator and contract reviewer. It covered the distance between them in three quick steps. Donald and the Icky flew together into the awaiting wet foliage and parts of Donald flew outwards immediately after.

Ian jumped back into his jeep as an Icky slashed and cut open some of his scales. He yelled to Ellie to get the jeep going, and he got the door shut. The Icky were now on the jeep and Ellie frantically drove off with all three still attached.

Dr. Grant and the children sat in the jeep for a moment. All was quiet.

Dr. Grant looked out and saw the remains of Donald. He told Tim and Lex not to look. He tried the jeep and it was clear that the electric jeeps were failing in the rain and mud.

If they were getting out of this park, it would have to be on foot.

Ch 08 - Nedry's Demise

Nedry drove overly fast down a muddy road in a jeep that somehow seemed too small for one person. It was very well branded however. The jeep's tires slid as he took a sharp turn. Isla Nublar's riotous vegetation was a black and green smudge that offered him the occasional cold shower.

He looked down at the frill cream canister holding embryos for multiple human species: Taxi Driver, American Football Fan, European Football Fan, US Marine, Nurse, Butcher, and Runner to name a few. He had no idea what kind of society this might make, but it sounded angry. Maybe the Runners could counterbalance all the blood and misery that the others bring? All he knew was his contact worked for The Jerry Dinospringer Show and had enough money.

Nedry thought of all the money and what he could buy with it. A Pentium with a sixty-six megahertz processor. VESA Local Bus with 2 MB of VRAM would make the DinoDoom just scream and the SoundBlaster 16 would just bring in all the ladies as well. WinRAR? A generational license for the entire Nedry clan. Nobody pays for WinRAR at the Nedry home anymore, he thought.

His jeep screamed through the forest as he thought, "That uberjar will never stop compiling. I'll escape in the chaos and people will assume I was eaten or something. Then, Nedry will just disappear into a fantasy of meat bars and free compression software."

Suddenly, a road sign appeared in his headlights. He slammed on the brakes but the sign post was undone: the sign itself flew away in newfound freedom. Nedry had run off the road in the middle of a fork. Nedry cursed himself, "Damn it. Forgot the fork in the road!"

He tried to back up but the slick mud under the microjeep's tires gained no traction. "Damn it! Ugh. I'll need to use the winch, I guess!" said the lead developer. He exited and was immediately soaked by the sheets of water from the inbound typhoon. He slid down leaving mud over his right side until he reached the front of his Tonka car.

Nedry found the sign. It had a now loose arrow pointing to the possible road to take for the dock. The other way, he assumed, led to something unspeakable. He'd just have to guess based on his lossy memory of the island's geography. If he chose poorly, it would be bad; like choosing Teams over Slack bad — life-threatening.

Nedry started to climb up the muddy hill with the winch hook in hand. As he passed the driver's side door, a strange human sat there looking at him.

"HIUBER? HIUBER? LEEFT! LEEFT!" the Ride Share human said.

Nedry waved a very wet talon and tried to shoo the human, "NO RIDE! Not on duty! Scram! Shoo! Get lost!"

The Ride Share human hissed and left the jeep. It slunk back into the vegetation.

Nedry clambered up the mud and muck. A large tree on the other side of the road looked strong enough for the job. He ran the steel cable around the tree's heavy wooden trunk. He slipped the hook under the cable to make a strong loop and made his sodden, muddy, and now leafy way back to the awaiting jeep.

"HIUBER," the Ride Share human said through bared teeth.

Nedry yelled, "NO RIDE!"

The Ride Share human pulled out a glass object that appeared to be its mobile phone.

“o stars!” the human cried. It slammed the glass into Nedry’s surprised and suddenly bisected cranium.

Ch 09 - Tim, Lex and Alan walking home

Alan walked slowly with his two charges. Tim and Lex were holding up rather well considering all that had happened. Lex had been frightened when some Free Range Vegetarians came through their camp.

“SEITAN? SEITAN?” they had murmured as they poked through Alan’s backpack looking for sustenance. One had found a large mushroom nearby and crowed, “PORTOBELLOOOOOOOOOOOO! PORTOBELLOOOOOOOOOOOO!” The rest swallowed their kale cuds in excitement and helped dig up meaty fungus from the wet ground.

After a long night in the rain and after what seemed to be endless wet collards to wade through, Tim, Lex and Alan walked in the open field towards a fence in the distance.

They hadn’t seen any humans since the fungus team from last night and the kids were in good spirits. Even Tim could walk fairly well and was telling his favorite human jokes.

Tim tried, “How many runners does it take to eat a muffin?” Alan said, “No idea.” Tim countered, “I don’t have an idea either. Nobody has seen a runner eat a muffin!”

Tim followed on, “How many Icky does it take to change a lightbulb?” Alan said, “You got me. How many?” Tim laughed and said, “None. The Icky likes to work in darkness! Hahaha!”

Lex groaned and asked for a break from the jokes after that one. Alan agreed that a break might be good as they started to see what was ahead. It was a tall paddock fence. Electrified to keep humans out. About ten feet high. There was no buzzing or any sound at all.

Alan was pretty sure, given all the chaos of late, that the park's systems were malfunctioning. The gate was probably not powered.

Tim looked at the height and was concerned that at his age, he might not be able to clear ten feet of climbing. Lex taunted, "Watch me!"

Dr. Grant held Lex back and said, "Wait. That fence may be powered. We don't know if they've repaired power since the... the..."

Tim said, "Icky," softly.

Alan put his talon on Tim's bony shoulder, and said, "I think I see the power light there. That light would be red if this were powered at all." Dr. Grant carefully reached out with his talons. Barely touching and then his whole body seized.

"Bzzzzz! Bzzzzz! Bzzzz!" Alan said with laughing eyes. He jerked around a bit more to try to sell the joke. Lex screamed in horror until Tim laughed out loud.

Lex said, "That wasn't funny!" and Alan meekly apologized.

"Let's see you climb over, Lex. I want to help Tim over on this side. Tim, we'll climb this together, ok? I'll be there the entire time," said Alan to the frightened young dinopod.

Lex clambered over. It wasn't easy but she made it. "I did it!" the young pod beamed at her accomplishment. Tim was motivated by her success and started up. Alan climbed next to him. He wheezed up and paused at the top. Dr. Grant went over the other side and joined Lex.

Tim was still at the top and fearful of the final descent. Suddenly, the red light on the fence started to light up. The sign underneath noted that the light would give people ten seconds of warning before the fence would be filled with deadly high-voltage electricity.

Alan fearfully called out, “Tim, you need to jump. Jump and I will catch you.”

Tim was unable to let go. “I’m frightened, Dr. Grant.”

Alan told him, “Call me Alan, Tim. Now jump. I’m here. I will not drop you.”

Tim held on and tried to let go. He couldn’t.

Alan cried out, “On three, Tim! NOW!”

Tim counted, “One, two, ...” and the fence lit up with power. His body was jerked from the fence and flew into Alan’s arms. He was out cold.

Lex cried out, “Oh no! Save him, Alan!”

Dr. Grant immediately started DinoCPR on the boy’s thorax. After a moment, the young man’s feeble heart started up again. Tim opened his eyes and meekly offered, “three?”

Alan sighed. They rested there a moment before they headed out to the visitor center again.

Ch 10 - Ian and Ellie

Ian was on his back with his shirt unbuttoned and his full torso exposed. He was in pain from his slashed scale wound from the Icky attack. His glistening dinopod abs were covered in an attractive layer of sweat.

Ian said, “Someone should take a picture of me right now. I think this is a moment that everyone should enjoy. A perfect frozen moment in time somehow...”

Ellie said, “Hold still. I need to dress that wound.” She tried not to look too closely at Ian’s uncovered body, but it was very hard to keep her composure. She reminded herself of how she was a serious doctor and not a teenager with a crush.

Ian hissed as Ellie applied some antiseptic to his torso. The Icky had managed to slash him before the electric jeep could speed them away. He was fearful of the fact that it appeared the humans were now loose across the park. Who knows what other humans could be out and freely roaming outside of their paddocks?

Nedry was nowhere to be found and they were left with a 386 that seemed to be melting into its supporting desk. It was running some build process and the end was not coming soon. The park was completely unmoored.

Hammond ran in with his surrogate mother in tow, “Stupid Nedry! So dumb. I paid him a full \$35 per hour! He was so lazy! ‘WAAA! I NEED QA SUPPORT OR AT LEAST A SECOND DEV.’ \$35! DOLLARS! AN! HOUR! Can you believe it! Some people are so lazy!”

Hammond’s caretaker, Susan, shushed the CEO and he stuck his talon into his mouth for comfort. Ian was deep in thought as Ellie daubed his forehead.

Ian offered, “I think we just need to reset everything. I’d go but I’m currently very attractive right now and would like to stay here a bit longer like this. Would you like to take a picture? Anybody? I think this is special somehow?”

Ellie blushed and said, “I already have that picture in my head, Ian,” and she giggled before regaining her composure. She wished she had a camera but nobody walked around with cameras all day. That would be silly, she thought to herself. She steeled herself for what she thought must be done.

“I’ll go reset the power at the park. That should allow the 386 to reset and the park’s systems, I hope, will restart fresh from the last good image,” she announced to the group.

Hammond perked up and asked, “Would you be willing to work here? I’d go to \$50 per hour!”

Hammond’s caretaker corrected the tired CEO, “This isn’t a good time for networking. We need to focus on the problem, Johnny.”

Hammond stormed off, crossed his arms, and sat on a nearby chair, “I’m done talking!”

Ian was concerned, “Ellie, there’s wild humans running throughout the park. You need to be careful.”

Ellie smiled and said, “I’ll be back and we’ll see how the park responds after a power reset.”

Ian looked after Ellie and tried to be even more glistening somehow.

Ch 11 - Action Climax

Ellie drove the gas-powered jeep through the miles of strip malls and vegetation that made up the park. She was racing to find the maintenance shed from where all of Quaternary Park was powered. She wondered if anything ever came of the game warden they'd met. She wanted that large weapon as, well, it was obvious some humans were as deadly as she had imagined.

The jeep's headlights tried to light the way forward through the wall of inbound water but only about twenty feet ahead was clear at any one time. Ellie leaned forward to try to see a bit better. She was worried that Ian would dry off before her task was completed and he'd stop glistening. She stepped on the gas to get to the shed faster, but then a group appeared in her headlights.

She slammed on the brakes and the jeep skidded forward across the mud.

A large group of New Agers were rooting in the dirt. One was chewing some rhubarb while mumbling "needpowah. needpowah." One pulled up a large quartz and held it overhead. It yelled, "MAGICWOCK! MAGICWOCK!" and the rest of the New Agers kowtowed in agreement.

Ellie leaned on her horn. She imagined the moisture off Ian's abs slowly evaporating, "MOVE! MOVE!" Ellie's talons waved wildly at the pack of New Agers. Unfortunately for her, some Homeopaths joined the New Agers.

The new humans were lowing, "PLAAAAACEEEEEBO. PLAAAAACEEEEEBO. PLAAAAACEEEEEBO." The combined herd sniffed at each other and a New Ager offered "MAGICWOCK." to an unimpressed Homeopath. The Homeopath licked the proffered quartz, wrinkled its nose, and asked again,

“PLAAAAACEEEEEBO.
PLAAAAACEEEEEBO.”

PLAAAAACEEEEEBO.

Ellie panicked and honked her horn, “There’s water over there with nothing but a single atom of fennel! I bet the shore has some black tourmaline or a bloodstone!”

The combined herd looked at Ellie and then where she was pointing. “PLAAAAACEEEEEBO. MAGICWOCK! PLAAAAACEEEEEBO. MAGICWOCK! PLAAAAACEEEEEBO,” said the melange as it slowly left the road.

“Ian’s probably still sitting there and it was pretty hot in that room,” she told herself as the minutes passed. The road cleared after the last Homeopath followed the rest. She managed to get around a badly-maintained, muddy curve in the road before more feral humans were highlighted by the jeep.

She slammed on the brakes again as her headlights lit up some Ribbon Wearers. The male was in mid-application. “IMHELPING. IMHELPING.” it cooed as it placed another red ribbon on its festooned chest of various-colored ribbons. The female near him was unimpressed, “NOTENOUGH. WHEREMORE.” She was fascinated by this behavior but Ian’s thorax wouldn’t stay glistening forever. She drove around the two carefully but then sped on the path.

The maintenance shed appeared in Ellie’s headlights through the pounding rain. She stopped and gathered herself. The rain beat down on the roof of the jeep. She panted a bit and the windows of the jeep fogged as she steeled herself for the task ahead.

She looked around the shed carefully. She didn’t see any Icky. She gathered herself and opened the door. The rain drenched her from head to toe. Fortunately, having worn very short shorts, she had no pants to get soaked. She brought a flashlight from the vehicle and started towards the entrance of the shed. The door opened with a loud creak. Ellie peered into nothingness.

It was pitch black in the shed. She turned on her flashlight and pointed it into the murky darkness. Nothing was there. She walked carefully inside. Her talons clanked heavily on the metallic grate that made up the shed's flooring. The collected rain from her body dripped between the grating gaps to an unknowable abyss below.

She could only hear her breathing and see portions of the space at once. Her flashlight beam finally hit her goal. The sign read, "Quaternary Park. MAIN POWER SUPPLY." Ellie hoped the power restart was simple to execute; her interring job had given her little experience restarting theme parks.

She opened the door and found a twelve-socket power strip with the word Staples with "XtraCapable" in script below. A square USB-A transformer wart was plugged in and the wire coming out was glowing red. There was a switch on the wall, but the knob was taped down. "DO NOT TURN OFF!" was written nearby.

Ellie was sure she didn't want to disturb the tape. She decided to unplug the USB-A cord directly from the transformer. She ripped a small piece of her top to use as a glove, and she reached for the red-hot cable.

"Here goes nothing," said Ellie and she yanked the USB-A cord hard upwards. It slid out without fanfare and the wire's glow immediately faded. Ellie could feel more than hear as the entire park's energy was removed. She counted to five slowly.

She put the USB cable back into the wart. It didn't fit. She swore she didn't turn it over, but she did so now. She tried again. It didn't fit.

"DAMN IT!" she yelled. She blew on the rectangle and stared hard at the orientation. She tried again. It didn't fit.

"Please. Please. This time. Please fit!" she prayed with the cord in both talons. She closed her eyes and felt the plug slide home. The warmth of the power could be felt surging through the Staples-brand USB-A to USB-C gold-tipped cable.

She sighed as the lights came on in the shed and she could see clearly now. As she turned, Muldoon's severed arm dropped down from the ceiling. Ellie screamed in terror.

"WHARFROM! WHARFROM!" yelled the blue Icky that now blocked her exit from the shed.

Ellie backed away in fear as she tried to think how to escape. The blue Icky's curiosity increased and its hands started to reach for Ellie, "WHARFROM! WHARFROM!"

Ellie's deep blue eyes widened, but she knew what to do. "Savannah! Of course!" She flipped her hair in what she hoped was "southern."

The blue Icky looked and cocked his head. His hands drooped. "Gud," it said, somewhat deflated, and let her pass.

Ellie jumped into the jeep. Ian's moisture was ahead.

Ch 12 - The Hack

Ellie made it back safely to the visitor center. She jogged as best she could given her age, and hoped she was in time to see Ian moist again. She jumped when she bumped into Dr. Grant coming towards her.

Alan said, "You're alive! Thank goodness! I saw what happened to Donald. Is Ian ok?" He looked weary and dirty but generally in good health. Ellie had more pressing matters as Ian might be drying.

"He's actually pretty great right now. Can we talk later, maybe? I'm kinda busy," said Ellie as she walked past her friend.

Dr. Grant offered, "We can walk and talk. Let me follow you." She did not stop and he managed to keep pace. The kids lagged slightly behind.

Tim and Lex found Ellie tending to Ian's wounds again while Dr. Grant looked on with some concern.

Ian was using a spray bottle to keep his glistening fresh. "I'm so glad you're all safe. I would have gotten up but you can see why I can't. It looks like the 386, that computer over there, is restarting, but the software isn't running. The park is only half online. Power yes, but the control programs aren't running."

Lex perked up at anything non-ape related. "Can I take a look? I love hacking computer interfaces and I'm pretty good at it." She was making her way across the room when a familiar call echoed from the open doorway.

"WHARFROM! WHARFROM! ACCENT? ACCENT?" said the two Icky at the doorway.

Ellie's eyes went wide. There was no way the Icky would believe Ian was from Savannah — even with valid identification. She had to act and threw herself at the open doorway, “NOOOOOO!”

Her body slammed the door closed, but the red Icky placed a heavy, fat, bony foot paddle in the way. Ellie pushed with all of her might while Dr. Grant stood supervising the effort.

The yellow double-frilled Icky was now behind and both Icky breaths made the door's window fog with each breath. The frilled Icky shook its shoulders to communicate its relative status and yelled, “ACCENT? ACCENT?”

Alan urged Lex, “Quick, get the park back online so the door will lock! We can't let the Icky in here. Dr. Malcolm is obviously not from Savannah originally or anything!”

Lex ran to the 386. Her talons worked the Logitech rat and she watched the Dindows 3.1 startup splash on the yard-deep VGA CRT. She saw stacks of raw meat on screen. Lex yelled, “This is Dindows 3.1! I know this! We just need to find the raw meat stack with the park's operating system in here somewhere?”

She used the rat to open one stack of meat. Meatlications. Good. Maybe the park's system is a meatlication? She tried the first named Meatcel. A gridded list of meat bars and their relative price appeared with “Nedry's shopping list” on the top. “Dead end,” said the female hacker.

Meatlook? She opened that next. It was a list of e-Meatmails asking when Nedry would finish his roadmap planning deck for the team. “Nothing here either,” Lex noted grimly.

She knew better than to try Meatcess. “Far too dangerous,” she thought.

“Hurry! I can't hold them forever!” yelled Ellie from the door. The Icky hands were grabbing at her through the gap as the dinopod pushed back as hard as she could.

Dr. Grant looked over at her with some concern, “Put your back into it, ok, Ellie? We’re hacking over here and it’s hard to concentrate over the yelling,” he said while looking over Lex’s shoulder at the CRT screen.

“MeetAndCry is for communications,” said Lex.

“WHARFROM! IckyIckyIckyIcky! ACCENT?” yelled the humans as they pushed hard on the door. Ellie, for some reason, did not get a wedge and simply pushed back as hard as she could. Everyone else just watched as she struggled to keep the Icky from getting into the room.

Dr. Grant looked at Lex and asked, “Can you find it in all that meat, Lex? The operating system has got to be there.”

Lex gave up on the Meatlications folder. There was a “Work” folder next. She found a meat icon that read “Project1” and tried to execute it. The park’s systems started to seize and start up. The lights in the visitor center brightly shone.

Ellie managed to slam the door on the pressing Icky and heavy locks slammed into place. The Icky seemed upset for a moment.

Then the yellow-frilled one yelled, “ACCENT? ACCENT?” at an unseen object, and the two humans left the door. “IckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIckyIcky! HALT!” could be heard in the distance.

Ellie fell to the floor exhausted from her efforts. She looked over at Ian. “Thank goodness,” she thought as she saw that his abs remained damp. Lex was beaming, “I DID IT!” and Tim congratulated his awesome sister for saving them all.

Ian moistly offered, “Phew. That was close. I’ve learned something at this park, and I have a plan.”

Ch 12.5 - Ian's Plan

Ian was holding court with moist bare abs. He had started to talk over his ideas when Alan asked a question.

“What is your plan and what did you learn here, Ian? I’ve learned quite a bit here as well. Maybe I am ready for fatherhood? I should go find some kids and become a father...” said Dr. Grant.

Ian misted his abdomen and smiled at Alan. “That’s a great thing to learn, Alan, but that’s not what I had in mind.”

He had sat up but left his shirt up, “Order theory. It’s clear the world is heading for more order.”

Dr. Grant countered, “Order! Did you just see what happened to us? This isn’t order!”

Ian glistenly said, “Sure. In any particular instance, the world can be chaotic, but look at this.”

Ian looked on the floor but carefully kept his shirt up off the moist areas, and found a broken matchstick. He pressed the match together and it bound in his hands. He flicked the head and it flamed into a red inert blob on the tip. He looked inside his shirt pocket and found a matchbook missing a single match. The repaired match fit the box and joined its siblings as if it never left.

Ellie said, “Yeah. We’ve all done that as kids, Ian. We all know that things fix themselves and get better and simpler over time. That was humanity’s message to us all. Simple and not too complex. Don’t overbuild or you’ll make poison clouds.”

Ian wetly offered as he sprayed himself again, “Ellie. How can the world already know things like a match or how to improve things over time? That would require a goal. We’ve seen just here that nobody has a goal. Humans, like any other group in the world, have a collection of assholes as a subset. They are not more or less

noble than dinopods. In fact, they might be worse. This is my key social theorem that I call Ian's Universal Asshole Axiom of IUAA, 'any group of more than 20 sentient beings will contain at least one asshole more than half of the time.'

Ian drippingly continued, "Humans were no more perfect than we are, Ellie. Consider a cosmological cause for all this *knowing*. The universe has no plan at all, but if *time itself* repeats over and over again. Not a loop, but like a tennis match, going back and forth. Sometimes time moves in one direction and order theory rules our existence, but consider if time ran the other direction."

Dr. Grant looked puzzled, "Time moving backwards?"

Ian sultrily lectured, "Time moving in a direction, Dr. Grant. Backwards and forwards is all relative to a given perspective, no? We can tell, however, that this timeline is heading to order. Perhaps the next, in pure fairness, will reverse to chaos. Consider what humans would look like in reverse order."

Tim's eyes widened, "They would make the poison cloud and not be super cleaners!"

Ian walked and dripped, "Exactly, Tim. And what would happen to this park?"

Ellie helped Tim get to the conclusion, "There would be a Jurassic Park. Dinopods would be in the park. Humans in the jeeps. The giant volcanic eruption that ended human society forever? That would be a comet strike in reverse. Dinopods would be extinguished in favor of humans."

Tim cried a bit, "... humans who would kill the earth eventually?"

Ian suddenly comforted the young man and Tim's lined face looked up with rheumy eyes, "Tim," Ian waterloggedly said, "It'll be ok. I have a plan to solve this."

Tim and Lex brightened at the idea of a plan versus just doing nothing.

Ian's moisture-driven genius continued, "We will leave a record in the soil itself. I will spend my life making sure that if the ball passes through our age again, we will prepare ourselves for the comet and defeat it in the chaos timeline!"

Dr. Grant looked skeptical but said, "I think I can help. I know how to place things into the earth. I inter."

Ian dewyly smiled and they began their work.

Ch 13 - Paddle Bounce

Order watched the ball come off Chaos' paddle. Order moved its paddle. The ball would hit it; both knew and waited for the eventual rebound together.

"You know you can't win this game, Chaos," said Order with a small sniff. It looked down at its long, transparent wings and buzzed them a bit.

Chaos, with its wild mouth of fangs, looked up angrily, "What? I see there's a random number generator in this thing." It jumped up and its pointed tail smacked the side of the game's yellow case.

"You can't cheat!" declared Chaos.

Order said, "Why would I need to cheat? The ball moves, its path is clear. Look ahead. Put paddle at the right spot. I cannot lose and, in fact, I will not."

Chaos was still confused and snarled, "What are you talking about? This is a game of skill!"

Order sighed, "As soon as the ball leaves your paddle? I know where it will be leaving the board. I have all the time in the world to move to the right spot. No matter how fast or 'diagonal' your shot? It's just perfectly clear what to do next."

Order's paddle was correctly positioned. They both knew it.

Chaos erupted, "You KNEW THIS ALL ALONG. YOU PICKED A GAME I CAN'T WIN!"

Order smiled and said, "You wanted to play. Try this return."

Order moved its paddle so that the ball hit the very corner pixel and the random number generator pushed the angle even harder. The ball started a wild path across the screen. The speed was its fastest, the angle its steepest, and the exit could be anywhere on Chaos' side.

Chaos' paddle was moving back and forth as the ball careened towards its side again. The ball, and the world, was in new territory.

Ch 14 - The Jurassic

The two raptors were hungry. The shade from the tall Wollemi pines overhead was complex. The masses of needles and cones above left a pickup-sticks game more than a blanket-type solar covering.

BlooTooth stared hard at his prey. His vertical irises focused on the potential meal. His stomach growled and his forepaws motioned in anticipation of a wet and satisfying break from a long fast.

Bloo whistled to RedMund, his mate. She moved over into position and only her eye could be seen. She was waiting for Bloo to see what would come next. Bloo knew that she was hurting from hunger. He looked back at their potential brunch option. Bloo also knew that their clutch of eggs that RedMund had laid would need support soon. He would not let his new clan go hungry.

However, BlooTooth was very wary as this meal moved differently than most.

“EAT ME! EAT ME! EAT ME!” bleated a hairy thing. BlooTooth smelled the air and passed the scent onto his tongue. The hairy thing was not something Bloo had ever seen before.

RedMund’s eye pleaded with Bloo to make a call.

Bloo’s stomach was empty so he decided it was worth the risk. RedMund watched him through the foliage for her signal. RedMund would chase the goat to Bloo and then they’d have a nice conversation over arterial spurts and red organs thrashing about.

Bloo gave the sign and she charged, “IckyIckyIckyIckyIcky!”

The goat bolted towards Bloo, who ran towards the goat, and suddenly the world went black.

Bloo was confused. Where was RedMund? Where was the hairy thing? He thrashed in the dark until a calming light entered his brain.

A moist dinosaur-looking person was talking inside his head. “Welcome, good friend! Do not be frightened! This is your lucky day! You have been selected to help your entire race survive the upcoming apocalypse! Get ready to meet the full team!”

Bloo’s eyes adjusted to bright lights and he saw RedMund in a glass column. Bloo was also in a glass column and they were both slowly descending into the earth. Bloo would normally be thrashing and scratching, but the light kept him calm and he felt his mind changing as they descended.

Bloo and Red walked upright out of their glass columns after their rear talons hit the floor. Bloo spoke, “Hi. RedMund?” This was new as they usually just clicked and whistled.

RedMund looked confused and said, “Hello back, Bloo. This is strange. These vocalizations are so much better than clicks and whistles. How did we learn this?”

From the shadows, a new raptor appeared, “Hello, new friends! We have so much to talk about. Just know that we call it Dinopods Eternal!”

Bloo and Red looked in awe at the laboratories and strange vehicles parked here. Hundreds of friendly reptile faces greeted the new additions.

Ch 15 - The Next Tour

Tim's bright eyes and happy tail wags told us he was excited for what would come next. His old, wrinkled grandpod had built the most amazing park. It was filled with dinopods and their happy domesticated humans. It was a peaceful place that celebrated the agricultural revolution that his kind started after the great comet's seeding of water.

The jeep rolled up and Lex jumped in ahead. Tim yelled, "HEY! I'm the youngest! I should sit near the window!"

Lex stuck her pink tongue out at Tim and giggled. They tickled each other as their caretaker Susan asked them to settle down. Dinopods just out of the egg were so energetic and, well, resilient to almost anything you could throw at them.

The three dinos sat and the jeep started the tour. "Welcome to John Hammond's recreation of times long past," the jeep's DinoAI, named Ellie, narrated. The jeep headed down grassy hills to a wide open valley.

"As you know, the ancient dinoscience that stabilized our climate, and helped usher in a new age of dinopod culture, is called Dinopods Eternal. Dinopods Eternal led to agriculture, and from agriculture, dinopods mastered domestication," said Ellie.

"As the top of Dinoterra's food chain, the kind dinopod cares for all its domesticated animals," continued the AI as the jeep entered the first paddock. The jeep slowed as a humanboy on horseback appeared.

"It's a HUMANBOY!" yelled an ecstatic Tim from the jeep.

The humanboy smiled and nodded at the young pod. He kept his steed trotting forward. Five Runner humans came out to a small corral. Each had very long hair almost all over. The

humanboy dismounted and walked into the corral. The humans huddled together on the exact opposite side. The humanboy sighed and pulled out a pair of electric shears. He tested the shears and the battery was still good. The humanboy put chaps over his lower legs.

The humanboy sniffed and then lunged at the nearest human. The human wasn't fast enough and was grabbed roughly and forced onto its back by the humanboy. The four other humans ran to the other side.

The shears made quick work of the human's dorsal hair and the humanboy grabbed a leg, causing the human to flip over. The shears took care of the front. The boy decided that the rest of the hair wasn't worth the effort and kicked the human out of the corral. Its new hairstyle was not quite avant-garde but possibly adjacent.

Lex asked Susan, "Can we see some other demonstrations? I've seen hwool collection before."

Susan looked at a map that also served as a schedule, "Let's see. I really can't see the milking demo again. Those poor ladies seemed so raw at the end. Would you guys like to just walk by the livestock and get some lunch before seeing more demos?"

Tim said, "Dino, that sounds great. I'm so hungry."

Lex said, "You're always hungry, but yeah, let's go eat. Where's the restaurant?"

Susan looked up at a nearby sign that read, "Jurassic Park Prime Rib. 200 Yards To The Left."

Susan offered, "Let's head to the left and it's just a bit ahead."

The three walked up the path by a long fenced-in pasture. A humanboy was driving his stock with a steady cadence of 'getalong here now humie. getalong. hep hep. humie.'

The twenty or so humans ran together in a tight pack. Each had a 'JPPR' brand on each left haunch.

A scent of roasting meat wafted from a building with a smokestack in very active use. The sign over the door said, “JPPR. Farm-fresh meats.”

Tim yelled as he ran forward, “Oh boy! Last one to the table has to eat the hands!”