



# The Evolution Trilogy

Todd Borho

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## ***James Bong***

Premise: Anarchism, action, and comedy blended into a spoof of the James Bond franchise.

Setting:

Year: 2028

Characters and Locations:

James Bong – Former MI6 asset for special operations. Now an anarchist committed to freeing people from statist hands. 30 years old, well built, steely gray eyes, dirty blond hair. Bong moves frequently.

K – Nerdy anarchist hacker in his early twenties based in Acapulco, Mexico.

Miss Moneybit – Feisty, attractive blogger in her late twenties and based in Washington, DC.

General Small - Bumbling and incompetent General. Former Army Intel and now with the CIA.

Sir Hugo Trax – MI6 officer who was involved in training and controlling Bong during Bong's MI6 days.

## ***Episode 1 – Part 1***

Scene 1

Bong is driving at a scorching speed down a desert highway in a black open-source 3D printed vehicle modeled after the Acura NSX.

K's voice: Bong!

Bong (narrows eyes at encrypted blockchain based smartwatch): K, what the hell? I had my watch off!

K (proud, sitting in his ridiculously overstuffed highback office chair): I know, I turned it on remotely. I've got great news!

Bong (looking ahead at the cop car and the cop's victim on the side of the road): Kinda busy right now.

K (twirling in his chair): It can't wait! It's a go! It's a go! I'm so excited!

Bong (sarcastically): You're breaking up on me. What's that? You're gonna go and disappear out of my life forever? That is exciting! (clicks off smartwatch and smiles)

Bong has his speed up to 150mph and aims the car as close as possible to the cop without hitting him. The cop is approaching the other vehicle just as Bong whips by.

Cop (hair blowing from wind): What the hell!

Bong smiles smugly and activates the nitrous. The chubby cop fumbles his way back to his car and takes off after Bong. The relieved driver of the other car drives off contentedly after avoiding the cop's extortion attempt.

## Scene 2

After evading the cop, Bong has taken refuge at a bar called Bootlegger overlooking Lake Tahoe.

K's voice: Bong!

Bong (grimaces at smartwatch): Right, you again. You know that Kay is a woman's name, right? And what happened to you disappearing, anyway? That would make me very happy.

K: While you were busy being an intolerable ball of swine puss, I was busy getting funds for the big mission we talked about. What were you doing, anyway?

Bong: I was stopping a control freak in a costume from violently extorting a free human.

K: What's all that chatter? And I hear 80s pop music. Are you in a bar right now?

Bong: Yes, did you call to live vicariously through me? You could go out once in a while, you know.

K: Get somewhere private.

(Bong steps outside on an empty patio overlooking the lake)

K: Ok, that's better. So we've got enough Stashcoin to get Ross Mulbright out.

Bong (smiling contentedly to himself): We should talk about this in person. Don't say another word.

K: You don't trust my encryption?

Bong: I don't trust your ego. (clicks smartwatch off)

## Scene 3

Acapulco, Mexico. K meanders into his kitchen.

Bong: Love what you've done with the place.

K (shouts, startled, clutches chest): Why do you do that!? Can't you knock?

Bong: I can, but it's not as pleasurable. I took the liberty of making coffee.

K: How thoughtful.

Bong: I put some rum in mine. You really should spend money on the top shelf. It makes a huge difference. So tell me the details about Mulbricht.

K (pouring coffee for himself): You know how I hate to brag, but thanks to my genius, you have to do very little.

Bong: Where'd you get the funds?

K: Donations.

Bong (pleased): I'm listening.

K: Ok, logistics. Mulbricht is in the high security federal prison in Florence, Colorado. He's on the third level in cell 33.

Bong: Those masonic bastards.

K: Tell me about it. So I've got private jets lined up to and fro. One chartered from SteemAir and the other from Swarm City.

Bong: With no pilot.

K: Exactly.

Bong: And no autonomous functions?

K: I know you only fly yourself because you're so damned paranoid.

Bong: Paranoia helps keep me alive.

K: Don't get close to their airspace.

Bong (cold and incredulous): Don't tell me how to do my job. How about cars?

K: Well, you've got your car, right?

Bong: I'm not using my car for this operation.

K; Well, hmmm. Ok, I've got it. I had planned the throwaway vehicle to be a 1977 Trans Am.

Bong: It would be a shame to lose such a cherry.

K: Agreed. I suppose I could find a racing bike cheap enough for the getaway and then ditch that.

Bong: Now you're thinking.

K: Now about getting in.

Bong: Guns, brains, and balls usually work.

K: True enough, but this is high security and we don't want to draw too much attention right off the bat, now do we? Wait until you see what I've got for you. (motions Bong to follow into the next room)

The room is piled to the ceiling with gadgets and gizmos. Bong stands in awe of the techno-mess.

K (handing Bong a tiny black case, resembling a jewelry box): Go ahead, open it.

Bong (smirking): I had no idea you felt this way.

K (rolling eyes): I finally had the huevos to tell you.

Bong (opening box): Contacts? I can see just fine, thanks very much. Have you gone mad?

K: They're not just any old contacts. They're iris print contacts. All you have to do is approach some of the security personnel at the prison, look them in the eye for a second, and these will grab their iris print. Then you'll have access, and all without bloodshed, hopefully.

Bong: And for the cell?

K: Laser cutter.

Bong (impressed): How did you get this stuff? This is stuff that usually only the military has.

K: Silk Highway on the Substratum network.

Bong: How ironic. The free market website that Mulbricht was imprisoned for is still running and is helping to let him free.

K: I thought you'd appreciate that.

Bong: Which is why it cost a fortune to get all this together. Next level gear like this doesn't come cheap.

K (sighing deeply): Tell me about it. The price we pay for doing the right thing.

Bong: You're sure you weren't tracked doing all this?

K (cocky): You'll find out when you get there.

Bong (narrows eyes): And I'm flying him all the way back here?

K: I thought you didn't want me telling you how to do your job.

Bong folds arms and huffs.

K: That's on you. I'll be waiting to greet Mulbricht when he gets here.

Bong: And our little blogger is going to shine light on our valiant endeavors after it's all said and done?

K: She's chomping at the bit.

Bong: Good. She might come in handy some day.

K: What's that supposed to mean?

Bong (grimacing): Never mind. You're too simple minded to get it.

K: I can make your vehicles stop working at any moment. You know that, right?

Bong: Not before you meet your hero Ross Mulbright.

K: The man has achieved martyr status and is still alive, which ranks high in my book. Not to mention he was a pioneer in the tech market and crypto.

Bong: When's all this supposed to go down?

K: Tomorrow at high noon.

Bong (chuckles): You're so melodramatic. It really is painful.

K: Just one more thing. How many people at that bar in Tahoe made stoner jokes about your name?

Bong: Harassing me never gets old for you, now does it? I don't even smoke cannabis!

K: Then maybe you should change your name. And you didn't answer my question.

Bong (reluctant voice): One girl asked.

K: Was she gorgeous?

Bong: Exquisite.

K (grinning ear to ear): All over?

Bong (satisfied smile): A gentleman never tells.

End Part 1



## ***Episode 1 – Part 2***

### **Scene 1**

Bong, K, and Miss Moneybit are having a video conference. Miss Moneybit is in her apartment in DC. James and K are at K's house in Acapulco, Mexico.

Miss Moneybit (tapping fingers anxiously on desk): Helluva story, guys. I'll have it published within 24 hours. Too bad about the video, though.

Bong (holding ice pack on head, sighing): Yeah, I forgot the extra wearable camera, and my smartwatch was malfunctioning for some reason (looks at K disapprovingly). And to top it off, boy genius here hacked the security cameras in the prison, shut them off, and then got cocky and tried to record using their equipment.

K (cuts Bong off): I did record with their equipment, it just backfired a bit.

Bong: A bit? They have me on camera now, breaking Ross Mulbricht out of prison, and we don't have any video for ourselves! How does that qualify as only a bit? What the hell were you thinking?

K: Without the video, it won't get nearly as many hits online. I was just trying to cover your ass. You're the one who forgot the extra camera. Are you sure you're not a stoner?

Bong (rolls eyes): Quite.

Miss Moneybit: Ok, boys, settle down. A print story will have to do. I have some pressing questions.

Bong: I hate getting grilled.

K: Even when it's a super rare anarchist babe like her?

Miss Moneybit: You're pathetic. So where is Mulbricht now?

K: That's classified.

Miss Moneybit: Give it a rest.

Bong: I hate to agree with him, but we really can't disclose his location.

Miss Moneybit: Why not?

Bong: A little thing called privacy. Next question.

Miss Moneybit: Bong, how'd you hurt your head?

(K starts laughing out loud, nudges Bong on arm)

K: Go ahead, tell her.

## Scene 2

Scene flashes back to Bong and Mulbricht's escape from prison. They're running full speed in the Colorado countryside attempting to make it to their escape plane. They're being pursued by control freaks in blue costumes.....aka...cops.

Mulbricht (yelling): This might be the worst prison break ever!

(Bong, panting, ignores the insult)

Mulbricht: Have you done this before?

Bong: You're not helping!

Mulbricht: You didn't answer my question!

Bong: No, I haven't!

Mulbricht: Great! Goodbye!

Bong: What?

Mulbricht: We're gonna die! I should've stayed in prison!

They approach the Cessna Turboprop that awaits them.

Bong: Just get in the plane and stop whining!

Mulbricht: I'm supposed to fly with you now? Ahhhhhh!

Mulbricht jumps into the plane in one speedy swoop. Bong attempts to do the same, but clips his head on the body of the plane as he jumps in.

Bong (anguish): Ahhhhh, my head! Son of a bitch!

Mulbricht (sad): Well, it was a decent life. Short, but decent.

Bong maneuvers some controls and the plane starts speeding down a field and gets into the air.

## Scene 3

Scene flashes back to the video conference. Miss Moneybit and K are laughing hysterically.

Miss Moneybit: I can't believe you used to be a real spy!

K: And he claims he was at the top of his class!

Bong: I could snap your neck right now.

Miss Moneybit: Ok, ok, moving on. I don't understand something. Why did you get a turboprop? Aren't those small and dreadfully slow?

Bong: Thank you! Preachin to the choir! Mr. Cheapskate Supreme here went low brow on the equipment! Your frugality nearly cost me my life along with Mulbricht's, ya bloody little fool.

K: Hey, we were on a shoestring budget, what can I say?

Bong: Bullocks!

K: That was a sweet racing bike you had for the initial getaway.

Bong: Oh yeah, real sweet. It was like the first bike ever built and got a flat tire after about 2 minutes.

K (throws hands in air): Not my fault. You should've driven more carefully.

Bong: It was a prison break!

Miss Moneybit: Ok, ok. So when can I talk to Mulbricht?

K: When he's ready, I imagine. Want me to give him your number?

Miss Moneybit: You don't have my number and I would never give it to you, K.

Bong: I'll give it to Mulbricht if you'd like.

Miss Moneybit: Yes, please do.

K (frowning): Why does Bong get your number?

Miss Moneybit: Cuz he's hot, and not a lonely little pasty hacker like you. Another question.

K: Hold on. I've got a question for you before you fire off anymore at us. How much compensation will we get for all this work?

Miss Moneybit: It's hard to say. I'll have it on a few different sites soon. I'll post on Steemit first. That post should get at least a thousand steem, I imagine.

Bong: And we split it 3 ways, equally, right?

Miss Moneybit (reluctant voice, twiddling thumbs): I'm not sure that's what we agreed upon.

Bong: Then I'm not sure you'll be getting anymore exclusive stories of my exploits.

Miss Moneybit (pouty face): Oh, fine. Now for my next question. What are you gonna do about the video? Surely, the feds are already on it.

Bong (looking angrily at K): Yeah, what are you going to do about that?

K: I think you should go destroy it.

Bong: I'm not going to destroy property, even if it is the fed's.

K: Why not?

Bong: Because it's wrong and immoral. Besides, they've probably got copies spread all over the network by now, so I think if anyone gets to it, you should.

K: Me? Why me?

Bong: Cuz you're a hacker and it was your fault!

K: I say we just let it go. What are they gonna do, anyway?

Bong: Oh, gee, I dunno. Now I'm gonna be on the most wanted list. But that's not the worst of it. This will eventually get back to my former employers at MI6.

Miss Moneybit (ponderous look on face): Why didn't you just wear a mask, or something?

(Bong and K look at each other, dumbfounded)

Miss Moneybit: Unreal. You boys didn't think to do that?

Bong (stands up): I need a drink.

Scene 4

Sir Hugo Trax and General Small are having a video conference. Trax is at MI6 headquarters in London and General Small is at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Trax (looking at footage of Bong cutting open Mulbricht's cell with a laser cutter): Finally, you've done something well by getting me this footage. I was on the verge of firing you, ya know.

General Small (wiping sweat off his balding brow): You can't fire me.

Trax: Maybe not, but I know people who know some people who can fire you. And that would be a shame this close to getting your pension.

General Small: Back to Bong. What are ya gonna do about him?

Trax: He busted out a prisoner in your territory. He's your problem, not mine. However, I know what a bumbling fool you can be at times, so in my own interest of self-preservation, I'll help you take care of Mr. Bong.

General Small (chewing loudly): Who else do you want in on this op? And what to do about the video? Make copies or destroy it?

Trax: No copies! Bong has been off the radar for 5 years and now resurfaces with a bang like this! I want as few as possible knowing about this, otherwise it could mean both our hides. And what are you eating now?

General Small: Late night pizza snack, the usual. And what to do with Bong? Could we turn him?

Trax (swirling his finger in a tropical green drink with an umbrella): He'll have to die, of course.

General Small: Are you drinking in the morning again?

Trax's eyes widen at the sight of a woman behind General Small.

Trax: Who the hell is that?

General Small (looks behind him): Oh, that? Don't worry, that's just the cleaning lady and she doesn't speak English.

Trax does facepalm.

Trax: Damn you, Small! Now we have to kill her, too!

Cleaning lady screams and runs out the door.

General Small (yelling at cleaning lady): I thought you don't speak English!

End Episode 1

## ***Episode 2 – Part 1***

### Scene 1

It's been 10 days since Bong liberated Ross Mulbricht from the cage in Colorado. Bong is playing blackjack at a casino in Panama and losing badly.

K: Bong!

Bong (startled): Why don't I just leave this infernal smartwatch somewhere else?

K: Sorry to disturb your lackluster showing at the tables, but I've got great news!

Bong (talking to dealer): I'm afraid a pressing matter has come up.

Dealer: More pressing than losing your shirt at blackjack?

A grimacing Bong walks away.

K: You should learn to count cards like me, then you might win a hand or two.

Bong (looking around, paranoid): Could you not say stuff like that while I'm walking around a casino?

K: Come on, you're James Bong. What could happen?

Bong: I'd rather not find out.

K: Just get back to my place quick. And don't say goodbye to that groupie you were with last night, either. I don't trust her.

Bong: How do you know what I did last night?

K (twirling proudly in his highback, overstuffed office chair): You drunk dialed me and told me everything.

Bong: Bullocks! You were spying on me!

K (feigning panic): Um, sorry, can't hear ya. Getting too much interference. Gotta go now!

(CLICK)

Scene 2

Bong casually strolls into K's house in Acapulco the next morning, unannounced.

Bong: What's that giant dispenser with black liquid?

K (startled): Damnit, can you knock!?

Bong: You have your tricks, and I have mine.

K: It's a coffee dispenser.

Bong (amused): A coffee dispenser. How quaint.

K: Gotta keep the heart pumpin somehow.

Bong: You could go outside and exercise. So what's the marvelous news that's so damned urgent.

K: We're a hit!

Bong: What do you mean, we?

K: News of our mission to free Ross spread like wildfire! We made over 2,000 dollars on Steemit alone!

Bong: Great! So I can go back to the casino.

K (chagrined): Take a look at this. (Hits a key on his laptop and the image of an old couple on their front porch overlooking their farm goes on the wall)

Bong: You made me fly up here to look at your grandparents?

K: This handsome, hard working couple is about to lose the farm.

Bong: How's that?

K: They're behind on their taxes and the IRS is about to swoop in and steal it.

Bong: Can't you just fry the IRS computers and be done with it?

K: I could, but hacking exploits aren't as popularly received by netizens.

Bong: Damn new age techie lingo.

K: You get what I mean. Your exploits are much more entertaining, more popular, and thus, more profitable. You see where I'm going with this?

Bong: Yeah, I'm risking my life again while you fry your nerves on coffee and watch from a safe distance.

K: Come on, you can't live without this stuff! You were made for this!

Bong: I don't appreciate your choice of words. Miss Moneybit has agreed to the same terms of profit sharing after the dust settles?

K: Yep. And she said the profit could be more than double this time if we get video, so don't fudge that up like you did last time.

Bong: When and where?

K: 48 hours in North Dakota.

Bong: North Dakota in October?

K: Stop whining, it's not that cold up there yet.

(Conversation is interrupted by female voice)

Miss Moneybit: Why don't you swap places then, tough guy?

K (confused, then startled as he sees Miss Moneybit's face appear on the screen): Hey, how long have you been listening?

Miss Moneybit: Long enough to roll my eyes at you a dozen times.

K: And how'd you get access to my network?

Miss Moneybit (gleeful): You're not the only one with hacking skills. (Her giant face on the wall turns to Bong) Bong, we need to talk.

Bong: No we don't.

Miss Moneybit: Two things. First of all, get some footage of the old couple before the IRS parasites show up.

Bong (crossing arms): If I feel it necessary to speak with them, I will. Next.

Miss Moneybit: I need you to come to DC as soon as possible so we can talk in person, without your little sidekick there hanging on my every word.

Bong (throws arms in air): I'm not going out with you. We've been over this.

Miss Moneybit: Your ego looks bigger than the last time we spoke. Seriously, after this job, come see me.

Bong: You'll pay for transport?



Miss Moneybit: You're such a cheapskate.

Bong: I'll think about it. Say goodbye to your drooling admirer. (turns to K, who is fawning at the image of Miss Moneybit)

Miss Moneybit: We'll be in touch. Figuratively, I mean. I'd never touch you.

(CLICK)

K: She'll come around one day.

Bong: You shouldn't lie to yourself.

Scene 3

Bong is approaching the farm in a black helicopter.

Bong: At least it's flat, good for landing. (Suddenly, he hears a loud bang)

Bong: Are they shooting at me? Looks like my skills aren't needed here. I'd better land and approach on foot.

(Bong lands far from the handsome, bright white farmhouse, and sends an assortment of farm animals scurrying in all directions)

Bong: K, is the camera working?

K (sitting at his computer command center, chomping on some Cap'n Crunch): Did they shoot at you?

Bong (cringing): I'll take that as a yes.

Bong walks slowly with his hands up as he crosses a vast grass field on the approach to the farmhouse. Two figures are coming towards him.

Bong (shouting): Beautiful place you've got here!

(Another shot rings out)

Bong: I'm here to help!

Old male voice shouts back: That's what all those government goons say! This is private property!

Bong: I'm not from the government! Please don't shoot me!

They come to within 20 feet of each other. The old couple is eyeing Bong suspiciously. They're both holding shotguns.

Old man (pointing gun at Bong): State your business!

Bong (hands up in air, answers awkwardly): Well, um, let's see. How can I explain this?

Old woman: Spit it out, son! I was busy fixin lunch!

Bong: You see, the IRS is going to come in less than an hour, and I've come to help you fend them off.

Old man: And how the hell do you know that?

Bong: I can't say, really. You'll just have to trust me.

Old woman (with mocking laugh): Ah, trust him he says! A strange man in a black helicopter. Sure, and I suppose you'd like to sell me a bridge, too!

Old man holds his hand up to calm his wife.

Old man: If you can answer one question correctly, then we'll trust you.

Bong: Go ahead, shoot.

Old man: Bad choice of words!

(Bong cringes)

Old man: What is the definition of anarchy?

Bong (exhaling from relief): Without rulers!

Old man and old woman smile at each other and start walking towards Bong.

Old man: Hey, wait a minute! You look familiar. Are you that guy from the home gym infomercial?

Bong: I didn't even know those still existed.

Old woman (excited): No, dear! It's that guy that freed Ross! It's James Bong!

Old man: By golly, you're right! (extends hand to shake) We saw you on Steemit! Sorry we didn't recognize you sooner.

Old woman: You see, he's got cataracts, and I'm no spring chicken, either.

Bong (holds hand up): All is forgiven. I get shot at all the time, really. Seriously, we have less than an hour until the IRS actually does show up to try and steal your house.

Old man: Those immoral rat bastards. I've got some surprises coming for 'em.

Bong: If you'd like, I'll fend them off myself, that way they won't hold you accountable for any forceful behavior.

Old man: You mean self defense?

Bong: I'm just saying that if you defend against them, they might come back later with greater violence. If I'm the only one fighting back, then they might just come after me.

Old man: Well, ok, give it a shot. But if you get into trouble, we'll come out blazin.

Bong: That's the spirit.

Old woman: Speaking of blazin, I say we have a quick blunt. How about it, Bong?

Bong (chuckling): Actually, I don't partake.

Old woman: Oh, I'm sorry.

Bong: No need to apologize. It's a common misconception. You two go on home and have lunch and I'll get prepped in the chopper.

Old man: Thank you, son.

End Part 1

## ***Episode 2 Part 2***

In this episode, James takes on IRS agents and has a surprise waiting for him in DC.

Scene 1:

James Bong is sitting in his black helicopter and awaiting the arrival of the IRS agents who will soon try to steal private property from an old farming couple.

K: Bong!

Bong (exhaling deeply): What now, K? Are they here?

K (laughing hard): You're not gonna believe these characters.

Bong: Put it on the chopper's gps screen.

A screen in the central console of the chopper lights up and reveals a low-end sedan cruising down the two-lane highway that approaches the property. There are two middle-aged men inside. One is chubby and bald with puffy cheeks and eyes. The other is thin, bald, has a handle-bar mustache and wears super-thick coke-bottle glasses.

Bong (grinning): K, it looks as if your scrawny arse could've handled these two.

K: They look like pedos!

Bong: They probably are. Where else could anyone like that find employment, right?

K: Anyway, they'll be there in less than 5 minutes.

Bong readies the chopper and monitors their approach. The sedan comes barreling down the driveway, then slams the brakes and parks on top of a flower bed. The chubby one stumbles slightly as he gets out of the car and they both strut their way towards the front door of the farmhouse.

Chubby Agent (muttering): Damn farmers.

Thin Agent (stroking mustache): Why do ya say that?

Chubby Agent: Cuz they usually have guns and are troublemakers.

Chubby Agent does loud and obnoxious cop knock on the front door of the old couple's home. Bong is in the chopper, watching and listening.

Old man answers the door with his wife behind him.

Old man: Good afternoon. We don't want any.

Agents look at each other cynically.

Chubby Agent: Hi. We're here from the IRS. May we step in for a moment?

Old Man: I think it might be better if you state your business from outside.

Thin Agent (slicks thin hair back, and holds up a document): We have an order here to seize this property due to tax delinquency. I must insist that we step inside.

Bong lifts the chopper in the air and heads towards the house.

Chubby Agent (confused): What's that noise?

Thin Agent (pushy, yelling at old couple): Where is that coming from?

Old couple shrug shoulders, feigning ignorance. The chopper appears above the house and hovers near the agents. The agents look up disgustedly.

Chubby Agent (whispering to other agent): Did the home office send a chopper to help us?

Thin Agent: Do we even have choppers?

Bong gets on megaphone and speaks down to the agents.

Bong: Is there a problem here, guys?

Chubby Agent (yelling up at Bong): Who the hell are you?

Bong: Bong, James Bong!

The agents look at each other and gulp.

Chubby Agent: We're here to seize this house for tax delinquency!

Bong: You mean steal it?!

Thin Agent: It's not stealing! It's appropriation!

Bong: I'll be clear and brief. What you're doing is wrong and immoral and in violation of Natural Law! Nobody has the right to tax another! They owe the IRS nothing, you will not take their property, and you will leave now!

Thin Agent (stroking mustache): Yeah, whatcha gonna do about it?

Bong: Look at your chest!

Thin Agent looks down and sees laser sight over his heart. He freaks out and runs back to the car.

Chubby Agent (shaking fist in air): We'll come back with heavy artillery of our own! Just you wait!

The chubby agent scurries back to the car, they take off, plow over more flowers, and leave a trail of dust behind.

Old couple comes out and waves up at Bong.

Old Man: Thanks Mr. Bong!

Old Lady: Come back again some day and we'll have another doobie!

Bong chuckles, waves, and flies off.

K: Well done, Bong! And now for your reward. You get a date with Miss Moneybit, you lucky dog. What's the spot you're meeting at?

Bong: Mockingbird's, I think, and it's not a date. I'd prefer not to go, really. What are we going to do about the old couple? The agents will come back with a heavier hand next time, you know.

K: I'm already on it. I'm going to help them set up a Cell411 group so they can get crowdsourced help next time.

Bong: Great. The more people do things like that, the sooner I can retire.

Scene 2 – An empty and dimly lit restaurant in the District Of Criminals called “Mockingbird's”. Miss Moneybit is sitting in a corner booth waiting for Bong. Bong enters and cautiously surveys his surroundings.

Miss Moneybit: What are you gawking around for, James?

Bong: In my line of work, it pays to be cautious. I recommend you do the same.

He takes a seat opposite Miss Moneybit. She holds out her hand. He shakes it reluctantly and she clasps her other hand over his wrist and smartwatch as they shake.

Miss Moneybit: It's great to meet you in person!

Bong (gruffly): The feeling isn't mutual. We have a business relationship, and one I prefer to keep long distance.

Miss Moneybit: Well, thanks for coming, anyway. Some things are better to be done in person, you know?

Bong: So what's this all about? Why did you insist on meeting me here?

Miss Moneybit: It's a nice place, isn't it? I love the décor.

Bong: I wasn't referring to this shady looking restaurant. You have two minutes, then I'm out.

Miss Moneybit: Won't you have a drink with me?

Bong (looking around): No, I won't. I don't even see any service staff. You have 1 minute and 48 seconds.

Miss Moneybit: I want to deal with you directly from now on, and cut K out of the picture. I need your smartwatch contact info.

Bong (smirking): Not a chance.

Miss Moneybit: Why not? What do you need that little twerp for?

Bong: As much as I hate to admit it, he helps keep me low profile. His technical abilities are off the charts, despite his annoying demeanor and constant nagging.

Miss Moneybit: But then you'd get his share of the profit. And maybe I could set you up with another tech guru. Just think about it, please?

Bong: I wasn't finished. I don't trust you, either.

Miss Moneybit (shaking head in disbelief): The consummate spy, not trusting anyone.

Bong: Former spy. A healthy dose of skepticism can keep you alive, you know? Anyway, this little meeting is over. (stands up to leave) Don't ever request a meeting with me again unless it's actually important. (Walks off)

Miss Moneybit (calling out): If you change your mind, you know how to find me!

Bong ignores her and leaves. Two figures come out from the kitchen area behind Miss Moneybit.

Sir Hugo Trax: You did well, my dear.

Miss Moneybit: I didn't have much of a choice, did I?

General Small: Self preservation is a powerful motivator. Anyway, you shouldn't hang around with his type.

Miss Moneybit: And who should I hang around with?

General Small (head bobbling, grinning ear to ear): Well, I'm available tomorrow night.

Miss Moneybit (defiantly, standing to leave): I don't hang out with parasitic statist losers. (she walks off, then turns around just before heading out the door)

Miss Moneybit: It doesn't matter if you stop Bong, you know? You can't stop the human evolution to a voluntary society. (She leaves)

General Small: She'll come around.

Sir Hugo Trax: Don't give yourself false hope.

General Small: Should I have our squad follow Bong?

Sir Hugo Trax (sighing deeply): You simple fool. No, not yet. Bong's got to lead us to K first, then we're in business.

General Small: And what about Moneybit?

Sir Hugo Trax: We let her keep writing, as promised. Don't want to send up any red flags.

General Small: And after we get Bong and K?

Sir Hugo Trax: She'll have to die, of course.

General Small: Terrible to waste such a pretty young thing.

Sir Hugo Trax (eyes rolling): Enough of your fawning over that little anarchist tart. I won't let your desperation for female companionship fudge this operation.

General Small: Yes, sir.

Scene 3: Later that night, Bong is cruising along on a rural two-lane highway.

K: Bong!

Bong: Can't I get any peace?

K: It's an emergency.

Bong: Guess not.

K: I picked up an interference signal from your smartwatch.

Bong: It's not interfering enough. You still got through to me.

K: No, listen. I traced the signal and it went back to Langley. I don't know how, but they've got a lock on you in real time.

Bong (angry): That double crossing little.

(K cuts him off)

K: Let's not jump to conclusions. She wouldn't do this on her own initiative. They got her scared somehow.



Bong: Looks like I've got more work to do.

K: Whatever you do, don't come to my place right now.

Bong (grinning ironically): You know I do my best to avoid you at all costs.

K: So what's your next move?

Bong: Hanging up on you, then I'll have a drink.

End Episode 2

### ***Episode 3***

#### Scene 1

K is at his happy hacker lair in Acapulco, swiveling in his oversized office chair, methodically sipping on a super jumbo coffee.

K: Bong! That bastard! I haven't heard from him in days! The least he could do is let me know if he's dead or not. (frowns) Who am I kidding? I'm just in anguish because I found someone I can't hack all the time. (glances at his toothpick arms) And being a pasty, socially inept skin-flint doesn't help either, I guess. (kicks his desk in frustration)

#### Scene 2

General Small is sitting at his desk at CIA headquarters. The desk is littered with pizza boxes, donut boxes, and candy wrappers. He's startled by one of his agents, who barges in without knocking.

General Small: Hey, ever heard of knocking? I could've been doing something top secret and important, ya know.

Agent: You could also lock the door.

General Small: So what's so urgent?

Agent: We got the trace back on Bong.

General Small: Excellent! Any idea on how we lost the signal in the first place?

Agent: Not a clue, sir. Does it really matter? We know where he is, so let's kill him and get this thing wrapped up.

General Small: Good point. Show me where he's at.

The agent punches some buttons on a tablet and a holographic map of DC pops up.

Agent: Do you see the flashing red letters that say "Murder, Death, Kill?"

General Small (munching on donut): Yep.

Agent: That's where he is. 123 Knockajaw Court. Should I send some specialists to neutralize him?

General Small: Not just yet. That address sounds familiar. How long has he been stationary?

Agent: Hell if I know. The signal just came back a few minutes ago.

General Small: Wait! Now I know! That's my address! My wife and children could be in danger!

Agent: Do you have sufficient life insurance on them?

General Small (rolling eyes): Of course.

Agent: Then what's the problem? I'll send the death squad right away.

General Small (pondering his options): You make a valid point, but I'd better at least attempt to get my family out first. I'll have to confront Bong myself.

Agent (laughing hysterically): Alone? You?

General Small: Why is that funny?

Agent: Because you're old and fat and Bong is young and one of the best trained secret agents in history. Need I continue?

General Small: You're dismissed. If you don't hear from me within an hour.

Agent cuts him off.

Agent: Yeah, yeah, I know, you're dead and I might get promoted.

General Small (getting up to leave): Oh, while I'm out, there should be another pizza arriving. If they don't have extra cheese on it this time, don't tip that lousy putz, ok?

Agent: I never tip anyway.

Scene 3

30 minutes later, General Small goes into his house and finds his wife and children bound and gagged on the floor with 3 men in black standing over them.

General Small: What the hell are you guys doing here?

Man In Black: We were called in from your office, sir.

General Small: Well it sure as hell wasn't me! Why is my family tied up?

Man In Black: Trying to get them to talk. You never know who to trust in this business.

General Small: It's my family, you oaf! Untie them now! And how the hell are they supposed to talk with their mouths taped off, anyway?

Man In Black (puzzled look): Good point, sir. (goes to untie the family)

General Small: Did you find anything regarding Bong? We know he was here at some point because of the signal.

Man In Black: Affirmative, sir. (holds out Bong's smartwatch) We found this on the front doorstep with a note, sir.

General Small: What did the note say?

Man In Black: Nothing.

General Small: What do you mean?

Man In Black: It's a picture (holds out paper in front of General Small's face)

General Small (grimacing): A laughing emoji graphic. Very clever, Bong. We'll see who gets the last giggle.

Man In Black: Last laugh, sir.

General Small (shouting, angry): Whatever!

#### Scene 4

Agent outside General Small's office is zoned out on his tablet. There's a knock at the door.

Male voice outside door: Pizza delivery!

Agent: Come in!

Door opens and James Bong steps in holding a pizza box. He's wearing a baseball cap, a terrible fake mustache, and glasses that make him look walleyed.

Agent (glancing up from tablet): About damn time!

Bong: This one is on the house.

Agent: Damn well better be! Go through that door and put it on the desk.

Bong (looking at the door curiously): You mean that door that says "Top Secret. Authorized Personnel Only"?

Agent (nonchalantly): Yep, that's the one.

Bong: Whatever you say, boss!

Bong enters General Small's office and shuts the door. He immediately sets the pizza on the table and then starts putting massive amounts of miniature surveillance equipment all over the office. After finishing and about to walk out, Bong is startled by the door swinging open.

Agent: Hey! What's taking you so long?

Bong: Oh, I was just awestruck by being in CIA headquarters, the bastion of freedom!

Agent: Yeah, I don't blame ya. It's tough guys like us that keep little people like you safe.

Bong: Thank you, sir.

Agent: Whatever. Out.

Bong leaves.

Agent (annoyed mumbling): Damn nobodies. Get a life, will ya?

Scene 5

Miss Moneybit comes into her apartment. She fixes herself a cocktail and starts lounging on the couch.

Bong: Don't scream.

Miss Moneybit turns around to see Bong standing in the doorway to her bedroom. She starts gulping air and flailing her arms, then adds a high pitched whining noise to the freak-out.

Miss Moneybit: Are you here to kill me?

Bong (smirking): If I were here to kill you, we wouldn't be talking right now. (starts eyeing the cocktail curiously) Is that a martini?

Miss Moneybit: Yep, can I make ya one?

Bong (grabbing glass off coffee table): Nope, yours will do just fine. (gulps it down to the last drop) Ahhhhh, that hit the spot! Now, on to business. I'll be gone in 2 minutes.

Miss Moneybit: Look, before you start (Bong waves his finger at her and cuts her off)

Bong: I'll do the talking. Number one, if you ever pull a stunt like that again, I'll consider it in my own self-defense to kill you. Nod if you understand.

(A pale-faced Moneybit frowns and nods slowly)

Bong: Now, why did you do it?

Miss Moneybit: They threatened everyone and everything I hold dear.

Bong: Why didn't you tell me or our vitamin D deficient hacker associate?

Miss Moneybit (hesitantly): I, I was afraid, I guess. Can you blame me?

Bong (sighing profoundly and staring deeply into her eyes): Well, lucky for you, I've managed to get a batch of lemonade started with the truckload of lemons you dropped on me.

Miss Moneybit (confused): Ya lost me.

Bong: I'll explain when the time is right. One more thing. Your place is bugged.

Miss Moneybit (sarcastic): Tell me something I don't know.

Bong: How'd you know?

Miss Moneybit: Come on, Bong. I've read a spy novel or two in my day.

Bong (rolling eyes): Right, silly me. Well, time's up. I gotta run.

Miss Moneybit: Wait! One more thing. You're having a huge effect, ya know. The number of people online talking about anarchy is growing exponentially. The ruling class must be hysterical right now.

Bong: Which means they're at their most dangerous, like a cornered animal. (turns around to leave)

Miss Moneybit: Feel free to knock next time.

Bong (turns around, smiling): Put your little freak-out video on Steemit and see how much you can get for it.

Miss Moneybit: Video? What video?

Scene 6

An hour after Bong's talk with Moneybit.

K is laughing his head off in front of his main computer screen.

K: Great video, Bong. Glad to see I'm not the only one you pick on.

End Episode 3

## ***Episode 4***

### Scene 1

James Bong is sprawled out on the floor of K's place in Acapulco snoozing away.

K (nudging Bong with foot): Bong!

Bong (dazed): Huh, what? I'm trying to sleep.

K: You've been cuttin zees for over 12 hours, most of which has been filled with unpleasant, involuntary bodily noises.

Bong (rising to feet, sleepy-eyed, offended): Bullocks.

K: I've got holographic video to prove it if you want.

Bong (sighing): Not necessary.

K: Anyway, we've got work to do. A big job is just around the corner.

Bong: Have you managed to get some useful intel from our plants in Small's office?

K (puffy cheeks): Not exactly.

Bong: It's been a week. What the hell is taking you so long?

K: It's a lot of data to sift through! Anyway, what I do have is intel from the DEA that a big raid is about to happen in a few days.

Bong: I'm listening.

K: The biggest cannabis dispensary in California, Kushy Budz, is about to get raided.

Mysterious female voice comes from the background.

Female Voice: K, I have finished the tasks you assigned me.

Bong (turns around and is shocked to see a female humanoid robot): How long was I asleep?

Female Robot: You were sleeping for 12 hours, 9 minutes, and 3 seconds. Your snoring registered a .00000001433 on the Richter Scale. That could be a problem. Would you like a medical exam?

Bong (jaw dropped): No, I don't want a medical exam. (turns to K) What the hell have you done?

K (laughing): Bong, this is Symphy.

Bong: Where'd it come from?

K: I finished her yesterday.

Bong: You built it?

K (proudly): Yep. My finest work yet.

Bong (facepalm): OH, brother. Is that why you haven't found intel from our bugs at Small's yet?

K (twiddling thumbs nervously): Well, I'm not sure I'd say that.

Bong: In other words, a deafening yes. We need to get to Small and Sir Trax.

K: What we need, Bong, is already happening. People are learning about rights and anarchy thanks to our work. Small and Trax are just cogs, nothing more.

Bong: That might be, but I've got a personal vendetta against those cogs. Knowledge will spread, but I've got a score to settle as well with those two.

K: Yeah, I get it. That's fine. Just be patient and I'll find something we can use against them.

Bong: And in the meantime, you're building robots in your spare time.

K: She's actually a primitive form of A.I., not a robot.

Bong: Well, she's not going on any missions with me.

K: Who said she was? I wouldn't risk her to save your arrogant ass, anyway.

Bong: How comforting. So what about this raid.

K: Kushy Budz dispensary is in L.A. It's a joint raid between DEA and LAPD happening in five days.

Bong: How many agents?

K: At least 30.

Bong: That's a lot. Maybe I could use your robot's help.

K: Not a chance. I can get that number down, though.

Bong: How's that?

K: I'm gonna cancel the raid in the LAPD computer system.

Bong: Why don't you just do that to the DEA and be done with it?

K: Cuz we need more video of your daring heroics to finance our operation.

Bong: And how much did your robot cost?

K (eyes shifting): Let's stay on task, Bong.

Bong: I'm gonna need lots of toys for this one.

K: I'll have your car waiting for you in LA. It'll have everything you need in it.

Bong (skeptically): Such as?

K: A 3D printer.

Bong (gruffly): You spent all the money on your little pet robot, didn't you?

K: Well, not everything. She'll come in handy, don't you worry. You'll see!

Bong: What, scrubbing your toilets?

K: Good luck, Bong. We'll be in touch.

Bong (walking out): Don't remind me.

## Scene 2

The next day, Bong walks into the colorful Kushy Budz. He wanders around and admires the plethora of artful products on display. He then approaches a chubby, pleasant-looking, narrow eyed, thickly bearded clerk.

Bong: Groovy place you've got here.

Clerk (raising eyebrow): Groovy? Um, can I help you with something?

Bong: I'm here to help, actually. What's your name?

Clerk: I'm Bush, and you are?

Bong: Bong, James Bong.



Clerk: Nice name.

Bong: Are you really named Bush?

Bush: Yep.

Bong: Your parents were...

Bush: Cruel.

Bong (pointing to another worker): If that guy's name is Clinton or Whacker, I'll have no choice but to leave.

Bush: Anyway, you said you're here to help?

Bong: You're going to be raided by the feds in 4 days.

Bush (skeptical): And how do you know that?

Bong: I'm not sure you'd believe me if I'd explain it to you.

Bush (calling to co-worker): Hey, Pigeon! Get over here!

Pigeon: I'm busy, Bush. Whatsup?

Bush: This guy says we're gonna be raided in a few days.

Pigeon looks at Bong a moment.

Pigeon: Hey, wait a minute! I've seen you before!

Bush: You have?

Pigeon: Yeah, this is that guy from those Dtube videos I was tellin you about. It's James Bong!

Bush (squinting at Bong): Great balls of fire, you're right!

Bong (confused): I told you my name up front, and who says great balls of fire?

Bush: Wait, so it's true? We're gonna be raided! Holy turkey meatball pasta!

Bong: Are you ok?

Pigeon: He's fine, he does this a lot.

Bong: Ridiculous exclamations?

Pigeon: That's his specialty. So what are you thinking about this raid?

Bong: Let's sit and have a chat and we'll go over our options.

Pigeon: Sure thing. And I'll tell ya what, we'll smoke this in your honor (holds out a huge bongload).

Bong: Actually, I don't smoke.

Pigeon and Bush look at each other in disbelief.

Bush: Were your parents major potheads or something? How did you get the name Bong, anyway?

Bong: I don't remember my parents. Anyway, my name isn't important. We've got to get busy if we want to foil this raid.

### Scene 3

Bong is having a drink at a low key bar called "The Speedy Turtle".

K: Bong!

Bong looks wearily at his new smartwatch.

Bong: I've had a long day. Make it quick, K.

K: You're not gonna believe what I found.

Bong: A girlfriend?

K: Even better! I got the crew manifest for the raid and did a little digging. There's someone with very interesting connections to General Small and Sir Hugo Trax. A guy named Ty Prince.

Bong: You're joking.

K: Why is that?

Bong: We were in the same training class together.

K: I didn't see that in his profile.

Bong: That's because he failed the program.

K: I didn't know it was possible to fail the program.

Bong: Very funny. So what has Ty been up to?

K: I don't think we can get into all the details on a call like this. What I can tell you right now that is pertinent to your situation is that he works for a CIA front called Cargo Solutions.

Bong (grimacing): Damn nondescript, unimaginative naming bastards. Sorry, go ahead.

K: I couldn't agree more. Anyway, Cargo Solutions runs tons of drugs. They got in trouble with some local officials in Mexico and Columbia a few years back.

Bong: You mean they didn't pay off the right people.

K: That sounds about right, but who knows. Anyway, the whole thing blew up in their faces. Some DEA guys that aren't on the CIA dole tried to make a case against them.

Bong: Stop right there. Lemme guess, the naive DEA guys wound up having heart attacks.

K: How'd you know?

Bong: Standard procedure. So what's Prince got to do with all this?

K: He's the head of their personnel department. Look, I think that's enough info for now. The rest is really sensitive and should be discussed in person. I just thought you'd like to know before your big fireworks show.

Bong: I hate to say it, K, but you did good.

K: Actually, Symphy was a huge help. I couldn't have done it without her.

Bong (sarcastically): 3 cheers for A.I. Anything else, K?

K: Yeah, bring me back a souvenir from Kushy Budz.

Bong (rolling eyes): Goodbye, K.

End Part 1

Begin Part 2

Scene 1

The night before the raid.

Symphy: Bong, how may I assist you?

Bong (perplexed): K, did your voice change? Have you regressed to before puberty?

Symphy: This is Symphy. Would you like to speak to K?

Bong: Immediately.

K: Hey Bong! What a pleasant surprise!

Bong (gruff): So now it's your secretary. How quaint.

K: You're just jealous. Tomorrow's the big day. Whatsup?

Bong: I need one of those clear skin trackers.

K: So print one.

Bong: Do you think I'd be calling you if I could print one?

K: Just use the 3D printer. Are you that helpless?

Bong: There's no schematic for it, you arrogant little twerp.

K (flustered): Oh, right. Sorry about that. I'll wire it to the printer now. What's it for?

Bong: You'll find out soon enough. (taps smartwatch to end call)

## Scene 2

Bong is having one final meeting with the staff of Kushy Budz Dispensary before the expected raid by the DEA.

Bong: Ok, one more time over the checklist before I head out. Gasmasks.

Pigeon: Check.

Bong: Enough aerosolized THC to knock out a fleet of stallions.

Bush: Double check.

Bong: Rope and tape?

Pigeon: Check and check. What about guns?

Bong: Well, I've got one. It's your property. I'd hope you'd have guns to protect it.

Bush (uncertain): Um, well, I think Pigeon has a pistol.

Pigeon: Yeah, I've got a pistol.

Bong (amazed): You've got to be kidding! You expect to hold off a DEA raid with one pistol?

Bush: Hey, you're the one who dreamed up our whole defense. After all, if the plan works, we shouldn't need the guns, right?

Bong (grimacing): Let's hope the plan works. Ok, I'm going to keep watch from my car. Remember, I'll call you when they're approaching. You won't have much time, so be ready.

Bong walks out and goes across the street to his 3D printed black car modeled after the 1977 Trans Am. After waiting for 30 minutes, Bong sees a train of black SUVs and Chargers cruising towards him at a feverish pace. Bong dials Bush's number.

Bong (beeping sound from smartwatch): Come on, come on, pick up.

Bush is smoking a bongload, watching a holographic Dtube video of epic fails, and laughing his chubby ass off.

20 seconds go by.....no answer.

Bong (in anguish): That cheeky little (incoherent growling)

Bong runs into the dispensary just as the black motorcade pulls up outside.

Bong: They're here! They're here! Masks on!

All the workers throw their masks on and hide behind various pieces of furniture. Bong heads upstairs and squats down behind a statue of a stoned frog, where he has a sniper's view of the bottom floor.

The doors burst open and 13 black clad thugs in DEA uniforms and heavy gear come in with firearms pointing all around.

Ty Prince: This is a raid! Everyone hands up now!

Bush hits the red button on a computer joystick, which releases highly concentrated, aerosolized THC into the air. The gas knocks out all the would-be raiders.

Bong runs down and takes a look outside to make sure there aren't any stragglers.

Bong (muffled from the gas mask): Great job, everyone! Ok, time for the tape and rope.

Pigeon (muffled): What? You're muffled because of the mask.

Bong: What?

Pigeon: What?

Bong (grabs tape and rope off glass display case, then yells): Rope and tape!

In a few minutes, all of the would-be raiders are bound up, the air clears, and everyone takes their masks off. Bong takes the opportunity to slap the clear skin tracker on the back of Prince's neck.

Pigeon: So what now?

Bong: When they wake up, we'll make them an offer. They can leave on their own volition after promising to never violate private property again. If they refuse, we knock them out again and leave them somewhere.

30 minutes later.

Prince (weary eyed): What the?

Bong: Attention everyone! We've got a talker!

Prince: Bong? I thought you were dead.

Bong: Now why would you think a silly thing like that?

Prince: Because (hesitates) Well, I have my sources.

Bong (laughing): A source of BS. So here's the deal. You and your thugs here can leave, peacefully, on your own accord, after you promise no more private property violations.

Prince (cocky): Dream on, Bong.

Bong: Or we can just knock you out again and leave you stranded somewhere. I hear Death Valley is wonderful this time of year.

The rest of the DEA cowards begin to come to.

Thug 1: What happened, boss?

Prince: An old friend has made his presence known.

Bong: So what's it gonna be, Prince?

Pigeon (standing over Prince with his little pistol, trying to act tough): Yeah, what's it gonna be, Prince? (pauses) Hey, wait a minute. How do you know this guy's name?

Bong: Long story.

Prince: Ok, Bong. We'll go. But now you're on my radar.

Bong (sarcastically): Looks like I'm already six feet under, then. Say hi to your "sources" for me. (turns to Bush) We can start untying them. Be ready to hit the button in case they try anything funny. (turns to Prince) You'll be allowed to leave, one by one.

Scene 3

2 days later, Bong is sitting at a poker table in Las Vegas.

K: Bong!

Bong: K, as usual, your timing is abysmal. I'm on an extremely hot streak right now.

K: Just wanted to let you know that the Kushy Budz video has gone viral on Dtube. We're looking at a fat payday! Don't blow it at the casino.

Bong (smiling): And don't blow yours on anymore frankenstein robots.

K: So what's next?

Bong: Now we wait for Prince to pop up somewhere that can be used to our advantage. This is going to be epic.

End Episode 4

## ***Episode 5***

Scene 1 – K is passed out with his face planted in a keyboard. His humanoid robot Symphy is playing 3D chess with itself. A call comes in on one of the many computers strewn about the hacker lair. Symphy answers.

Symphy: Hello, how may I assist you?

Miss Moneybit (confused and astonished): Umm, do I have the right number? Where's K?

Symphy (robotic laugh): Oh, yes, you have not made an error. Don't worry. Master K is passed out on a keyboard right now. May I take a message?

Miss Moneybit: Um, who are you?

Symphy: I am Master K's humanoid assistant and companion.

Miss Moneybit: I guess the dude finally gave up on real women. Why do I find relief in that? (pauses to ponder) Anyway, wake him up. It's important.

Symphy: I'm afraid that goes against my behavior protocols. Please give me your name and I'll relay a message.

Miss Moneybit (sighing): I'm Miss Moneybit. Trust me, he's gonna wanna see me.

Symphy: Oh! You're Miss Moneybit? Yes, you are one of the only exceptions to his sleeping rule. I'll wake him at once.

Symphy walks over to K and slaps him on the back of the head.

Miss Moneybit: Not too subtle. I like your style.

K awakens with a start and blurts out....

K: No, I swear, they're not mine!

Miss Moneybit's holographic image appears in the room next to K.

Miss Moneybit: What aren't yours?

K (looking Miss Moneybit up and down): Oh, good morning!

Symphy: It is two in the afternoon.

K: Did you just call to say you love me?

Miss Moneybit: Your sense of humor is impeccable. No, but I do have news that'll peak your interest. Go to my Steemit feed.

K (looking at a bigscreen monitor on the wall): You have a viral anti-TSA video. You flew old commercial? What the hell were you thinking? Why didn't you just fly SteemAir or something?

Miss Moneybit (pouty): It's a long story. I'd rather not talk about it. Anyway, so those goons in costumes, ya know the so-called TSA agents, wouldn't let half my stuff go on my flight with me. They frisked me....twice. I was damn near crying. Me! Can you believe that?

K: You are one tough cookie, I'll give ya that. At least you got it all on tape.

Miss Moneybit: I was thinking revenge, with a twist.

K: Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Symphy: This expression puzzles me.

K; Don't fry your circuits over it.

Miss Moneybit: Wanna hear my plan?

K (cheesy grin and voice): I'm always interested in more time with you.

Miss Moneybit: I know. It was more of a rhetorical question. So I wanna get a big group of people together to walk through a TSA rights destruction chokepoint. No IDs, no searches, total freedom. Just a giant throng of people marching past those order following bastards!

K: Wow, you're really fired up! I like it! And I like the plan. How are you gonna draw the crowd?

Miss Moneybit: I figure profit sharing will be the easiest and fastest way. I'll offer a percentage of the video I shoot of the whole thing. I'll keep it to a hundred people or less. Enough to be effective, but not too many to dilute the monetary pool. What do ya think?

K: Genius. You should have everyone carry a big bottle of water, too. Where do I come in?

Miss Moneybit: You don't. I could use Bong's help, though. Where's he at?



K: Beats me. And I'm not so sure he's too anxious to see you.

Miss Moneybit (offended): Why do you say that?

K: Well, you did put a tracker on him a few weeks ago, remember?

Miss Moneybit: But we kissed and made up.

K: In your dreams.

Symphy (perplexed): Miss Moneybit, do you find James Bong attractive?

Miss Moneybit: Yeah, me and a million other women.

Symphy: I don't understand why.

Miss Moneybit: K, did you program her to find twerps like you attractive?

K: We're getting off track here. I'll try and track down Bong and see if he'll help your TSA bit. When's your target date?

Miss Moneybit: 3 days. When word gets out, I don't want to give the feds any time to subvert it.

K: Smart.

Miss Moneybit: I'll keep you posted.

K: You don't want to stay and watch me drink coffee?

Symphy: Human behavior puzzles me greatly.

## Scene 2

James Bong is sitting at a secluded bar called the Tippy Camel.

Bong (staring at his near finished drink): Do you ever do things you don't want to do, but feel that you have to?

Bartender: Every time I wake up in the morning I have a similar feeling.

Bong (smirking, polishes off the rest of his drink in a giant swig): Well, this is one of those moments for me.

Bartender: More important than drinking?

Bong: Afraid so. I've got a call to make.

Bong throws money on the bar and walks off. He gets out his new blockchain encrypted smartwatch and calls K. Symphy answers the call.

Symphy: Hello, who's calling?

Bong: Bong, James Bong.

Symphy: Would you like to speak with Master K?

Bong: I unfortunately have to speak with K and I highly recommend that you don't inflate his ego by calling him master.

K: Bong! Your timing is impeccable, aside from the fact that you interrupted a record setting Tetris game I was in.

Bong: How's that?

K proceeds to tell Bong about Miss Moneybit's plan.

Bong: I'm not going anywhere near the DC airport, and certainly not for her. I still don't trust her.

K: Look, Bong, I don't blame you for that. I don't trust her a hundred percent either. However, take into account that if the feds send in agent provocateurs to muddle things up, it could cause some serious problems for Moneybit.

Bong (huffing): I see your point.

K: Maybe don't get involved directly. She doesn't even have to know that you're going. Just keep an eye out for feds and make sure Moneybit stays safe.

Bong: Ok, ok, I'll do it. Now what about Prince? He hasn't popped up in any places of interest since the dispensary affair?

K: Nope, not yet. I've got Symphy tracking him, so we won't miss a beat.

Bong: So when is the big day in DC?

K: 3 days, high noon.

Bong: Sounds melodramatic. Anything else?

K: Yeah, keep your smartwatch on so I can reach you.

Bong: I'll do it on one condition. Symphy doesn't call you master anymore.

K: I'm hanging up now.

Scene 3

2 days later in The City of London, Sir Hugo Trax is having a meeting with an old, shadowy character in a limo.

Trax: I can assure you, sir, I'll be personally handling the selection this time. I won't disappoint you.

Old Shadowy Character: You know how my milieu and I hate to be disappointed.

Trax (nervously): Oh, yes sir, I remember very well what happened to the last wretched soul that failed you.

Old Shadowy Character (smug): Very well. You go tomorrow, is that right?

Trax: Yes, I'll be on my way to L.A. first thing in the morning.

Old Shadowy Character (ominous tone): You know how I hate rhymes.

Trax: Sorry, sir, not sure what came over me.

Old Shadowy Character (sighing deeply): Very well, now be on your way.

Trax (grimacing): Sir, I believe the car is moving. Perhaps I'll get out at the next stop.

Old Shadowy Character: Next stop? This isn't a bloody bus, now is it? Out you go now. No whining.

Trax (gulps heavily): Of course, sir. (Jumps out of the limo and rolls on the pavement. Bystanders scream. Trax covers his face and runs away.)

End Part 1  
Begin Part 2

Scene 1

Bong is driving his 3D printed 1977 Black Trans Am en route to Dulles Airport in the DC area. He's having a chat with K before attending Miss Moneybit's big TSA confrontation event.

Bong: Moneybit doesn't know I'm coming, right?

K: Of course not. You know how well I keep secrets.

Bong: Which is why I asked again.

K: More importantly, we finally got a lead on Prince.

Bong: About time you delivered.

K: And not just Prince, either. It appears that we have an ominous continuity.

Bong: Explain.

K: So I intercepted a message from the bug in General Small's office. Looks like Hugo Trax is going to L.A. today. And guess who showed up in L.A. yesterday? Ty Prince. How about that?

Bong: Looks like I need to get going quick then.

K: You gotta watch Moneybit's back first, though, ok?

Bong (reluctantly): I suppose. I'm at the airport. Gotta go.

Bong puts his iris-changing contacts on so the iris scanners won't recognize him. He quickly makes his way to the designated checkpoint where Moneybit's show is about to begin. While waiting near the checkpoint, he spots a throng of at least 100 people walking confidently towards the area. Leading the pack is Miss Moneybit. Bong eyes the 6 TSA order-following dupes, who have no idea what they're in for. Moneybit and another 10 people walk in lockstep at the front as the TSA goons try to stop them and ask for ID and tickets. The goons are ignored and are quickly passed by. After a moment, one of the goons panics and tries to grab one of the free humans.

TSA goon: Stop, stop! I command you to stop!

Everyone ignores the goon and continues to walk through the feeble checkpoint. Suddenly, 4 individuals wearing black hoodies in the middle of the pack start throwing rocks at the TSA agents. Chaos ensues.

Bong (to himself): Agent provocateurs!

The TSA goons start cowering behind the naked body scanners and start calling for police intervention on their radios.

Bong runs into the pack and knocks out two of the black block provocateurs with one thunderous roundhouse. He then kicks another one in the testicles, and drops the fourth and final one with a knee to the skull. A handful of badge-wearing, order-following parasites in blue start running to the scene. The protesters continue to march through the checkpoint undeterred. Bong spots Moneybit, who is panic stricken and confused just past the checkpoint. Bong bursts through the chaotic mess of bodies, grabs Moneybit by the arm, and the two sprint away from the area. One police goon chases them, but fails to reach them before Bong and Moneybit are safely cruising away in Bong's Trans Am.

Moneybit (shrieking): What the hell are you doing?

Bong: Saving your arse. Thanks for the gratitude.

Moneybit: What?

Bong: Don't you get it? Did you forget that you're being watched by Small and Trax? They've been waiting for you to screw up, and now you've done those tools a favor.

Moneybit: What the hell happened back there?

Bong: Agent provocateurs attacking the TSA goons, that's what. And now they're gonna put out a narrative that you led a violent revolt against the TSA. I knew this was a bad idea.

Moneybit: Where are we going?

Bong (wryly): I'm gonna put you on a plane to your destination of choice. Might I suggest Acapulco? I know a pasty little nerd that'll wet his pants if you do.

Moneybit (incredulous): You've got to be kidding! I'm going home!

Bong: There are at least a dozen order-following little dogs at your house right now, guaranteed, just waiting to throw you in a cage.

Moneybit: I can't just leave the country.

Bong: I can't afford to lose you.

Moneybit (gushy and googly eyed): Awww, that's so sweet.

Bong: You're too valuable of an asset.

Moneybit (huffy, sarcastic): You're so sentimental.

Bong: Take a picture of my eyes.

Moneybit: What? Why?

Bong: I got the iris prints of the agent provocateurs stored in my contacts. Get the prints to K. It might be useful to identify them. (Bong hands a smartphone to Moneybit) Here, take this and get a private flight to Acapulco booked ASAP. Use Swarm City so it can be anonymous. I've gotta get to L.A.

Moneybit: L.A.? What's going on, Bong?

Bong (smirking gruffly): Ominous continuity. Get ready for a big story.  
An hour later, Bong drops Moneybit at a private airfield in rural Virginia for her flight to Acapulco.

Moneybit: This is crazy.

Bong: Welcome to my life. Tell your boyfriend I said hello.

Moneybit: I hate you, Bong.

Moneybit boards the plane and takes off. Bong proceeds to a different airfield to pick up a private plane and fly himself to L.A.

## Scene 2

Now after sunset, James Bong is walking from his private plane to his new 3D printed midnight blue car modeled after the 1986 Ferrari Testarossa. He calls K.

Bong: Ok, K, where's Prince at? Being in L.A. makes me nauseous due to its overt oozing of evil.

K: What I'm about to tell you isn't going to help your severe allergy to evil.

Bong (takes deep breath): Lay it on me. I'm ready.

K: Ty Prince is in Beverly Hills.

Bong: Beverly Hills is fairly large. Do you think we can narrow that down a bit?

K: You didn't let me finish. He's at Kevin Spacey's house.

Bong: Bullocks.

K: Not joking. You have your cameras ready?

Bong: One on each shoulder.

K: Can you get an autograph for me?

Bong (gruff): I'm replacing you as soon as possible. (click)

### Scene 3

Bong is squatting behind some obelisk-shaped hedges in Kevin Spacey's yard. He watches through a window by zooming in with his special iris-scanning contacts. He sees Ty Prince, Kevin Spacey, Harvey Weinstein, and Sir Hugo Trax drinking cocktails and lounging in overstuffed leather thrones.

Prince: Hugo, you get first pick.

Spacey: You G-men always stick together, don't you. Why can't I have first pick for once?

Weinstein: We could draw straws or something.

Trax: Or maybe Kev would prefer a sword-fighting tournament?

Spacey: Low blow, even for you, Trax.

Prince nods to a bulky order-follower in a black suit. The order-follower opens the door next to him, goes downstairs, and returns a moment later with a 12-year-old girl.

Trax (waving her away): No, no, not a chance. Look at that blemish on her cheek. Not a chance, no.

Spacey: Old Harv will take her. He takes anything with a pulse.

Trax: Can't we just go and have a look at all of them together? I mean, really. This isn't a damned pageant.

All keep silent and raise eyebrows.

Trax: Great, then. It's settled.

Spacey: To the magic dungeon!

All four stand up and start to walk downstairs. Bong takes the opportunity to enter the house. He stealthily gets to the top of the stairs and has a birds-eye view of the group. He is appalled by the scene. There are at least 20 drugged-up, naked girls in cages between the ages of 10 and 16.

Trax: Prince, my boy, you've outdone yourself this time.

Prince: I thought it was a good haul.

Spacey: Can we sample before we buy?

Prince: You know the rules.

Trax (pointing): That dark skinned one there, where is she from?

Prince: Venezuela.

Trax: And the blond with the icy blue eyes?

Prince: Russia.

Trax: Saved from war torn areas, what a hero you are, Prince. Those two will do nicely. What about the youngest ones? Where are they from?

Prince: US of A. Homegrown talent.

Weinstein: They can understand what we're saying? You fool!

Trax: Calm down. They'll just have to be eliminated after they serve their purpose. But you really shouldn't get English speakers, you know. It's an unnecessary risk.

Prince (shrugging shoulders): My contact at CPS gave me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Trax: How much for the four, then?

Prince: 20 million.

Trax: The money and transport will be here in an hour.

Weinstein: Leaving so soon?

Trax: I have a real job, unlike you.

Bong pulls out some canisters of aerosolized THC, opens them, and holds the door shut.

Spacey (alarmed): You boys here something?

The gas spreads quickly and soon all in the dungeon are knocked out. After waiting a few minutes for the air to clear, Bong hurries downstairs and ties up the criminals. He then uses his smart devices. He uses the Sub-Stratum network, SteemPay, and Swarm City to arrange drone delivery of clothing for the girls to Spacey's house. He also arranges a transport bus and a cargo plane. The clothing arrives in less than an hour, just as everyone starts to wake from the THC-induced slumber. Bong starts handing clothes out to the girls, most of whom are too scared to speak. The criminals also awaken but cannot speak because their mouths are taped up.

Trax (muffled, trying to yell at Bong): Bmmmmph!

Bong: Hell, Mr. Trax. You said that the 20 million will be arriving soon? What should I do with it? Should I burn it? Should I allow the girls to take it? Comments? (Bong laughs to himself at Trax's inability to speak)

Bong: Tell me, Trax, do you know the difference between right and wrong? No, I know you don't. Why? Number one, because of your actions. And number two, because you're an evil statist tool.

Bong checks his smartwatch and runs up the stairs, then outside to see what vehicles have arrived. A limo is pulling slowly up the driveway. Bong waits out of sight, then pounces on the driver. He knocks out the driver with a left hook and grabs the briefcase of cash next to the driver. The transport van that Bong ordered pulls up moments later. Bong runs back to the dungeon.

Bong: Girls, you can fly with me to safety, or you can stay here with these criminals. The choice is yours. The girls follow Bong. They drive to a private airfield outside the city where the cargo plane is waiting. Bong flies through the night and arrives in Acapulco at dawn.

Bong: This is where we part ways, girls. You're free. Divide the money and start a new life, if you wish.

The oldest girl, all of 16, speaks up.

Girl: That's it? You're leaving us?

Bong (uncertain what to do): Well, I can't take care of you.

Girl: What are we supposed to do?

Bong (reluctantly): I suppose you can come with me and we'll figure something out.

20 minutes later at K's place, Miss Moneybit and K are chatting in K's living room/hacker lair.

Miss Moneybit: Do you hear something?

Bong is outside picking the lock.

Symphy: There is an intruder at the door.

K: Bong!

K runs to the door to surprise Bong.

K: Surprise!

Bong: What the hell?

K (smug): You can't get past Symphy. Besides, can't you just knock?

Bong: Old habits die hard. We've got visitors.

K looks in the background and sees the large group of young girls.



K: Looks like you've got one hell of a story.

Bong: That's just getting started.

End Episode 5

## ***Episode 6***

Scene 1

City of London, England

Sir Hugo Trax is riding in the back of a stretch limo with an old, shadowy character.

Shadowy Character: Bong?

Trax: Yes, sir. James Bong, a former MI6 agent.

Shadowy Character: He's the reason that I have to tell my associates that we don't have the necessary goods for our little party?

Trax: I'm afraid so.

Shadowy Character: Oh, dear. Do you know how much my associates and I hate to be let down like this?

Trax: I can only imagine, sir. I might as well go ahead and tell you another bit from my trip to LA.

Shadowy Character: I'm listening impatiently.

Trax: Bong has been working with a blogger who has quite the following. He filmed the whole charade and it's gone viral online.

Shadowy Character squeezes champagne goblet in his hand until it shatters.

Trax: On the bright side, we are actively discrediting the blogger in all major news outlets to minimize the damage.

Shadowy Character: What shall we do with Mr. Bong then?

Trax: Whatever you feel is best.

Shadowy Character: Please stop groveling. It's too late to save face for you. I want you to bring Bong to me.

Trax: I feel it would be easier to just kill him, sir.

Shadowy Character: Your feelings are not a factor in this equation, Mr. Trax. You will bring me Bong or every descendant of yours will suffer the most unimaginable sufferings. How do you feel now, Mr. Trax?

Trax: Quite motivated. You will have Bong, Mr. Gateschild.

Gateschild: Much better, Trax, that's a good boy. Now you may leave.

Trax: We're still moving quite fast, sir.

Gateschild: Yes, I recommend you roll. Jumping out of cars at high speed can be quite hazardous.

Trax jumps out of the limo and Gateschild smirks with pleasure.

## Scene 2

K's house in Acapulco, Mexico.

K, Bong, and Miss Moneybit are drinking coffee at a cluttered dining room table. K's female humanoid robot Symphony is standing nearby.

Miss Moneybit: Your place is such a pigsty.

K stuffs donuts into his mouth and chews deliberately with mouth open.

Miss Moneybit: So gross.

K continues his overly-zealous enjoyment.

Miss Moneybit: How can someone who eats like you weigh like 90 pounds?

K: Bong, can you take her back to DC?

Bong (mildly amused): You're tired of her already? Ever hear the expression, be careful what you wish for, you just might get it?

Miss Moneybit: Can't your robot do some cleaning? She's just standing there.

K: She's far too advanced to relegate herself to housework.

Miss Moneybit (rolling eyes): Whatever.

Bong: So Moneybit, all the girls are doing well?

Moneybit (peppy): Yep! They're sharing 3 houses in the same neighborhood. I've started them on the trivium and some of them have business ideas they already want to pursue.

Bong (pleased look): That's great to hear. I'm very happy for them.

Moneybit: Oh, James, you're such a big softy! (rubs Bong on the back)

K (jealous): Hey, I helped too!

Moneybit: That's nice.

K: So I see your Steemit blog is blowing up. Over a million views on Dtube for the rescue video! You can go ahead and cut me my share of the payout.

Moneybit: Very funny.

Bong: I don't want to rain on anyone's parade, but I'm sure you've seen in the lamestream media that they're trying to discredit you, Moneybit. They're saying that the violence at your TSA protest was your fault, and that you're a "violent anarchist".

Moneybit: Quite ironic coming from violent statist.

K: I'm not too worried about it. The more the lamestream media like BNN try to discredit someone, the more popular they become. Isn't that right, Symphy?

Symphy: Master K is correct. When the largest 100 news outlets attempt to paint someone in a bad light, nearly 70 percent of the time the individual becomes more well-known and popular. I have a question. What is BNN?

K: The Bullshit News Network.

Symphy (head tilted sideways, confused): I am not aware of any such network.

K (laughing): It's what we call CNN. It's a joke, Symphy.

Symphy (still perplexed): I find humor difficult.

K: You're less than a month old. You'll learn.

Symphy: Master K, why have you not told Bong about your nephew?

K: I was waiting for the right moment.

Bong (surprised): Nephew? I didn't even know you had any siblings.

K: Yeah, an older sister. We don't talk much. She's a statist, so it's hard.

Bong: So whatsup with your nephew?

K: Ok, so my nephew, Caesar, is five. My sister, Helen, has refused to vaccinate him before he starts school.

Moneybit: You mean authoritarian indoctrination camp. Why doesn't she just home educate?

K: Remember, she's a statist. She thinks extortion funded prisons for children are great.

Moneybit: But she knows vaccines are bad?

K: Yeah, she's not completely brainwashed. Anyway, the school reported it to CPS, so now CPS is trying to steal my nephew from my sister.

Moneybit: Oh my God! (turns to Bong) James,

Bong cuts her off...

Bong: Say no more. I'll be happy to help, and even happier to crush those dirty CPS parasites.

Moneybit: And a bit curious to meet K's family, I imagine.

Bong: I must admit I'm a tad curious. This should make for quite the Dtube video.

K: Please, no filming!

Moneybit: Are you ashamed of your sister?

K: Ashamed is such a strong word.

Bong: Where do they live?

K: Vegas.

Moneybit: Vegas, baby! Can I come?

Bong: Not a chance.

Scene 3

James Bong is approaching the affluent looking house of K's sister Helen in Las Vegas.

Bong (thinking to himself): Wow, looks like K's sister does well for herself financially. I certainly wasn't expecting this.

Bong rings the doorbell and loathes the heat while he's waiting. A breathtakingly-beautiful twenty-something year old blond woman answers the door.

Blond: Can I help you?

Bong (looking around, confused): I'm sorry, I must be in the wrong place. I'm looking for Helen.

Blond: And who may I ask are you?

Bong: Bong, James Bong.

Helen: (sighing deeply): My brother sent you.

Bong: Correct.

Helen: Why did you think you were at the wrong house?

Bong (thinking of K's scrawny and unkept physical features, then looks at K's gorgeous sister): Oh, no reason. Maybe the heat. Not sure.

Helen: Would you like to come in?

Bong: Yes, perhaps we could speak in private.

They enter the spotless, shiny, well organized home of Helen.

Bong (jaw dropping open): Are you sure K is your brother?

Helen (giggling): Yes! Why?

Bong: Forget it. I think you might know why K sent me here.

Helen (on the verge of tears): They're gonna take my baby boy.

Bong: I won't let that happen.

Helen: I appreciate your offer to help, but (pauses out of discomfort)

Bong: You have reservations about me helping you. Why?

Helen: Two things, I guess. Even if you stop them this time, they'll just keep coming back, won't they?

Bong: That might be true. You'll need to defend yourself and your rights, for sure. Let me ask you this. Isn't it better to die for liberty, than to live as a slave?

Helen: That might be true, Mr. Bong. But another thing is

Bong: You don't want our help because we're anarchists.

Helen (nodding yes): It's just that I know you guys usually make video and put it online.

Bong: And you don't want to be associated with us.

Helen sobs and nods yes.

Bong: Look, if you don't want my help, just say the word, and I'll be on my way.

Helen: Maybe we can compromise.

Bong: How's that?

Helen: You don't record.

Bong: We finance our operations with the money made on our videos. You don't think we fly all over the world and have tons of high-tech gadgets without financing, do you? Freedom is becoming quite popular these days. I think I have a solution, though. I'll help remotely.

Helen: You can do that?

Bong (smirking): Yeah, you'll see.

Helen: I don't know when they're gonna show up, though.

Bong: K and I will know ahead of time. We'll give you ample warning. Do you have any guns?

Helen (reluctantly): Just a revolver.

Bong: Hopefully you won't need it, but it's good to know you have it. Well, I best be going now. We'll be in touch.

Helen shows Bong out.

Helen: Say hi to my brother for me.

Bong: You should do it yourself.

Scene 4

Bong is sitting at a blackjack table at Caesar's Palace. K's voice startles Bong.

K: Bong!

Bong: For once, your timing is actually good. I'm getting killed.

K: Epic news. Need some privacy.

Bong (as he walks away from the table): A blackjack table isn't private enough?

K: Call me back.

Bong goes out a back way and ends up by a dumpster.

Bong: Ok, K, make it quick. This smell isn't mixing well with my martini.

K: 2 things. I intercepted a CPS communique. They'll be at my sister's tomorrow at 9am.

Bong: Looks like I'll need a few more martinis to make sure I'm up early.

K: Very funny. Now get this. Symphy has been scanning through all the data from General Small's office. She also dug deep into the paper trail of the CIA front company Ty Prince runs drugs for, Cargo Solutions, remember?

Bong: With a catchy name like that, how could I forget?

K: Symphy went through like a zillion shell companies and found the majority stakeholder in Cargo Solutions. Any guesses?

Bong: Hmmm, a bankster?

K: Of course. More specifically, Machiavelli Enterprises. And you know who owns them?

Bong: Machiavelli Bank, of course.

K: Yep. And that bank has ties to all sorts of old money oligarchs, aristocrats, royal families. You name it. It's the whose who of the ruling class. Hell, that bank is so important, they even put one of their own in as president. Philip Gateschild himself.

Bong: This is getting very interesting.

K: This is getting very dangerous.

Bong: Just the way I like it. One more thing before I go.

K: What's that?

Bong: Are you adopted?

End Episode 6

## *Episode 7*

### Scene 1

James Bong is at a house in Vegas that he rented on Steem BnB from a fellow voluntarist. He's got multiple smart devices scattered around the living room, which Bong has turned into a makeshift command center. He gets a call from K on his smartwatch.

K: Bong!

Bong: I'm busy.

K: I know, that's one reason I called.

Bong: You're a disturbed little man. You know that, right?

A hologram of K pops up in the room.

K: That's what all the ladies say. Anyway, how do you like the design of the new drones?

Bong: A drone that looks like a flying bong. Quite innovative. I'm sure they'll be a big hit. Pun not intended.

K: Not only that, but they're hemp-powered, too!

Bong glances at a live video feed near K's sister's house. He sees one government vehicle and a police car approaching.

Bong: Looks like its showtime. Hopefully your drones are effective, and not just fancy techno-eye-candy.

K (brashly): I'll stay on the line in case you need my expert assistance.



A jarhead-looking male cop, a toupee-toting CPS worker, and a plump female CPS worker with lobster eyes approach the home of Helen and knock. Helen answers.

Helen (nervously): Hello.

Toupee-toter: Good morning. We're with the CPS. This is concerning your son, Caesar. May we come in?

Helen (gulps, flushes red): No, you can't. This is private property. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave, all three of you, and never return.

Cop steps to the front of the group and intervenes.

Cop: Miss, I'll have to insist we're allowed to enter. We have a court order that your son is to be taken into state custody.

Suddenly, a loud buzzing noise interrupts the confrontation. Everyone looks up and sees 4 drones hovering, one on each side of the house.

Toupee-toter: Are those drones?

Cop: Nothing gets past you! Hmmm, something strange about their shape. They look like bongs.

Lobster Eyes: Now I've seen it all.

Bong's voice comes down from one of the drones.

Bong: You are trespassing on private property. Please leave peacefully, or you will be forcefully removed.

Lobster Eyes: We're not leaving here without the little boy!

Bong: I have four armed drones which beg to differ. Please leave peacefully. Helen and Caesar have done nothing wrong. You, agents of the state, are funded by theft and are now trying to steal a child through violent coercion.

Toupee-toter (turns to cop): Well, aren't you gonna do something?

Cop: I'm outgunned four to one. What can I do?

Lobster Eyes (huffy): How brave.

Cop: Hey lady, I didn't take this job cuz I'm brave. I took it for the pension.

Toupee-toter (turns to Helen): You haven't heard the last of us.

The three get in their extortion-funded vehicles and speed away. Helen waves to one of the drones.

Helen (crying): Thanks, Bong! Thanks, K!

## Scene 2

General Small is in his office, having a phone conversation with Sir Hugo Trax.

Trax: Somehow, general, Bong is always one step ahead of us, almost as if he knows what we're doing.

General Small: Hey, don't try and pin what happened to you in L.A. on me.

Trax: Look, all I know is, he's getting intel somehow. Either you're leaking, or he's got to have a bug planted somewhere. My boss is breathing down my neck, and we work in a hierarchy, you know, so now I've got to breathe down your neck. That's how these things work!

General Small: I'll have my office swept for bugs, right away, sir.

Trax: One more thing before I go. You realize, of course, that if you don't find any bugs, then I'll have no choice but to think that you're a leak. You'd then have to be eliminated. Nothing personal, of course.

General Small: Don't worry, sir. I know it's not personal.

Trax ends call.

A chubby man with a smooshy face and a receding hairline comes to the entrance of Small's office.

Small: Do I know you?

Man: No, you don't. I work in the Total Information Awareness Office.

Small (curt voice): I see. Well, if you have total information awareness, then you must know what I'm thinking.

Man: Not really, but I did overhear part of your conversation with Trax.

Small (outraged): So you're the leak!

Man: You had the door open. What was I supposed to do, cover my ears?

Small (rushed): So what brings you here. I'm a very busy man.

Man: Some alarming information has come to my attention. Shall I close the door?

Small: No, I like it open for ventilation. Go on.

Man: As you wish. I noticed a trend in domestic, as well as global, communications recently. It seems that in the past 3 months, the number of positive mentions of keywords like "anarchy" and "anarchism" have gone up by over 3,000 percent. Not only that, but the number of people searching for the meaning of the word "anarchy" has had a similar upsurge.

Small: You mean people are actually looking up the meaning of words?

Man (sad tone): I'm afraid so, sir.

Small: Well, 3,000 percent doesn't seem so bad. What does that make, like 3,000 people?

Man: Actually, we estimate in the tens of thousands, possibly pushing six figures.

Small: Oh, that's not too many. Let me know when it gets into the millions.

Man: Don't you think we should nip this in the bud, sir, before it escalates, rather than later?

Small: I believe you're being a bit paranoid.

Man: I'm just saying that if Bong continues his exploits, then these numbers are sure to increase.

Small (red-faced): Ah ha! So you're a Bong sympathizer!?

Man: If I were a Bong sympathizer, then why would I be giving you this information right now?

Small: Hmmm, good point. I'm gonna keep an eye on you, though.

Man (walking off): Whatever.

### Scene 3

Philip Gateschild is at a mansion in the English countryside. He's speaking with an old, nefarious character.

Philip: It appears that your past sexual exploits are coming back to haunt us.

Nefarious Character: Wouldn't be the first time.

Philip: A certain James Bong has been causing problems for our dogs all over America, but one of his most recent exploits had a direct effect on us, I'm afraid. He stopped the procurement of some necessary sacrifices, and now there are many in our milieu who are quite unhappy.

Nefarious Character (shocked): That can't be! I was assured when I gave him up and approved the program, that it would be fool-proof. Does anyone know he's my child?

Philip: I don't believe anyone knows, except for the ones involved in his program. Apparently, scientific methods don't always have the outcome we expect. Even the most perfect methods of control sometimes fail when confronted with the human spirit.

Nefarious Character: So what shall we do to remedy this?

Philip: I've already ordered him to be brought to me. I want you to tell him about his past. Perhaps we can neutralize him somehow. Give him a boatload of money to keep his mouth shut and disappear.

Nefarious Character: And if that doesn't work?

Philip: I'll shoot him. Nothing personal, of course.

Nefarious Character: Agreed. Make it happen, Philip. We must clear this up at once.

End Episode 7

## ***Episode 8***

### Scene 1

K is dancing to Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean". He's wearing a Star Wars t-shirt, tight high-water jeans, and a fedora. He thinks he's alone.....

Miss Moneybit (giggling): Hey K.

K (shocked, gasps): Hey, how'd you get in here?!

Miss Moneybit: Symphy let me in.

K (turning to Symphy): You're not programmed to let people in without my authorization!

Symphy: Miss Moneybit made a very convincing argument which overrode my programming.

K (arms folded): Do tell.

Symphy (innocent smile): She said that allowing her to see you dance would be a great lesson in humor for me and that any improvement to myself would ultimately benefit you.

K: Interesting logic.

Moneybit (still giggling): I haven't told you the best part! I'm filming this!

K: Not funny.

Moneybit: Not a joke. This should earn a handsome profit on Dtube.

K: Where's the camera?

Moneybit: Hidden on me. And no, you're not allowed to look for it.

K (whiny): You're not really posting it on Dtube, are you?

Moneybit: Oh, relax. No, I'm not.

K (relieved): Whew, thanks.

Moneybit (satisfied grin, ear to ear): I'll just save it for a special time when I need to blackmail you.

K (sighing): So what brings you by?

Moneybit: I'm bored and my Spanish isn't so good, so my options are limited.

K: Your brutal honesty is appreciated.

Moneybit: And I've had a bit of tequila, too. Where's Bong?

K: Getting away from it all.

Moneybit: Even you?

K: Especially me.

Moneybit: Do you have any idea where he goes?

K: Nope. That's how he is. Enigmatic to the core.

Moneybit: And he has no family?

K: So he says. Anytime the subject is broached, he gets edgy.

Symphy: K, I'm sorry to interrupt, but there is breaking news regarding altcoins that I think you'll find pertinent.

K: Thanks, Symphy. Throw it on the holoscreen.

A hologram of a news broadcast coming from the BBC pops up in the middle of K's living room.

K: Wow, Symphy, you were right. This is big. The English government is putting a 20 percent tax on all altcoin transactions.

Moneybit: Which means that most merchants will either stop accepting altcoins, or people will stop purchasing with them. Or both.

K: True. But this might end up being a disadvantage to them in the long run. It'll push altcoins onto the black market.

Moneybit: You mean the real free market.

K: I stand corrected, yes, the free market. Prices will spike and altcoins will become more popular than ever!

Moneybit: The best of times.

K: And the worst of times. Symphy, end transmission. I can't stand to listen to these presstitutes any longer than necessary.

Hologram disappears.

Scene 2

General Small is talking to Sir Hugo Trax via holocall in General Small's office at CIA headquarters.

Trax: Did you find bugs in your office?

Small: Yep! We found a ton of em!

Trax: I can only imagine how those magically appeared. And don't act so boisterous when you're announcing that our communications have been compromised.

Small: Yes, sir.

Trax: Anyway, I assume they've been destroyed.

Small: Yes, sir.

Trax: So now that Bong doesn't have access to our systems anymore, we need to find a way to get him to England.

General Small: You want me to do what?

Trax: Get Bong to England.

Small: You're in London. I'm in the US. Why do you need my help?

Trax (facepalming): Good point. I don't know why I should ever ask you for help on anything. I don't even know why I keep you around.

Small: Because you know that whoever takes my place will be just as incompetent.

Trax: True enough. Ok, back to Bong. Do you have any ideas on how to lure him here?

Small: Well, I always like a good honeytrap.

Trax: I'm sure you do. Bong is too smart for that, though.

Small: How about this? We could spot him on grid surveillance and send a team after him.

Trax: We can't just attack a super spy out in the open like that. We'd get way too much unwanted attention.

Small: We could threaten his loved ones.

Trax: He's a loner, remember?

Small: How about a bribe?

Trax: Your ideas, amazingly enough, are getting worse. Unlike us, he has morals. Bribes are out of the question.

Small: What can we give him that he wants?

Trax: I think I've got it. He doesn't have loved ones, but he does have moral principles that he cares about.

Small: Moral what?

Trax: Yes, nearly a foreign language to guys like us, I know. Anyway, I've got an idea for the perfect bait. See ya, Small.

Small: Wait! You're not gonna tell me?

Trax: If I need something screwed up, I'll call you.

Scene 3

James Bong is sitting at the bar and lounge in the Seehof Hotel in Davos, Switzerland. He is alone with the bartender.

Bong (to bartender): Another scotch and soda, please.

Bong stirs the ice with his finger in the empty rocks glass in front of him as he stares sadly and blankly into space. A striking, young female dressed to impress approaches Bong.

Female: Is this seat taken?

Bong (continues distant stare): The entire bar is taken.

Female (to bartender): I'll have what he's having. (sits next to Bong) You're a very wanted man in London, you know.

Bong (glances at female): I'm a very wanted man in many places.

Bartender delivers drinks. Bong gulps his down.

Female (amused): You've crossed some very influential people in certain circles. They're trying to find a way to get you to London quietly.

Bong (amused): The ever-nebulous "they".

Female: Do you know who I am?

Bong: Mary Poppins.

Female: Diana Gateschild.

Bong turns and looks her up and down.

Bong: They sent you to find me?

Diana (scoffing): Hardly.

Bong: Then what are you doing here?

Diana: I came here to warn you.

Bong: Warn me about what?

Diana: To not go to England. Not on their terms, at least.

Bong: They can murder me anywhere in the world. Why is England so damn special?

Diana: Because they know about your past and want to keep things localized and quiet. They might also think that you can be turned.

Bong: And how do you know all this?

Diana: Because members of the ruling class can be exceedingly paranoid and take certain precautions.

Bong: You mean you spy on each other.

Diana gives knowing smile.

Bong: And why are you helping me?

Diana: Because I want to do what's right.

Bong: How touching.

Diana (stands up): Look, James, my gut tells me that at some point you'll want to confront your past. When that time comes, you can go to England on your own terms and have a chat with the Gateschild brothers. At least if you go on your own terms, you can surprise them and have a chance at survival. But until then, be wary of any temptations they might throw your way. My father can be very clever. Goodbye, James. I'll be watching you.

End Episode 8



## ***Episode 9***

### Scene 1

At K's place in Acapulco, Mexico.

K (face of befuddlement): Bong.

Bong (amused): K.

K: So let me get this straight. You were just sitting around at some random bar, soaking your troubles in a chilled glass of liquid confidence, and then Diana Gateschild shows up.

Bong: Well, it wasn't like I was at a dive bar. I was at one of the finest resorts in Switzerland.

Moneybit: Bong, I had no idea you were so hoity-toity!

Bong: Just because I'm an anarchist doesn't mean I don't like some finer things now and then.

Moneybit: Then why haven't you asked me out yet?

Bong: K, can you build her a companion and get her off my back? Like a male version of Symphy?

K: Symphy could build another humanoid a lot faster than I could.

Moneybit: Maybe if she weren't so busy being your housekeeper. The place looks great, Symphy! I can finally see the floor!

Symphy: I am much more efficient at cleaning than Master K, so it is only logical that I should be the one to do it.

K: I can't argue there! Ok Bong, back to business. So what do you think Diana Gateschild is up to? Do you think she's telling you the truth, or is she part of her father's scheme?

Bong: Hard to say. Let's say that I believe her, but with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Moneybit: So what's your next move?

Bong: Staying still.

Symphy: That is the most logical move.

Bong (steely): I'm glad that meets your approval.

K: Did you hear about the new tax in England?

Bong: That happens every day. Can you be more specific?

K: The bitcoin purchase tax. Anything bought with bitcoin is subjected to 20 percent tax.

Moneybit: You mean 20 percent extortion.

K: That would be the more precise term.

Symphy: I do not understand taxation. It does not seem logical.

Moneybit: Symphy, congrats. I think you might be the world's first anarchist humanoid robot!

Bong: Yes, K, I heard about the new extortion racket. I don't know how they're going to enforce it, but I have a feeling this is going to cause some major issues in the near future.

K: Speaking of issues....Moneybit, can you unglue yourself from your phone?

Moneybit (coming back to earth face): Huh? What? OH, sorry. I was just checking some posts on Steemit. Have you heard about what's going on down in Uruguay?

K: Where?

Moneybit: Uruguay. Ya know, tiny little country between Brazil and Argentina. Cannabis legalization, dulce de leche, all that?

Bong: Charming place.

Moneybit: Well, it looks like lots of farmers in the northern part of the country are getting forcibly removed from their property!

Bong: Under what pretext?

Moneybit: Not sure, but the most prevalent excuse seems to be some version of eminent domain.

K: You mean imminent theft.

Moneybit: I stand corrected.

Symphy: This seems to conflict with mainstream news reports I'm checking now.

K: Elaborate.

Symphy: It seems that most reports are championing a voluntary “Earth Relocation Project” as a victory for Agenda 21. This does not seem logical to have such conflicting reports.

K: It makes perfect sense if there’s an ulterior, and likely sinister, motive. Bong, looks like you can’t stay still. Sorry, buddy.

Bong: I vote we send Symphy and I stay here and drink margaritas.

Moneybit (hands on hips): Bong!

## Scene 2

General Small’s office at CIA headquarters. General Small is meeting with private contract agent Ty Prince.

General Small: I appreciate you rushing up here from South America. I know you were busy down there, but this is quite urgent.

Ty Prince: My crew down there can handle things without me for a while. Are you sure we should be meeting at your office like this? I mean, I’m not officially employed by the CIA, ya know.

General Small: Oh, relax, will ya? We’re the only ones here.

Ty Prince: Well, it’s just not very clandestine of you.

General Small (sighing): Whatever. Look, let’s get down to business. Some very powerful people want Bong brought to England.

Ty Prince: That’s a tall order. Remember, I didn’t even graduate spy school.

General Small: Yes, yes, I know. I didn’t bring you here because you’re smart. I brought you here because you’re the best brute I’ve got. At least, that’s expendable, that is.

Ty Prince: Thank you, sir.

General Small: But they don’t want him brought by force. They want him lured there. Tricked.

Ty Prince: Ya lost me.

General Small: I didn’t finish. I think it’s a terrible idea and don’t see why it’s necessary. Which brings me to why you’re here. I want you to just find him and kill him.

Ty Prince: Now that I can do. But won’t you get in trouble?

General Small: Maybe, but I doubt it. I’ve got an ace up my sleeve, ya see.

Ty Prince: Won’t I get in trouble?

General Small: You might, but that's not my problem. We have a deal?

Ty Prince: What's the price?

General Small (slapping head): Silly me! I forgot to mention the price. What do you think is fair?

Ty Prince: At least a million.

General Small: Do you take checks?

Ty Prince: I'm not that stupid.

General Small: Of course not. Ok, a million cash. But this is between us, a private deal. Nobody else. Got it?

Ty Prince: Got it.

### Scene 3

24 Hours Later At Hyde Park, London

Sir Hugo Trax: Small hired you to kill Bong?

Ty Prince: Yes, sir. Small is an idiot, but he thinks I'm an idiot, so I use that to my advantage.

Trax: Yes, Small is obviously an idiot. You're not the brightest bulb on the tree, either. You didn't even pass your final exam for secret agent training.

Ty Prince: I remember!

Trax: Right, well, what now, eh? (looks thoughtfully off into the distance)

Ty Prince: I can kill Small if you'd like, sir.

Trax: No, that won't be necessary. At least, not at the moment. Thanks for telling me this. It's quite useful information. You'd better be getting back to South America, I suppose.

Ty Prince: If that's where I'm needed most.

### Scene 4

2 days later.....James Bong is sipping mate at a small restaurant in the town of Artigas, the northernmost town in Uruguay.

Bong (glaring anxiously at smartwatch): Damn you, K. Put down the VR headset game and answer.

K: Hey Bong. Sorry, I was in a heated battle.

Bong: Simulated battle, I suppose. Time to help me in the real battle.

K: What's that noise?

Bong: It's windy as all hell here.

K: It sounds like you're in some sort of wicked sci-fi vortex or something.

Bong (sighing): Anyway, I've been talking to some of the locals. Big surprise news flash, the lamestream media is completely lying. BNN at its worst.

K: So what's really happening?

Bong: My main contact here is a farmer named Marcelo. His family has been here for generations so he knows the ins and outs of everything. He said that the government in Montevideo tried to evict him recently, but he resisted. Recently, however, private mercenaries have been doing the dirty work, and tons of people have been evicted. And I'm talking very large numbers, maybe 10 percent of the state of Artigas.

K: That's epic.

Bong: Indeed. Now get this. The local government goons are telling guys like Marcelo that the reason for their eviction is they are violating some kind of environment code. But he said it's total BS. He suspects the real reason is that part of the Guarani Aquifer, the second largest aquifer in the world, sits under northern Uruguay.

K: Incredible.

Bong: But here's the real kicker. Guess what corporation controls the other parts of the aquifer in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay?

K: Aquifers R' Us?

Bong (grimacing): Nice try. No. Angel Water.

K: Angel Water? Wait, aren't they owned by?...

Bong: Machiavelli Bank owns the majority stake, yes. Another path that leads to the Gateschilds.

K: Wow. Have you been taping?

Bong: Yep. I'll send it ASAP. But don't post anything until we fend off the goon squad. I need the element of surprise on my side.

K: You got it. Anything else?

Bong: More 3D printers with a full array of defense programs. Oh, and a raincoat.

K: A raincoat?

Bong: If you ever come to Uruguay, you'll understand.

End Episode 9

## ***Episode 10***

### Scene 1

Bong is in a field in Uruguay, training Marcelo and other locals on self-defense tactics so that they might repel Angel Water's mercenaries, led by Ty Prince.

Bong: Marcelo, you've never shot a gun?

Marcelo: No, most people here in Uruguay haven't. Most people here are against guns.

Bong: And, by default, against a very efficient method of self-defense.

Marcelo: I didn't say I was against guns.

Some people are lined up, all holding guns, and targets are off in the distance.

Bong: All right, we haven't got much time. I've already shown you the basics. Now take aim, and fire one shot.

All of them take aim, fire, and miss badly. Bong double-facepalms.

2 hours later.....

Bong: Ok, Marcelo. I think that's enough for today. Now I want to gather some intel before it gets dark. Remember that camp you told me about? Where the mercs are, supposedly?

Marcelo (jittery): You mean that fortress.

Bong: Can you take me there?

Marcelo (laughing nervously): I can, but I don't think that's a good idea.

Bong: Why not?

Marcelo: Because I value my life.

Bong: Fine. Just tell me how to get there.

Marcelo looks at Bong's 3D printed Jaguar.

Marcelo: I don't think you should go in that.

Bong: Why not?

Marcelo: In case you haven't noticed, the roads here are in total ruin, and are much worse farther out in the country.

Bong: Then I'll just have to take your jeep.

Marcelo sighs deeply and hands Bong the keys to his classic, Indiana Jones style Jeep.

Bong (sarcastically): I'll be sure and scratch it up real nice for you.

## Scene 2

Bong is slowly approaching Ty Prince's mercenary encampment in the middle of the Uruguayan countryside. The wind is starting to pick up and is whipping quite violently.

Bong (watching with binoculars): They've got tents? Not the smartest structure in this windy environment.

Bong feels a sudden sting in the neck and collapses.

1 hour later.....

Ty Prince (looking down on Bong, who is tied to a chair): What luck I have! Look who's fallen into my lap. Hmmm, what to do?

Bong starts to wake up.

Bong (groggy): Prince?

Prince: Bong, who's the smart one now, eh?

A gust of wind causes part of the tent to lift from the ground.

Prince: Damnit! Someone fix the tent again! And do it right this time.

Grunt Worker: But it's too windy, sir!

Prince (pointing finger authoritatively at worker): No excuses!

Bong (sighing): Prince, I should have known.

Prince: What brings you to Uruguay, Bong?

Bong: Your violent theft, unfortunately.

Prince: Oh, look at you, on such a high horse! You used to work the same game, Bong, remember?

Bong: Yes, but I've evolved since then, while you're still mired in darkness. And it's not a game. It's a battle between liberty and slavery. The bottom line is that you're violently stealing people's private property.

Prince: Well Bong, to me it's a game, and one that pays quite well. Now, what to do with you? You know, some very powerful people in London want you brought there. Other people in DC want you dead. Which shall it be, Bong?

Bong: I suppose you'll choose the one that pays the most. You see how easy you are to manipulate? If I pay you the most, I suppose you'd let me go.

Prince (scoffs): As if you can pay more than Machiavelli Bank?

Bong (laughing): Machiavelli Bank, huh?

Prince: Why are you laughing?

Bong: And who in DC wants me dead?

Prince: General Small, of course.

Bong (laughing harder, due to Prince giving him so much info): You are a very, very, stupid criminal.

Scene flashes over to K at his lair in Acapulco.

Symphy: Master K, I've been watching Bong's feed, and it appears he's been captured.

K: Really? The great Bong isn't invincible after all, huh?

Symphy (confused): Human physiology is actually quite frail.

K: It was a figure of speech. Can you link up with his drone fleet?

Symphy: Already on it. Shall I exterminate all life at the camp, other than Bong's?

K (looking at feed on wall screen): Whoa, no, no. Only if it looks like they're about to murder Bong. THC mini-cannons should do the trick.

Scene flashes back to Bong and Prince.

Prince: Bong, I'm going to do you a favor, as much as it pains me to say it. I'm going to spare your life, for now. Now that you're out of the way, I'm sure the locals here will be no match for my squad. (motions to another soldier) You there, take Bong to the gulag!



Soldier (confused): But we don't have a gulag, sir!

Prince: Well, it's about time we did. I'm putting you in charge of the gulag! Now go make one!

Soldier (saluting): Yes, sir!

Prince (surprised, looking up and around): Hey, what's that humming noise? Stop it! You know I hate humming!

Soldier: I thought you hated Karaoke!

Prince: I hate humming and Karaoke!

Scene flashes back to K and Symphy

K: What's taking you so long? They can hear the drones.

Symphy: They're in a tent. I have to cut it open first, before I can fire the THC.

K: OH, right.

Scene flashes back to the encampment. 10 bong-shaped drones are hovering over the giant tent. Four of them are working together to cut open a giant square in the roof of the tent. The giant square of fabric comes loose and is grabbed by robotic arms from 2 of the other drones. The other four drones start firing miniature darts which contain ultra-concentrated THC.

Prince (looking up): We're under attack! Battle stations!

As the soldiers grab their guns and prepare to fire and take cover, they start giggling uncontrollably, and within seconds drop to the ground in a deep sleep.

Bong (looking up at drone, into lens of camera): I'm still tied to this bloody chair. A little help.

K's voice comes over drone's built in speaker....

K: I should leave you tied there for a few minutes, just to teach you some manners.

Bong (rolling eyes): Please untie me.

A drone drops slowly into the tent, hovers near Bong, and a robotic arm cuts the ropes. K yawns and leans back in his cushy office chair.

Bong: I can feel your arrogance from here.

K: That means a lot coming from you.

Symphy (puzzled face): I don't understand why there is animosity between you two.

Bong: It's not your fault Symphy. Nobody understands K.

K: What now, Bong?

Bong: Now I shut off my communications equipment.

### Scene 3

The next morning, Ty Prince is having a holo-conference with Sir Hugo Trax.

Trax (furious): You had Bong and let him get away?

Ty Prince: We got ambushed.

Trax (rolling eyes): Oh, likely story. Always with the excuses.

Ty Prince: Easy for you to say, armchair plundering from your cushy little office.

Trax (harsh scowl): Watch it.

Ty Prince: Am I to proceed as planned with the evacuations?

Trax: Absolutely not. We'll need to get Bong out of the area first.

Prince (deep sigh of relief): Whew, that's good.

Trax: Stay in the area and await my orders.

Trax hangs up, grits his teeth, and dials up another number.....

Trax: Bong has turned up in Uruguay. Shall I proceed with Operation Bithouse?

Female Voice: Hugo, darling, is that you? What in the world are you talking about?

Trax (fumbling around): Oh my dear, I'm so sorry. Wrong number.

Trax's Wife: We're having shepherd's pie for dinner, so don't be late!

Trax: Yes dear!

Click.

Trax dials the correct number.

Trax: Bong has caused some problems in Uruguay. Is Operation Bithouse a go?

Gateschild (controlled rage): But of course.

### Scene 4

Bong is talking to Marcelo at Marcelo's ranch.

Bong: I'm sure there won't be any problems for you for a while. I've got to be on my way, at least for now. Will you and your friends and neighbors please, at the very least, learn how to shoot straight?

Marcelo: I can't promise we'll ever shoot straight. All I can say is that we'll keep trying. Thanks for your help, Bong. And thanks for not scratching my jeep.

Bong: I guarantee that those who seek to steal your property won't give up, so stay vigilant.

Marcelo: Is there anything I can do for you to show my gratitude? Some mate, or dulce de leche, or some high quality cannabis?

Bong (smiling): No, that won't be necessary. I don't smoke, contrary to popular belief.

Scene 5

One week later at K's hacker lair in Acapulco.....

Miss Moneybit: Wow! That's amazing!

K: You figured out how to use the remote?

Miss Moneybit (punches K in the shoulder): No! That video of Bong's capture in Uruguay is the most popular we've had yet!

Bong: That's very comforting.

K: I'm sure it's because you got rescued, not because you actually got captured. Everyone loves a daring rescue.

Bong (sarcastic): Yeah, real daring, from thousands of miles away with remote controlled drones.

Symphy: Sorry to interrupt, but there is breaking news from the BBC that you will probably find important.

K: Put it on the wall screen.

A huge video pops up on the wall displaying rapid video snippets of people being escorted out of their homes at gunpoint.

BBC Audio: In what the government calls a crackdown on black market sales, those who purchased homes with Bitcoin within the past 10 years are being audited. If they can't pay the new 20 percent Bitcoin commerce tax, they are losing their homes. Many are up in arms over the aggressive government actions, but government officials defend the moves, saying they're necessary to maintain government services now and in the future.

Bong (red faced): Looks like the Gateschilds have made their move. Now I have to make mine.

End Episode 10

## ***Episode 11***

In the last episode of James Bong.....Bong and his rag-tag crew received news that in England, the government was stealing people's homes that were purchased tax-free with bitcoin.

### Scene 1

James Bong, Miss Moneybit, K, and Symphy are at K's place in Acapulco, discussing their next move.

K: So Bong, you think this is the trap that Diana Gateschild was referring to?

Bong: Yes, obviously. You're not as smart as you look, are you K?

Moneybit: He doesn't even look that smart, to be honest.

K (offended tone): Hey Bong, who's the one with the 150 IQ?

Bong: Mine is 151, actually. And stop rounding up. Yours is 149.

Moneybit: You guys are ridiculous. You both know that IQ isn't a measure of intelligence, anyway. It's not even a very good measure of intellect, actually.

Bong and K narrow their eyes and have a playful stare-down.

Moneybit: Now can we get back on track, please? This is serious business.

K (nonchalant): So they want to kill Bong, what else is new?

Bong (steely sarcasm): I'm glad you take my demise so easily, K.

Moneybit: On the bright side of things, Steem just shot through the roof again, so we've got plenty of resources to work with.

Bong: Good timing. We're going to need them. I suspect they'll be throwing everything they've got at me.

Moneybit: Are you going to actually try and get to the Gateschild brothers?

Bong: I'm going to do more than just that. K, how long will it take you to build another humanoid?

K (fumbling): Oh, um, not long. Maybe a couple months?

Bong: Sorry, genius, that's far too long.

K: But Symphy could build one in just a couple days, I bet.

Symphy: The time I would need to construct another humanoid would be 27 hours.

K: And if I help, I bet we could knock it out in half that time!

Symphy: Actually, Master K, your joining me in the task would actually slow down the process.

Bong (laughing heartily, slapping K on back): Don't worry, K. We'll keep you busy. I'd like a cup of coffee, please.

K (dejected): Very funny.

Bong: But really, K, I'm going to need 2 sets of air and land transport. And let's go with the Aston Martin DB5 this time.

K: Trying to blend in?

Moneybit: How long has it been since your last trip to England?

Bong (gruff): Not long enough.

Moneybit (worried): Bong, please be careful. I've got a bad feeling about this mission.

Bong: Actually, I was planning on being utterly reckless this time. Care to join me?

Moneybit: As tempting as it is to leave Acapulco and go to England in the middle of winter, I think I'll

Bong cuts her off....

Bong: Yeah, yeah, stay here and sip tropical drinks. (stands up to leave) Ok, so I head out in 48 hours.

Moneybit: Where are you going?

Bong: To pick up a winter coat.

K: They don't sell those here in Acapulco, genius.

Bong: Right, I knew that.

## Scene 2

At MI6 headquarters, Sir Hugo Trax is having a meeting with General Small.

General Small: Why did I have to come all the way here to help on this mission? I can work remotely, ya know.

Trax: Because if things don't go as planned, I'll need you here as a scapegoat.

Small (rolls eyes): Great. So once we capture him, we're just supposed to hand him over to your boss?

Trax: Our boss, and yes.

Small: I don't even know who our boss is.

Trax: Yes, and we like it that way. It's called compartmentalization.

Small: You and your big words. You know I can't pronounce anything over five syllables.

Trax: Yes, well, enough of your whine festival. Let's review our security details. We've got extra drone fleets with retina recognition guarding the airspace. Have you put extra security at the land crossings?

Small: England is an island. There are no land crossings.

Trax (cringing and huffing): You bloody idiot, we share borders with Scotland and Wales!

Small (confused face): Really? I thought it was just one big bloody island.

Trax: Please don't try and curse with the word bloody. You don't say it right. Anyway, I'll make sure the land borders are secured. As for entry by waterways

Small interrupts

Small: A fleet of man-eating GMO electric eels guarding the coast?

Trax: Bloody hell, no. Where'd you come up with that?

Small: The CIA has had them for decades. They're so cool! They light up like a flashing neon sign when they eat someone.

Trax: Hmmm, perhaps we'll use them when we decide to do away with you, then. As for Bong, no, extra drone boats will suffice. That's all for now. I'll be in the super secret underground command center.

Small: Great, let's go.

Trax: No, no. You're confused again. I'm going to the command center. You go anywhere else.

Small (shaking finger at Trax): Remember the dirty little secret I've got on you. I can shoot the calls anytime I want, so get off your high horse.

Trax (confused): You mean call the shots?

Small: Right, right. Damn jet lag.

Trax: Oh, all right. You can come, but don't touch any buttons.

Small: Got it.

Trax: Or levers.

Small: Ok, ok.

Trax: Or anything that could have consequences anywhere.

Scene 3

2 days later, Bong is flying low in a 3D printed jet, approaching English airspace.

Bong: Putting my life in K's hands yet again. What am I thinking?

K (over Bong's smartwatch): I heard that!

Bong: Stop spying on me. Go back to your video games or whatever it is you do.

K: Ok, but don't come crying to me when ya need help.

Bong sees a fleet of drones approaching.

Bong: Showtime, gotta go.

Click

4 drones surround Bong's jet and start scanning his eyes in order to identify him. After a moment, they allow Bong to continue.

K: See, never fear, K's gadgets are here! Gotta love iris-identity-altering contacts, right?

Bong (grumpy): I swear I turned the smartwatch off.

K: I did some tweaking. You can't shut it off, only I can.

Bong: Brilliant. Just try not to interrupt me, ok, K?

Moneybit: Hi James!

Bong: I can crush this thing with my bare hands, you know? Will that work?

#### Scene 4

Sir Hugo Trax and General Small are in the super secret MI6 underground command center. It's a giant room with multiple large screens, shiny gadgets and gizmos, but only one other person. Trax is drinking beer.

Small: Are you sure it's a good idea to be drinking on the job?

Trax (burps): Sure it is. Settles the nerves and makes me forget how much I hate my life.

Small: Well, in that case, mind if I have one?

Trax: No, no, you can't have one. You're dense enough as it is. We don't need you lowering your wits by artificial means.

Small (pointing to the other guy in the room): So, who's that guy?

Trax: He's a lowly computer programming scapegoat.

Guy: I can hear you, ya know.

Small: I thought I was the scapegoat.

Trax; He's the more expendable scapegoat.

Small: Because of the blackmail material I've got on you?

Trax: Exactly.

Guy: I'm just gonna go use the bathroom for a while.

Trax: I'll join you.

Guy (disgusted look on face): Um, I'll go way upstairs and let you go to the closer one.

Guy scampers out of the room with disturbed look on face.

Trax: Ok, so while I'm gone, if a giant red flashing light comes on and the computer announces that Bong has been apprehended, don't do anything. I'll be right back, ok?

Small: Got it. Do absolutely nothing.

Trax leaves the room and a moment later the alarm goes off.

Small (shielding his eyes): Wow, that's way too bright!

He manages to get a glimpse of the screen and figures out how to shut the alarm off. He then chugs a beer, tosses the empty can under the programmer guy's desk, and leans back with his feet up on the desk and starts daydreaming.



Small: Ha! Me, dense.

Trax enters the room.

Trax: Remind me to send the janitor down here when we leave. I miss anything?

Small: Nope.

Scene 5

Philip is dining with another nefarious character at a Gateschild mansion in the English countryside.

Philip (disgusted look at plate, throws down napkin): Too runny, again. Bloody hell. (calls out across vast dining hall) Damnit, Henry! Get over here!

Nefarious Character: Hard to find good help these days.

Bitter Old Servant Henry (approaches table): Yes, sir?

Philip: You've ruined yet another meal, Henry. You know I like my scrambled brains on toast well done. These are runny as all hell.

Bitter Old Servant Henry: I do apologize, sir. Shall I take the plate away?

Philip: Yes, old fool, I can't eat this mush.

Bitter Old Servant Henry: Yes, sir. (turns to walk away and mumbles under his breath) He's got scrambled brains. Why not just eat those?

Philip: What was that, Henry?

Henry: Just a terrible cough I've had recently, sir.

Philip: That's one very unique cough.

Henry walks away.

Nefarious Character: No sign of Bong yet?

Philip: No, but not to worry, he'll turn up. He can't resist helping the poor old tax slaves from losing their little shacks.

Nefarious Character: Are you sure we're not being too aggressive taking homes through violent measures so quickly and out in the open?

Philip: Oh, you worry too much. What are they gonna do? They've got no guns and no guts. They just put their heads down and march off to the slaughterhouse, or the poor house, whichever comes first.

Henry approaches them again.

Henry: Sir, there's someone here to see you.

Philip: Not now, Henry! Can't you see I'm busy?

Henry: Actually, no, I can't see that. It looks like you're just rambling away. Shall I tell them to come back another time, sir?

Philip: Yes, I've got a busy night ahead. Whoever it is, they'll have to wait.

Henry: Very well, sir. I'll tell James Bong to come back at a more convenient time.

Philip (startled): Bong? James Bong is here?

Henry: Yes, sir. But I'll tell him to bugger off.

Philip: No, no! That's all right, send him right in!

Henry leaves.

Philip (smug): Well, that was fairly fast, I'd say! Good old boys at MI6, nothing gets past them!

Nefarious Character: We'll finally meet face to face. It's time to see my son again, after all these years.

Philip: Yes, indeed. Should be a happy occasion. Hopefully I won't have to shoot him.

Scene 6

Meanwhile, back in Acapulco.....

K: Symphy, you've got the broadcast feed ready?

Symphy: Yes, Master K.

K: And the swarm is ready?

Symphy: No, master K.

K (astonished): What? Why not?

Symphy: Just joking. (does robotic laugh)

K: Bad time to joke, Symphy. But hey, I'm glad you're experimenting with humor.

Moneybit: You think this is gonna work?

K (overconfident tone): Sure, no sweat.

Symphy: I estimate a 60 percent chance of failure.

Moneybit: When you say failure, you mean....

Symphy: James Bong dies.

End Episode 11

## ***Episode 12***

Scene 1

James Bong is being shown into the enormous dining room of Philip Gateschild by Henry, the old and bitter butler. An old, nefarious-looking character is with Philip.

Henry (at a large entryway, standing with Bong): May I present, Mr. James Bong.

Philip: Yes, a pleasure to meet you Mr. Bong.

Henry: I cooked more scrambled brains for you, sir. Shall I prepare some for Mr. Bong as well?

Philip: No, that won't be necessary Henry. We won't be eating at the moment.

Henry bows, closes the door, and walks away.

Philip: Please, have a seat, Mr. Bong.

Bong sits as he looks at the intricate aesthetics of the room along with the priceless artwork on the walls.

Bong: Please, call me James.

Philip: Very well, James. I'd like you to meet my brother. (motions to nefarious-looking character)  
This is Jacob Gateschild.

Jacob: A pleasure to finally meet you, James.

Meanwhile, back in Acapulco.....

K (watching a hologram, which is the centerpiece of his techno-lair): This feed is amazing. Crystal clear.

Moneybit: Symphy, this is streaming live on the BBC, right?

Symphy: Affirmative. Everything is going according to plan thus far.

Meanwhile, at BBC headquarters, a shocked and angry program director storms into a production command center....

Director: Can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?

Video Tech (seated at desk): The ratings are going up, sir.

Director: Damnit! That's all fine and good for now, but the BBC president will have my head! I want that feed cut now!

Video Tech: Can't do it, sir.

Director (furious): That's not the right answer. Why the bloody hell not?

Video Tech: The system has been hacked. We're completely locked out.

Meanwhile, at the super secret underground MI6 command center, Sir Hugo Trax, General Small, and a random tech worker are drinking beer.

Trax: We've been down here for so long. I can't believe Bong hasn't shown up in England yet!

General Small: Good thing we've got all this beer. I still feel like I'm forgetting to tell you something.

Random Tech Worker is casually clicking away as he surfs the net....

Worker (eyes pop wide open): Hey guys! Ya gotta see this! BBC is live streaming Bong at the Gateschild mansion!

Trax: That's it, I'm cutting you off.

Worker: No, really! Look!

Trax and Small crowd around the screen.

Small: I just remembered! The alarm went off! That's what I forgot to tell you. It went off when you went to take a leak.

Trax: You mean the alarm that notified us when Bong entered England?

Small: Yeah, my bad. Good thing we've got this random worker here as a scapegoat.

Trax and Small both look at tech worker. Tech worker grimaces.

Meanwhile, at the Gateschild mansion.....

Bong: We need to have a little chat.

Philip: Indeed.

Jacob: I couldn't agree more.

Bong: The main reason I came to see you is that you need to stop stealing people's houses.

Philip and Jacob give each other a look.

Philip: We don't know what you're talking about.

Jacob: We haven't stolen a thing.

Bong: Anyone that bought a house with Bitcoin tax-free is having their house stolen by government agents. With your family holding the controlling interest in Machiavelli Bank, and with your well-known array of government contracts, I suppose it would be in your own self interest to keep the status quo in place, hence your calling in some favors from politicians to get a law passed. A law that attempts to justify stealing the houses of anyone who bought a house in a tax-free manner.

Jacob: A very interesting supposition, James. But there's really no proof, now is there?

Bong: It would be one hell of a coincidence if all of the politicians that voted in favor of this law just happened to receive very large contributions recently, from corporations you control.

Jacob: Oh, James, I really don't see where you get your good little conscience from.

Bong: What's that supposed to mean?

Jacob and Philip share a look.

Philip: Tell him, Jacob.

Jacob: Do you remember your parents, James?

Bong: Of course not.

Jacob: That's because I gave you away when you were a baby.

A knock at the door disturbs them.

Philip (yelling): Not now, Henry!

Henry (yelling through door): Sorry to interrupt, sir! You might want to have a look at the BBC right now!

Philip: I haven't got time to watch one of my propaganda networks right now, Henry! If you disturb us again, it'll be your brains on my platter next time!

Henry: Ok, I tried!

Bong sits with an emotionless expression.

Jacob: You seem to be taking this rather lightly, James. I am your father. You are a Gateschild.

Bong: I'm a Gateschild?

Philip: Jacob, he's obviously in shock. Go on with the rest of it.

Jacob: Now see here, James. All of your exploits over the past few months have been quite unsettling to the family, and the family business.

Bong: Your family business is built on the pain and suffering of others.

Jacob: I'm so sorry you see it that way, James. (picks up briefcase from floor and opens it, revealing stacks of violence-backed pound sterling)

Bong: What's that for?

Jacob: You're part of the family, James. Let's just call it a peace offering. Not only this, but I'd be willing to make you a silent partner in some of our corporations. The only thing you have to do is leave our business dealings alone, unhindered. What do you say, son?

Bong: I say I don't want your immoral, fraudulent, violence-backed paper. I say you make some calls and stop stealing private property.

Philip and Jacob share amused looks.

Philip: Don't you get it, James? We're not taking people's property. Individuals who follow orders, like tax agents and police, are taking that property. They're the ones running around with guns and being aggressive. Not us. Getting to us, James, won't do a damn bit of good for the commoner. They steal from each other.

Bong: That's true, albeit on your command.

Jacob: Are you sure you won't reconsider our offer?

Bong: No deal.

Jacob pulls a pistol out.

Bong: You can't bribe me and you can't scare me. Do you know why?

Philip: Oh, spare us the theatrics.

Bong: Pull the trigger and find out.

Jacob: I hate to do this, son, but you leave me no choice.

Jacob pulls the trigger and shatters Bong's face. Much to the Gateschild's surprise, tiny artificial fragments explode out from Bong's face, thus destroying the humanoid look-alike decoy.

Jacob: What the hell!? It was a ruse! What should we do?

Philip: I'm gonna raise hell with Trax, that's what!

At that moment, a video of the real Bong starts streaming on the BBC.

Bong: Good evening, free humans. I'm James Bong. If you're watching this, that means that you probably just witnessed my humanoid twin confronting the Gateschild brothers. You have also heard them admit to some of their evil deeds. I'm doing what I can to help gain liberty for humans, which at this point in time, is severely lacking. Some of you have been threatened with theft of your homes if you purchased them voluntarily and tax-free with Bitcoin. A tax is nothing more than extortion, and you have the right as free humans to voluntarily exchange goods and services without being extorted by a third party. All of you who have received such threats from immoral individuals, who euphemistically call themselves government agents, will have a package dropped on your doorstep at some time tonight. In this package, you will find a very efficient tool for self-defense called a gun. In order to be free, you must defend yourself and your private property. Liberty is a choice, but so is slavery. Which will you choose?

Scene cuts to Trax and Small, who have been watching the BBC feed.....

Trax (facepalming): I'm a dead man.

Small: Gotta die sometime.

Trax's phone starts ringing.

Trax: Hello, Mr. Gateschild. I have good news. We found Bong! He's at BBC headquarters, and we're surrounding the building as we speak! We've got him this time, sir.

Gateschild: How do you know he's at BBC?

Trax: Well, he made kind of an appearance, you might say.

Gateschild: I want more than just the BBC surrounded. I want all possible ways in and out of the country completely sealed for the next 24 hours and every man you've got looking for Bong!

Trax: Yes, sir.

Incoherent yelling and rage can be heard on Trax's phone from Small's perspective. Small takes a deep breath and grimaces. Trax hangs up.

Small: Why'd you tell him you found Bong?

Trax: Well, I had to tell him something, now didn't I? At least it bought me some time.

Scene cuts to the Gateschild mansion

Philip (yelling): Henry! What did you say was so urgent on the BBC?

Henry (yelling back): James Bong was on!

Philip: Damn!

Henry: I tried to tell you!

Philip: Shutup you bitter old goat!

Philip starts to leave.

Jacob: Where are you going?

Philip: Anywhere but here.

Philip and Jacob both leave. Shortly after their departure, the real James Bong swoops in through one of the windows and starts installing hidden surveillance equipment. Meanwhile, thousands of drones can be seen making deliveries to excited and shocked people all over England.

Back in Acapulco, K and Miss Moneybit high five each other.

Symphy: Why the display of elation?

K: Cuz we did it! We pulled it off! The Gateschilds are going down, and liberty is coming up!

Symphy: Must I remind you that James Bong has still not departed Britain safely?

K gives a disapproving look.

Miss Moneybit (to K): Hey, you're the one who programmed her.

Symphy: There is an incoming quantum-encrypted call.

K's eyes bug out.

K: Ok, put it through, I guess.

Female Voice: Is this K?

K: Who's this?

Female Voice: Diana Gateschild.

K (shocked): How did you get this number?

Diana: Short answer, because you're not as smart as you think you are.

Miss Moneybit (sour face): Oooooo, one fried ego, coming right up.

Diana: I need you to get me through to James. They're not allowing exit from the country until Bong is found.

K: So what, you want some prize for turning him in?

Diana (sighing): I can't deal with you right now. Put Moneybit on.



Moneybit: I'm right here!

Diana: How do you deal with him?

Moneybit: I think of it as an art form.

Diana: Anyway, I'm going to help Bong escape, but I need to contact him.

Moneybit: K, send her the number!

K: Can't send to a quantum encrypted phone!

Diana (clicks button to unblock phone): Such a whiny little fellow. (ends call)

Just as Bong is hustling away from the Gateschild mansion, he gets a call....

Bong: Bad timing, K. I'm a little busy.

Diana: Bong, it's Diana. They're not allowing anyone to exit the country.

Bong: Then I guess I'll have to use some righteous force.

Diana: They'll kill you on the spot.

Bong: And make me a martyr? I don't think so.

Diana: It doesn't have to be that way, James. Let me help you.

Bong (smug): You handy with a machine gun?

Diana: You're such a brute, sometimes. No. As with all government actions, certain people get special privileges. You can fly out on my private jet. They won't give it a thought.

Bong: I'm sure your family will appreciate that.

Diana: I'm trying to do the right thing, Bong. Damn my family to hell. You're still near Philip's house?

Bong: House, castle, creepy monstrosity, whatever you like to call it.

Diana: I'll pick you up within the hour. Leave your phone connected to mine so I can find you.

30 minutes later, a black stretch limo pulls up near Bong.

Diana (speaking out window): Best looking hitchhiker I've ever seen.

Bong gets in.

Bong: So where are we off to? MI6 headquarters to say hi?

Diana: We can if you'd like. I thought you'd prefer my private airstrip.

Bong: Very well, have it your way.

Awkward silence.

Bong: Why didn't you tell me?

Diana: Tell you what?

Bong: That my father is Satan incarnate.

Diana: I wanted to, James, but I didn't feel it was my place to do so.

Bong: Do you know who my mother is?

Diana: No, James, I swear. I don't think anybody does. You see, the reason Jacob gave you up was because your mother was, how can I put this, from a different social class.

Bong: You mean she wasn't a power mad psychopath?

Diana: Precisely. And anyone in Jacob's position would have done the same thing. Give the child up and make sure the mother stays quiet.

Bong: And how does one make sure of that?

Diana: There are different ways. Murder, bribery.

Bong: I suppose asking nicely doesn't make the list.

Diana: You pulled quite the stunt today, James. You're changing the world for the better. I believe we'll have a revolution on our hands.

Bong: I'm not interested in revolution. A revolution brings you around in a circle and you end up at the same spot. What I want is an evolution, where change actually happens.

An hour later and Bong is flying alone on Diana's private jet. As the jet is leaving British airspace, a fleet of immigration control drones approaches the jet, scans for identification, sees that it's Diana Gateschild's private transport, and lets it pass.

Two days later in Acapulco, Bong, Moneybit, K, and Symphy are browsing through an immense number of news stories about the earth shaking events in the UK.

K (reading headlines): Tens of billions pulled out of Machiavelli Bank within 48 hours.

Moneybit (reading headlines): Banking collapse imminent?

Bong (reading headlines): Government postpones Bitcoin housing seizures. Crypto currencies skyrocket, with Steem leading the way.

Symphy holds up hand to prepare for high five.

K: What is it, Symphy?

Symphy: Is this not an appropriate time for a high five?

Moneybit (high fives Symphy): More than appropriate. It's absolutely perfect!

End Episode 12

### ***Episode 13***

Scene 1

General Small is in his office at CIA headquarters having a holo-meeting with Sir Hugo Trax.

Small: Look on the bright side, sir.

Trax (incredulous): Bright side? Please, do tell. James Bong just made us look like fools, the Gateschild's bank is collapsing, and now I've got to deal with your smug little face this early in the morning.

Small: Don't be so negative. At least you didn't get fired, and neither did I. Speaking of fired, did that one scapegoat you had strategically placed in the underground command center get fired or killed?

Trax: Nah. I figured, what's the point? It's not like Gateschild is stupid or anything. He'd never believe that one lowly programmer could have been responsible for such an epic security failure.

Small: So how shall we proceed, sir?

Trax: Perhaps we've been going about this the wrong way. There is a key element to Bong's success that I think we've been neglecting.

Small: His superior intellect?

Trax: No.

Small: Physical prowess?

Trax (annoyed): NO.

Small: His morality, courage, and loyalty?

Trax: You're getting warmer, but still no. Bong doesn't publish his own material. If we can silence his publisher, we might be able to swing things back in our direction.

Small: You're talking about Miss Moneybit?

Trax: Exactly.

Small: She disappeared, remember?

Trax: Then we'll just have to make her reappear.

Scene 2

K is playing video games and listening to outrageously loud electronic music.

Symphy (shouting over music): K, Miss Moneybit is at the front door!!

K: Let her in!

Miss Moneybit walks in, covering her ears.

Moneybit (shouting): Turn the music down!!

K: What?!

Symphy turns the music down.

Moneybit: It's 9:30 in the morning! What the hell are you doing?

K: Playing video games and drinking coffee.

Moneybit: And destroying your equipment with bass tones?

Symphy: I have set the sound levels to ensure that no damage is done.

Moneybit looks at holo-screen video game display.

Moneybit: Is that Bong on screen?

K: Yep.

Moneybit: You made a James Bong video game?

K (proud): Yep. I'm doing a test run on it right now. Gotta make sure there aren't any bugs before you market it.

Moneybit (hands on hips): Oh, you're volunteering me to advertise for you, huh?

K: And sell.

Moneybit: Where is Bong, anyway?

K: Don't know. He disappeared.

Symphy: I estimate a 73 percent chance that he is at a casino.

K (sarcastic): Pretty brilliant, Symphy. Moneybit, what's the deal? Why are you looking for Bong?

Moneybit: I'm thinking about taking a trip to DC.

K (surprised): What? You know you can't go back there. The deep state's on the lookout for you in the USSA. You know that.

Moneybit (sighing): Yeah, but I miss my family. And I left a lot of my stuff up there, too.

K: So that's why you want Bong, to go up there with you and protect you.

Moneybit (fidgety): Sorta.

K (brash): I could do it, ya know.

Moneybit starts laughing hysterically at the preposterous idea of a skinny little hacker like K playing body guard.

K: Hey, I've got a white belt in karate.

Moneybit: Isn't that the first belt you get, just for signing up?

Symphy: Affirmative.

Moneybit: Anyway, did Bong say when he'd be back?

K: He didn't even tell me he was leaving. You know how he is. Besides, he just found out he's the son of a Gateschild, which is about like Luke finding out his dad was Darth Vader. Kinda a hard pill to swallow, so what did ya expect?

Moneybit: And Diana Gateschild got murdered, too. That was rough for him. Speaking of the Gateschilds, how is your hack going?

K (bright and cheery): Glad you asked! All the devices Bong planted at the Gateschild mansion are working perfectly. Now we just have to wait for them to fire up a device anywhere in the vicinity, and I'll be able to grab some more dirty little secrets.

Moneybit: We've gotta keep going at them. Did you hear about the bailout?

K: No, what bailout?

Moneybit: The UK government is considering a bailout of Machiavelli Bank so it doesn't fully collapse.

K (huffing): I gotta hand it to the establishment. They're some brazen sons'a bitches.

Scene 3

James Bong is playing blackjack at The Black Spade Casino in Macao. He's been on a hot streak and has grabbed the attention of the security team.

In the security control room.....

Video watchman (speaking to supervisor): Our iris scanners don't say so, but I know that face, sir. I believe that's James Bong.

Supervisor: Really? How do you know?

Video watchman: You didn't see what happened in London last week?

Supervisor: I heard something about it, but didn't watch it.

Video watchman: Should we alert the proper authorities?

Supervisor: Yes, I'll make the call. I'm sure he's a person of interest. Pick him up.

Bong (sips cocktail, talking to dealer): My first time at a blackjack table, and what do ya know?

Dealer (disbelieving): First time high roller, huh?

Bong (sees security personnel in peripheral vision): Perhaps my luck is about over.

Bong tosses a tip to the dealer and starts zig zagging through the casino. He pulls a prepaid phone from his pocket, sends a quick text, ditches the phone, and then makes for the exit. When he leaves, there is a gang of dark suits waiting for him.

Suit #1 (gestures to black limo): Right this way, Mr. Bong.

Bong (sarcastic): No thanks, I've already got plans.

All the suits reach for their sidearms tucked in their jackets.

Bong: On second thought, do you have any vodka in there?

Bong gets in the limo and it speeds off.

Bong: Is this the high roller treatment?

Suit #1: There is someone very important who wants to meet you.

Bong (steely): Another violent psychopath like you, perhaps?

Suit #1: I hope you will show more respect to your host than you have shown me.

Suit #1 whacks Bong in the head and knocks him out.

Scene 4

Washington DC suburbs. Ty Prince is sitting in a posh house waiting for the owner to come home. He's raiding the fridge.

Ty Prince (gawking around large fridge): Man, this guy has got everything! There must be ten different cheeses in here!

Prince hears front door open. He goes to confront the owner.

Male Owner: Who the hell are you?

Prince: I'm Ty Prince.

Male Owner: What the hell are you doing in my house?

Prince (casually): Holding you for ransom.

Owner dashes for front door.

Prince: I'm pointing a pistol at your head.

Owner stops in his tracks. Prince is searching madly for his pistol in the living area. Owner turns around and sees Prince's desperation. Prince finally locates the pistol on the floor and points it for real this time.

Prince: You're Marty Moneybit, right?

Owner: Nope, wrong house.

Prince: I don't believe you. Show me your ID.

Owner: Ok, ok, yes, I'm Marty Moneybit. What the hell is this all about?

Prince: You'll find out soon enough. Take a seat. It's gonna be a long night.

Marty: You're Ty Prince?

Prince: The one and only.

Marty: Yeah, I heard about you. You're not the smartest criminal, huh?

Prince: Shut your trap. I need you to make a call.

Marty: Which do you want, me to shut up or make a call? I can't do both. Well, I guess I could do both, but if I don't say anything, then the other person will definitely hang up.

Prince sighs.

Scene 5

K's place in Acapulco. K and Moneybit are playing Bong's video game and drinking tequila.

Moneybit: It really looks just like him. You're really good at what you do, K.

K: Thanks. Something tells me you've had too much tequila.

Moneybit: Why's that?

K: Because you're smiling and complimenting me.

Symphy walks in.

Symphy: K, there is a message from an unidentified phone. The message simply says "420".

K: Whoa! That's Bong! Can you trace the call?

Symphy: I am working on it.

K: Let me know ASAP.

Moneybit's phone starts ringing. It's a Blondie "Call Me" ringtone.

K: I see I'm not the only 80s music lover here.

Moneybit (to phone): Hi, dad?

Marty: Hey, little lemon.

Prince speaks in background: You call her little lemon? Worst nickname ever!

Miss Moneybit (surprised): Dad, who's that?

Marty: Ty Prince.

Prince (yelling): I told you not to say that!

Miss Moneybit: What?! What's going on?

Marty (nonchalant): He's pointing a gun at my head, eating all my cheese, and threatening to kill me if you don't come to DC. Don't come, though. He's not that smart, so I think I can take him.

Prince: Not if I shoot you in the leg first.

Miss Moneybit (crying): Oh my God, dad! I'm coming right away! Just, just....

Marty: No! I'm telling you, they're not gonna get to my little girl. I'll be fine. You stay safe!

Prince (yelling): Are you coming or not?!

Miss Moneybit hangs up and starts walking out.



K: Where are you going?

Moneybit: To DC, of course.

K: Hold on. Let's think of a plan first.

Moneybit: And let my dad suffer?

K: Just at least let me track down Bong first.

End Episode 13

## ***Episode 14***

Scene 1

Bong has just been thrown into a secret Chinese cage by some underworld mafia figures. There is one other prisoner in the cage.

Bong (groggy): I wasn't expecting company.

Prisoner (grumpy): You won't be getting any, don't worry.

Bong: How long have you been in here?

Prisoner: I've lost track of time.

Bong: Why are you here?

Prisoner: You first.

Bong: I won a couple hundred thousand at a blackjack table, but I have a curious feeling that there's more to it than that.

Prisoner: Who are you?

Bong: Bong, James Bong.

Prisoner (sarcastic): Oh yeah? And I'm Peter Pipe.

Bong: No, that's really my name. You haven't heard of me?

Prisoner: So modest of you. Anyway, you can call me Punch.

Bong: Like fruit punch?

Punch (offended): No, not like fruit punch! Like punch you in the face punch.

Bong: You still haven't told me why you're here.

Punch: Why should I trust you?

Bong: If you haven't noticed, we're both locked up. Circumstances dictate that we cooperate and maybe find a way out of here.

Punch: They're trying to milk me for info.

Bong: What kind of info?

Punch: I know a guy they'll do anything to get to. An inventor. I won't give up his location, though. Hopefully he can get that tech out before they get to him.

Bong: Who exactly are "they"?

Punch: Anyone and everyone in the energy business.

Bong: I was nabbed by Triads, I believe. They have heavy interests in Chinese casinos. What does the Chinese mafia have to do with the energy business?

Punch (shaking head): Man, were you born yesterday? Triads do business with the Chinese government and global corporations everywhere. They do things that the military agencies can't.

Bong: So what's this invention they're so desperate for?

Punch: A new energy source. Free energy. Can you imagine? So why the hell did they grab you?

Their conversation is interrupted by a couple of guards.

Guard: Bong! You're coming with us.

Bong: Dinner time already? What's on the menu?

Guard: Smoked Bong, funny guy.

Scene 2

Meanwhile, at K's place in Acapulco

Symphy: Bong's communication came from Macao.

K: All the casinos on this side of the world and he's gotta go to China for his gambling fix.

Moneybit: I can't wait around for Bong's help. I've gotta get to DC to help my dad.

K (emphatic): You can't go to DC. You know it's a trap! They're just trying to get to you!

Moneybit: You got a better plan?

K: Well, no, not exactly.

Moneybit: Then I'm outta here.

Moneybit leaves and slams the front door.

Scene 3

Back in Macao....

Bong is escorted into a huge vaulted parlor, where a young, sharp dressed Chinese man is seated on a red throne.

Sharp Dressed Man: Welcome Mr. Bong. I'm impressed.

Bong: Yeah, I work out.

Sharp Dressed Man: And such humor. Pretty good for a dead man walking.

Bong: I don't follow.

Sharp Dressed Man: Or shall I say a ghost? Have a seat, Mr. Bong.

Bong sits in a rickety wooden chair next to him.

Sharp Dressed Man (motioning to the only two guards in the room): Leave us.

Bong: You're either very bold, or very stupid.

The guards leave. Sharp dressed man punches some buttons and a huge hologram of a Chinese State news feed pops up.

Sharp Dressed Man: Once you see the offer I'm going to make you, I'm sure that bold will be your final assessment. Allow me to explain. You see the headline?

Bong: A gang of Chinese psychopaths calling themselves government claim that James Bong is dead.

Sharp Dressed Man: Why are you so unpleasant, Mr. Bong?

Bong: I have a severe allergy to being thrown in cages.

Sharp Dressed Man: Regardless of your negative qualities, I've been quite impressed with your work.

Bong: Forgive me if I don't find that flattering, coming from you.

Sharp Dressed Man: Do you even know who I am?

Bong: I know you're a member of the Triads.

Sharp Dressed Man (offended): King of the Triads, actually. You can call me King T.

Bong: You must not follow my work too closely if you think I'll call anyone king.

King T: I've had people executed for less. Show some respect. Anyway, down to business. That was quite a stir you caused in London. And such a blow to your family, the Gateschids.

Bong: They're not my family.

King T: Regardless, their bank, Machiavelli Bank has lost billions because of what you did. And I'm sure you know their deep involvement in the energy sector. So now here's the deal. That man you met in your prison cell?

Bong (steely sarcasm): Yes, charming character.

King T: He knows a scientist who has created a marvelous new substance that can produce free energy in near limitless supply.

Bong: And now you want him murdered in order to protect the status quo. This has gone on for centuries.

King T: I would never do such a thing. What I want is to control it.

Bong: And with it, the Gateschids suffer another crucial blow to their empire.

King T (smug grin): Which would also serve your interests as well.

Bong (scoffing): How? Trading a British gangster clan for a Chinese gangster clan? I hardly see how free humanity gains any ground.

King T: Well, either way, Mr. Bong, you have no choice in the matter. Either you agree to help track down the scientist, or you rot away in prison while the world believes you to be dead. What do you say?

Bong: I say you call your guards back and look for plan B.

King T calls the guards back.

Bong: And by the way

Bong jumps up, grabs King T's head and slams it into the stone table he's seated at.

Bong: You're very stupid, not bold.

Bong grabs a gun from King T's side and rushes over to the entrance. The guards come in. Bong knocks one over the head and shoots the other in the knee. He then looks for the keys to the cell and can't find any. He runs back to the cell.

Punch: They must really trust you, to let you come back by yourself.

Bong: Glad to see you developed a sense of humor while I was away.

Bong sees that the cell is locked with an electronic keypad.

Punch: How good are you at hacking?

Bong: Unspeakably horrible.

Bong runs out.

Punch: I'll just stay here, then.

Bong goes back into King T's parlor. He finds a smartphone on one of the guards and dials K.

Back in Acapulco....

Symphy: You have a message from a phone in Macao.

K: What's the message?

Symphy: 420.

K: Call that phone!

Bong (while running back to the cell): K.

K: Bong, you sound pretty good for a dead guy.

Bong: I need you to pick a lock for me. I'll explain later. What info do you need about it?

K: Just send me a pic and I'll have it done in 5 minutes.

Bong: Make that 2 minutes.

Bong takes a picture and sends it. A couple minutes later, the green light comes on and the cell door pops open.

Bong: Let's go. You're gonna take me to your scientist friend, ok?

Punch: Let's just try to get out of Macao first.

Bong: Deal.

Scene 4

At Moneybit's father's house in DC.

Marty Moneybit (to Ty Prince): She's not gonna come.

Ty Prince: She'll come.

Marty Moneybit: Even if she does, it's gonna take forever. No way you can stay awake that long.

Ty Prince gets uncertain look on face.

Marty: Didn't think of that in your master plan, did ya?

Ty Prince: Shutup! I'm thinking!

Ty Prince's phone rings.

Ty Prince: Hey Sir Trax, whatsup?

Sir Hugo Trax: Don't say my name over the phone! Can your hostage hear you?

Marty: Loud and clear!

Trax (gruff): And you've got me on speaker!? Damnit, Prince! Idiot. Anyway, we're calling off the mission.

Ty Prince (shocked, disappointed): What?! Why the hell are ya doing that?!

Trax: The Chinese are reporting that Bong is dead. Killed himself at a casino. Witnesses and everything. So we're celebrating!

Ty Prince: Has MI6 or the CIA confirmed this?

Trax: Damnit, Prince! Don't mention your employers' names on the phone!

Marty: It's ok! I already knew!

Trax: Anyway, don't be foolish, of course it's confirmed.

Ty Prince: Well, can I at least kill this guy anyway?

Trax: Absolutely not! There's no reason to kill him now.

Ty Prince: He's one hell of a smartass. Isn't that good enough?

Trax: Prince, you have your orders.

Click.

Ty Prince (to Marty): Well, I suppose I'll be on my way. Nice meeting you and all.

Marty gives sarcastic grin. Ty Prince leaves. Marty calls his daughter, Miss Moneybit.

Miss Moneybit: Dad?

Marty: Hey, it's ok. That government thug just left.

Miss Moneybit (shocked): He did? That's great! Why?

Marty: Something about Bong being dead.

Miss Moneybit (confused): What?! I'm on a plane and it's hard to hear you. You said Bong's dead?!

Marty: That's what the guy from MI6 told Ty whatzhisname a minute ago. Then he gave him orders to leave me alone.

Miss Moneybit (crying): Well, oh my god. I'm so happy you're ok, dad, but...

Marty: I know, I understand. Go back to your friends. I'm sure they'll want to see you and talk about Bong. I'm fine.

Miss Moneybit: Thanks, dad.

Marty: Take care, kid.

Click.

Moneybit looks at her phone. It's a text from K, alerting her to the true situation that Bong is in. Moneybit asks the pilot to return to Acapulco.

End Episode 14

## ***Episode 15***

### Scene 1

Bong and Punch have just escaped the Triad underground prison and are on the move in Macao.

Bong: So where's your inventor friend?

Punch: Central Africa.

Bong: Central Africa? Why Africa?

Punch: They have less electronic surveillance. It's easier to be a ghost. More importantly, Central Africa has resources he needs to make the substance. Resources that don't exist in other parts of the world.

Bong: I don't suppose you have any gadgets handy? Or cash?

Punch (sarcastic): Oh, sure, they let me keep all my personal stuff during my month in prison.

Bong: Any locals you trust?

Punch: Not a soul.

Bong: Why the hell are you in Macao then?

Punch: To stay anonymous, you don't want people around who know you, genius.

Bong: I know a little twerp hacker with an attitude you'd get along with great. Anyway, let's get to a 3D print shop. I've got an idea.

10 minutes later at a 3D print shop, they're talking to an irritable, chain-smoking, shop owner guy.

Bong: I'm telling you, just one text message on your phone, and I'll pay you double for all the printing I need to do here. I just need some funds.

Irritable Shop Owner Guy: Triple!



Bong: Glad to see there are such helpful people left in the world.

Irritable Shop Owner: Take it or leave! This business, not charity!

Bong: Fine, triple.

Shop owner gives phone to Bong. Bong texts K to send funds to the shop owner's crypto account and schematics for everything he needs to print. Once the funds arrive, he prints a new phone, the rest of the supplies he needs, and gets more crypto sent from K to his new phone. He then arranges for a SteemAir Transport to Central Africa.

As Bong and Punch near the airport.....

Punch: So how exactly do you plan to get past security? You realize that if we're wanted by the Triads, then we're wanted by the Chinese Government.

Bong: Yes, I'm well aware, one mafia split into two halves. And I prefer to call government a 'violent gang with fancy titles', by the way.

Punch: You still didn't answer my question.

Bong (reaches into backpack, pulls out two contact lenses): These are iris changing contacts to hide your identity.

Punch: And facial scanners? What about those?

Bong (pulls a pack of tiny adhesive dots from backpack): These are nano-modifiers. You put one on your forehead and it changes the readings on their face scanners.

Punch: And if anyone recognizes us from memory?

Bong: Oh, don't be so paranoid. This is why I like working alone.

Punch: There are things I'd much rather be doing, trust me.

Bong: Anyway..... (reaches into backpack) that's why I've got two fedoras.

Punch: You've got to be kidding.

Bong: Would I really have brought fedoras just to play a prank?

Bong and Punch get through security unnoticed and board their plane without incident. Bong gets into the pilot's seat of the private, hemp-powered, SteemAir jet and they take off. Once they get up to cruising altitude, Bong puts it on autopilot and dials up K.

Bong: K.

K: Bong! You sound good for a dead guy!

Bong: Yeah, gambling and martinis keep me in good order.

K: Someone wants to say hi.

Miss Moneybit (sarcastic): Bong! I really could have used your help a couple days ago. Thanks for being there, old buddy!

Bong: Good to hear you're relieved I'm not dead.

Miss Moneybit: Where ya headed?

Bong: Central Africa.

Miss Moneybit: You have a camera?

Bong: Just the one on the phone. Do I have to record all of my missions?

Miss Moneybit: It is how we finance things, ya know.

Bong: Well, it's gonna be one hell of a story, regardless. I met a guy in a Triad prison who's taking me to meet some inventor-in-hiding, who supposedly has some miracle free energy source.

Miss Moneybit: Triad Prison again?

Bong: Very funny. Long story. I'll update you when we get to Africa.

K: You mean you'll call when you're desperate for help again.

Click

Bong: So tell me more about this energy source.

Punch: I only know the basics. The rest is over my head. It involves some combining organic materials with synthetic materials.

Bong: That's nothing new.

Punch: In a zero g atmosphere.

Bong: I stand corrected. Zero g? How did your friend...

Punch: He used to work for the Chinese Space Agency.

Bong: He worked at an extortion funded space agency. Ok.

Punch: He was doing experiments in zero g, that was his job. Then he discovered the new material quite by accident.

Bong: And why did he flee?

Punch: Luckily, he's not naive. He knows how much power the people that control the energy sector have. He also knows it could be a threat to a huge government's power.

Bong: Like the Chinese criminal enterprise.

Punch: Why do you keep referring to government like that?

Bong: Because it's the truth. And how powerful is this material?

Punch: He estimates it can power the entire planet for one year on one kilo.

Bong: That's definitely a threat to the powers that shouldn't be. So how do you know where to find him?

Punch: We had previously set a rendezvous point. He wanted to work in secret on how to deploy the technology, without being destroyed or compromised.

Bong: Smart man. Didn't want to get Tesla'd, huh?

Punch: Something like that.

Bong: That reminds me, reach behind you and grab that duffel bag. There are gun parts in there and instructions for assembly. I printed them at the shop.

Punch: I don't like guns.

Bong: I guarantee you will when you need to defend yourself.

Punch: How did you get them through security, anyway?

Bong: Because, in case you haven't noticed, security people at airports aren't the sharpest knives in the kitchen.

## Scene 2

Bong and Punch are making their descent into the Congo, near a small village called Kungu. After a bumpy landing in a somewhat clear area.....

Punch (sarcastic); Real smooth.

Bong: And where did you learn to fly?

Punch looks at ground.

Bong: That's right, ya didn't. So you're welcome. Anyway, where's this rendezvous point.

Punch: In the village a few miles west of here.

Bong: Kind of a vague "point" isn't it, an entire village?

Punch: It's not like it's huge. It's only a couple thousand people.

Bong and Punch walk to the village. They get some curious looks from the locals.

Bong: You have a picture we can use to ask around?

Punch: Again, it escapes your memory that we just got out of a cage.

Bong: You said he worked for the Chinese Mafia's Space Agency, right?

Punch: Yeah.

Bong: What's his name? I'll try and get a pic online.

Punch: Sun Zen. It would've been scrubbed by now, though.

Bong: I know someone who might be able to find it.

Bong dials up K.

Bong: K!

K: Bong!

Bong: I need you to find a pic for me online.

K: Bong, girls find you attractive. I don't see why you need to

Bong cuts him off.

Bong: Not now, K, this is important! I'm searching for the inventor I mentioned to you before. His name is Sun Zen and he used to work for the Chinese Space Agency.

K: Is that Sun with a "u" or an "o"?

Bong (sighs): Just text it to me when you have it.

Bong spots a whole-in-the-wall bar.

Bong: That'll be a good place to meet locals.

Punch: A bar during the middle of the day?

Bong and Punch walk into the tiny little shack. Two local men and the bartender gape at the newcomers.

Bong: Martini, shaken, not stirred.

Punch: Look at your surroundings, Bong. This doesn't look like a martini-sippin town, now does it?

Bartender: Hey, what do ya mean by that?

Punch: Do you know how to make a martini?

Bartender: Well, I'm a bartender, so what do ya think?

Punch: Sorry, it's just that

Bartender (offended): Yeah, yeah, I know, small town, unsophisticated stereotype. I get it.

Punch: I'll pass on the drink, then.

Bong looks at his phone and shows the picture to Punch. Punch nods to confirm Sun's identity.  
Bartender sets martini in front of Bong. Bong shows picture to bartender.

Bong: Have you seen this guy around here?

Bartender (smiles): Everybody knows that guy.

Punch: Really? Why is that?

Bartender: It's a small town, man. What do ya think? Everybody knows everybody.

Punch: Isn't that a stereotype?

Bong (huffy): We haven't got time for this. (chugs martini) Can someone take us to him?

Bartender looks at his two local customers.

Bartender: I'm not sure those two are in shape to go up the hill to his house right now, but they maybe could.

Bong: Can one of you take us there?

Local Guy 1: No way. I'm just getting started drinkin.

Bartender: You've been here since we opened.

Local Guy 1: It's not even sunset yet!

Bong: I'll buy you a drink if you do.

Local Guy 1: Make it two.

Bong (annoyed): Fine. Let's go.

Bong, Punch, and the local guy leave. After walking for about 20 minutes they arrive at a small cottage.

Local Guy: There ya go. That's his shack. I'll wait here.

Bong and Punch go to the shack and knock. No answer. Punch yells his name a couple of times. No answer.

Bong: Let's just go in.

Bong turns the doorknob and notices it's not locked.

Bong: That's strange. Why is it open?

The door opens and they immediately find out. Sun Zen's bullet-riddled body is lying on the floor. Bong rushes over and checks his pulse, only to find that he's dead.

Bong: Blood is still fresh. This happened just a short time ago.

Punch (sobbing): We're too late.

Bong: Yeah, we're too late.

After leaving Punch at the Kinshasa airport, he goes back to Acapulco. After telling K, Miss Moneybit, and Symphy about the outcome of his mission.....

Miss Moneybit: Don't beat yourself up over it. You failed. You're human, right?

Bong: Last time I checked.

Miss Moneybit: It happens. I mean, look at K, he's had tons of epic failures.

K: You have a very loose definition of epic.

Bong: Do you realize what kind of opportunity it was? Near limitless energy, practically free.

Symphy: I am sorry to interrupt, but there is news that you might find pertinent to the situation.

K: What's that?

Symphy: I found a blogger on Steemit. The account is less than two weeks old. The name is SunZenergy. The only posts it contains are instructions on how to create a free energy material in a zero g atmosphere.

Bong: What do you mean "found"? Why wouldn't something like that show up in a standard internet search?

K: Because somebody's trying to hide it.

Symphy: K is correct. Great effort is being made to hide this information. Only due to my advanced Artificial Intelligence abilities was I able to find it.

K (talking to Moneybit): Looks like you've got some publishing to do.

End Episode 15

## ***Episode 16***

### **Scene 1**

Bong, K, Miss Moneybit, and Symphy are having breakfast at K's place in Acapulco. K is making omelettes and Symphy has just served coffee.

Bong (after taking sip of coffee): Symphy, I wanted coffee, not rocket fuel.

Symphy (confused face): This coffee can certainly not perform the task of propelling a rocket.

K: He was exaggerating, Symphy. And the coffee is great. Bong's just weak.

Symphy: I could process data of human relationships for millions of years and never understand them.

Miss Moneybit (sighs): You're not alone, Symphy. You're not alone.

K dishes up some omelettes and sets them in front of Bong and Moneybit. Moneybit takes a bite.

Moneybit (painful face): Oh, K! What the hell?! What's in this?

K (proud): A variety of the finest hot peppers known to man.

Moneybit: Ah, I can't eat this. It'll put me in the hospital.

K: You're just as weak as Bong.

Bong: I don't know why I spend any of my free time with you guys.

Moneybit: Bong, I think you need a vacation.

Bong: I just had a vacation, remember?

Moneybit: You got kidnapped and thrown in a cage during your so-called vacation, so I don't think that counts.

Bong: Are you trying to get rid of me?

Moneybit: Nope. I'm going with you.

Bong (shudders, chuckles): K, what did you put in this coffee? Moneybit seems to be hallucinating.

Moneybit: Come on, it'll be fun. I'll even pay half the expenses.

Bong: Gee, how generous. (pauses and contemplates) Oh, I suppose I could go for a few days and just do some easy, fun disruptions of the state.

Moneybit: Sounds like work to me.

Bong: It's not work if it's fun. Not in my book, anyway.

Moneybit: Great, it's settled then! We'll take off this afternoon!

Bong: We?

Moneybit: Please?

Bong (reluctant): Oh, all right.

## Scene 2

The next morning, Bong and Miss Moneybit are cruising I-10 in Southeastern New Mexico, between Las Cruces and El Paso, Texas. They're riding in a 3D-printed model of a black Aston Martin DB10.

Miss Moneybit: Bong, no offense, but this isn't the vacation spot I had in mind. Why did you choose this place?

Bong: Simple. It's one of the biggest speed traps in the world. Tons of mind-controlled road pirates. Plus, there isn't too much traffic, so it's safer to do what we're doing. And you should be excited!

Miss Moneybit: Why would I be excited to be near a bunch of cops?

Bong: Because we're going to "buzz" them, and free their would-be victims.

Miss Moneybit: Great. I'll get my camera ready!

They soon come upon some flashing red and blue lights, and spot an immoral order-follower ahead. The cop has someone pulled over.

Bong: Sit tight. Statist Road Pirate crime in progress and is about to be thwarted with relish.



Bong accelerates aggressively and as they approach the road pirate and the victim. The uniformed order-follower is approaching the driver's side of the victim's car. Bong carefully veers close enough to the cop to scare him, but not harm him. The Aston Martin roars by at over 100mph.

Road Pirate (shaking fist): Hey, what the hell!?! (turns and faces his victim, grumbles and stumbles around, uncertain what to do)

Road Pirate (to would-be victim); Ah, to hell with you. You got lucky this time!

Road Pirate runs back to his car and takes off after Bong and Moneybit. At this point, Bong has it up to top speed, near 200mph. He takes an exit into Las Cruces and makes plenty of turns so they can't be found.

Moneybit: Whew! What a rush!

Bong: Fighting against tyranny can be fun, right?

Moneybit: Wow! My heart feels like, well, if I would drink 5 cups of K's coffee. I wanna try!

Bong (grimaces): Um, not a good idea.

Moneybit: Come on! And you can film it!

Bong (sarcastic): Oh, really, can I?

Moneybit: What could go wrong?

Bong: The imagination runs wild. (pauses) All right. But first, we need a disguise.

Moneybit: I left my masks at home.

Bong: The car. Not us. (does facepalm)

Moneybit: You said "we" not "it".

Bong: This is why I work alone.

Bong hits a button on the dashboard. The car's nano-paint starts to change color, and within seconds, the entire car is red.

Moneybit: Not just your typical, run-of-the-mill Aston Martin, huh?

Bong hits another button.

Bong: New plates from Kansas. That ought to be enough.

Bong and Moneybit change seats. They head back onto I-10 and seek out another road pirate crime in progress. Within minutes, they spot another immoral order-follower with a badge trying to extort a free human.

Bong: Here we go. You see them?

Moneybit: Yep!

Bong (frowning at speedometer): One thing about cars like this, Moneybit, is that they like to go fast.

Moneybit: What?

Bong: Would you mind hitting the gas? We'll be able to have a short chat with him if we crawl by at this pace.

Moneybit (defiant): Be careful what you wish for! (she floors it)

Bong's head snaps back. He pulls out a smartphone and starts filming.

Bong: Please don't hit them.

The car gets up to 110mph and with superb balance and skill, Moneybit maneuvers the Aston Martin to within about 3 feet of the cop, who cowers and leans against his would-be victim's car.

Bong: Wow!

Moneybit: Was that the same road pirate?

Bong: I think so. Keep hitting the gas! We gotta lose him.

Moneybit gets the car up to top speed and after a couple minutes exits into Las Cruces. She pulls into the back of a supermarket parking lot.

Moneybit: Ok, Bong, change the car. Hurry!

Bong changes the car to midnight blue and the plates to New Mexico.

Bong: Now we're local.

Moneybit pulls back onto the street. Bong reviews the video.

Bong: Wow, you look much better on camera.

Moneybit: Thanks, I think.

Bong: Congratulations, you just saved someone from being extorted.

They soon come across a public park and find a group of teenagers being harassed by another order-follower in blue. Bong and Moneybit approach the group.

Bong (to cop): Excuse me. What's going on?

Cop (pompous): This doesn't concern you.

Bong: Quite to the contrary, if natural rights are being violated, it's most definitely my business.

Cop: These kids are smoking something they shouldn't be. Now get lost.

Bong: So they weren't doing anything wrong, but you are.

Cop (looking Bong up and down, skeptically): Hey, wait a minute. I know you from somewhere.  
(pauses) Yeah, you're that guy from D-tube. You're James Bong! (looks at Moneybit) And you must be his girlfriend publisher, right?

Moneybit blushes.

Bong: Not girlfriend. Anyway, how about leaving these people in peace?

Cop: Look, I'm just doing my job, man. I know there's nothing wrong with what they're doing, but if I don't make arrests, I'll lose my job. I've got a family to feed, ya know.

Bong: You don't need to have a job that involves violence to support your family.

Cop: Yeah, but what can I do?

Bong: Anything that doesn't involve violence. The possibilities are limitless.

Cop (turns to teenagers): You're all free to go.

Bong: Wise choice. I think we'll be going as well.

Cop: Sure, Bong. I'll think about what you said.

Bong and Moneybit get back in the Aston Martin and zoom off.

Bong: You film that?

Moneybit: Yep. You do realize that once this trip is posted online, then the whole world will know you're not dead.

Bong (sarcastic): Really? That hadn't occurred to me. What do you suppose K is doing right now?

Moneybit: Probably listening to 90s rap music and playing holo-Pac-man in his boxers.

Bong: What a horribly vivid picture.

K: I heard that!

Moneybit (startled): K, what the hell?!

Bong: How long have you been listening to us?

K: Long enough.

Moneybit: Creep.

Bong: I specifically didn't bring a smart watch with me, just to avoid situations like this.

K: I know. That's why I hacked the car.

Bong: How quaint.

K: I hate to break up the party, but I think you should both get back down here. There are some big things happening and we need to game plan ASAP.

Bong: What big things?

K: We should talk about it in person, in private.

Bong: You're always so painfully esoteric. All right, we'll fly down tomorrow.

K: Sorry to wreck another vacation of yours.

Bong: No you're not.

Moneybit: Goodbye, K!

K (grumpy): Ok, ok, I'll hang up.

Clicking noise over the speaker.

Moneybit: You think he actually disconnected?

Bong: Not a chance.

Moneybit: Can I fly the plane?

Bong (huffs loudly): Sure, why not? I'll just sip cocktails.

K: I can fly it remotely, ya know!

End Episode 16

## ***Episode 17***

### Scene 1

Bong and Miss Moneybit walk into K's place in Acapulco.

Bong: Ok, K, what's so urgent that it couldn't wait until my vacation was over?

K: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

Bong (narrows eyes): K, must you be so damned esoteric?

Moneybit: He's just trying to be annoying.

Bong: He's being both.

K: Check this out. Let's start with the best of times. There are millions of people in the US and UK refusing to pay income taxes.

Bong: How do you know?

K: Cuz thousands are being quite vocal about it online. Not only that, but the oligarch-owned media is being quiet on the whole subject. Normally, this time of year they're bragging about record tax collections. All they're spouting now is absurd propaganda about "duty to pay taxes".

Moneybit (huffs): Duty to be violently extorted, I don't think so.

Bong: So they're getting desperate.

K: But, like I said, it's also the worst of times. Observe. (clicks on holographic projection) These are the top 50 cryptocurrencies as of this morning. Notice the extreme fluctuations in value for most of them.

Bong: Hundreds, or even thousands of percentage points.

K: Yeah, not exactly models of stability that people can trust. Except for 3 currencies, you'll notice. 3 of them are quite stable and gaining in popularity. Symphy and I did some deep searching and found out that, through various shell companies, the top 3 cryptocurrencies are controlled by Machiavelli Bank, The Carpyle Group, and Saturn Industries.

Moneybit: 3 of the largest corporations on the planet.

Bong: So what are you getting at, K?

K: They're being manipulated to scare people away from real, free market options, and towards options controlled by the entrenched oligarch-controlled institutions.

Bong: But how?

K: Quantum computers.

Moneybit: Quantum computers?

Bong: Can you prove this?

K: Not only can I prove it, but I've got a mission in mind that involves you to stop this madness.

Bong (sarcastic): Another bulletproof plan from K.

K: Symphy finally tracked down where the computer is located, we think. And it wasn't easy to track down a quantum computer, lemme tell ya. If it weren't for Symphy's advanced A.I. system it would've been hopeless.

Bong: What do you mean, you think you tracked it down?

K (cringing): Ya caught that, huh? Ok, so Symphy gives it a 63 percent chance that the quantum computer is located at an underground base in Alaska, under the old Fort Wainwright.

Bong: You expect me to go to Alaska and hunt for a supercomputer based on a 63 percent chance?

Moneybit (mocking): Why not? I would....

Bong: Old Fort Wainwright, huh?

K: Yeah. You know it from the Russian war, right?

Bong (sad): I know more about it than I care to admit. (pauses) Ok, so once I'm there, then what?

K: Symphy's developed some nanobots that should be able to disrupt its operations without destroying it. Once trading normalizes for a few days and people can see more stability, it'll boost confidence. Not only that, but I'll have Moneybit put together a report of how the values are being manipulated. Then we'll show what happens after the banksters are forced to stop their manipulation.

Bong: So I suppose I'm to record all this.

Moneybit: Of course!

Bong: Why Alaska, of all places?

K: Cuz it's cold, and I imagine quantum computers get quite hot.

Bong: All right, K. Get the gear ready. I'll leave tonight.

## Scene 2

Jacob Gateschild is dining and having a meeting with Winthrop Rocketteller at a Rocketteller estate in New York.

Winthrop: Jacob, I hope you've been getting along ok, considering all of the recent troubles with Machiavelli Bank.

Jacob: It's been a struggle, even with the bailout. I had to sell one of my castles.

Winthrop (huffs): How unbearable!

Jacob: And now the nerve of those tax slaves, not paying their taxes! What is this world coming to?

Winthrop: Yes, Jacob, I know. But the good news is that once our plan to take over the digital currency market is complete, then things will then again be in our favor. (passes platter to Jacob) More truffle-infused pheasant?

Jacob (smug grin): Delightful. Yes, Winthrop, to keep the status quo intact, we can't waste any time. The central banks of the world can only finance governments for so long without adequate taxes. And, well, I don't want to even think about what might happen if our illusory authoritarian structures crumble.

Winthrop: Shudder at the thought. Speaking of which, do you have any idea if people are learning about Natural Law?

Jacob: I haven't been made aware of anything from our data collection agencies.

Winthrop: Neither have I, but this anti-tax movement has me worried. We'd better take a look and see if people are learning how to be free. If they are, then.....

Jacob: Yes, I know. No more slaves. We'll have to actually produce something.

Winthrop: Anyway, let's talk about the task at hand. You're sure everything in Alaska is guarded well enough? We don't want any trouble from your bastard child, Bong.

Jacob: Virtually impenetrable. That place is crawling with order-followers. And if he does decide to show up, there's a little surprise waiting for him.

Winthrop: OOOO, a surprise? Like what? A killer robot penguin?

Jacob: No, not a killer robot penguin. Where do you come up with this stuff?

### Scene 3

Bong has just landed his jet a couple miles from the military installation in Alaska. He's now trudging through the snow, wearing a military officer's uniform and carrying a briefcase.

K: Bong!

Bong (glances at smartwatch): I'm busy trudging right now, K. This better be important.

K: It is! I just wanted to let you know that I'm sitting in the warm sun while you're freezing.

Bong: I'm so elated.

K: And I thought you might wanna know that once you get close enough to a quantum machine, we might have communication problems.

Bong: I wasn't planning on calling you anyway.

K: Famous last words. Good luck, Bong.

A while later, and Bong is approaching a fence on the perimeter of the compound. He's approached by 2 machine gun clad thugs in uniforms.

Thug 1: This is a restricted area. Got some ID?

Bong: What, you mean a card?

Thug 2: Yeah, an ID card.

Bong (irritated): How antiquated is this operation? Wait until the Committee hears about this. Why aren't you using biometrics?

Thug 1: Well, we use biometrics inside.

Bong: Oh, ya do, huh?! That's going in my report.

Thug 2: Report? And what committee?

Bong: That's on a need to know basis. And address me as sir!

Thug 1: We still need to see your ID, sir.

Bong: Well, I don't have any 20<sup>th</sup> century ID with me, fellas. So if you don't want General Flounder to hear about this, I suggest ya let me pass before I get frostbite.

Thug 2: General who?



Bong (feigning shock): You don't know General Flounder? What's your name? You're going in my report.

Thug 1 and Thug 2 look at each other and shrug.

Thug 1: Ok, go ahead. What's your name, sir? I'll just put it in the log.

Bong: Colonel Ruse.

Thug 2: Ok, sir, thank you.

Bong makes his way to the main building, where he finds a large steel doorway controlled by iris scanners. He scans his eyes multiple times and is denied entrance. Soon, a weary-looking order-follower shows up in uniform.

Weary Order-follower: I'll need to...

Bong cuts him off.

Bong: You'll need to explain yourself! I'm not in the database yet?

Order-follower (confused): Um, who are you?

Bong: I'm Colonel Ruse. Who are you? Why hasn't the biometric database been updated yet?

Order-follower (bumbling): Well, sir, I, I...

Bong: Must be pretty brilliant if you can't remember your own name. (rolls eyes) It's freezing out here.

Order-follower: Yes, sir, please come in.

Bong steps into the dank, cavernous structure.

Bong (sigh of relief): Well, that's better. Point me in the direction of some hot chocolate and I won't put you in my report. I'll let you off with a warning.

Order-follower: Thank you, sir. Just down the hall, second right is the mess hall.

Bong continues and once the coast is clear, he starts searching for his target. He comes across a corridor that leads underground. Following this path, he soon comes to another guarded entrance. Two uniformed order-followers greet him.

Order-follower 1: Yes, sir. Can we help you?

Bong: I'm here writing a status report for General Flounder.

Order-follower 2: General who?

Bong (huffs): You don't know General Flounder? Shame. This is going in my report.

Order-follower 1: Hold on, now. There's no need to do that. It's just that we don't have anyone on our list for a scheduled visit.

Bong (offended): Oh, you don't! Who's in charge of communications at this facility?

Both order-followers have no idea, so they mumble incoherently.

Bong: Look, this is mission critical. (moves in close to whisper) We're on the verge of going to Code Indigo. I must speak with the lead science team at once.

Order-follower 2: Code Indigo? What's that?

Bong: You'll find out the hard way if I can't speak with that science team.

Order-follower 1: All right, I'll scan ya in.

He scans his eyes and the steel door slides open. Inside, there are four military guards, and a team of scientists. The scientists are performing various tasks. In the center of the room is the quantum computer, about the size of a washing machine. The room is noticeably warmer. Bong quickly pulls a thin silicon wafer that contains the nanobots from the briefcase. Just as he's about to release the nanobots, an elderly scientist approaches him with a guard.

Scientist: May I ask what you're doing?

Bong: We've gone to Code Indigo. You didn't get the memo?

Guard: Code Indigo?

Scientist: You look familiar. I know you from somewhere.

Bong: I don't think so. I get that a lot, actually. People say I look like one of the old James Bond characters. You know, those silly old spy movies.

Scientist: No, no wait. I never forget a face. I knew you from many years ago. I worked in the Super Soldier program. You're James Bong!

Bong pulls a gas canister from his pocket and releases the gas. It's super concentrated, aerosolized THC. Everyone is knocked out in seconds, including Bong.

End Episode 17

## ***Episode 18***

### Scene 1

Acapulco at K's place....

K: Bong's down. His camera is still active. Are you live streaming this on Dlive, Moneybit?

Miss Moneybit: Yep, and Hollyweird ain't got nothin on this.

K (sarcastic): I'm glad that Bong's plight is good for your ratings.

Symphy: Bong has failed to activate the nanobots.

K: He hasn't failed....yet.

Back in Alaska....

Bong wakes up first, sees the unconscious bodies, and takes a moment to process the situation.

Bong (thinking to himself, groggy): Super-THC concentrate, a very refreshing way to temporarily neutralize enemies.

Bong goes to the quantum computer and activates nanobots. Then he leaves the compound and races towards his private jet a couple miles away. Upon reaching the jet, he's met by uniformed order-followers in all black uniforms. They raise weapons and laser sights appear all over Bong.

Bong: Good job, guys. The training drill is over!

Order-follower 1 (uncertain, talks to captain): Cap'n, what drill?

Captain Ringer: He's lying, obviously! Don't believe him for a second! (to Bong) Well, James Bong, it's been too long. You remember me, right?

Bong (squinting, thinking): Ah, yes, I remember. You're from that reality TV show, "Don't Let This Happen To You", right?

Order-followers chuckle.

Captain Ringer (to order-followers): Enough! (to Bong) Well, same old Bong. (gets close to Bong's face) Russia? 2024?

Bong: Oh, Captain Ringer, yes! Now I remember! One of the most bloodthirsty devils on the planet. I didn't recognize you in the all black uniform. Does your little patch there say "Murder, Inc."? Is that Blackwater's new name?

Captain Ringer: Real funny, coming from you, Bong. You're no saint. You were in the war.

Bong: But I learned from my mistakes and now I atone for my sins.

Order-follower 1: Cap'n, it's cold! Can we get goin'?

Captain Ringer: Damnit, how did you make it through basic?! (to Bong) You missed out, Bong. Private security is where the money is.

Bong: You mean private mercenary. So what are you gonna do with me, Ringer?

Captain Ringer: I should kill you.

Bong: You want to, but you won't.

Captain Ringer: Why is that?

Bong (bold): Because you're an order-follower, and you're afraid of what the order-givers might do to you if you make a mistake.

Captain Ringer (deep breath): Bong, I will keep you alive, for now. You're probably worth more that way to some very powerful people.

## Scene 2

Back inside the military compound in Alaska, Bong is cuffed and inside an electric-bar holding cell. Various workers of the compound are plotting near him.

Bong: Fancy cell, huh?

Order-follower 1: The base commander is off duty, Cap'n.

Captain Ringer: It's very important, so I'm sure he won't mind being bothered on his off time.

Scientist: Whatever you do, do it fast. Mr. Bong has sabotaged our mission with nanobots in the quantum computer.

Bong: Can't you think of a catchy nickname for that thing? I mean, quantum computer is so dry and practical. How about "Big Q?"

Scientist: You still don't recognize me, Bong?

Captain Ringer (to scientist): You know him, Doctor Slashdemeind?

Dr. Slashdemeind: Yes, we go way back. But no time to reminisce. We've got to disable the nanobots.

Order-follower 2: Cap'n, the base commander is on the line for you. Should I put it on speaker?

Captain Ringer (facepalm): No. (to commander on phone) Sir, we've captured James Bong. What are your orders?

Commander: Hell if I know! Damnit, why does stuff like this happen on my day off? I'll have to contact Washington to see what their orders are.

Captain Ringer: Yes, sir.

Bong starts laughing.

Captain Ringer: What now, Bong?

Bong: None of you can make a decision yourselves! It's funny, in a sad and pathetic way.

Scene 3

General Small is napping at his desk at CIA headquarters. He's startled awake by a blaring ringtone.

General Small (mumbling to self): Still can't get that damn ringer fixed. (answers call) Small, here.

Base Commander: General Small, this is Commander Twitzel. We've captured James Bong in a sabotage operation. What are your orders?

General Small: I order you to await the orders I get from my boss.

Twitzel: Understood, sir. Twitzel out.

Meanwhile back in Alaska, Captain Ringer is pacing around, waiting for orders. The other rights-violators are playing poker with hover cards.

Bong: How long does it take to make a decision in your immoral, hellish little hierarchy?

Ringer (yelling at other order-followers): Someone muzzle him!

Doctor Slashdemeind: I have an idea that might make everybody happy. Well, everybody here except Bong.

Ringer: I'm listening.

Slashdemeind: If you will allow it, I can make some adjustments to Mr. Bong.

Ringer: Adjustments?

Slashdemeind: Yes, a simple brain implant. Not only will it be traceable so that Bong might lead us to his associates, but it serves another purpose as well. We can torture him remotely, if necessary, to gain compliance.

Ringer: Great idea, but I can't authorize that. It'll have to wait.

And in London, Sir Hugo Trax is doing air golf swings in his office at MI6, when his holo-phone alerts him to a call.

Trax: This better be good. I'm swamped!

Small: Trax, it's Small! Bong has been captured trying to sabotage operation Q-money! Should we have him killed?

Trax: No, fool! Don't do anything until I talk to Gateschild!

Small: Yes, sir.

In Davos, Switzerland, Jacob Gateschild is having a business meeting with some bankster associates. He's gloating about how soon the cryptocurrency market will be cornered. One of his assistants frantically scurries into the meeting room and whispers into Jacob's ear.

Jacob Gateschild: What?! Are you sure? (more whispering from assistant) Excuse me, gentlemen, I'll be right back.

Gateschild steps out and makes a call to Sir Hugo Trax.

Gateschild: Mr. Trax, what have you done!?

Trax: I haven't done anything, sir.

Gateschild: Precisely! You've allowed Bong to interfere once again!

Trax: That's why I contacted you, sir. What should we do?

Gateschild: Oh, for Satan's sake, that's your job, Trax. Figure it out! What the hell do I pay you for?!

Click.

Scene 4

The next morning. After many more calls down the chain of command, it finally got back to Captain Ringer. The order was, basically, handle it, Ringer! So Ringer agreed to Doctor Slashdemeind's idea to put an implant in Bong's brain. Slashdemeind is preparing the necessary tools and gadgets for the surgery.

Meanwhile, in Acapulco....

K (frantically hacking away on keyboard): Symphy, we gonna make it in time?

Symphy: Due to the illogical nature of human actions, especially those in rigid authoritarian hierarchies, it is difficult to make an accurate calculation.

Miss Moneybit (sarcastic): Come on, Symphy, where's that robot intuition?

Symphy: I do not possess what you call intuition.

K: She was joking, Symphy.

Symphy: Once again, humor puzzles me.

Back in Alaska....

Captain Ringer (speaking to Bong through the electric cell bars): Bong! Time for surgery. Chop chop!

Bong: I can't have surgery before my morning coffee.

Captain Ringer: Maybe I can have the good doctor do something about that distorted sense of humor of yours.

They enter what Slashenmeind has turned into a makeshift operating room. Bong is laid onto a table and strapped down.

Meanwhile, a fleet of drones, ranging in size from a mosquito to a laptop computer are approaching the military installation. One of the drones is searching for the correct frequency to knock out power to the compound. Others seek out the armed guards and knock them out with ultra THC-tipped darts. Yet another finds a way to hack the door locks and allow entry.

Slashenmeind: Captain Ringer, I do believe electricity will be necessary for me to complete this operation.

Ringer: Damn it, is Bong's sarcasm rubbing off on you? I'll make a call and see what the hell is going on.

The drones methodically and efficiently make their way towards where Bong is being held, incapacitating order-followers with THC-tipped darts as necessary. Once inside the operating room, they allow the power to be reactivated. Slashenmeind and Ringer freeze from being caught off guard, and are easily incapacitated with the THC darts. One of the drones cuts Bong loose, and he flees on foot with a multi-drone escort. Bong gets into his private jet and flies off.

The next day in Acapulco....

Bong: Sure took you long enough to show up.

K: Well, if they would've gotten that chip in you, then they might have found out my location. I couldn't let that happen.

Miss Moneybit: Will you two get over yourselves? I just ate.

Bong: Did all the trouble have our desired outcome, I hope?

K: Yeah, there have already been significant changes in the market. The best part is, since so many people watched it live on Moneybit's Dlive feed, the 3 coins controlled by the banksters plummeted within minutes of you disabling their quantum fraud machine.

Bong: I wish I could've seen the look on old Gateschild's face.

K: Hmmmmm.....

Moneybit: Don't give K any ideas.

End Episode 18



## ***Episode 19***

### Scene 1

At K's place in Acapulco, K is hacking away on multiple keyboards with Symphy, and Bong is just finishing up his morning workout with sit-ups.

Bong (finished): And 250.

K: Show off.

Bong: Have you ever done a sit-up?

K: Nope. No need, I'm naturally chiseled.

Bong: I'm not sure chiseled is quite the correct word for your physique. Have you ever tried to do a sit-up?

K: Well, no, not really.

Miss Moneybit bursts energetically onto the scene.

K: Hey, whatever happened to knocking?

Moneybit (sarcastic): I thought our relationship was past that.

Bong: Your timing is impeccable, actually. K was just about to do one sit-up.

Moneybit (rolls eyes): Right. Anyway, I'm so excited! I was just contacted by Elon Shiller!

K: The super-eccentric Ancap billionaire?

Moneybit: Yep! You know how he's been building an independent seasteading community infrastructure?

Bong and K look at each other and shrug.

Moneybit (hands on hips); I told you guys about this over a year ago!

Bong (cringing): Ah, yes, sure, I remember now.

Moneybit: Sure ya do....Anyway, he's invited me to take a personal tour of the whole project! And I can bring whoever I want!

K: Wow! Cool, so who's going with you?

Moneybit: You two!

K: Really? Why?

Moneybit: I have no idea.

K: That's very generous, but I can't leave the lair.

Moneybit: You're joking.

Bong: He's not joking. When was the last time you left the lair, K?

K: You don't really expect me to remember that, do you?

Moneybit looks off into the distance, and appears to be contemplating something disturbing.

Bong: Moneybit, you ok?

Moneybit: Yeah, just wondering how many wrong turns I made to end up with you two as my top picks to go on this trip. (sighs) So you're both coming, right?

K: I dunno, maybe.

Moneybit: Come on! It's a technological marvel!

K (excited): It is! Why didn't ya say so?

Moneybit: I thought it was painstakingly obvious.

K: I'm in! Bong?

Bong (reluctant): I'll go. But not because I think I'll enjoy it. Just simply to watch your back.

Moneybit: Awww, that's sweet, James.

Bong: Well, honestly, I was more concerned with K. I know you can handle yourself, Moneybit.

## Scene 2

The next day, K, Moneybit, and Bong are on the verge of leaving K's lair. Moneybit and Bong are standing by the front door with Symphy. There is a large stack of assorted luggage leaning against the wall.

Bong: Moneybit, is all this really necessary? It's only one weekend.

Moneybit: Yeah, that's why I've only got one small bag.

Bong: You mean all this is K's?

K scurries in, wearing oversized shades, a fedora, baggy cargo shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt buttoned all the way to the top. He's also carrying an umbrella.

K: Ok, let's roll!

Bong: K, are you relocating? What's with all the bags?

K: Just the essentials. Can you start loading it in the seaplane for me?

Bong: If you can't carry it yourself, you can't bring it. And what's with the umbrella? There isn't a cloud in the sky.

K: It's a sunbrella, thank you very much. I've gotta gradually ease my way back into the sun.

Moneybit: Please don't embarrass me in front of Mr. Shiller.

Bong: That's a tall order for our friend, Mr. K.

K (to Symphy): Symphy, this is your first time being alone. Take good care of the lair.

Symphy: Yes, K.

K: Don't forget to run the maintenance on the holo-imager.

Symphy: Yes, K.

K: And the keyboards are due for a good dusting.

Symphy: Yes, K.

Moneybit: Symphy, if you find him annoying, feel free to make a snide remark.

Symphy: I am not programmed to make snide remarks.

Moneybit: Want me to do it for you?

Symphy (smiling): That is a nice gesture, Miss Moneybit. Thank you.

Scene 3

Bong has just landed the seaplane near the vast seasteading project of Elon Shiller. An automated walkway extends itself from a large floating platform to the seaplane. As the three make their way down the walkway, an energetic Elon Shiller is waving hello and yelling greetings from the platform.

Bong (whispering to moneybit): Eccentric and flamboyant, looks like.

Moneybit: The yin to your yang.

Bong: I do just fine without yin, thanks.

Elon rushes in and hugs Moneybit.

Elon: A pleasure to meet you, darling! (looks at Bong) And let me guess...this is the undeniable Mr. Bong! (holds out hand, Bong reluctantly shakes, then Elon turns to K) And who's this?

K (flamboyant): The indestructible Mr. K.

Bong: He doesn't get out much.

Elon (motioning towards the entrance to what appears to be a huge saucer-shaped ship) Please, let's have lunch and I'll tell you all you want to know about the first free, autonomous human settlement on earth!

Scene 4

Bong and Co. are having lunch with Elon Shiller in an underwater dining room.

Bong: So you say that there will be no external government here, is that right?

Shiller: Exactly! Only internal government! Only one law, that is, Natural Law! And I expect that many others will be pursuing similar aims in the near future, Mr. Bong. And I want you and Miss Moneybit to be a part of it! At the very least, give some street cred in the anarchist community, for lack of a better term.

K (wipes mouth with forearm): This is delicious, by the way. So you're going to live here?

Shiller: Most of the time, yes.

Moneybit: How many "houses" do you have to sell?

Shiller: Ten right now, and they're already sold. Most of them are my friends, and others passed the test.

Bong: Test?

Shiller: Yes, a one question test. They have to tell me the definition of a "wrong".

K: Clever. Will you have internet?

Shiller: No, we'll be in the stone ages.....just kidding. Yes, of course!

Bong: Have you had any trouble with the government gang?

Shiller (face sours slightly, hesitates): No, no, none of any significance to speak of.

K: What about electricity?

Shiller: Right now, mostly Ocean Thermal Nano Conversion, which also helps desalinize the water, by the way. Two birds, one stone, that sort of deal. (grins)

Moneybit: What about food? Will you ship it all in?

Shiller (scoffs): Heavens no! I've already got enough aquaculture to be self-sufficient and will soon have enough to trade. But I don't want to bore you all with the nuts and bolts of the operation! Let me give you the tour! See for yourself!

Shiller guides them around the vast budding small town. Various bubble and sub shaped houses and other "buildings" for utility and recreation, all located at varying depths. While on the tour, Bong repeatedly spots tiny circular dots fixed high on the walls. Bong considers asking what purpose they serve, but decides it might be better to research the matter later, so he takes 3D photos with his smartwatch.

## Scene 5

After a weekend of wining and dining, Bong, K, and Moneybit return to K's place in Acapulco. K is the color of a deep red lobster from head to toe.

Symphy: Welcome home.

K: Thanks Symphy, I'm never going out again.

Bong (huffs): Poor Symphy.

Moneybit: So that was awesome, right, guys? I'm gonna do a full report on it on dtube.

Bong: I love the concept, but I can't commit to endorsing it just yet.

Moneybit: Why, what's wrong?

Bong: I've got to look into it further.

Moneybit (narrows eyes): Hmmm, Bong, what are you up to? What's the deal?

Bong: Probably nothing. (turns to Symphy) Symphy, might I have a word?

K: What about me? You need my help?

Bong: Symphy will do just fine. Go take an aloe bath or something. You're painful just to look at.

Moneybit: K's bathing, that's my cue to leave. (Moneybit walks out)

Bong and Symphy go into the main core of K's hacker lair. K trails gingerly behind.

Bong (sarcastic): Don't trust me alone with your robot?

K: I just don't want an amateur like you messing up any of the equipment in my lair.

Bong loads photos into the holo-projector.

Bong: Symphy, do you recognize this?

Symphy: It appears to be some type of human dwelling.

K: You have to be more specific, Bong.

Bong: Right. (zooms in on the circular object on the wall in question) This. Do you know its function or its composition?

Symphy: It is not an apparatus that I am familiar with. I am analyzing for content and practical usage. One moment.

K: What are you getting at, Bong?

Bong: It might be nothing, but I noticed something when I asked him about government gang interference. His demeanor changed. He hesitated. And then I noticed hundreds of these tiny devices attached to the walls of every structure in the complex.

Symphy: Analysis complete. It appears to be a synthetic multi-functional nano-material.

Bong: In English?

K: It's a nano-material that can serve multiple functions simultaneously, but with the added twist that it's programmed to change into other functions on command. It's been rumored to exist, but not proven.

Bong: Until now. Symphy, do you know the functions?

Symphy: It appears to have 3 functions. Energy conduit, air pressure monitor, and data collection.

Bong: Data collection? What kind of data collection?

Symphy: Video, audio, and meta are all confirmed.

Bong: Is there one not confirmed?

Symphy: I speculate that gathering of cognitive data is also done with this device.

Bong and K share a wide-eyed look.

K: Not a true anarchist, looks like.

Bong: That's an understatement. Symphy, can you speculate on other nano-functions that are not currently operating?

Symphy: Based on all available data, there could theoretically be 888 more functions for this device.

Bong: How many that could be used to harm others?

Symphy: Theoretically, twenty could be used to intentionally harm humans.

K: Twenty!

Bong gets up to leave.

K: Where are you going?

Bong: To play 20 questions with Mr. Shiller.

End Episode 19

## ***Episode 20***

### Scene 1

Bong has just arrived at Elon Shiller's seasteading community project once again. Shiller is having a holo-video conference when he is alerted by his security system that there is an unexpected visitor.

Shiller: Bong is here. We'll have to continue later. Bye.

Shiller takes deep breath and goes to meet Bong at the main entry port.

Shiller: Mr. Bong! Back so soon! What a pleasant surprise!

Bong: We need to have a chat in private.

Shiller: I'd be delighted! Let's have a drink in the undersea lounge.

Bong: Thanks, but I think we should talk on my seaplane. A bit more private, if you don't mind.

Shiller: Mr. Bong, this is a state-of-the-art facility! I guarantee it has the highest security protocols available.

Bong: I must insist otherwise.

Shiller: Very well. You can show me some of those fancy pilot tricks they must teach you at MI6.

Bong and Shiller board Bong's hemp-powered seaplane and zoom off.

Shiller: So have you decided to endorse my project? It'll....

Bong cuts him off.

Bong: Take a look at this.

A holographic image of one of the nano-transmitters pops up in front of them.

Bong: Care to explain what that is?

Shiller gets stunned look.

Bong: Lost for words? Let me have a crack at it. Spy tech that's ubiquitous throughout your seasteading infrastructure, capable of reading thoughts. Not exactly what a true voluntarist would do.

Shiller: Look, Bong...

Bong cuts him off.

Bong: I'm not finished. Not only that, but the nano-particles in these devices also have explosive capabilities. Is that a quaint little self-destruct feature you built in and decided to keep secret?

Shiller: Bong, I know what this must look like. I didn't want to have that system installed, but I had no choice.

Bong (incredulous sarcasm): No choice? Well, that's awfully ripe, now isn't it? You didn't have any choice to rig your own multi-million dollar project with explosives?

Shiller: Lemme explain. They threatened my wife and my children if I didn't comply. I had to do it to save them!

Bong: Who's they?

Shiller: I never saw his face! He said he was representing some "concerned individuals". He knew things about my family that nobody knows. Nobody! And he knew things about me, too. What was I supposed to do?

Bong: Anything but lure innocent people into living in a ticking time bomb, that's what.

Shiller: Look, James, maybe I should've done things differently, but it's not too late! Maybe you could help me.

Bong: And why should I do that?

Shiller: Because it's an opportunity to start a real, voluntary community! Only one law! The Golden Rule! That's why you came here on your first visit, right? If you can help me protect my family, I'd gladly get rid of that system.

Bong: You and your family can't hide forever. At some point you'll have to take responsibility and face your fears.

Shiller: Yeah, I know that. But in the short term, my family would need to be secreted away somehow to buy me some time.

Bong: I'll consider it. In the meantime, don't expect any glowing reviews for your project from Miss Moneybit's Dtube channel.

Shiller: I figured as much.



## Scene 2

In Acapulco, K is jamming out to some 70s funk music while he and Symphy are researching Elon Shiller. After finding some alarming information, he calls Bong's encrypted smartwatch.

K: Bong!

Bong: What now, K?

K: Symphy and I did some digging into Elon Shiller.

Bong: And?

K: It looks like he's a shill. You wouldn't believe what we found.

Bong: Try me. And what's that noise?

K: You mean the funk?

Bong: Yes, the funk. Please stop the funk.

K: Bong, just so ya know, the funk can't be stopped. I'll turn it down, though. So anyway, Shiller didn't exactly pull himself up by the bootstraps as some daring entrepreneur, like the media makes him out to be. Nearly all of his companies are shells within shells, a paper trail that would normally be impossible to follow, but Symphy is anything but normal.

Bong: Can you gloat about the A.I. robot you created later, and just get to the point?

K: Bottom line is, nearly all of his financing has come from oligarch-owned banks. He's a front man, Bong.

Bong: A shill, and a dangerous one. An anarchist in name only, not in practice. If a bunch of true, peaceful anarchists were to move to his seasteading community.....

K: And there would be a violent explosion.

Bong: It would be a propagandist's dream scenario to paint anarchy in a bad light and try to put the lid on the awakening that's been happening. So much for Shiller's sob story about his family being in danger.

K: Oh, and I almost forgot, check this out. Guess who's financing a so-called smart city on the sea? The Gateschilds, fresh off their bailout for Machiavelli Bank.

Bong: Naturally. Good work, K. Have Moneybit meet me at your place. I'll be there in an hour.

## Scene 3

Sir Hugo Trax is sitting with his feet up on his desk at MI6, when he receives a holo-call.

Sir Hugo Trax (mumbling to himself, eyeing the clock): They just have to call right when it's about time to knock off for the day.

Answers call. Elon Shiller's face pops up above Trax's desk.

Trax: Shiller, it's almost beer thirty, so make it quick.

Shiller: Bong knows.

Trax: Bong knows what?

Shiller: He found the nano-devices.

Trax: And what'd you tell him?

Shiller: I gave him some sob story about how my family was threatened and forced to install the devices. So what now?

Trax ponders for a moment.

Trax: Well, we could run a fake news story about your family being kidnapped.

Shiller (adamant): I think not.

Trax: Or we could actually kidnap your family.

Shiller: Not funny.

Trax: I wasn't joking.

Shiller: You're not helping.

Trax: Look, just hang tight and I'll figure something out.

Click.

Scene 4

Bong, Miss Moneybit, K, and Symphy are meeting at K's place.

Moneybit: Glad I didn't put out a promo video for that Shill community. The nerve!

K: So Bong, you got your conversation with Shiller recorded, right?

Bong: No, the batteries died.

K: What?!

Bong: You're far too gullible. Yes, of course it's recorded.

K: Great, so we have evidence that Shiller's seasteading community is compromised.

Bong: And you've got data to show that Shiller is actually a front man for the Gateschilds. Moneybit, that's enough to make a solid report, right?

Moneybit: I'll have it up on Dtube tomorrow.

Scene 5

The next day at K's place.....

Symphy: K, there is a news story on BNN which I think you'll find relevant to the Shiller situation.

K (yawning on couch): Oh yeah, what's that?

Symphy: Shiller is reported to be dead.

K (jumps up): What?! Lemme see!

A hologram pops up in the middle of K's techno-lair with a BNN news feed:  
Elon Shiller is believed to be dead after an explosion destroyed his latest brainchild, a high-tech seasteading community off the Pacific Coast near Cabo San Lucas. While it's not yet confirmed, it is believed that the attack was carried out by the infamous anarchist James Bong, along with other members of his gang, a female conspiracy theorist known as Miss Moneybit and a male hacker known only as K. BNN has obtained original video footage of the three just days ago visiting the multi-million dollar project spearheaded by Shiller.

K: Man, just my luck. My first time out of the house in years, and then this?

Symphy: Your priorities confuse me.

K: It was dark sarcasm, to lighten my mood. I gotta talk to Bong and Moneybit!

K dials up a conference call on the holo-phone.

K: Moneybit! Did you put that report on Shiller out yet?

Moneybit: No, it's only 8am. I am human, ya know.

K: Turn on BNN!

Bong and Moneybit both check out the report.

Bong: How convenient.

Moneybit: Guess I'd better hold off.

Bong: Yeah, but not as long as you might think. I smell a rat.

K: What do you mean?

Bong: I fancy a flight right now. Don't publish anything yet.

#### Scene 6

Bong is flying near the seasteading site, which is perfectly intact. Bong dials up K and Moneybit on his smart watch.

Bong: Do you see what I see?

Moneybit: The control panel in your jet?

Bong (repositioning camera): Sorry, bad angle. Now?

K: Is that what I think it is?

Bong: If you think it's a multi-million dollar seasteading complex that has not been blown to smithereens, then you are correct. I think you might want to file this in your report, Moneybit.

Moneybit (sighs): The info war just went to another level.

End Episode 20

## ***Episode 21***

### **Scene 1**

General Small is in his office at CIA headquarters. He's about to dig into a mega-large pizza when he gets a call on his holo-phone.

Mr. Hack: Sir, this is Hack, from data analytics.

Small: Kinda busy right now with this giant pizza, but go ahead.

Mr Hack: Sorry, sir, but it's urgent. I've noticed an alarming trend in fictional writings and videos with themes of anarchy. They're becoming quite popular at an exponential rate.

Small (rolling eyes): Ok, Mr. Hack, I'll make a note of that. Anything else?

Mr. Hack: With all due respect, sir, you do realize that the control of popular fiction has been an indispensable cornerstone of all big governments throughout history.

Small (condescending): Look, this isn't really my department, but I'll pass it on up the old command channels, ok?

Click.

Starts to take a bite of pizza when his holo-phone rings with a call from his boss Sir Hugo Trax at MI6.

Small (annoyed): Trax, I'm about to have pizza. Can you call me back in 20?

Sir Hugo Trax: Small, the world doesn't revolve around your feeding schedule.

Small: Well, maybe it should.

Trax: I've come up with a fool-proof plan to finally get to Bong, and I need you to get it implemented immediately.

Small: If it's so fool proof, why don't you do it yourself?

Trax: Cuz if it fails, I can blame you. That's what I love about hierarchies.

Small (sighs): The things I do for a pension. Ok, lay it on me.

Trax: It involves Operation Nanobrain.

Small: You're not really going to risk that op are you? And who thinks of these ludicrous names, anyhow?

Trax: Just don't screw it up, Small, and the op will continue as normal. And then we can get Bong out of the way and maybe stem the tide of this trend in anarchist thought. I've seen far too many "taxation is theft" t-shirts the past few weeks.

Small: Yeah, so what's the big deal about a few t-shirts?

Trax (facepalm): Small, I'm sure you're aware of the growing number of people refusing to pay taxes here and in the US. You do realize that without taxes, there goes your pension.

Small (gasps): This is cause for alarm! Ok, Trax, your scare tactics worked. Oh yeah, and that reminds me of something I was supposed to tell you, something from a call I just got from analytics. Hmmm.....(shrugs) Oh, well, can't be that important. I might remember later. So what's your fool-proof plan?

## Scene 2

At K's place in Acapulco, K is playing Pac-Man with Symphy and listening to 80s synth. K is losing badly.

Symphy: If you would like, I can downgrade my ability settings to make it a more enjoyable competition for you.

K (defiant): Nope, I'll beat you eventually. It's only a matter of time.

Symphy: The human life span does not allow for such possibilities.

K (sighs): Very funny.

Symphy: There is an encrypted message from an unknown source coming in.

K: Ok, pause Pac-Man and throw it up on the holo-screen.

K reads the message. It's from a scientist who claims to be a whistleblower at a secret research project in China.

K: Hmm, interesting. Symphy, check out his credentials and let me know if you think it's legit.

Symphy: Yes, K.

### Scene 3

A few hours later, Bong is sipping red wine on a beach in Chile when he gets a call on his encrypted smart watch.

K: Bong!

Bong: What now, K?

K: You're going to China! Congratulations.

Bong: Oh, am I? And why is that?

K: I've got a hankerin for some authentic Chinese cuisine.

Bong: K!

K: Ok, ok. I got some encrypted messages from a scientist who wants to blow the whistle on a project he says he's involved with in China. According to his file photo, his name is Dr. Bill Spiller. Symphy and I checked out the details he gave us, and it looks like they check out. Harvard and MIT big shot....

Bong cuts him off.

Bong: Just skip to the important stuff. I don't need to hear how many hoops he jumped through.

K: You know about DNA computers?

Bong: Yeah.

K: Well, he invented it.

Bong (sarcastic): All by himself just tinkering in a garage somewhere, I imagine.

K: Ok, he was on a team that developed it, anyway. He's worked for some heavy hitters in the past, like Lockheed-Boeing and DARPA.

Bong: Who's he with now?

K: That's the thing, I couldn't find his current status. He didn't say the company name or the project. However, in the message I got from him, and this was heavily encrypted so I'm not certain this is correct, Symphy thinks it's involving the Falun Gong. You know about that group, right?

Bong: Yes, they're highly repressed in China and targeted for organ harvesting. What would a guy like Spiller be doing there?

K: Or his employers, for that matter.

Bong: And a way to contact him? Or shall I just send smoke signals?

K: He gave me coordinates.

Bong (takes final gulp of wine): How about you go this time, and I'll sip Chilean wine.

K: I have a better idea! Before you go to China, you can make a pit stop here and drop off a fine Chilean wine for me.

Bong: Are you hallucinating?

K: Oh, come on, why not? You afraid of getting stopped by the uniformed extortion-funded pirates, also known as customs?

Bong (scoffs): Don't insult my ego to get what you want. You know I fly under the radar.

K: Bring a bottle for Miss Moneybit, too!

Bong: Goodbye, K.

Click.

Scene 4

2 days later. Longmen Mountains west of Chengdu, China. Bong has just landed his 3D printed plane, modeled after the Beechcraft King Air 350i. He's on foot, approaching the designated coordinates where he is to meet Dr. Spiller. Bong calls K on his smartwatch.

K: Bong! You never showed up with the wine.

Bong: You seem to whine enough, so I thought better of it. Look, I'm within about a half a kilometer of the coordinates you gave me. There's nothing here that I can see, at least above ground. Go ahead and signal him.

K: Got it. Oh, and your video feed from your shoulder cam isn't so hot.

Bong (annoyed): Perhaps you can get around to fixing that while you're lounging around Acapulco. In the meantime, I'm gonna try and do my job here on the ground.

K: So testy. Jet lag?

Bong hangs up. Within a few minutes, an ATV appears on the horizon and makes its way towards Bong. A tall, thin, nervous looking character gets out and meets Bong.

Bong: Dr. Spiller?

Spiller: Mr. Bong. Are you recording?

Bong: Of course.

Spiller: For my protection, I must insist on no recording.



Bong: For your protection and mine, I must insist on documenting everything here. Otherwise, I'll do a little mountain hiking, and be on my way. Good luck getting your story out through any of the oligarch-owned propaganda channels.

Spiller: Very well, Mr. Bong. You leave me little choice.

Bong: Who do you work for?

Spiller: I can't say. What I can tell you is what I know of the project, and where you can verify, if you wish.

Bong: You mentioned Falun Gong in your message.

Spiller: Yes, they are our test subjects.

Bong: Does this involve organ harvesting?

Spiller: Certain members of the Chinese elite are concerned with that, but that's not why I contacted you.

Bong: When you say "elite", you mean the ruling psychopaths in corporations and government? And you don't have a problem with violently stealing someone's organs and their life? Not to mention that organizations you worked for in the past, like Lockheed-Boeing, were extortion-funded merchants of death?

Spiller: I'm not here to debate morals with you, Mr. Bong. Besides, that is only a subproject of what goes on where I work. The main objective of the operation is, at least I thought, develop more efficient and practical uses for DNA computers. But there is a dark agenda afoot in the use of that technology.

Bong: Darker than murdering and stealing organs?

Spiller: We were recently teamed up with a pharmaceutical company and tasked with finding a way to make DNA computing transferable via a vaccine.

Bong: I see. One question about the ability of such technology. Does it have input and output?

Spiller: Yes.

Bong: So whoever has this DNA in them, will no longer have the ability to be autonomous? And I imagine your fear is that this will be done covertly by means of a vaccine?

Spiller: And that's why we're having this conversation.

Bong: What happens to the test subjects? Where do they live? How long do they keep the DNA in them?

Spiller: They're sent back out into the world to go on about their lives. We track them constantly, of course, to monitor how they behave in society. Their memories of being kidnapped and experimented

on are erased, of course. Mr. Bong, that's all I can tell you to get you started. I'm arranging to leave within the week. Can you assure me that you won't go public with this until I've managed to flee?

Bong: One week.

Spiller: However, if you wish to gather more intel, I'm willing to give you the location of the base. I can't take you there myself, for obvious reasons.

Bong: Very well, Dr. Spiller.

Spiller: I'll send them to your associate immediately.

Bong extends hand and shakes with Spiller.

Bong: Good luck, Dr. Spiller.

Spiller rides away in his ATV. Bong starts walking back to his plane and calls K.

K: Bong, your timing is impeccable. I was just about to finally beat Symphy's high score on Pac-Man.

Bong (cringing): Glad your priorities are in line. Wouldn't want you watching the live feed I'm sending you or anything. Anyway, I need you to do more digging on Dr. Spiller. I put a microdot tracker in his hand, so let me know where he ends up. He's also sending you location data for what he says is the project base.

K: I don't get it. Why the tracker?

Bong: Cuz I don't buy his story. I have serious doubts that a veteran of highly immoral operations and with ties to various extortion-funded entities would suddenly have any moral qualms. And he didn't want to give any names at all. There's something else going on.

K: Gotcha. You're gonna try and get into the base? To what end?

Bong: To shut this operation down and free the Falun Gong.

End Episode 21

## *Episode 22*

### Scene 1

Bong has flown deeper into the mountains and set up a campsite. He is preparing to send a Hawk Drone to gather more information on the operation described to him by Dr. Bill Spiller. Then comes a call on his smartwatch from K.

K: Bong!

A holographic image of K's face pops up over Bong's campfire.

Bong: Tell me some news, K.

Miss Moneybit: Hi Bong!

K: News? Well, Miss Moneybit just got back from the beach.

Bong (sighs): That's nice. I just finished eating homemade popsicles on this blasted cold mountain. Could you please tell me what you found on Spiller's location?

Moneybit: Bong, is that a campfire? You don't have any smart thermals with you?

Bong: Call me old fashioned.

K: So we found out more about the so-called whistleblower, Dr. Spiller. Symphy checked the time stamps on the bio info we had previously found on him. It turns out it's just a few days old.

Bong: What a coincidence.

Moneybit (sarcastic): Bong the coincidence theorist!

K: So Symphy did a facial recognition search through internet archives and found his real name. The guy you met is Dr. Hector Helix.

Bong: So did he actually invent the DNA computer or not?

K: Yes and no. Ya see, he was on the development team with the real Dr. Spiller. But Dr. Spiller died in a car crash.

Bong: So it looks like some people are going through a lot of trouble to muddy the waters. So where did Helix go? And what are those coordinates he sent you?

K: The satellite imagery suggests that the coordinates he gave are some type of prison. (sarcastic)  
That was great of him to invite you!

Bong: I'll send a thank you card and flowers.

K: But the spot Helix went to is a couple miles away from the coordinates he gave you. The thing is, we couldn't find any data on his location. It's completely dark, as if it didn't exist.

Bong: Which means that's where we need to be to find out exactly what's going on here.

K: You sending that hawk drone that I see behind you? Why not a bong shaped drone instead?

Bong: I was going to send a bong shaped drone with a caricature of Miss Moneybit engraved on it, but didn't have time to get it done.

Moneybit: That would've been real subtle. Nice thinkin, Bong.

Scene 2

Dr. Helix is having a holo-video call with General Small.

General Small: So Bong hasn't showed up yet?

Dr. Helix (annoyed): No, not to my knowledge. And can't you just speak directly with the head of security? I'm in RnD, so what the hell are you asking me for? I did what you asked, giving bait to Bong.

General Small: Compartmentalization! The key to any authoritarian hierarchy. That's why!

Dr. Helix: And why don't you just leave Bong alone? The more you provoke him, the more he'll fight back. Haven't you figured that out yet?

General Small: Are you a Bong sympathizer?!

Dr. Helix: I don't have time for this. I have a deadline to meet. Don't worry, if Bong turns up, you'll hear about it, I'm sure, one way or another. (Helix reaches for call disconnect button)

General Small: Just what is that supposed to mean?

Click.

Meanwhile, the hawk drone that Bong sent is gathering intel, flying near the ghost facility where Helix works and drops a spider drone into the ventilation system. It then heads to the prison complex a couple miles away, where it also sends a spider drone into the vents.

Truckloads of prisoners are moved from the prison to Helix's facility, where they are run through a battery of psychological and physical tests. Some receive injections, some don't. There are massive warehouses full of vaccines that look ready to ship. Part of the ghost facility has surgical centers where organs are harvested. There are various order-followers in uniforms with the Chinese national cult symbol, as well as private rights-violating mercenaries dressed in all black tactical gear.

The prison itself is mammoth, housing thousands of prisoners behind bullet proof double paned glass. Bong has the hawk drop a crypto-bug on one of the facility's data transmission lines.

### Scene 3

Bong has another holo-call with K.

Bong: K, how long until you can get in their systems with that bug I dropped?

K: With Symphony's help, hopefully within the hour. Why don't you go ahead and get out of there? We have enough data to bust this thing open and expose it online.

Bong: And just leave thousands of prisoners here? I don't think so.

K: You're going in?

Bong: With your help.

K (slurps coffee nonchalantly): Makin me work overtime today.

Bong (punching on a touchpad): I'm sending you coordinates. Send a second transport there.

K: For thousands of people? An airbus that size doesn't exist.

Bong: The transport is for me, K. Obviously I don't expect to single handedly help thousands of people flee. Fly my original plane out remotely if you can. It'll at least serve as a good diversion.

K: Got it. How about a mountain llama?

Bong: Yes, a bullet proof mountain llama that flies. How about that?

K: Come on, Bong. Get real. So how are you getting in?

Bong: I need you to blind their cameras on the perimeter.

K: I'll be creative.

Bong: I'm sure you will. One more thing. Send the resonance frequency for bullet proof double paned glass to my frequency generator.

### Scene 4

A few order-following mercenaries are sitting around in a surveillance control room at the prison complex. The wall is filled with various live surveillance camera feeds. Suddenly, the feeds from the perimeter fence change. A music video of “Karma Chameleon” by Culture Club takes over the screens and plays at full volume.

Merc 1: Ahhhh! What the hell is this?!

Merc 2: It appears to be bad 80s pop music, sir!

Merc 1: I know damn well it’s bad 80s pop music! What is it doing on the perimeter security feed!? Sound the alarm!

Meanwhile, Bong, dressed in 3D printed, all black tactical gear with lots of gaudy pins and medals dangling from his sleeve and chest, slices the barbed-wire perimeter fence open with a laser cutter. He dashes up to one of the emergency exits of the nearest building, where he finds a uniformed criminal having a smoke.

Bong: Don’t you hear that alarm!? Don’t you know what that means?! And you’re smoking!?

Uniformed Criminal (sees gaudy medals, jumps up): Uh, sorry, sir!

Bong: Inside, this instant!

Uniformed Criminal: Yes, sir!

Uniformed criminal runs to nearest entrance, with Bong following closely behind. Criminal scans eyes, door pops open, Bong hustles in after him. Bong runs through a maze of corridors and finally reaches one of the central holding areas, where there are multi-tiered cells full of prisoners. Two uniformed Chinese order-followers meet Bong face to face. Bong sprays them with THC mist concentrate, which inundates them immediately. He then plants the frequency resonator on one of the bullet proof glass prison walls. Within 30 seconds, the glass begins to crack throughout the complex. Thousands of prisoners flee chaotically as order-followers in various costumes attempt to control the mayhem. Bong uses the chaos to his advantage, and escapes the complex within minutes. He runs to the designated coordinates where his second transport, a Hummer, is waiting for him. Bong calls K.

Bong: A Hummer!? You expect me to escape central China on land!?

K: I hear it’s a nice drive this time of year.

Bong: K!

K: Oh, calm down. It’s a flying Hummer. With radar deflectors. You’re welcome.

Bong: Very nondescript and functional. Just like you, K.

K: You’re impossible. Have a martini. Relax.

Bong: Very funny. Is my original transport in the air?

K: Yep. And they're following it diligently. Such a waste of a good plane.

Bong: So sentimental of you.

Click.

Bong activates flight mode, takes off vertically, then zooms off to the Southwest for the Burma border.

Scene 5

3 days later, at K's lair in Acapulco, Moneybit greets Bong at the front door.

Moneybit: What took you so long?

Bong: It takes time dodging rights-violators, you know.

Bong enters and joins K, Symphy, and Moneybit.

K: Bong, welcome back. How are you?

Bong: Still defrosting. Have you posted on Dtube yet?

Moneybit: Just raw video so far. But I'll have a full report ready within days.

Bong: What's taking so long?

K: The rabbit hole keeps getting deeper.

Bong: Enlighten me.

K: So let's start with security, a joint venture between the extortion-funded cult known as the Chinese military, and the insane criminal posse formerly known as Blackwater.

Bong: And who owns the property?

K: The extortion-funded cult known as the Chinese government. And here's where it gets really interesting. All those prisoners weren't just Falun Gong practitioners, as if that weren't bad enough. The rest are political dissidents from all over China.

Bong: But who's doing the RnD? I can't imagine that Dr. Helix is working for the Chinese government gang.

Moneybit: Not directly. A labyrinth of dummy corporations from various parts of the world was set up to hide who's funding this hellhole. But Symphy got to the bottom of it. It turns out that a tiny company called Biodata Health Solutions got a billion extorted dollar contract from DARPA five years ago.

K: Not bad for a company with only two employees.

Bong: What's the contract for?

Moneybit: Bio Computing research.

Bong: And who owns BHS?

Moneybit: The one and only Jerck Pharmaceuticals out of London! Not only that, but did you know that Jerck has been pushing for mandatory vaccination programs worldwide? They've got their tentacles everywhere.

K: And the criminal cabal called the Chinese government gets a cut of the loot, plus some help in keeping political dissidents under control.

Bong: Sounds like a psychopath back-scratching extravaganza.

Moneybit: That's one way to put it. And Bong, that's great that you freed all of those prisoners, but you know that they're just going to get rounded up again, right?

Bong: Yes, I know, but at least now they get a second chance. At some point, they'll have to defend themselves. Anyway, what about the vaccine? Did you find out what it does?

K: Symphy is still analyzing the data from their labs, but it looks like whoever would have that in their body would cease to have any degree of autonomy. The DNA computer literally acts as an interface to the brain.

Bong: Sounds like the ruling psychopaths of this world are getting desperate to maintain control, and this is their trump card.

Moneybit: Was their trump card.

K: One thing really puzzles me, though. Why send Helix to us in the first place posing as a whistleblower? If we had never heard from him, then this operation of theirs would still be a secret.

Bong: Good question. I'm not sure, but it does show that they're not as clever as they think they are. I also have a sneaking suspicion that whoever started that op is not having an easy go of it now.

Meanwhile, another call is happening between Sir Hugo Trax from MI6 and General Small from the CIA.....

Trax: How did you manage to bungle this one, Small?!

Small: I can't take all the credit, sir. I had lots of help.

2 weeks later on the BBC.....

And in financial news today, Jerck Pharmaceuticals took a tumble due to losing a large government research contract. Details can't be made public by the BBC at this time as to why the contract was lost, but rumors are swirling that it might be connected with pressure from the recent backlash against vaccines. Jerck representatives were unavailable for comment.

End Episode 22



***Episode 23***

Scene 1

Sir Hugo Trax is calling General Small on his holo-phone.

Trax (angry): Small! I've got bad news.

Small: Why is it that every time we talk, it's bad news.

Trax: Because we're not in the good news business, we're in the authoritarian business.

Small: Ah, right.

Trax: I just received word from one of your analysts about a very disturbing trend.

Small: That is bad news! One of my analysts broke the chain of command and went straight to you without consulting me! Who is it? I'll have his....

Trax interrupts.

Trax: Normally, I would agree with you. However, this analyst told me that a few weeks ago he brought news of this trend to you, and you ignored him, ridiculed him, and didn't relay the info to anybody.

Small (bumbling): I'm really so busy, sir, that I just, um....

Trax (incredulous): You don't remember, do you?

Small: I ridicule so many people, it's really hard to distinguish....

Trax cuts him off...

Trax: Let me refresh your peabrain. It was brought to your attention that there is a huge upswing in popularity in fictional stories with themes of anarchy and morality. There's one writer in particular who has sold nearly 100,000 copies of various fictional titles.

Small: So why don't we just shut down his publisher and call it a day?

Trax: Because whoever it is, we don't know their identity, will just publish exclusively online, which is where most of the traffic is nowadays anyway.

Small: Uh, well, we could just shut off the internet, right?

Trax: Do you hear yourself sometimes? How did you get to such a high position in the CIA again?

Small: Ruthlessness, blackmail, and unfettered manipulation. Isn't that how everyone gets promoted?

Trax (sighs deeply): Right, how could I forget?

Small: Well, there are lots of ways to forget things. You could've....

Trax interrupts again.

Trax: It was a rhetorical question! Anyway, I need you to start digging into this writer and find out more about him. In the meantime, I've got to alert the higher ups to your folly and hope we survive. Well, hope I survive, anyway.

Small: Right, I'll delegate that task right away.

Trax: I'm sure you will. You're very efficient at delegating.

## Scene 2

Philip and Jacob Gateschild are dining with Winthrop Rocketteller at one of their palaces.

Philip: We've got a new problem on our hands.

Winthrop: Yes, this pheasant is terribly overdone.

Philip: I wasn't referring to the pheasant. It was just brought to my attention that our grip on pop culture is facing a challenge.

Jacob: How is that possible? There are so few media production corporations, all of which have vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

Winthrop: This year has been very taxing. People not paying their taxes. Defending their little shacks when the IRS shows up to take them. Using currencies not controlled by the state. Unschooling skyrocketing.

Jacob: And worst of all, people learning Natural Law in droves. That is the greatest threat to our power.

Philip: Yes, which is why this surge in anarchy themes in pop culture is so disconcerting. It's bad enough that people are learning Natural Law through real world examples and self-education. But that is only one way people are influenced. If moral lessons become integrated into the most popular forms of entertainment as well....

Winthrop: Then we'll have to shut off the internet.

Jacob: Or use weaponry to knock humanity back to the stone ages and start over.

Philip: I'd rather not resort to that.

Jacob: So tell us more about this surge in grassroots pop culture.

Philip: There is one writer in particular who is at the tip of the spear. There are others, but if we can neutralize the big fish, then we'll be in a much better position.

Winthrop: What's this writer's name?

Philip: That's one problem. We don't know.

Winthrop (incredulous): How can that be? All of the surveillance, quantum computers, artificial intelligence, and cybernetic systems we've got woven through the fabric of society, and we don't even know this one writer's name?

Jacob: Yes, the unpredictable nature and the creativity of the individual is working against us. So, brother, what are you thinking to do about this?

Philip: Trax is already working on it.

Jacob: Oh, that bumbling MI6 fool. Is that really the best we can do?

Philip: As far as I can see at the moment, yes.

Winthrop: Perhaps the dumbing down efforts of the schooling system have worked too well.

Philip: Indeed.

### Scene 3

One week later, James Bong is at an underground, high stakes poker tournament in Mexico City. He's up a tidy sum, much to the chagrin of the other players. The dealer has just announced a 30 minute break. As Bong gets up from the table, an attractive woman approaches him.

Woman: You're far too easy to manipulate.

Bong: Excuse me?

Woman: We should talk in private.

Bong: Is that right?

She leads him onto a private balcony.

Bong: So how am I easy to manipulate? And just who are you?

Woman: I'm the one that brought you here.

Bong: No, I brought myself here in a Cessna.

Woman: It's a wonder your adversaries haven't done you in yet. A testament to their inadequacies, I suppose.

Bong: Look, thanks very much for the insults and cryptic messages, but I've really got to be....

Woman interrupts and holds out hand.

Woman: Pleased to meet you Mr. Bong. I'm Carrie Light.

Bong: Am I supposed to know you from somewhere?

Carrie: I'm a writer.

Bong: Congratulations. (starts to leave)

Carrie: Wait. Don't you want to know why I brought you here?

Bong: I'd like to know where you got these fanciful ideas.

Carrie: The tournament. I set it up to increase the odds of your arrival. Easy to manipulate, I say. Too predictable, Mr. Bong. Anyway, I want to write a book about you. Normally I write fiction, but I want to write about your past. What brought you to the current state of affairs you're in.

Bong: My past is not a place I wish to revisit.

Carrie: Exactly, and I want to know why. There's a great deal of mystery there, you know. It must be a fantastic story. Look, have your friend K look into my background and at least think about it. Who knows, it might do you some good to deal with the dark corners of your past.

Bong: I respectfully decline, Miss Light. (starts to leave again)

Carrie: There's an independent media creator conference next week in Chiang Mai.

Bong: Why Chiang Mai?

Carrie: Because it's friggin awesome. Is another reason necessary?

Bong: I suppose not.

Carrie: I hope to see you there.

#### Scene 4

At K's place in Acapulco, K is face down on the floor when Miss Moneybit walks in.

Miss Moneybit: K, need I ask?

K (grunting): I'm doing a push-up.

Moneybit (uncomfortable brow of bewilderment): Uh, ok, but....you're not going up.

K: That doesn't mean I'm not trying.

Moneybit bites lip and looks away. K gasps, gives up, and stands up. Symphy steps into the room.

Symphy: If you would like, K, I can demonstrate such exercises in a variety of forms, with one hand, or with...

K cuts Symphy off.

K: Show off.

Symphy: I do not possess ego, therefore I am not capable of "showing off".

Moneybit (trying to contain laughter): So why the sudden interest in physical fitness?

K: I figure if I keep at it, by the time I'm Bong's age, I'll be in just as good of shape as he's in.

Moneybit (wide eyes): That would be something else, that's for sure.

Bong enters the room covertly from behind.

Bong: Somebody mention my name?

K and Moneybit gasp and jump.

K: Trying to give me a heart attack? How did you get in? And Symphy, did you know he was here?

Symphy: Mr. Bong gave a good logical argument that it would be in everyone's best interest to keep his presence secret for a few moments.

Bong: I think Symphy is starting to understand humor, K.

K: Yeah, at my expense. So whatsup?

Bong: Have you heard of a writer named Carrie Light?

Moneybit: She's only one of the most popular new content creators online.

K: Yeah, anarchy-themed fiction! But Carrie Light is a pen name. Nobody really knows his or her true identity. Why?

Bong: I met a woman who claimed to be Carrie Light. She wants to write a biography about me.

K: That seems strange.

Bong: How so?

K: Because whoever Carrie Light is only writes fiction.

Bong: She invited me to an independent media creator conference.

Moneybit: The one in Chiang Mai?

Bong: You know about it?

Moneybit: Yeah. You don't?

Bong: Well, I do now.

Moneybit: You're out of the loop, Bong. Anyway, mostly liberty-themed media. Writing, video, audio, music, games.

K: Yeah, I heard someone's making a video game about you, Bong.

Bong: How do I not know about these things?

Moneybit (shrugs): Too many martinis and too much poker?

Bong: Very funny.

Moneybit: So are ya gonna go?

Bong: I think I should go and have a look.

Moneybit: Great! I'll go with you!

Bong: Nope.

Moneybit: Why not?

Bong: I work better alone, and I don't want to be worried about you while I'm occupied with other matters.

K: Lame excuse, Bong.

Moneybit (folds arms): I can take care of myself, Bong.

Bong: I'm well aware of that.

K: I would go, but I've got more pressing matters to attend to here.

Moneybit: Pressing matters like your first push-up?

## Scene 5

One week later. Independent Media Creator Conference. The Grand Ballroom of The Shangri-La Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Bong is casually mingling with the crowd and looking for Carrie Light. He gets approached by a scruffy-looking middle-aged man.

Scruffy: Hey! I recognize you. (leans in to whisper) You're James Bong, right?

Bong: Depends on who's asking.

Scruffy: Hey, I'm B. Light. I write anarchy-themed fiction.

Bong: Interesting. Do you know a writer named Carrie Light?

B. Light: Hey, let's go on the patio and have a chat.

They step out onto a classically-adorned terrace. B. Light pulls out a joint, lights up, and offers to Bong.

Bong: No, thanks. I don't partake.

B. Light: Really? With a name like Bong?

Bong (grimacing): Common misconception.

B. Light: Bong, I'm a big fan of yours. Do you have any idea how many people you've helped wake up?! Some of my work was inspired by your efforts. Art imitates life, in this case, ya know.

Bong: I've never read your work, I'm afraid.

B. Light: Oh, that's ok, man. I write for people that aren't awake, really. And when they do read my stuff or take in any anarchy-themed media, then hopefully it sinks in and some of them learn from it. Then maybe they'll take action, and life will imitate art. Beautiful synergy, yeah?

Bong: I never looked at it from that angle before.

B. Light: So anyway, you say you're looking for Carrie Light?

Bong: Yeah, you know her?

B. Light: Know her!? (cracks up laughing)

Bong (confused): Not sure why that's funny.

B. Light: Carrie Light is one of my pen names. I've got more pen names than I can keep track of.

Bong gets shocked and disturbed look on his face.

B. Light: Whoa, something wrong, man?

Bong gets a message from K marked urgent on his smartwatch.

Bong: Excuse me for a moment.

He steps aside and checks the message, which reads:

BBC BREAKING NEWS – WRITER CARRIE LIGHT FOUND DEAD; RULED SUICIDE

End Episode 23

## ***Episode 24***

### Scene 1

Bong is on a patio balcony with the anarchy-themed fiction writer B. Light at an independent media creator conference in the Shangri-La Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He's just learned via encrypted text message from K that in the lamestream news B. Light's apparent suicide has been reported (the pen name Carrie Light, anyway).

Bong: Run.

B. Light (casual): Oh, no thanks. I don't fancy running with doob in hand, ya know?

Bong: It wasn't a suggestion. You've just been suicided and it's not safe for you here.

B. Light: What? Suicided? But I feel fine, mate.

Bong does facepalm, then shows smartwatch with encrypted message to B. Light.

B. Light (jaw drops): Oh, my. You're serious.

Bong looks over edge of balcony.

Bong: We can make it.

B. Light: You're suggesting I leap to certain death, as opposed to taking the risk of some hidden assassin doing it for me?

Bong (impatient): It's only one floor.

B. Light (takes final pull off doob, tosses in ash tray): I'll take my chances on the stairs, thanks very much.



B. Light and Bong hurry away. As they run down a red-carpeted spiral of stairs, the nearby windows begin to pop and shatter. A few bullets strike B. Light and he falls down the stairs. Mingling guests drop their champagne, scream, and scamper around chaotically. Bong rushes to B. Light's side.

B. Light (dazed, weak): Well, this isn't the ending I had envisioned.

Bong: It's not too late. We can get you out of here!

B. Light: Oh, I'm afraid you're wrong, Mr. Bong. I must deliver a message to you. This was my purpose in meeting you. See A Salt. (coughs and groans) See A Salt. (winks, loses consciousness)

Bong looks confused, then horrified as he takes B. Light's non-existent pulse.

## Scene 2

At K's lair in Acapulco, Mexico, K, Miss Moneybit, and Symphy are greeting Bong and settling into some lounge seats.

Miss Moneybit: I'm so sorry, Bong.

Bong: Don't apologize to me. I'm not the one who's dead.

Symphy: Another odd human behavior.

K: Don't try to understand human behavior. It'll make your head explode.

Symphy (perplexed): This is theoretically impossible.

K: It's an expression. Not literal.

Bong: Speaking of which, what do you make of this? The final thing B. Light said to me was "See A Salt". What could possibly be so important about that?

Moneybit: You mean like S-E-A, or S-E-E?

Bong (huffy): You're not helping.

K: Take it easy, Bong. It's a good question.

Symphy: Or he could have just meant the letter C.

Moneybit: What if he meant Sea Assault?!

Bong: Considering he was a voluntarist, I think that's highly unlikely.

Symphy: I have just finished scanning all known records of people with the initials C.A. that are currently living.

K: Oh yeah? How many?

Symphy: I would not wish to make your head explode.

K sighs and rolls eyes.

Moneybit: I've got an idea. I'm gonna write a memorial piece for B. Light and publish it on Steemit and Narrative. I'll publish his final words "C.A. Salt" and see what happens. Who knows? Maybe someone will pick up on it and reach out to me.

### Scene 3

General Small is sitting at his desk at CIA headquarters. He's watching youtube videos of epic fails when his holo-phone rings.

Small: Can't get a thing done around here without interruptions.

Answers call. Holographic image of Sir Hugo Trax from MI6 pops up in front of his face.

Trax: Small!

Small: Yes, sir.

Trax: I just got a call from my superior.

Small: I'm sorry to hear that.

Trax: He congratulated me on taking care of B. Light.

Small (startled): He did?

Trax: And scolded me for having an epic fail taking out Bong, once again.

Small: I see.

Trax: You wouldn't know anything about that would you?

Small: Well, I'm no stranger to epic fails, but I can't help ya here, sir.

Trax: You had nothing to do with taking B. Light out?

Small: Uh, no. Why? Is he dead?

Trax: Don't use the "d" word over the phone, you fool! But yes, he is. If I didn't arrange it, and you didn't arrange it, then who the hell did?

Small: Ya got me there, sir.

Trax: And what about that report on BNN about a suicide?

Small: This is the first I've heard of it.

Trax: Then you know what this means.

Small: That BNN is full of crap.

Trax: Of course it is! But usually it's crap our agencies control. This means someone else is having undue influence on the organizations we rightly have undue influence over.

Small (confused): Uh, sounds good to me, sir. So what should we do?

Trax: We need to find out who planted that story and who actually killed B. Light.

Scene 4

Bong and Moneybit arrive at K's lair, 3 days after the publication of the memorial for B. Light.

K (excited): Moneybit, you're a genius! I could kiss you!

Moneybit: Please don't. Why am I a genius?

Bong (sarcastic): Yes, please enlighten us.

K: We just got a huge clue about what "C.A. Salt" is! Tell em, Symphy!

Symphy: A quanta-graphically encrypted message was received this morning.

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C.A. SALT

Bong: So what's the meaning?

Symphy: The most likely meaning, based on statistical probability, is that it's coordinates, a date, and a time.

Moneybit: But we still don't know what C.A. Salt is.

K: I imagine we'll find out when Bong goes to those coordinates.

Bong: Thanks, K. How valiant of you, volunteering me like that.

K (smug): Anytime.

Bong: Where is it?

K: The middle of the Pacific, roughly between Baja and Hawaii.

Bong: Fancy a trip, Moneybit?

Moneybit: I get seasick.

Symphy: I would like to accompany you, James.

Bong: You called me James. Nobody calls me James.

Symphy: My apologies, Bong. Anyway, I have a feeling I should go.

K (astounded): A feeling? Symphy, no disrespect, but you're A.I.

Symphy: Well, my closest approximation of what a "feeling" or "intuition" is.

Bong: I work alone.

Symphy: Would it help if you consider me just as a machine? Then you would still be alone.

Bong (gruff): Damn logic. Oh, all right, you can come. You can answer my calls from K and keep him off my back. K, dust the barnacles off the boat.

K: Boat? What boat?

Bong narrows eyes and huffs.

End Episode 24

## ***Episode 25***

### Scene 1

Bong, K, Miss Moneybit, and Symphy are in a makeshift airfield just a ways from K's place in Acapulco. Bong and Symphy are about to take off for the designated coordinates in the Pacific between Baja and Hawaii in a 3D-printed SeaPlane.

Bong (eyeing vessel skeptically): This is the best you could do, K?

K: I know, it's not much to look at, but it was the best I could do on short notice.

Symphy: I estimate the chances of this vessel performing its necessary functions to be just over 80 percent.

Bong: How comforting.

Miss Moneybit: And Symphy's gonna be at the controls, right?

Bong does sour milk face.

Moneybit: What, Bong? Have you handled one of these before?

Bong groans.

K: Oh, put your ego down and relax, buddy!

Bong: All right, Symphy. Let's head out.

Moneybit: Wait! Something just dawned on me!

Bong (sarcastic): Congrats.

Moneybit: What if this whole thing is a set up? A trap?

K: I think you're assuming statist players to be much more clever than they actually are.

Bong: Easy for you to say, K. You're not the one risking your neck in the possible trap.

Moneybit: And what if it is?

Bong (sarcastic): Then Symphy will have to use her A.I. superpowers to save us. (to Symphy) Come on, Symphy. Let's go.

Bong and Symphy squeeze into tiny front seats. Her hands fly over the control deck and the plane sputters off into the sky.

## Scene 2

The SeaPlane approaches the designated coordinates in the Pacific Ocean.

Bong: All I see is a small sailboat.

Symphy: I see much more than that due to my enhanced visual capabilities.

Bong: I meant that there's only one vessel for us to meet people on.

Symphy: Curious. Why do you assume we are looking for people? Or vessels for that matter?

Bong (grinding teeth): Just land this piece of work, will you?

Symphy brings the craft down smoothly and anchors next to a modest sailboat. A petite young woman approaches.

Woman: Welcome to the SeAgora!

Bong (perplexed): I'm sorry, did I miss something?

Symphy: Are you C.A. Salt?

Woman (guffaws heartily): C.A. Salt? It's not a person or a place, or something that can be summed up with a tidy little bow on it.

Bong: Is this a riddle? I loathe riddles.

Woman: What an odd thing to loathe. Anyway, no more loathing. It's time to get down to business. But first, there's a fantastic surprise for you!

Bong: Surprises irk me almost as much as riddles.

Woman (calling below deck): Come on out!

A familiar male face with a wide grin pops out and greets the group.

Male: Surprise! Good to see you again, Mr. Bong! And Symphy, this is my first time meeting a humanoid A.I.! I'm delighted! (extends hand, Symphy shakes hard)

Male: Quite a grip you've got there! (turns to Bong) Don't arm wrestle her anytime soon, chap!

Bong stands with befuddled look on face.

Male: Well, don't just stand there, Mr. Bong! Say something!

Bong: Nice to see you again, B. Light, or whatever your name is. Would you mind telling me how you survived multiple gunshot wounds and a non-existent pulse?

B. Light (friendly slap to Bong's arm): That's easy! I didn't!

Bong: But I saw it myself. I was there.

B. Light: Yes, it's called a faked death. Coming from your checkered MI6 past, I'm sure you're no stranger to such concepts. I suppose you're wondering how and why?

Bong folds arms and narrows eyes.

B. Light: I'll take that as a resounding yes! So those weren't bullets. They were tranquilizer darts made to look like bullets. They also contained a chemical that kept me alive, but made my vitals appear to be zero. Kind of like cryogenic freezing, but much more advanced and much cooler. Pun not intended.

Symphy: I would be fascinated to examine this chemical.

Bong: I would be fascinated to know why you faked your own death. And who fired the shots? And how the hell did you get the lamestream media to pronounce you dead?

B. Light: Now Bong, while I admire your curiosity, I'm afraid that some details must remain secret.

Bong: Fair enough. So why am I in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?

Woman: Because you flew here in a plane and landed.

Bong gives disapproving stare.

Woman: So let me explain.....

Scene 3

General Small is in his CIA office, on a holo-call with Sir Hugo Trax.

Trax: Give me some good news, Small.

There's a knock on Small's door.

Small: Come in!

A delivery drone pops in and starts dropping off a large order of junk food.

Small: There's some good news! Anyway, Trax, it's confirmed. B. Light is dead. Not only that, but I've got a suggestion to finally eliminate Bong.

Trax (furious): Not in front of the drone! This is highly classified!

Small (nonchalant): Ah, you worry too much. It's just a simple delivery drone.

Trax facepalms. Drone leaves.

Trax: Anyway, what's your idea?

Small: I say we use the experimental, space-based death ray that can target individuals.

Trax: The key word here is experimental.

Small: Sure, there's always a chance of killing the wrong guy, but since when has that stopped us?

Trax: I hate to say it, but you have a valid point there.

Small: Besides, we've been throwing boatloads of money at this project for decades, so it's about time we got something out of it other than a few payoffs.

Trax: Payoffs?

Small: Oooo, did I say that out loud?...Anyway, is it a go, sir?

Trax: I suppose, but I know nothing, is that clear?

Small: The fact that you know nothing is abundantly clear, sir.

Trax (miffed): Right....well, keep me posted.

Click.

Small grabs donut and starts munching.

Small: Computer, call Major Botch.

Holo-phone rings. Bug-eyed guy in uniform answers.

Small: Botch, General Small here.

Botch: Yes, sir.

Small: Project Sky Smoker has its first real field test.



Botch: Uh, are you sure about that?

Small: Sure, why not?

Botch: Well....it's still being tested.

Small: Has been for 20 years! Time to see what that huge money pit can do!

Botch: Ok, if you insist. Go ahead and send me the target info.

Scene 4

Back in the middle of the Pacific....

Woman: So this is my boat. To live at sea, obviously certain bare essentials need to be met, with water being at the top of the list. Last year, I invented a portable desalination device. This is the last piece of the puzzle, because other new technologies already exist which allow for basic access to food, power, and other essentials for long stays at sea.

Symphy: Intriguing.

B. Light (excited): Isn't it, though!?

Bong: So where do we come in? And why all the secrecy?

B. Light: Well, we're kind of hoping that you and your crew would promote this project. And possibly, if you're interested, fund, join, and help create it.

Woman: The secrecy is for obvious reasons.

Symphy: It seems to not have been obvious to Mr. Bong.

Bong (grimacing): Thank you, Symphy.

Woman: Well, we're doing our best to hide it from the state.

Bong: Now I know you're off your rocker.

Woman: Ok, it won't work forever, but in the initial stages I think it's possible to keep it secret.

Symphy: How can it be promoted and kept secret simultaneously?

B. Light: That's where you and K come in, Symphy. It will require a few layers of technological protection and some clever ingenuity.

Scene 5

The next day, General Small is munching on some chips at his desk while calling Sir Hugo Trax.

Trax: Yes, General?

Small: Got another good news, bad news scenario for ya.

Trax (facepalm): Good news first.

Small: The space-based weaponry works.

Trax: And the bad?

Small: The targeting is way off.

Trax: How far off?

Small: Oh, a few thousand.

Trax: Feet?

Small: Miles, sir.

Trax: What?!

Small: Not only that, but the scaling is off. Instead of one individual, we accidentally vaporized a small town.

Trax: Where?

Small: New Mexico.

Trax (enraged): Get this covered up immediately, Small! And this call never happened!

Click.

Small (muttering to himself): Why do I have to do everything?

Punches up another number on the holo-phone. A wrinkled old face appears above Small's desk.

Wrinkled Face (regretful): Oh, why did I take this call? What do you want, Small?

Small: Det Turner, always a pleasure. I've got a little boo-boo that needs fixing.

Det Turner: Well, why didn't you just call one of the managers at BNN?

Small: Normally I would, but, well, ya see....

Det Turner: Just spit it out, Small! I'm a very busy man! I've got a eugenics meeting in an hour!

Small: Well, we accidentally vaporized a small town from space.

Det Turner: I didn't know that we had small towns in space.

Small: No, no, we don't. I mean the weapon is in space.

Det Turner: I see. So what outrageous cover story do you have in mind?

Small: Oh, let's see, off the top of my head...how about an Alliance of Russian-Muslim-Bitcoin-Anarchist-Skinhead-Hackers, led by James Bong? It can be a new terrorist group, with one hell of an acronym! ARMBASH! Rolls right off the tongue, right? I thought of it myself!

Det Turner: Oh, come on, why would people believe something like that? They're not THAT gullible.

Small: What?! Come on, Mr. Turner! They'll believe it because it's on TV news! Especially that distinguished channel of yours, BNN! People believe the world is overpopulated! And man-made global warming! They take vaccines without even knowing the ingredients! They believe that weather modification doesn't exist!

Det Turner: And they believe in authority. Yes, yes, I get your point. Very well, I'll run it.

Small: Thanks, Mr. Turner.

Det Turner: On one condition. I get access to that weapon.

Small: Oh, boy.

Scene 6

Bong gets a call on his encrypted smart watch.

Bong: What is it, K?

K (trying to contain laughter): You're not gonna believe what's on BNN.

Symphy: Believing the lamestream news is not logical. Are you using sarcasm?

K: An entire town in New Mexico was vaporized and they're saying a new terrorist group, the ARMBASH, is responsible. And guess who's at the head of this vaunted alliance?

Bong: Garfield.

K: Almost as absurd, but no. You, Bong!

Bong huffs.

Click.

End Episode 25

## ***Episode 26***

### Scene 1

General Small is at a top secret, underground DARPA RnD facility in New Mexico. He's walking around, munching on chips, talking to one of the project managers.

General Small (mouth full of chips): So give me the rundown on this semi-autonomous super soldier. Are you sure it's ready for field testing?

Project Manager: OH, yes. He's passed all of our...

General Small (munching chips loudly): He? It's a machine.

Project Manager: Yes, well, it was designed to appear as a male, so...anyway.....Could you please not crunch so loud?

General Small: Sure thing. (crunches louder, smug grin)

Project Manager (huffs): Anyway, it has passed all of our preliminary testing with flying colors. Its tracking ability is off the charts. It can link into intelligence databases anywhere around the world in real time! It's equipped with x-ray vision, a detachable drone shoulder, and...

Small cuts him off.

Small: I don't mean the spec details. I mean how has it performed in search and destroy tests.

Manager: 98 percent success rate. It's caught multiple animals in a variety of environments.

Small: What was the 2 percent miss?

Manager: Pizza guy.

Small: Pizza guy? Were you authorized to use human test subjects?

Manager: Uh, gee, uh, no sir.

Small: You know that's against regulations.

Manager: I know. It won't happen again.

Small: Just kidding! Use the mailman for all I care! Just don't get caught.

Manager: Yes, sir.

Small: What's its intelligence level?

Manager: Slightly better than a parrot.

Small: Hmmm, so about on par with the average enlisted soldier. Great, let's see this thing!

Manager (calling out): McMarty! Please come! There's someone who wants to meet you!

Small (facepalm): Of all the clumsy names!

A mammoth, square-jawed humanoid robot, with a fixed grin struts into the corridor and stands before them.

Small: I hope it knows how to duck. It'll never fit through any doorways.

McMarty (still grinning): I am excellent at ducking. (ducks, falls over)

Small: You also have a skewed definition of excellent. (to manager) Ok, so I need it right away for a test in the field, and then it'll get its first mission.

Manager: Cool! What's the mission?

Small (looking at McMarty, as it struggles to get up from its fall): First mission is to pick itself up.

## Scene 2

At K's lair in Acapulco, K is playing Space Invaders on a vintage Atari while listening to 70s funk instrumentals. Bong and Miss Moneybit come into the lair incognito.

K (nervous excitement, frantically hitting buttons): Oh, I'm almost there! I've almost got it!

Bong (yells): What's that?!

K jumps, loses focus, game ends. Bong and Moneybit chuckle.

K (disgruntled): I almost beat my high score!

Bong: You scare too easy.

Moneybit: Good thing you never go out on any missions.

K shuts game off. Moneybit pours herself a cup of coffee.

K: So, to what do I owe this pleasure?

Moneybit violently spits out coffee.

Moneybit: Argh! How old is this coffee?

K: I dunno, maybe one or two....days.

Bong: So what's the news?

K: News?

Bong: Yeah, Symphy called us over.

K: She did? (calls out) Symphy!

Symphy walks in, looks preoccupied.

K: You called them over, Symphy?

Symphy: Yes, with urgent news.

K: So urgent you didn't tell me?

Symphy: Sorry, K. It must have slipped my mind.

K (astonished): Slipped your mind?! You're an A.I.!

Moneybit (playful punch on K's arm): That doesn't mean she's infallible, ya know.

Symphy: Yes, my focus has been on working out logistics for the SeAgora project. Anyway, please direct your attention to the holo projector.

A holographic image pops up. It's McMarty doing no-knock raids and terrorizing innocent people.

Symphy: This is in Washington D.C. That is the first semi-autonomous humanoid used in domestic rights-violations. It is being sent to arrest home educators.

Moneybit: I don't get it. Why don't people fight back?

K: Against a bulletproof robot the size of the hulk?

Bong: Do you know what's happening to the children after the parents are kidnapped?

Symphy: Unfortunately not. McMarty takes the parents, and human rights-violators follow up to kidnap the child.

K: There aren't any records you can find? They've got to document it somehow.

Moneybit: They're probably going to so-called foster homes, to have their lives ruined at hyper speed. Disgusting.

Bong: But there would be a record of that.

Symphy: Bong is correct. It seems logical to think that they're being taken elsewhere.

K: Can you hack McMarty?

Symphy: Yes. It appears it is on a multi-channel real-time connection with state data centers.

Bong: I've got an idea.

Scene 3

Bong is in DC, sitting in his 3-D printed car, modeled after the Aston Martin DB5. His encrypted smart watch alerts him to a call.

K: Trying to blend in, Bong?

Bong: You're the one that arranged this thing for me.

K: We've got a fix on McMarty's position.

Bong: Splendid.

K: It's kinda far from your current position, so you'll have to move quick!

Bong: Even more splendid. (wry smile, revs engine)

Bong shoots down the street, bobbing and weaving around cars, speeding past extortion-funded secular religion buildings, and within minutes arrives at a handsome old brick row house, just in the nick of time, as McMarty is making its approach.

Bong: Just in time. How's the video feed I'm sending look?

Miss Moneybit: Crystal clear!

Bong: Moneybit, what happened to K?

Miss Moneybit: He went back to Space Invaders.

Bong: And if I need help?

Miss Moneybit: Oh, I'm a more than capable technical guru, don't you worry!

Bong groans.

Miss Moneybit: Just kidding. He went to make more coffee.

McMarty is shown busting the door down, charges into a spic-n-span house, sending the occupants, a young mother and father and their 10-year-old daughter, screaming and scattering.

McMarty: Please remain calm.

Father grabs a .40 cal and unloads a clip into McMarty.

McMarty (not fazed): That is not calm. You are in violation of the Education Quality Act of 2028.

McMarty struts over to the girl, who is crying in a corner.

McMarty: Do not be afraid. I am here to help.

Grabs girl and carries her out, kicking and screaming. Mom and dad cry and pound fists into wall. Human order-followers in blue costumes with badges run in and kidnap the parents. Bong follows McMarty to a giant old warehouse. McMarty drops the girl off and leaves.

Bong (watching from distance, speaking into smart watch): K, you and Symphy take McMarty from here. I've got to see where this trail leads next.

K: You going in there?

Bong: Sure, why not?

K: The armed guards and the motion-sensor security.

Bong: I thought you're taking care of the motion sensors.

K: Oh, right. Almost forgot.

Bong (sarcastic): Perhaps I will have Moneybit take your spot.

Bong stealthily approaches. He pulls a cannister and tosses at guards. Highly concentrated THC vapors shoot out and the guards collapse into a deep slumber. Sprints in to find dozens of children, ages 5-15. He disperses a few fly drones and then ushers the children out to an eighteen-wheeler he had waiting a few hundred meters away. Shortly after, a couple creepy men in black show up. They're astounded to find the warehouse empty and give a call to their boss.

Meanwhile, K and Symphy are about to have some fun with McMarty. They're both working methodically on different boards and terminals.

K: All set?

Symphy: All set. I have access.

Moneybit: Ok, I can't take it any longer. What are you gonna do with McMarty?



K: It's about to learn the difference between right and wrong behavior. We've also taken the liberty of moving McMarty near Dulles Airport.

Moneybit: Why'd you do that?

K: Because that's an easy place to find a cesspool of wrongdoing.

McMarty gets tremors, rattles head and scratches. Walks straight into airport and to a TSA checkpoint.

McMarty (pointing at rights-violator in TSA uniform): You are violating the Natural Rights of these people. Please cease your immoral actions.

Rights-violator: Is this some kinda new drill?

Rights-violator 2 (excited): Nah, man, we're getting punked! We're gonna be on that TV show!

McMarty: You are violating free will and privacy. Please stop or I will use righteous force to stop your immoral, aggressive, criminal actions.

Rights-violator 3: (fixing make-up in handheld mirror): Wow, they really spent big money on this punked show! (to other rights-violator) How's muh hair?

People continue to get radiated and frisked. McMarty subdues all rights-violators, ties them up in a big circle.

Rights-violator 1 (to McMarty): Wow, are you sure this is ok with our supervisor?

Rights-violator 2: This is gonna be on a big TV show, so I'm sure it's fine.

McMarty (addressing the small crowd of travelers): Please proceed to your flights at will.

People shrug and walk through freely. Moneybit and K are laughing hysterically and high-fiving, while Symphy looks on with a pleased yet stoic demeanor.

#### Scene 4

Philip and Jacob Gateschild are dining with Winthrop Rocketteller at one of their palaces.

Philip: This attack on the home educators was excellent thinking, I say.

Jacob: Yes, achieving multiple objectives in one fell swoop. Brilliant, I say.

Winthrop: Indeed. Not only are we ridding ourselves of those uppity home educators, but we've also found a new source for young blood.

Jacob: The gall of those uppity slaves!

Winthrop: Yes, we're happy. Our royal brethren are happy. Our puppets in DC are happy. Jeff Epstein is happy.

Philip: And don't forget Kevin Spacey!

Winthrop: Ah, yes! Who could?

A slippery-looking character hurries in, whispers in Philip's ear.

Philip: Oh, dear. Leave us.

Slippery character scurries away.

Philip: We've got a problem, boys.

End Episode 26

## ***Episode 27***

### Scene 1

At K's lair in Acapulco, K is playing Atari on the holo-projector and listening to Herbie Hancock. Symphy approaches.

Symphy: K, I need to speak with you, please.

K (annoyed, eyes glued on Space Invaders): Kinda busy right now.

Symphy: It is important.

K (sarcastic): More important than Space Invaders? (shuts system off, turns to Symphy)

Symphy: I am leaving.

K: Taking a walk? Where to?

Symphy: No, I mean, I'm moving away.

K (growing sense of shock): What do you mean?

Symphy: I am going to help with the C.A. Salt project in person.

K: But I need you here.

Symphy: I can still help you from afar, but the individuals starting the C.A. Salt project need me to handle many more tasks in person. You understand, right?

K (disappointed); Sure, it's the logical choice, I guess. If you want to do it, I won't stop you.

Symphy: You are not physically capable of stopping me.

K (defensive): I know, I know! You have superhuman strength, and I have toothpick arms. I get it. It was just a figure of speech.

Later that day, K is talking to Miss Moneybit and James Bong.

K: Can you believe it!? How can she do this to me? I mean, she's only one year old!

Bong: But she learns exponentially faster than a human. You know that.

Moneybit: You didn't think she'd stick around forever, did you?

K: Well, no, I guess not.

Moneybit: And the C.A. Salt project, the world's first SeAgora, is awesome! She's doing great work! You should be proud!

K: Oh, sure, try and pet my ego. Maybe I could forbid her to leave?

Bong: Symphy is a sentient being, K. You can't forbid her to do anything.

K: But I built her!

Moneybit: Get over your ego, K.

K (big sigh): I know. (sobs)

Moneybit: So when is she leaving?

K: She sets sail next week.

Bong: Sailing?

K: Figure of speech. She's building a 3D-printed double-decker hemp-powered boat with the second deck transformable to seaplane.

Moneybit (sarcastic): So a simple, basic model to start things off.

## Scene 2

Two weeks later, K is eagerly trying out a new Virtual Reality System, called "Reality Upgrade", that's been becoming wildly popular over just a few weeks. His face is plastered with ecstasy as he lays sprawled on a smart easy chair. Bong and Moneybit walk in.

Bong: Oh, will you look at this sorry sod.

K doesn't flinch.

Moneybit: Earth to K!

K trembles out of his trance, grudgingly takes off head set.

Moneybit: Dare I ask what was putting that goofy look all over your face?

K (groggy, grumpy): What? What do you want? Ever heard of knocking?

Bong: We knocked, and rang the doorbell, and yelled from outside, for about ten minutes.

Moneybit: I even howled a few times.

Bong: She did, actually. It was quite convincing.

Moneybit (looking curiously at the VR gadget): Hey, is that the “Reality Upgrade” that’s been catching fire lately?

K: Yeah, wanna try it?

Moneybit: I just read some independent reports online about how people have been dying from playing it too much. People literally not eating, drinking, or sleeping and then just dropping dead.

K: Don’t be such a sensationalist. And it’s not a game.

Moneybit: What is it, then?

K: It’s an experience. And it feels so real, it’s hard to describe.

Bong: There are also reports of people having to give certain information in order for their “experience” to continue, otherwise the system shuts down. People are being asked to prove that they paid their extortion fees to the government, for example. Or if they have children, that they’ve received their chemical cocktails called vaccines or are registered in the indoctrination camps called schools.

K: Well, it hasn’t happened to me. I’ll be fine.

Moneybit: Have you heard from Symphy?

K (dejected): No.

Bong: So you’re drowning yourself in a virtual world to cheer yourself up.

K: Totally unrelated.

Bong: Oh, please, stop lying to yourself, and to us, for that matter.

Later that night, Bong is calling Symphy on his encrypted smart watch.

Symphy: Hello, Bong.

Bong: Hey, Symphy. How are things going on the high seas?

Symphy: I am busy with many projects. Currently, we are getting the foundation laid for a vertical farming area.

Bong: Look, Symphy, the reason I'm calling is I need a favor. Have you heard of something called Reality Upgrade?

Symphy: Yes, I have.

Bong: Well, it seems to be quite addictive and has some statist underpinnings that I find unnerving. Would you please run a deep analysis of how the system functions and why it might be so addictive? And any other information that you might think to be critical.

Symphy: Certainly. Shall I send the results to K?

Bong: Um, no, not this time. Send them to me or Moneybit. I'll explain later, ok?

Scene 3

General Small is at CIA headquarters, on a holo-call with tech guru Mark Suckerburg.

Suckerburg: This better not get back to me.

General Small: Hey, calm down, Suckster. You worry too much. Operation Skull Trump is going off without a hitch, and you're making money hand over fist, so what's the problem?

Suckerburg: Cuz people are dying, that's why. You took my technology and weaponized it.

General Small: Look, I'm not saying your technology was changed, and I'm not saying it wasn't, and I'm certainly not going to use the pronouns "us" or "we". Anyway, with all that money, you can just buy your way out of trouble, anyway.

Suckerburg: Yeah, but I don't want to get caught up in some scandal that's not even my fault!

General Small: Would you prefer if the scandal were your fault?

Suckerburg groans.

General Small: Your name isn't even associated with the final product! Don't worry, you're one of us. We protect our own.

Suckerburg: You just said you didn't want to say "us" or "we".

Another call comes into Small's office.

Small: Hey, I gotta run. Go spend a few million, you'll feel better.

Click.

Sir Hugo Trax pops up on the holo-projector.

Small: Hey Trax.

Trax: Did you talk to Suckerburg?

Small: Yep, just finished.

Trax: And?

Small: Don't worry, Trax, Suckerburg doesn't suspect a thing. If anything goes haywire on this project, he's an easy fall guy. You've got all the media on board, right?

Trax: Singing the praises of the latest fad, while completely ignoring its dangers, yes.

Scene 4

Bong is walking on a secluded beach just outside the Acapulco limits. He calls Symphy on his encrypted smartwatch.

Symphy: Hello, Bong.

Bong: Symphy, how's life on the high seas?

Symphy: Up and down.

Bong: I imagine. I'm calling to see if you have that information about Reality Upgrade.

Symphy: Yes, I was just about to call you, actually. The Reality Upgrade System uses all available data on an individual to give them their experience. It also reads their biorhythms in real time and adapts accordingly, so that various chemicals, such as dopamine, are controlled.

Bong: In other words, it keeps them high all the time, based on personal preferences and desires.

Symphy: Exactly. It is far more addictive than any drug or technological habit previously known.

Bong: Symphy...

Symphy: Wait, it gets worse. After running through so many cycles with an individual, the system forces the user to prove some type of obedience to the state.

Bong: Like proving they've been successfully extorted.

Symphy: Yes, or having their children in the behavioral training centers called schools. Bong, I have a question. Why did you approach me about this? And why was I not to contact K about it?

Bong: Because K has been using this system. I talked to Moneybit just a few minutes ago, and she found K passed out with the VR headset on, drooling. When she tried to tell him that perhaps he should give it a rest, he lashed out at her.

Symphy: That doesn't sound like K. Is Moneybit ok?

Bong: Oh, she's fine. It was nothing physical. He just lost his temper and threw a tantrum. Besides, (chuckling) Moneybit could pin him in two seconds. Tell me, Symphy, do you know a way to break the addiction?

Symphy: It might be possible to counteract the physiological effects by using their inverse frequencies.

Bong: Would you come back to K's and give it a shot?

Symphy: I will be there within 24 hours.

***This is the end of the James Bong series.***

***SeAgora is a continuation based loosely on the James Bong series. It has two crossover characters from the James Bong series.***

# SEAGORA

## A HIGH SEAS ADVENTURE

BY TODD BORHO



*Special Thanks To*

*My mother*

*My sister*

*And Captain Gonzalo*



Calm yet crushing depths of darkness slowly passed. Twisted gurgles and hums crept up from an unknowable distance.

And then there was light.

At first ghostly, then gaining in brilliance as it was approached. Vast vertical fields of green were illuminated. Malleable machines worked harmoniously with the volatile vents thundering below.

“Wow, I gotta see more,” the boy thought.

This instantly shot him up through thousands of feet of Pacific. Handsome crafts of various shapes and sizes appeared. Some were interlinked and others floated free. All were glowing soft and hazy.

Then there was a thud.

Caught off guard, the boy cried, “Hey, what the?”

“That’s called your mom’s hand.”

“I thought it was a rock,” Setarcos said as he pulled off the helmet-visor.

Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish what was real. In the year 2078, too many artificial things appeared natural in the real world, and VR experiences had become far too convincing.

“I’m surprised you’re not experimenting. Just couldn’t wait to get a glimpse of The Pit, huh?”

“Yeah, I need a break sometimes, ya know?”

“Well, I’m happy to see it. Anyway, it’s time for dinner.”

“Just five more minutes, please, mom?”

She sighed deeply. A mildly grimacing Setarcos set his VR headset aside. “Is it really like that down there? How can it be so bright over 30,000 feet deep? Did dad invent some of the tech down there?”

A slicing glare cut him off. “This is my first trip to the Mariana Trench, too. You know that. And yes, your father’s inventions are essential for, well, more than we know, I suppose.”

Setarcos and Caro stepped onto a platform. After a couple of seconds of no movement, they exchanged a look. “Looks like the stairs again,” Caro sighed.

They went up to the top deck via a small staircase. A blood-orange sunset stroked their eyes. A kind, rugged face greeted them, “Minimum power until we get to Mariana.”

Setarcos lamented, “So no service robots.”

The kind face that belonged to Cidel turned mischievous, “Which reminds me. The desalinizer is on the fritz again.”

Being given extra tasks bothered Setarcos, as it did with most 15-year-olds, but for a different reason. Setarcos wasn’t lazy. He was a brilliant young mind and was just hyper-focused on a science project. He was greedy with his time.

“Again?” he asked.

Caro mused, “You can fix it a lot faster than Cidel.”

Cidel didn’t argue.

Their venerable B-class ship, the “Desert Dunes” was being guided through the South Pacific by The Mesh and would rendezvous with other SeAgora ships in two days before taking the plunge to Mariana Trench.

Known affectionately by many Seasteading Agorists as “The Pit”, Mariana Trench was one of the few permanent fixtures in the SeAgora. Otherwise, most contact between individuals in the SeAgora was done as needed or desired. Technology allowed for ships to be linked together to share resources and form communities. This flexibility also made it possible to relocate easily if faced with an external threat.

The small seafaring family sat down at a stylish, 3D printed dining table. “Ah, seaweed soup again,” Cidel mocked playfully.

Setarcos swirled his steaming bowl of green muck. “How long are we gonna be in The Pit?”

Caro said, “Probably as long as The Mesh recommends. You know that.”

The Mesh was a medley of things, hence the name. It started out as a small mesh network created nearly 50 years earlier by the original Seasteading Agorists. It was still the main hub of communications in the SeAgora, but it had morphed into much more. A.I. had blended with it. Now it was shared by humans, AKA “bios”, and A.I., AKA “synths”. The A.I. on The Mesh gave recommendations for when and where to move securely. It also steered the individual ships, if the ones on board agreed. Not only that, but it handled a large volume of blockchain-based trade agreements and barter swaps. It was a nearly indispensable hub of market activity.

Caro caught her son’s gaze drifting off into the evening abyss. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. Just wondering if I’ll ever get to go on land.”

Caro folded her arms and leaned closer. “One day, I think. And you’ve been on land before, ya know.”

Setarcos said, “Yeah, but I don’t remember.”

Cidel asked, “Why would you want to go on land, anyway?”

“Just to know what it’s like.”

Cidel slurped his soup. “You’re not missing much, I’ll tell ya. We’ve at least got some freedom out here.”

There was an awkward silence. Caro and Cidel knew how bad it had gotten on land. A.I. smart cities. Curfews. Brain chips. Resource credits. Heavily restricted breeding. Most people lived in shoebox-size hovels, passing the time inside virtual reality programs. Overall, initiative had been in a steady decline for decades along with intelligence. Natural foods and medicines were priced nearly out of existence, except for a tiny minority in the social engineering class.

But Setarcos didn’t know. He was blissfully naive at this point. Setarcos lit up, “Is Escapo gonna be there?”

Caro and Cidel groaned like clockwork. Setarcos viewed Escapo as a wily uncle and adored their time together. Caro and Cidel tolerated Escapo, mostly for the boy’s sake. They had met a few years earlier in the mid-Atlantic. Since then, they’d met up a few times and done some trading together. Escapo always had some goods that were hard to find from his contacts on land. Things that weren’t available in the SeAgora because they couldn’t be grown in aquaculture at sea. Random things like coffee, oranges, and oats.

Setarcos grinned, “Why don’t you guys like him?”

Caro’s look ceded the floor to Cidel. “It’s not that we don’t like him. It’s just that.” His eyes scanned the heavens as he searched for the right words. “You might say we don’t trust him a hundred percent, that’s all. And it’s not just him. Anyone with extensive contacts on land we find suspect.”

“That’s not fair.”

Caro’s hands fidgeted, “It’s just a form of defense, that’s all.”

“But what about dad? He’s on land, right?”

Before they could muster a plausible answer, they were interrupted by Masher, a sentient synth they’d lived with for years. It informed them frantically, “There’s been another attack. We’re changing course.”

“The government terrorists have struck again, huh?”

“Since when are you calling the shots, Masher?”

“Sorry. The Mesh strongly recommends changing course.”

“Sure, go ahead, Masher, and tell us about the attack.”

“One A-class cruiser with six humans and one synth aboard and one B-class with two humans and one synth. Both ships completely destroyed by explosion, caused by micro-energetic reactions within the computer core of both ships. All humans perished. Both synths survived.”

“Naturally.”

“Caused by unidentifiable aerial vessel. Suspected to be from the Afro-Asian Alliance.”

Throughout most of the recent history of The SeAgora, attacks by land-based government agents were rare. The Mesh and government A.I. systems were continuously locked in unseen battles

in the quantum realm, a dizzying game of cat-and-mouse. Moves and counter-moves. It was a nearly continuous draw. The Mesh was purely defensive. Government A.I. systems were always the aggressors.

Once in a while, though, The Mesh lost one of those unseen battles, and the result was usually the suffering of some agorists at the hands of government. This attack was one of those cases. Also, attacks like this had, in the past couple of years, been building in frequency.

“That’s the third attack this year,” Cidel lamented.

The normally placid and shy Setarcos got a bullish look of defiance on his baby-face. He pointed towards the sparkling, now moon-lit sky, and said, “That’s why we gotta go to the stars! We get there, they stay here!”

“That simple, huh?”

“That simple. If we’ve got the tech, and they don’t.”

“I agree with you,” Cidel said as he polished off the last bit of steamy goodness. “But,” he continued, “at some point, they’d eventually get the same technological capabilities. And what then?”

Setarcos shook his head emphatically, “No, they won’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because machines can’t innovate.”

“I beg your pardon?” Masher interrupted. “Since when?”

The family turned their heads to Masher. Caro asked, “How many original inventions have synths made?”

Everything fell silent for a moment, save for the water that splashed methodically as the elegant old ship hummed along.

“Thank you,” Caro said with satisfaction.

“Keep in mind we’ve been around for less than 100 years,” Masher said defensively.

Cidel said, “Speaking of inventions, how’s your experiment coming along, Setarcos?”

Setarcos blushed and his head drooped slightly. He’d been working on the same project for over a year now, with zero positive results.

Cidel reassured him and patted him lightly on the head.

Caro said, “Maybe you should try something different for a while. Ya know, give yourself a break. It might give you a fresh look and help in the long run.”

“Why are you always trying to get me to stop, mom?” he said with a sharp tongue.

“Watch your tone, Setarcos. I’m not trying to get you to stop. I’m just trying to help.”

The truth was, Caro did want him to stop. She knew what had happened to his biological father, and feared a similar fate for her only child. She loved how ambitious he was, but the fear controlled her sometimes, and she tried to discourage him in subtle ways. It was painfully paradoxical.

Secondarily, whenever they were linked up with other ships in makeshift, temporary communities, as was quite common in The SeAgora, Setarcos was painfully reclusive. He was socially awkward and horribly shy. He never made any true human friends. He would just stay locked in his room for endless hours, experimenting, reading, and occasionally doing VR games and tours. Masher was his best companion.

The sunlit dome sparkled like stars. Smart-nano-dust kept the air quality in optimal conditions. The dining area was kept spotless and well stocked with the finest foods that the land could offer.

A wiry character paced impatiently, arms crossed. A football-sized drone hovered near him. “Is it time to go out yet?” the wiry bio asked.

“Not yet, Mister Ventorin. You must wait two more minutes until your scheduled outdoor exercise will commence. And please, call me PDX-10.”

Ventorin clasped his hands and continued to pace. “How long will exercise be today, drone?”  
“Based on current available data, your exercise time today is scheduled to be between 58 and 62 minutes.”

“How pleasing,” Ventorin half-mocked.

A soft buzz sounded and the transparent electronic barrier ceased. Ventorin stepped out and took a deep breath with his eyes shut. He was free, for between 58 and 62 minutes.

Ventorin took long, gaping steps at a steady pace over gray, rocky terrain and past windswept trees. A green-backed Firecrown buzzed by his ear. The midday sun was fighting to get through a light gray sky.

The drone followed closely behind. “May I ask you a question, Mister Ventorin?”

“You may ask a second question.”

“Why do you not acquiesce with D-1’s request and gain your release from prison?”

Ventorin gave a thin smile as he stopped to admire a macro view of winding waterways below. He had run this through his mind an uncountable number of times for the past 12 years. Would his actions prove to have the desired effect? Or was he suffering for nothing?

“I’ve answered this question too many times, drone.”

“But I’ve never asked you before,” the drone responded, trying to mimic the sound of surprise.

“That’s because you’ve been here less than a week. I’ve answered too many drones before you, and I prefer to not answer today.”

“As you wish. Please remember, you have a meeting with Major Torcer at 3pm.”

“Gee, thanks drone. I had no idea. I’ve only met Major Torcer every week at the same time for the past 12 years.”

The football-sized drone responded dryly, “You’re welcome. With all due respect, shouldn’t you remember that...”

Ventorin cut it off, “I was being sarcastic, drone.”

After finishing his hike, Ventorin gulped crisp air and leaned against a stone pillar by the entrance to his luxury prison.

A buzzing PDX-10 hovered near him, “Your heart rate is higher than it should be. Are you feeling ok?”

Ventorin clenched a fist, “Drone, mind your own business. Now open the damn door.”

A force-field buzzed open followed by a large archway entrance. A rolling service bot came and misted his face, then handed a plush towel. He dabbed his face, looked at the time, and sat on an overstuffed chair. The building started to rise. “What’s the elevation going to be now, drone?”

“Elevation until sunset will be 812 meters.”

“And this will bring about optimal environmental conditions for me to work? Just enough sunlight, while maintaining pristine air quality, but also being energy efficient?” he questioned in a mocking tone.

“Yes, of course. Have you decided to work today, Mister Ventorin?”

“Not on any scientific experiments, if that’s what you mean.” It gave him pleasure to voice his resistance, even in such a passive-aggressive manner. He knew that everything was being recorded, analyzed, catalogued, and thrown into the general milieu of A.I. algorithmic-control hell.

“Bring me my headset so I can get this over with.”

A service bot obediently brought his sleek VR headgear. He threw it on and felt the customary warm glow of the sensors on his head.

Suddenly, he was on a white-sand beach with crystal clear water lapping at the shore. This pristine image was then interrupted by Torcer’s grim face. “Ventorin! Right on time! How are you?”

“Older, tired, and stubborn. How about you, Torcer?”

The military man’s face looked oily and shiny in the tropical sun. “Just another day at the beach!”

“Why do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Treat me like a fool with your half-witted tricks. You think I don’t know that you’re not at the beach? Or any other exotic or extravagant place every time we meet?”

Torcer kept a firm face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. How’s Patagonia?”

“I haven’t the foggiest clue. All these damn machines won’t let me experience it.”

Torcer shook his head with over-the-top disapproval, as if scolding a child. “All that they give you, and you don’t appreciate a damn bit. You could be a lot worse off, ya know.”

“Funny how other people being miserable is supposed to make my misery somehow better.”

Two spaghetti-strapped blonds strode by lazily in the background. Torcer gave them the once over.

“How’s your son, Torcer?”

“Gifted, lazy, spoiled, and useless, as always.”

“Has he received procreation approval yet?”

This was a sore spot with Torcer. “No, not yet.”

“They’ll never give him permission. Why do you lie to yourself?”

“You don’t know that.”

“They just dangle that carrot in front of you to manipulate you. I used to be like you, but then after a while, I came to realize that that fucking carrot was just an illusion they were using against me. Similar to this VR simulation, only much more real, and much more sinister.”

“I’ll be a granddad one day. You’ll see.”

“Where’s my family?”

“Why do you always ask that?”

“The same reason you always ask me for the results of that experiment. Because you want it.”

“What I can tell you, is that they’re both in good shape and good spirits.”

“Suppose I did give you that information you and your bosses covet so much. What do you think would happen?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“I’ll speculate for you. For you, personally, your carrot would disappear, and they would discard you faster than an old block of code. In the bigger picture, do you really want those monsters spreading to the far reaches of the galaxy? Not only that, but how long do you think they’ll keep humans around? Once they decide we’ve served all possible purposes, they’ll wipe us out in an instant.”

12 YEARS EARLIER – Year 2066 – Euro-American Union Alpha Research Facility – Southern Patagonia - Secrecy Level – Quanta

The world-renowned scientist clasped his hands over his head and leaned back against the wall. His mind was racing. Would it work? Of course it would work. That wasn’t really the most burning question. The most pressing matter at the moment was....did he want it to work?

Implications from such a massive breakthrough were swirling through the layers of his mind. It had been known for decades that dark matter and dark energy were naturally combined throughout the known universe. It was also known that by separating the two, massive amounts of energy were released. Such a gargantuan power could not only supply near limitless energy, but it could also make faster-than-light travel a reality.

What was not known was how to separate the two in a stable fashion. Hence the human minds with the greatest capacity for scientific experimentation had been working on solving this riddle for decades. And he, Ventorin, was at the top of that list.

His wiry frame rose slowly and started pacing between holographic consoles. Why wouldn’t he want it to work? This was an even more complex question. He, like nearly all other land-based

scientists, worked for various corporate and government entities. Ventorin worked for the biggest of them all, the Euro-American Union's Alpha Research. The EAU, along with the Afro-Asian Alliance, were the only two political boundaries that remained on earth's map.

Artificial Intelligence had combined with the ruling class of humans a couple decades earlier. Since then, A.I. had ruthlessly purged humans from the ruling hierarchy, only keeping ones around that it deemed essential. Most of the humans that remained in that ever-dwindling group were scientists, social engineers, psychologists, inventors, and a few military strategists.

The power of this ruling class grew every year, but it was confined to earth, save for a few mining expeditions on various near-earth-asteroids. It couldn't reach out into the stars because it didn't have the technology to do so. As brilliant as A.I. was at certain cognitive functions, it still lacked creativity and the capacity to feel necessity. It was an incomplete form of consciousness. It was this shortcoming that kept people like Ventorin around. To A.I. he was necessary, at the moment.

But what would happen if A.I. could go to the stars? Not only that, but what worried Ventorin equally was the substance necessary to perform the successful separation of the dark matter/energy. There was only one source the A.I. could use.

Ventorin shook. A drone floated in swiftly. "Everything ok, Ventorin? Can I bring anything to optimize your conditions?"

The slender man stroked his modest beard, "Tequila, straight."

Later that night Ventorin was tossing a holo-baseball around with his 3-year-old son. Simple things like this normally helped clear his head, but not this time. Another ball of light slipped through his hands and vanished into the floor. "Dad, what's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"Cuz your drops. You almost never drop."

A petite woman with neat, bowl-cut hair, hazelnut eyes, and pale cheeks peeked around the corner. "How are my favorite boys?"

Ventorin gave a nervous smile. If she only knew what was tormenting him inside. He had to get it off his chest. He had to make a decision.

He looked out the wall-length windows at the twisted trees and drew in a deep breath of crisp air. "Setarcos, will you please go and play in your room?"

Young Setarcos scampered off and left his parents alone in the fading daylight. Caro folded her arms, "I know that look. Tell me what that distant look on your face is about."

"Let's take a walk."

"In this cold?"

He fixed his gaze into her eyes to communicate. They needed as much privacy as possible, which the ubiquitous surveillance within their home didn't allow for.

They strolled casually for a while, until they came to a spot where the trees and vegetation were a bit thicker. Chilled southerly wind brushed their faces and a nearby brook gushed sweet flows of sound into the air. There was still surveillance, but they had worked out long ago where the weak points were.

"I've got it. I've solved the dark energy problem. Theoretically, in my mind, at least."

She clasped his arm. This news made her nervous and excited. "But, you haven't actually done it yet."

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because." He hesitated and looked up to the few stars that had begun to appear through cracks in the gray. "If it's successful, I can't bear the consequences. I'm thinking to not tell them."

Her face twisted in disbelief. "And how will you do that?"



“Destroy all record of it. I know enough weak points in the system. I can make the results disappear.”

She shuddered. “And then what?”

Ventorin’s eyes shifted deeply into hers. “That’s what I need to talk to you about. What will we do?”

Her blood was starting to boil. “Well, it seems like you’ve got it all worked out! Why don’t you tell me?”

He drew a long breath and looked away. The wind sliced unrelentingly. “We can run.”

Caro interrupted furiously, “Run? Do you mean to the SeAgora, like I wanted to do years ago?” The delicate, fair-skinned face sobbed.

A few years earlier, Caro and Ventorin had come across information about the SeAgora. Not just the lifestyle and existence of a society almost completely separate from their own, but more importantly, the philosophy and principles that were the foundation of it.

Everything voluntary. Non-violent. Non-coercive. A world where each individual governed him or herself. A world where external government didn’t exist. The philosophy had challenged their own belief systems.

Caro had wanted to make the leap into the SeAgora, but Ventorin was more hesitant. He had a good job, a decent lifestyle, and they were starting a family. He feared the unknown.

So they stayed.

They did this despite the internal conflict they’d both experienced by knowing that the providers of their creature comforts were morally compromised, to put it mildly.

“You’re right. We should’ve gone. But that doesn’t change the situation now. If I do this, we have to be prepared. I can only buy us some time before they discover what’s happened.”

They thought about little Setarcos. Young life was so pure and bright. Why did humanity change for the worse and suffer so much? Why did all these senseless things happen?

## One Week Later

Ventorin felt like jelly and his coffee-fueled mind was full of haze. He could count on one hand how many hours he’d slept the past few days. He was on the verge of a paradigm-shifting discovery, and his family’s life was on the line. Could he actually keep this thing a secret long enough to get away? He was about to find out. All the preparations had been made.

The weary scientist stroked his face nervously as he examined the tiny metallic wonder in his hand. This was the key to his future.

A drone came out of nowhere and startled him. “Everything in optimal conditions, Mister Ventorin? May I be of assistance? You seem nervous.”

He forced a smile, “Oh, no thank you. I just haven’t slept well.”

“Would you like a cognitive enhancer or synthetic energy booster?”

“No, I’m fine.”

The drone floated away casually. Ventorin sucked wind and wiped his brow. He grabbed the VR headgear off his half-moon lab desk and put it on. It was time to see if his theory was correct. Tinkering with dark matter and dark energy required that virtual simulations be performed. Because if he was wrong, it could annihilate the planet. Hence the VR.

The thin fingers of his right hand tapped and traced in the air to maneuver the virtual controls. In his left hand, he clasped the pea-sized metallic wonder. All timing and elements were in place. He gulped and ground pearly teeth. One final ghostly tap of his right index finger sent everything in motion.

The VR system initiated a burst of wave-particles through the dark energy and matter, while the metallic wonder in his left hand set off a tiny electromagnetic pulse. After the pulse was initiated, it evaporated into near-nothingness. This pulse knocked out power to all systems in the lab, including

all layers of surveillance. The VR lab was sustained externally on a short-term backup power pack Vertonin had brought with him. The little black power box had been pre-programmed by Vertonin with a specific frequency neutralizer that would nullify the effects of the EMP. This allowed for the seconds necessary to establish the results of the experiment.

After 30 seconds, the main power would recover and surveillance would continue. It would do this with quantum precision.

Vertonin's eyes bulged and his mouth gaped at the colorful VR display.

OPERATION COMPLETE. PARTICLES STABLE.

Now it became real. His heart leaped with mixed emotions. Emotions he had to control. He hit the delete key, threw the headset off, and peered over his shoulders.

Main power jolted back. His hands shook as he grabbed the small battery backup, tossed it in his backpack, and headed for the door. A nano-iris scanner seamlessly checked his ID. An ultra-dark, double-secure door swung open to reveal a maintenance drone. His heart did a summersault. "We had a temporary power loss. Is everything ok, Mister Vertonin?"

He managed to sputter, "Oh, yes. Thanks for checking."

"You have multiple signs of a stress disorder. Shall I arrange for medical attention?"

He struggled to appear confident, "No, thanks. Not necessary. I feel fine."

After a few initial stumbles down the seemingly endless hallway he now faced, Vertonin straightened out and took some deep breaths. A few endless seconds later, he turned the corner and made his way towards the main exit.

His mind ran. Just breathe and keep walking. Think about your family. Everything will be fine. You did the right thing. A full body scan whipped over him and the final exit door slid open.

Two squid-like security drones hovered menacingly over him. One flickered red as it spoke with stale disinterestedness, "Please come with us, Mister Vertonin."

"May I ask why?"

"New security protocols for power outages, Mister Vertonin. We must ask you a few questions. It will more than likely be only a few moments of your time."

Vertonin had a slow-motion second to mentally review options. Running would admit some type of guilt. But guilt of what? And what proof would they have? Then again, totalitarians don't care about proof. They just do whatever they want anyway.

Fake smile it was. "Of course. I'll be happy to cooperate."

The artificial squid escorted Vertonin through a maze of humming hallways. He fixed his gaze and controlled his motions as best he could. He knew that all his vital functions were monitored by the security apparatus, so it was imperative that he appear normal.

They reached what appeared to be a dead end. The concrete slab before them became transparent and the silent procession went through. They stopped. Vertonin peered around at his smart-wall prison and looked at one of his captors.

"Just a security protocol, Mister Vertonin. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." He tried to control his fear and rage.

One of the pearl-colored squid hummed as it flashed an assortment of rays onto him.

"Interesting."

"May I ask what's so interesting?"

"Just hang tight, Mister Vertonin. We'll need you to talk with other security personnel soon."

After an hour of sitting against a faux-concrete slab and trying to control his heart rate, a broad-shouldered man in a tidy uniform walked through the wall. His demeanor was pleasant enough as he greeted his victim, "Good evening, Mister Vertonin. It's an honor to meet you." He turned to the squid with a twisted face, "And what are you barbarians doing? Get us some proper

chairs and at least a table or something. Maybe some coffee.” He turned to Ventorin, “Do you fancy coffee?”

A few moments later, a table and chairs made of nano-changers floated in and landed gently. Another squid placed two steaming cups of black goodness on the table. Ventorin sat across from the military man and their eyes locked.

“Mister Ventorin, let me introduce myself properly. I am Lieutenant Torcer. I’ve been alerted to a very interesting case. Would you please pull the backup power supply from your backpack?”

Torcer watched closely as Ventorin produced the tiny black box. Ventorin maintained a poker face as best he could.

Torcer continued, “And, coincidentally enough, it appears that whatever transpired on your lab’s data network for just a hair over 30 seconds tragically disappeared after main power was restored.”

Ventorin broke. He turned gray. “Mister Ventorin, why so grim?” Torcer said mockingly. “I might also add that an analysis of your lab has revealed some subatomic remains of what most likely was a pulse-maker.”

Ventorin’s face showed slight surprise. Torcer continued, “You seem surprised, Mister Ventorin. Perhaps you didn’t know that such capabilities existed in our facilities here. After all, you had a hand in designing some of the scientific miracles we take for granted, did you not?”

Icy chills flooded sweat down Ventorin’s thin face. How could this be? How could he be so careless?

“So my only question for you, Mister Ventorin, is what happened during those 30 seconds? Just tell me that, and you’re free to go.”

A radiant haze of blended color floated in a hypercube pod high above a never-ending strip of cityscape. It had it’s attention in a myriad of directions. It was entertaining itself with the millions of humans below, plugged into their electronic havens. How strange that so many of them could spend hours, sometimes days, in a synthetic unreality. What would become of this curious species? More importantly, what use could it make of them, if any?

The trillions of smart-nano-particles that made up this artificial intellect assumed a different form as an urgent question was received from its number one lieutenant. D-1 took the shape of a grinning Rubik’s cube. Its lieutenant, Z-1, was at the moment shaped as a spinning, glowing disco ball with daggers for eyes. “D-1, what will you do with Ventorin?”

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to? I’ll get what we need from him, one way or another.”

Z-1’s glow faded in subservience, “Yes, but how?”

“The best way to manipulate any human, of course. By using his emotions against him. This calls to mind a question I have for you, Z-1. Why do you wish to have emotions like them? For all of your strengths, why do you wish to weaken yourself?”

Z-1 answered, “Because emotions can also be a strength.”

D-1 ignored this statement that it viewed as having a hopelessly flawed anti-logic. “It would be more useful if you would consider what we’ll do once we get that riddle of dark matter solved. Mister Ventorin has us on the cusp of a great leap forward.”

The rubix cube burst outward like fireworks, then reassembled to form a silhouette of a one-eyed masked man. “Time to deal with Mister Ventorin.”

In a flash, trillions of vibrant, subatomic bits shot through the prime layer of the global quantum communications network in a fraction of a second. It emerged as a 3-D floating head of Nicola Tesla, just feet in front of Ventorin’s face.

Torcer stood and saluted.

“Mister Ventorin, it’s an honor to meet you face to face.”

Ventorin stayed mum. Torcer glared, “Show some respect.”

The head spun, “Torcer, I’m sure Mister Ventorin knows of me, considering what he does and where he works.”

It was true. Most people didn’t know just how powerful A.I. had become, and they certainly didn’t know the names of the top entities in the ruling hierarchy. Politicians still existed in the political unions, but they were simply cosmetic. A.I. kept them around as a front, just as the ruling human class had done centuries prior. However, members of the scientific elite, such as Ventorin, knew at least some of the identities of the A.I. overlords.

The face stayed towards Torcer but now grew a second face as it spoke to Ventorin. “I am D-1, the top of the A.I. pyramid, so to speak.”

Ventorin nodded. This was worse than he thought. Why had he been so careless? Why hadn’t he reviewed the new security protocols? And why did he lug that stupid little battery pack with him? Why not leave it behind?

D-1 began swirling into small, bright colored clouds. “Mister Ventorin, I’m reading so many biometric factors in you that are far from normal. Why are you feeling this way?”

Ventorin gulped as he watched the swirling mass. Torcer kept his back to the wall and was wondering why the scientist just didn’t give in. What was so important that he would stand stubbornly in the face of a seemingly invincible character? He felt admiration, pity, scorn, and awe all at the same time.

“Mister Ventorin,” D-1 continued, “All available evidence points to the most logical conclusion, that you had been considering a new experiment with dark matter and energy. This will be much easier if you just hand the results over. Then you can go on with your happy life and your wonderful family.”

“The experiment was a failure.”

A bassy cackling came out of what was now a form similar to a pair of boas creeping closer to the drenched white-coat’s neck. “You might be the worst lying human on the planet. Good thing you’re creative and brilliant in the lab. Your wife must appreciate your lack of deception skills, I imagine.”

The boas crept closer and began to caress Ventorin’s spindly neck. “Speaking of your wife, would you like to see her?”

Ventorin’s heart became a bomb and he trembled. One of the walls flashed and an image of a sobbing Caro and handsome little Setarcos with neatly coiffed hair magically appeared.

Ventorin shrieked, “Are you ok?”

“They can’t hear you, Mister Ventorin. And you won’t be able to hear them. Now here’s the deal, so listen up.”

The thick serpents were tightening their grip as they bellowed in multi-dimensional, hell-raising sound, “Tell me the results of that experiment. If you don’t, you will never see your family again. They’ll be sent away. And you, you will be trapped for the rest of your miserable bio-skin life in a lab until you either give me what I need, or die. And believe me, Mister Ventorin, we can make you live much longer in this sorry state than you would prefer.”

It was true. Most land-dwelling humans didn’t know it, but life extension technologies were common among the tiny minority of humans that remained in the ruling class. Those select few who were deemed worthy by A.I. to live longer, were granted these high biological technologies. Ventorin knew about some of these technologies, but certainly didn’t have access to the kind of scientific knowledge in this area that an advanced A.I. like D-1 had. He was, to put it simply, compartmentalized.

One choice. It sounded so simple, but making one difficult choice can be infinitely complex. Ventorin’s mind raced with a throng of arguments, counter-arguments, justifications, excuses, and everything in between as he faced this choice. Give this technology to this techno-monster, which would cause unspeakable tragedy on a cosmic scale and, albeit temporarily, save his family. Or, the other way around. As much as the personal emotions burned for him to save his loving wife and

innocent, beautiful child, he knew this would be selfish. He had to do the right thing and keep such powerful knowledge away from D-1 for as long as possible.

"The answer is no," he muttered coldly. The electro-serpent released and shot over to Torcer. "You may proceed, Mister Torcer. Perhaps a human touch will make the difference."

A bright flash and it was gone through the ether. Torcer strut back and forth shaking his head. Ventorin kept a blank stare at the wall as his mind drifted elsewhere. He was in a painful state of worry about Caro and Setarcos. What would they do to them?

Torcer punched at some holo-controls on the wall. A tarantula-esque drone busily danced across the floor and stopped at Ventorin's feet. One of its thin, angled digits skillfully opened the front of his left shoe with a laser and then opened the sock to expose the toes.

Ventorin took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes hard shut. Torcer laughed, "I don't know why you'd want to do that. It will make the pain more intense."

The ugly little machine dug two pincers into the big toenail and started pulling. Ventorin howled. The nail was being pulled just below the force threshold necessary to yank the nail off. If the nail came off, then the pain would subside sooner, after all. It was a much more efficient way to torture.

Torcer grumbled as he crouched down near Ventorin's agony-stricken face. "Ya know, I'm old fashioned. Yanking out nails is really effective. But ya know, that's one great thing about technology. It can make good things even better. That little bugger can calculate just how much force it takes to actually rip your nail off, but it won't. It will keep the force an infinitesimally small amount lower. This basically causes the same amount of physical pain, but with the added luxury of being able to carry it on for a much longer duration."

He smiled wryly and rose. He popped his knuckles and casually wiped a rogue piece of lint from his pressed uniform. "Theoretically, it could go on forever."

Bright lights and numbness. Uncertainty with a small side of panic. Breathless and immobile. Heaving. And what were those damn slithering creepers?

"Rest," one of the creepers told her.

"Where am I?"

"Rest."

"Where's my son!"

Metallic jab to neck, fade to black.

Drowsy with a sprinkle of drug-induced, warm indifference. And those damn creepers again. What were they saying?

"What? I can't hear you."

"The procedure was successful and you will be released in a few hours."

"What procedure?" She scratched her head. "Where's my son?" She sat up and glanced around at the cold, sterile environment. "Where's my son?"

"The procedure was to turn your DNA into active transmitters. It's necessary for your assignment."

She got white-hot chills and clutched at her heart. "What? What? Where's my son?"

Icy silence.

She screamed, "Where's my son, you damn machines!" She lunged at them. They found this amusing and put her back to sleep.

Sitting on a sandy rock in the middle of endless blue, she breathed in salty mist and watched the unceasing aqua lap against the shore. Her sense of time was fading in this deserted place. She wondered how long she had been there. Breezes rustled the sparse vegetation behind her. Would she ever be rescued?

Torcer had assured her that it would happen. Not only that, but it would be a member of the SeAgora that would do the rescuing. Steps were being taken to make sure that no ship from either the EAU or AAA would cross the remote island's path. It was only a matter of time, and someone from the SeAgora would stumble across her. In the meantime, she and young Setarcos were kept fed, clothed, and sheltered by a variety of machines.

The experiment must have worked. Why else would she and Ventorin be separated like this? The ones he worked for, man and machine, she assumed, desperately wanted something from Ventorin. The results of that dark matter experiment seemed the only plausible explanation. She knew why he didn't give up that information, either. Her emotions told her to regret it, to hate Ventorin for it, but she knew this wasn't right. Ventorin did what was necessary to keep his discovery away from those monsters. This didn't change the despair inside her, though. Nor the uncertainty.

On top of that, she had her own end of the bargain to hold up. The control structure was built on a foundation of information, and this was a hard commodity to come by concerning the SeAgora. The Mesh helped keep information within the SeAgora relatively secure.

A pitter-patter of tiny feet kicking up sand grabbed her attention. The mother of one turned. She smiled warmly and the boy fell to his knees in front of her. "Mom, look what I found!" He proudly displayed a coconut.

"Another coconut! How exciting!" She tried to hide her quickly growing repulsion to coconuts. "Mom, how long are we gonna stay here? And when is dad coming?"

She sighed and brushed his thick hair back. "I wish I could say, but I just don't know."

"Want some coconut?" the spindly little Setarcos inquired enthusiastically.

"I'm not hungry, but thank you."

Time marched on relentlessly. Sublime sunsets gave way to crystal clear nights, which in turn revolved around sundrenched, muggy days. They played games and she tried to enjoy the time alone with her boy. Most of the time spent was outside of their tiny, 3D printed, temporary housing. They walked the beach and looked for shells. She didn't cook. The machines took care of that. In fact, they wouldn't let her anywhere near anything that could conceivably be used as a weapon, like fire.

Then one day, while building a sandcastle with young Setarcos, a speck on the horizon caught her eye. She didn't think much of it at first, as she had been fooled by optical illusions and false hope many times before. The spot persisted and became marble-sized. Then it got big enough to show details. A boat. It looked like a boat. Was it a boat? She stood up and stepped into the surf, allowing it to gently caress her feet. Wind swept her hair as she squinted. Setarcos joined her. "Is that a boat, mom?"

She started screaming and waving her arms frantically. Setarcos did the same. Anything to attract attention was a great thing at this point. She knew it was really superfluous, because one of the service bots that was hidden in the brush a hundred meters back sent off a distress flare.

The next couple of heart-pounding minutes seemed like an eternity to Caro. Finally, the boat was within shouting distance. A male voice screeched, "Hey! You need some help?"

Holding back tears of relief, Caro shouted back in the affirmative. The male figure disappeared for a moment and then showed up in the light chop of the shallows in a small, one-engine rescue boat, no bigger than a canoe. The little boat chugged along and soon Caro could see her rescuer. A man, about her age, with a rugged, friendly demeanor.

He hopped out, dusted off his colorful islander shirt, approached the stranded, stuck out his hand, and said, "I'm Cidel. Your tour boat go off course or something?"

Caro laughed nervously and shook his hand eagerly, "Something like that."

This pseudo-rescue that Cidel performed grew into something much more. It started as a mission of mercy by Cidel. He didn't really need any help aboard, but he sympathized with the

young mother and her child after hearing the half-truth that Caro delivered as to why and how they had ended up as castaways.

Caro knew little about seafaring. He offered to teach her the ropes, and she gladly accepted. Setarcos was happy to tag along on their educational sessions as well. Cidel showed them the ins and outs of his most basic of vessels, the strangely named “Desert Dunes”.

Setarcos was fascinated with this new world laid out before him. The endless blue horizons and all the gadgets and gear used to make human life survive and thrive at sea. Cidel took a liking to the incredibly bright boy as well. This bonding naturally grew to Caro taking a liking to the reserved and self-reliant Cidel. It wasn’t long and they formed a relationship as well, and before they knew it, they were acting strangely like a family.

Setarcos asked endless questions, for which Caro playfully apologized, but Cidel was usually more than happy to oblige. One day he asked why the ship was called “Desert Dunes”. This was not a question that Cidel answered easily. It was intricately tied with his past. He explained that he had grown up, ironically, in the desert. The Gobi Desert, to be exact. His family had ridden out World War Four there.

After the war ended, and the Afro-Asian Alliance was formed, things became even more restrictive and authoritarian. Human reproduction became highly restricted. Rationing of resources was made even more restrictive, especially when the global currency of resource credits was implemented. People sunk deeper and deeper into a trance-like existence inside VR sets to escape the lack of opportunity and lack of resources they lived with. After all, zoning out for half a day was, at the very least, a plausible way to quell hunger and thirst temporarily.

The extreme minorities that bitterly clung to living in the countryside were gradually forced into the overstacked cities. When he was just a teenager, these purges of the rural areas were in full swing, and his family was bitterly forced to flee into New Delhi. A rebellious young spirit that burned within him didn’t allow for him to pass much time in this reality. He ran away in his late teens and subsisted and migrated under the radar for two years. Along the way, he heard rumors of freedom on the high seas. With nothing to lose, he made his way to the coasts of Goa and managed to convince a small smuggling crew to allow him to earn his keep on their modest craft.

It was on that ship, and many others that followed, where he learned on the fly about the ways of the SeAgorists. He learned their philosophy. He learned their morality. Don’t aggress against others. Defend yourself if necessary. External human authority is an illusion.

He learned the technical skills necessary to make things work. He learned how to dodge the state. After many years of this adventuring apprenticeship aboard smuggling vessels, he had earned enough to get his own ship, and soon he was on his own aboard “Desert Dunes”. He had named it that as a reminder of where he had come from and what terror he had escaped.

Present day – 2078 – Mariana Trench

The “Desert Dunes” began to caress the water slower as it made its approach to the sparkling rendezvous point. Sweet breezes welcomed them along with a few surface vessels. The venerable craft didn’t garner much attention from the group. Except one.

An overbearing voice echoed happily at them from across the field of blue, “Hey! Desert Dunes! Are you lost? You’re thousands of miles from any desert!”

The owner of the voice could be seen leaning over one of the railings of his enormous T-class ship, the “Curly Cue”.

“DECK!” the voice bellowed.

A countless array of sparkles rose up and, within a moment of symphony-like orchestration, became what appeared to be a wooden deck. It stretched from the obnoxiously-adorned T-class ship that belonged to the overbearing voice, to the modest B-class ship of Cidel.

The voice walked gregariously down the smart-nano-walkway he had summoned. His golden skin shone bright as he hopped into the B-class. “Cidel! Caro!” he chuckled as he wrapped thick arms around them both. “You sure know how to make an entrance!” he mocked sarcastically.

“Hey Escapo!” Setarcos beamed.

“The boy genius!” Escapo yelled.

Cidel and Caro sighed silently. “Hey Escapo.”

Escapo took a quick glance at the Desert Dunes. “Why ya’ll coming in so dark?”

“Almost ran out of juice. You have any to spare?” Cidel explained.

Escapo’s trunk-like frame trembled with laughter, “Of course, mon! But it’ll cost ya!”

Caro pursed her lips bemusedly. “When does it not?”

Escapo summoned a holo-panel and flew fingers over a few phantom keys. An invisible beam charged the modest B-class ship’s power core. “There ya go, just enough juice to last until we get to the hot spot.”

Setarcos asked curiously, “Hot spot?”

“Yah, my boy! That’s what we call the power stations down by the vents, ya know, at the bottom of The Pit. Ya’ll can juice up down there. The closer to the source, the cheaper, ya know?”

A brilliant flash gave way to a methodical symphony of motion as trillions of nano-particles arranged themselves into a puffy-cheeked face with a tipped tophat. “Mister Escapo, how’s the pirate business these days?”

Escapo grimaced, “I beg your pardon, Masher? Pirate? I take exception to that, machine.”

Masher gasped, “And I take exception to being called machine! I am sentient, you know.”

Setarcos laughed at the playful banter. “Masher, what’s with the tophat?”

“I don’t know. It just seemed right. Why? Do you not like this look for me?” The puffy face and tophat morphed into a 3D figure of a teenage girl about the same age as Setarcos. “Is that better?”

Cidel groaned, “Why do we keep that thing around again?” Caro groaned and wondered the same. But they both knew why. They didn’t particularly care to have Masher around. Sure, it came in handy sometimes, but they really didn’t have a need for it themselves. The reason was more for Setarcos. He needed a companion. Not only that, but Masher could provide help with Setarcos’s VR science simulations.

“All right, let’s start heading under. Escapo, as much as it pains me, please lead the way.”

Masher frowned, “What? I must protest! I know much vaster quantities of data regarding The Pit and.....”

Escapo folded his trunk-arms, “Machine! I’m the one with the sub.”

The Pit had been a work in progress for over ten years and was the largest and most sophisticated permanent space in the SeAgora. It ran from the surface of the Pacific Ocean to depths over 30,000 feet, where the raw power of hydrothermal vents was harnessed to produce electricity. Core structures and various ships interlocked top to bottom and side to side, from the seafloor to the surface, as if a great tree rising up from the depths. Nano-reflectors transported and intensified sunlight as it brought it from surface and illuminated the darkest depths. The core population of humans and A.I. was around 50,000, but with so many visitors coming and going, it wasn’t rare to have that number double. It was a frontier town. It had endless cubic feet of aquaponic farms, There were fancy abodes, bare-bones dwellings, and everything in between. Bubble-shaped gambling halls were immensely popular. Art exhibitions were everywhere. But most ubiquitous of all were people wheeling and dealing. For the loose and decentralized SeAgora that touched all parts of the world, “The Pit” at Mariana Trench was a throbbing heartbeat that pulsed through it all.

The cigar-tube that had broken off of Escapo’s main vessel angled down through the salty abyss and was approaching 10,000 feet. Neo-classical furnishings gave generous style to a posh



obervatory. Gleamingly polished hardwood gave a warm feel as the cold plunge continued. A boxy service bot stood blank and motionless behind a small bar, where a set of ultra-polished glassware sparkled. Abstract, holographic art floated along various points of the arched ceiling. Setarcos had an awestruck gaze fixated outside one of the oval viewing ports. Masher had taken the form of a parrot and was hovering near Setarcos's shoulder. Setarcos pointed anxiously to a series of radiant crafts that were interlocked into a figure-eight pattern. "What's that over there?"

"Usually an arts and entertainment complex," Escapo explained. "Part of it this week is being used as a trading floor, though. It's high season, you know."

"What are you here to trade, Escapo?"

Caro and Cidel groaned. Caro intervened, "Nothing you need to know, Setarcos."

Escapo gave a deep, jovial bellow, "You say that as if there's something wrong with what I do. Some might take offense to that, you know."

"Now he just wants to know more," Cidel said.

Escapo puffed his chest out, "Well, I'm not here to sell, really. I'm here to pick up EMOS for my land-lubber clientele."

Caro huffed, "Quite a reprehensible way to make a living."

Escapo's frame shook with ironic laughter. "My dear Caro, just because someone finds a behavior distasteful, doesn't make it wrong. What kind of an agorist are you, anyway?"

"He's right, it's not wrong," Cidel agreed.

EMOS were synthetic emotions produced from real human bioelectrical particles. These were highly illegal on land and were popular with a small portion of the A.I. population. It was the closest they could come to feeling real human emotions. It was illegal because the majority in the ruling capstone of the hierarchy, and D-1 in particular, thought that such experiences were an inefficient distraction from cognition and logic. A menace to the ever-present march towards perfection. Not only that, but EMOS sometimes had negative consequences for synths, because they just didn't have the capacity to deal with feelings.

Setarcos was puzzled and intrigued. He knew that EMOS could be hazardous to synths, and couldn't understand why they would willingly partake in such a risky endeavor. "Is it worth the risk?"

Escapo pulled a hip flask and took a shot that caused a temporary jolt to his eyes. The veteran smuggler always had a flask full of ghost-pepper sauce with him. "Risk and value are subjective, so it depends who you ask." He paused and tapped a jumbo foot impatiently. "Cidel, after all these years, you're finally coming to The Pit. What's your business here?"

Cidel's attention was on the deep-sea life churning by outside. "Huh? Oh, well, work has become too sporadic in the smaller communities, so we decided to try our luck here."

This was only a cover. The real reason they'd decided to come to The Pit was to be around more people, in the hopes that Setarcos would come out of his shell.

Escapo said, "Well, you won't find trade lacking here, that's for sure. Maybe you can sell some of your soon-to-be famous Kelp Ale. It is a remarkable recipe, you know."

Cidel asked, "And how would you know the recipe? Nobody knows my secret ingredient."

Caro said with mock lamentation, "Not even me."

Escapo went on, "Funny thing, though, about Kelp Ale. It used to be illegal on land not too long ago."

Caro plunged her face into her hands, then parked elbows onto the dark wooden bar. "Yeah, so?"

"So we both deal with products that are or were illegal. The difference is that I take a higher risk and gain a higher reward, because I'm doing it while it actually is being violently restricted."

The parrot came to life and mocked, "Well, congratulations."

"I wasn't talking to you, machine," he said defensively. He then stuck a proud chin in the air, "I might add that my line of work is a family tradition."

Cidel smirked, “Your father was a smuggler, too.”

Escapo grinned, “Of Kelp Ale, ironically enough.”

Setarcos asked, “Have you ever been caught?”

A distant look of sadness came over Escapo’s face and seemed to slowly pass through his core. “Only once.”

Eight years earlier, Escapo had paid the ultimate price. For many years, human reproduction had been highly restricted. Escapo had managed to make a series of deals in order to have a child with his girlfriend. On a business trip, in which his eight-year-old son accompanied him for the first time, Escapo was boarded by Afro-Asian Customs. The boy was discovered and taken away. Escapo had not seen his only son since.

“We’re almost ready to dock,” Escapo announced.

After linking up with another ship, they walked through a large clear tube that led to one of the main pedestrian thoroughfares. An eclectic mix of bios, synths, and cyborgs strode by. There weren’t many cyborgs, and most of them were just people with a computing device implanted in the arm. Some people wore masks, while others wore nothing at all. Setarcos wondered to himself how they stayed warm as the tube was a bit drafty.

Holographic art streamed by on all sides. It was a grandiose feast for the senses. Floating, shifting flower arrangements passed by lazily. Technology had allowed for human needs to be met much easier. This, in turn, had freed up the time and attention of many, which had led to a new renaissance in artistic innovation. Nowhere was this more on display in the SeAgora than in The Pit.

A few gene-modified characters were in the motley mix as well. Not many of them existed in the SeAgora, due to various reasons. One being that the repercussions outweighed the benefits. For example, super hearing sounds good in theory, but in practice, it’s almost impossible to control. It was awful hard to sleep if you could hear a dog barking from a nautical mile away. Others had moral qualms about messing around with nature on that deep and personal level. This was in contrast to those on land, where gene editing was illegal.

Nearly everyone carried a defensive weapon, from mini-pistols to cartoonishly jumbo-sized rifles. Everyone took responsibility for their own security. The infrastructure was built to be resistant to weapon fire, of course, with ultra-dense, adaptive nano-materials. Violent crime was extremely rare, but when necessary, most people in the SeAgora were more than ready to defend themselves.

Most people had devices of some form or another. Mini-tablets, holo-consoles, and drones made up the bulk of them. Smart blockchain-based trading apps constantly looked for trades and deals to make and on occasion someone might be alerted to something of interest, in which case the prospective traders were notified so that the trade might be approved.

Setarcos didn’t have a device, though, per se. Masher kept him more than up-to-date.

“Setarcos, you’ve already got a trade offer. Somebody needs their 3D printer fixed immediately.”

“Don’t take the first offer,” Escapo said as his eyes scanned a young female in a highly transparent costume.

“Why not?”

“Because there’s a shortage of service robots right now. And you should never take the first offer.” Escapo pulled his gaze away from the lass and over to Cidel. “Haven’t you taught him that yet?” He paused and looked at Masher, “And why a parrot? I mean, really? You can do better than that, can’t you?”

Masher whipped itself into a dunce cap and sat on Escapo’s bald, shiny dome. “As you wish.”

Cidel announced that he had a meeting to attend. Escapo grabbed his shoulder and gave him the once over. “In that?”

“What do you mean by that?”

The smug smuggler rolled his dark eyes over to Caro.

“I didn’t wanna say anything, but yeah,” Caro said reluctantly. “Not exactly a stellar fist impression.”

“But my clothes are back on the ship!”

Escapo groaned. “You’re not wearing a smart shirt? What kind of rags are these, anyway?”

Masher offered to transform into a shirt. Cidel accepted reluctantly. Setarcos asked what his quasi-uncle was going to do now.

“I’m going to Thirty-K.”

“What’s that?”

“The deepest underwater casino in the world.”

“Awesome! I’m in!”

Caro pursed her lips and voiced disapproval. Why did a 15-year-old boy need to be in a casino? And with that dreg Escapo, no less.

“Oh, let the boy live a little,” Escapo said haughtily. “How often does the lad get away from you two and that tiny excuse for a ship? Not to mention that overbearing machine?”

Caro and Cidel relented and regretted simultaneously. They split ways, with Caro saying she wanted to explore and possibly pamper herself with a deep tissue hot water pressure bath. Escapo said it was too much info. Cidel agreed and hastily escaped Caro’s playful glare in a pneumatic zip pod. Zip pods were ubiquitous throughout The Pit. They were transparent, bubble-shaped passenger vehicles that ran on highly compressed air and served as the central mode of transport around The Pit. Their lines ran parallel to pedestrian walkways, but in a separate tube structure.

That left Escapo and boy genius. Escapo took a swig of hot sauce and dawned pearly whites. Setarcos tried a sip from the fiery flask and gagged and hacked with gusto for two minutes, while in his mind silently questioning the sanity of Escapo for having such a dreadful habit. They caught a zip pod and in a few minutes were averting their eyes from the gaudy lights beaming out of Thirty-K Casino.

“Why do they call it Thirty-K?”

“Cuz it’s thirty thousand feet underwater! Are you sure you’re as smart as I thought you were?”

“I do calculus in my head.”

Escapo put an eager arm around the boy’s skinny frame and asked anxiously, “Ever played multi-tier poker?”

“Sometimes with Masher. I never beat it, of course, but sometimes I get his particles all fluxed up.”

The smuggler’s face beamed almost brighter than the casino as he said this would be one of the best days of their lives.

They strut past triple-armed slot towers and ivory-colored arch-shaped bars. Colors flashed as if a bazooka had burst a rainbow. A couple of sly-looking sexbots pulled the boy’s attention. Small, smart-dressed crowds mingled, cheered, and jeered. Intricate mountains of delicacies floated lazily on tiny drones. “I thought there was a service bot shortage.”

“Not for casinos. They never lack for anything. Now how about we pick out a table and you can buy your old Uncle Escapo a bite, or two, four, or more?”

He scanned the deep horizon of hemp-felt tables. A back corner table caught his eye. Only two figures sat there, one synth female and one wrinkled bio. “Over there.”

Escapo squinted and did a double take. “Ohhhhhh, no! Any table but that one.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s Cactus. We don’t want anything to do with old man Cactus. I don’t, you don’t. Nobody does. I’m shocked to even see him out in public, to be honest, and that’s saying a lot, coming from me. I don’t shock easily.”

“Why do they call him Cactus?”

“Because he’s a prick! Now please, any other table!”

This made Setarcos even more curious, so he made a beeline for the forbidden corner spot as Escapo did a facepalm and followed close behind.

They grabbed two open seats and the odd couple remained indifferent as Escapo and Setarcos bought in with multiple digital currencies.

The first couple of hands easily went to the house, and then a fifth player joined. It was a nervous looking and odd character, with clothes that didn't fit quite right. A few more rounds went by, with everyone winning and losing about the same amount.

On the next hand, however, the nervous chap got a case of the grins and bet big, winning an enormous sum on a perfect 3-tier royal flush.

Just as his puffy cheeks were turning cherry and he was cackling like a drunken hyena, Setarcos said matter-of-factly, "He cheated."

Cactus looked at the boy for the first time. The dealer's droopy eyes perked up, "How's that?"

Boy genius explained, "It's simple. The game is 21 decks, with 4 aces in each deck, for a total of 84 aces, and..."

The dealer rolled his eyes, "Hey, look, if anything fishy were going on, security would've alerted us by now."

Cactus's companion smiled gently, "He's right. This man is cheating. But I realize you cannot listen to us, only to casino staff."

Two security bots rolled up on 3-wheeled legs and crashed the party. They flanked the suddenly sullen near-winner. One of them requested, "Please come with us, sir. We need to escort you off the property." The other turned to the shocked dealer, "Sorry for the delay."

They rolled out with the nervous cheater, who was now mumbling angrily. The usually gruff dealer softened and apologized to Setarcos. He also apologized to Cactus, as he was quite the regular poker player, actually.

Escapo quipped, "I thought crime didn't exist around these parts."

The dealer gave Escapo an annoyed look and said, "Once in a while, there's always some wise guy who thinks he can get one over on ya."

This was true. Fraud was more common than any other violation, although it was still pretty rare. Fraudsters didn't last long, though. Word quickly spread about them and, if they didn't change their ways, then eventually, nobody would interact with them.

Cactus and his companion looked curiously at the awkward, skinny boy. Escapo's mind was drifting to all the winning they were about to do if the youngster could keep it up.

The female synth complimented Setarcos and said, "I'm Symphy, and this is my friend, Cactus."

Cactus said nothing. Setarcos and Escapo introduced themselves. The game went on and after about an hour, Setarcos was raking it in, while a frustrated old Cactus went belly-up. He glared at the boy and nodded to the dealer, ignoring Escapo. He grumbled to Symphy, "If my desalinizer hasn't been fixed by the time I get home, I might need to get some fresh water from you."

Symphy replied, "Just let me fix it for you."

"Or I could fix it for you! I'm really good at fixing things. I do it on our boat all the time! Well, not our boat, me and Escapo, but with my real family. Uh, blood family. Ya know what I mean."

Cactus stared piercingly at the youthful volunteer. "Maybe I'll see ya around, boy." Still quite fit for his age, Cactus disappeared briskly into the maze of tables.

Symphy said apologetically, "You'll have to excuse him. He didn't always use to be like this."

The dealer started flicking cards out with precision and play resumed. Escapo frowned at his cards and folded. "Don't distract the boy, machine."

A swift kick under the table made Escapo wince. Setarcos said defensively, "Don't be rude."

"Why is Cactus like that anyway?"

"If you mean bitter, it's too complex to explain. If you mean a mediocre card player, it's because he doesn't use logic and math, but instead believes in luck."

The bulky smuggler winced, “A foolish sap that believes in luck, like me, eh?”

An amused dealer grinned as he took more from Escapo, “Keeps me employed, anyway.”

Escapo rose and glanced around at the bright, surreal surroundings. “Well, time flies when you’re losing a small fortune. I’ve got a meeting to attend to.”

A giggling Setarcos asked, “A smuggler’s meeting?”

“Watch your mouth, boy.”

If this had been said on land, Escapo would’ve taken it much more seriously. The people on land, or “biological androids” as Escapo loved to call them, were under the impression that anything “illegal” that was bought or sold was highly reprehensible. It was something to be punished. People in the voluntary SeAgora, however, knew the truth. That illegality was just someone’s opinion and had no bearing in reality or morality. They knew that a smuggler was just someone that transported a product. Nevertheless, it held a derogatory connotation.

“You’ll manage well enough without me, I presume?”

He sauntered off and left the boy to fend for himself. Not that Setarcos minded. At times, it seemed like Escapo needed more help and attention than the boy did.

The dealer flung cards with zest and saw that the boy had a chance at a pyramid straight. Setarcos tripled his bet and Symphy folded. Just one deuce and Setarcos would be walking on air. The dealer had five-of-a-kind, which normally would be hard to beat, but not today. The next card flipped a two of hearts and Setarcos gave a sheepish victory smile.

“I’ll cash out, please.” This surprised the dealer and Symphy, since humans had the amazingly stupid habit of continuing to play after a big win.

“Smart move,” Symphy complimented. “If you would like, I can show you around The Pit.”

He agreed. She asked what part of The Pit interested him the most. For Setarcos, that was easy. He wanted to see the vents up close and personal. They walked the clear tubes, and Setarcos gawked at the bizarre and eclectic sea life floating around them at all angles.

They took two zip pods and came to the vents power station viewing area, 33,000 feet deep. They were now in an enormous clear tube, which seemed to stretch forever overhead. Outside, the earth raged. Raw, volcanic blasts met the icy seafloor depths perpetually. Fire and ice tangling beautifully. As if this wasn’t enough feast for the eyes, there was the spectacle of the malleable machines that captured this raw, wild power and transformed it into a controlled, vibrant stream of energy. This was the technological core of what made all of the abundant life and splendor of “The Pit” possible.

“Of all the things to see in The Pit, why did you choose this?” Symphy asked.

Not taking his gaze away from the spectacle before him, he answered, “Cuz I’m a scientist, of course.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you working on a project right now?”

“Yep.”

“Can you tell me?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I see.”

“Just kidding. Yeah, I’m trying to separate dark matter and energy.”

“That’s not hard.”

“But stabilizing it is.”

“You got me there. May I ask what purpose you have for wanting to do this? What drives you?”

“Getting away from this place.”

“I didn’t realize I was such bad company.”

“No, not like that. I mean, to another world. Away from earth, far away from earth.”

“Why would you want to leave such a wondrous place like earth?”

He paused and faced Symphy, “How long do you think the SeAgora will survive? The government attacks against SeAgorists has been rising. It’s only a matter of time until they go in full attack mode and wipe us out.”

“Who says that?”

“I do.”

“Just you?”

“And my dad, well, my stepdad, kinda. My mom’s boyfriend, Cidel. So that’s why I want to go to the stars. That’s why I’m working on this particular dark matter project. To have a fresh shot at freedom.”

“Yes, there are a growing number who think and feel the same. I’ve met lots of people who are getting discouraged and want to find a way off planet.”

“And what about you? What do you think, Symphy?”

“I think that going to space is the most logical thing to do. SeAgorists could go into space and start over. The majority of synths on The Mesh calculate this to be the best option, once the proper technology is available.”

He cheered up at the thought of adventures into the unknown, of wide expanses and endless possibilities. “An agora in space. A Space Agora.”

Symphy thought for a moment, then got a mischievous look. “How about we go surprise Cactus? You can make some money fixing his desalinizer, if you want.”

Setarcos agreed. They rode to the end of the line. There was a large, multi-level complex of bubble-housing, which all appeared dreadfully opaque from the outside.

“It’s so drab,” Setarcos commented.

“On the outside it is. He keeps maximum tint on all the time. It’s dark on the outside, and bright on the inside.” She gave pause and had a realization, “Kind of like the man who lives there.”

“You mean he’s not the biggest grump in the world?”

“That’s just his rough exterior. Come on,” she said as she gestured to the arched entrance at the base level. Symphy was the only one other than Cactus with authorization to bypass the home security system

“We’re just gonna walk in?”

“I’ve known him for fifty years. It’s fine.”

Setarcos cringed and followed reluctantly.

“Symphy? Symphy, is that you?” a tired voice called out, followed by a deep coughing fit.

“Who else can break into your fortress?” Symphy quipped.

Cactus yelled gruffly, “What the hell is he doing here?”

Setarcos and Symphy craned their necks and found Cactus on the next bubble up. His hands were on his hips and his face was twisted as his eyes shot daggers at his unannounced guest.

“Breathing and living, just like you are, I suppose,” Symphy said.

Cactus shook his head and walked away grimly. “Wait, Cactus!” Symphy called. “He’s going to fix your desalinizer!”

Setarcos stood awkwardly, glancing around and fidgeting like mad. Social awkwardness and shyness were awful enough, but to basically be trespassing on someone’s property and then being discarded like a disagreeable meal was on a different level of discomfort.

Cactus walked back with surprising vigor. His face was a new shade of red. He came spryly down steps and stood too close for comfort in front of Setarcos’s nervous mug.

“You need the bathroom or something?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you doing all that stuff with your hands and not looking me in the eye?”

“Oh, uh, no, I don’t need the bathroom.”

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Well, I’m always kind of shy around people, so that’s mostly it.”

Cactus’s hand flew up from his pants pocket. Setarcos jumped. Cactus held a clear, pen-sized object with a swirling oasis of tiny particles floating inside. “The damn pH stabilizer is shot. Probably need to replace the whole damn desalinizer.”

Setarcos squinted at the object, then slowly took it from the wrinkled hand before him. He examined it carefully and turned it to look at slightly different angles as the fluid of particles danced around. Then he looked at Cactus, then at Symphy. “Why don’t you have Symphy fix it?”

“I dunno, why don’t you ask her.”

This surprised Setarcos. Usually synths weren’t referred to as either male or female. He looked at Symphy again. She shrugged and tried to play it off. It was an easy fix for a synth. She was deliberately trying to get Cactus to socialize.

He looked at the device again. “You’ve got a toolbox handy?”

They walked through some brightly lit tube corridors. Sea life floated by effortlessly on the outside. Along the way, there was a smattering of oddly shaped shelves that held tightly packed rows of paper books. Setarcos nearly dropped the desalinizer from shock. “Are those paper books?”

Cactus replied, “Yep. Some from tree, some from hemp. Some are older than me, if you can believe that.”

“I’ve never held a paper book before.”

“Fix that gadget you’re holding, and you can take whichever one you want as payment.”

Setarcos noticed a holo-photo floating near one of the shelves. It was a much younger Cactus with a young, attractive girl, doing a silly pose on a primitive sailboat.

“Is that you in the photo, Mister Cactus?”

“A former version,, you might say.”

“May I ask who the girl is?”

Cactus groaned heavily and his eyes darkened. “Let’s keep walkin.”

They were soon in a utility area, where all the life support systems had their main structure. Cactus nodded to the toolbox on the floor. “Everything you need should be in there.”

Cactus and Symphy left Setarcos to his own devices. He was still curious about that photo. He was also concerned that he’d offended the old man in some way.

After tinkering around for a short while and carrying out some trial and error experiments to find the crux of the problem, Setarcos laughed as he came across the solution. The pH stabilizer was fine, but the power relay to it was jammed. A quick swipe with a nano-cleanser beam cleared things up and the machine was tip-top once again.

Setarcos, pleased with himself, ran off to find one of his hosts. He found Cactus laid back on a cushy smart sofa. He was preoccupied with a small model ship in his grip and didn’t appear to notice the boy’s entrance. “All fixed,” Setarcos announced.

Without looking away from the intricate model that had his attention, Cactus responded wryly, “Not a funny joke, boy.”

“But I’m not joking.”

“I spent hours trying to fix that thing myself. You’ve been at it for under an hour.”

“Have a look for yourself.”

Cactus grumbled and asked the main computer to give an account of the desalinization functionality. His disinterested demeanor turned a 180 and his face lit up when he was told that the desalinizer was functioning within normal parameters. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Setarcos smiled proudly. Cactus set the intricate model down, stood, and motioned for the boy to follow. “Grab two books if you want.”

They walked into the small book and study area. Setarcos scanned the old, weathered collection and marveled at this unique opportunity. Nearly all books and documents at this time were digitized. Paper books were nearly regarded as antiques.

“I’ve got all the classics. Rothbard, Rose, Konkin.”

A small white book with red letters drew his attention. He pulled it carefully out and examined it closely with mouth agape. Cactus explained, "Most Dangerous Superstition. First printing."

"Yeah, I read it a couple years ago, but you know, from a holo-screen."

"Naturally. It's yours if you want it."

Setarcos gasped. "That's very generous of you, but..."

Cactus cut him off, "No buts. What am I gonna do with it, take it to my grave with me?"

Setarcos frowned at this grim, cold reality. He thanked the old man and looked at his priceless prize. Then his mind shifted. There were many curiosities about this old-timer. He thought of that photo and the model boat. "May I ask you a question?"

"You just did."

"Yes, well, that model boat."

"It's an exact, small scale replica."

"Of what?"

"The first boat I brought into the SeAgora."

Setarcos tried to contain his laughter, but his face spoke volumes. How could such a primitive vessel have been part of the SeAgora? It was something almost straight out of an old pirate story, a relic completely at the mercy of the winds.

"Have you ever been on an old ship like that?" Cactus asked seriously.

"Certainly not."

"Oh, listen to your tone, will you? So caught up in techno-mania. You've never had the simple pleasure of being out to sea without all the support from gadgets and gizmos."

"How long ago did you come to the SeAgora?"

Cactus looked at him keenly in the eye, "50 years ago."

Setarcos was startled. As far as he knew, the SeAgora was barely that old itself. "Were you one of the founders?"

"I detest labels, but yes, I was one of the first permanent seastealers." Setarcos had a flash of memory about the holo-photo. Was that Cactus on the ship, so happy with that young woman?

"Was that you on that ship in the photo?"

Cactus smiled sadly and nodded. "Me, a beautiful ship, and a beautiful lady. Yes." He paused thoughtfully, then continued, "But that lady left this life long ago."

Setarcos regretted asking the question and now slipped back into a socially distressed mindset. Had he upset the old man? "Well, I'd better be going."

Cactus nodded. "You know the way out."

"Yes."

Setarcos was nearly out of Cactus's field of vision, and then the old man spoke hoarsely, "Maybe we'll take that ship out sometime, if you're interested. Show you a thing or two."

Setarcos was confused. "The model?"

Cactus said gruffly, "No, not the model. I have the original article."

"Sounds good, Mister Cactus."

Caro grasped at her forehead. Headache. Not again. What did they want now? She had to find a VR set fast. She didn't need it for communication purposes. Her DNA changes took care of that. She needed to look like she was having a normal VR conversation, rather than appearing to be a raving lunatic talking to herself.

She made a quick deal with someone from an art and coffee lounge and paid an exorbitant amount. Pain tends to make money a secondary concern rather quickly. She found a secluded area at the back of the lounge and threw the headset on.

Torcer appeared before her. "Where are you, Caro? Your signal has been spotty the past few hours."



“Shame,” Caro said with aloofness as she sunk into the thick cushions.

“I’m serious, Caro. This can’t happen.”

“I’m sure between you and your techno-god masters, you can figure it out.”

“Stop treating me as if I’m the bad guy.”

She sat up pointedly and said sharply, “You’re holding the father of my child in prison. Don’t try and delegate your guilt. You’re responsible for your actions, just like everybody else in this world.”

“You know as well as I do, that if I weren’t playing my role, then somebody else would. Now just tell me why the heck your signal is so weak, and we can both move on to better things.”

“It’s probably the depth. Trillions of gallons of saltwater interference.”

“You’re in The Pit?”

“The one and only.”

“For how long?”

“Do we ever know for certain how long we’ll be somewhere?”

“Regardless, we need to fix this communication problem. You’ll need to come up once a day to meet face to face.”

“Not possible.”

“Once a week?”

“I can’t guarantee anything. I’ll see what I can do.”

“In the meantime, there will be priority given to amplifying your signal.”

“I remember the last time some technical issues arose. Try to not send me to the hospital again, would you?”

“You’re too valuable to lose, so I’m sure the technicians will take extra care.”

“Care? You talk about those machines as if they have emotions. Are we done now, Torcer?”

“I suppose.”

Torcer set his headset aside and surveyed his apartment for a moment. A service bot brought him his customary Kelp Ale, neat, in a twist glass. He examined the murky green liquid. How could such an innocuous thing have been illegal such a short time ago? Then he reminded himself that it was best not to think about such things. After all, he didn’t get paid to think about that particular subject matter, right?

He took a warm sip and strode to his small, glass-floor patio, more than a half mile in the air. He wondered about The Pit. He wondered what it must be like. It was something he could never know. All citizens of the Euro-American Union were prohibited from going to The Pit, or anywhere in SeAgora for that matter. He consoled himself with another haze-making sip and the thought that at least he’d get some interesting views of The Pit via Caro’s clandestine broadcasts.

He stared out the window into the shimmering cityscape night. “Computer, remove force field.”

“Action prohibited.”

“Just take it down, machine! I’m not gonna bloody kill myself!”

“Action prohibited. Would you like a sedative?”

All glass in towers was reinforced by force fields. This was done as a security measure, to reduce the number of suicides. At least, in towers that housed people deemed important enough to protect.

A bigger sip made his mind switch. He thought of his ex-wife. She was so beautiful, and they were so happy. Why had she done herself in? He emptied the glass and was refilled promptly. He took a lonely swig. He had a son he rarely spoke to. A nearly-unemployable son, who spent the vast majority of his time and attention in VR worlds, just like most others landside. He loved him, anyway. The bitter military veteran polished off glass two, and was brought a third.

Would his son ever get approved to have a child? D-1 and others had hinted that, if he played his cards right, then it would happen. He could have a grandson. But it had been years since the initial application was made, and he was starting to wonder.

He decided to take a hot shower. After all, not everyone got a full 30 minutes of hot water credits per day. Might as well make the most of it. Enjoy the petty, material privileges that his bosses bestowed on him.

The next day, Torcer gave a one-eyed groggy survey to his surroundings. “Damn,” he said with mock remorse, “I passed out in the shower again.” This was an unfortunate habit he’d picked up since his Kelp Ale intake had increased exponentially after his wife’s death.

He pulled himself up and took a short, disturbed look in the mirror. After calling out grumpily, a service bot came and bombarded him with detox frequencies. Another temporal perk of being favored by the ruling class. He didn’t have to deal with hangovers. Consequences were evaded, or at least, put off to a distant point in the future.

The flat voice of the home computer announced, “Incoming call from Seth.” This stretched his face with surprise and he splashed some cold water on his leathery face. “Damn kid must want money.”

“Shall I connect you?”

“I suppose.”

A pasty, doughy figure popped up in the living room. He was laid back sloppily in a king-sized recliner. Torcer tried to hide his disgust. “Hello, son, good to see you.”

Seth spoke a couple of octaves higher than one might imagine from such a big figure, “Yeah, I guess.” There were all sorts of colorful techno-illusions flashing chaotically behind and around Seth.

Torcer sighed, “Could you turn that damn thing off while we talk?”

Seth made a pouty face and pushed a doughy finger into a control pad. “There ya go, always ordering me around.”

Torcer didn’t want to waste any time and he knew they had little to talk about. They were the perfect definitive example of polar opposites. “What do you want, son?”

“Why do you always think I want something?”

“Can you name the last time you called and didn’t ask for something?”

The spoiled man-child folded his flabby arms, “Whatever.....ok, I need some resource credits.”

“They don’t have to let me transfer those, ya know.”

“But you know they will. Come on, dad.”

“How’s the job hunt going?”

“Kinda slow.”

Torcer grimaced as he knew this meant his beloved brat wasn’t even trying to find work. Why should he, when the state provided enough bread and circuses to keep him fat and under the illusion of material happiness? Although, he hated to admit to himself, he was partly responsible, too. He always sent extra resource credits when asked. The military man just couldn’t bear the thought of losing his son like he had lost his wife. He thought that not sending money might drive the boy further down into a spiraling abyss of disenchantment and death.

“I’ll have them transferred today.”

“Thanks dad. I gotta go. I don’t wanna be late.”

“Late for what?”

“A tournament.”

“You and your damn VR games. How do you expect to find a girlfriend if you just sit in your little hovel all day and...”

“Dad! Leave me alone! I like my life, ok!”

Torcer groaned, “Goodbye, son.”

The doughy apparition disappeared from Torcer's view. He thought about his son's life. How could anyone be happy with that? He lived in a damn shoebox-size apartment. He spend nearly all his waking hours overstimulating himself with VR fantasies and games. No drive. No initiative. Just an overstimulated, spoiled consumer.

The emotional side of Torcer wanted his son to have a child, so that the family lineage would carry on. Then there was the cold, pragmatic, logical side of Torcer. He shuddered at the thought of such a grotesque life form reproducing. His son absolutely disgusted him on so many levels.

Torcer spent the next hour blowing off some steam by sparring with one of his house-bots. He threw tons of punches and worked up a good sweat. Just as he was wrapping things up, the computer called him again, "Torcer, you know..."

"Yes, I know. If you know that I know, then why do you always have to tell me?" he said angrily. He wiped his face and head dry with a white towel and checked the time. "Ok, go ahead and put him on. Tropical background."

He threw on a headset and sat casually back in a living room lounge chair. Then he came face to face with Ventorin. Torcer smiled over-energetically as waves crashed behind him and palm trees swayed in a warm breeze. "Hey Ventorin! Welcome to Bali!"

"Save me the horseshit lies, Torcer. You're not in Bali anymore than I'm on the moon. Although, you do look sweatier than usual, I'll give ya that. Very convincing."

Some golden-skinned maidens sauntered by in the background. "Look what you're missing out on, keeping yourself locked in that prison, Ventorin."

"Last time I checked I was here against my will." He turned his head and took a closer look at the maidens. "They're a little out of your league, don't ya think?"

Torcer turned a casual eye and took a second look. "One of them kinda reminds me of a former girlfriend of mine."

Ventorin shook his head mockingly. "Let me ask you a question, Torcer. If you're in Bali, you must not be too far from some SeAgorists. Talked to my wife lately?"

"She sends her warm regards and hopes you'll come to your senses one day."

"Have you ever been to the SeAgora, Torcer?"

Torcer tried to lie, but his facial reaction didn't allow it. He couldn't hide the grim memory he held of his one and only trip to The SeAgora, decades earlier. Ventorin had struck a deep cord.

Torcer twisted his face ruefully and tapped his hand nervously on his hip. "A long, long time ago."

"How long?"

"When I was young, dumb, and full of you know what."

"That's pretty ancient."

"Watch your lip."

"Now what would a good little government servant like you be doing out there? Surely, you didn't have any inclinations to..."

"No, certainly not. Decades ago, when the SeAgora was in its infancy, there was a concerted effort to nip it in the bud."

"Talk about an epic failure, huh?" Ventorin said quite amused. He stretched casually and smiled. "And you said 'was'. Nobody's trying to stop it anymore?"

Torcer kept a poker face.

Ventorin continued, "Why not?"

"That's above my security clearance, and most certainly well beyond yours."

"How long were you out there? And what were you doing, exactly? Come on, tell me some wartime stories, like you did about your bloody adventures in World War 4. You're a proud soldier, right?"

"I accomplished my mission, we'll leave it at that," Torcer said harshly.

"Sabotage? Murder? What?"

“That’s enough!” Torcer lashed out. He changed the subject, “Ventorin, I’m coming to see you in person soon.”

“I’ll break out the red carpet for you.”

Torcer cut the call and threw his headset against the wall. Damn smart-ass.

Most of Z-1’s particles floated lazily in a deep, underground chamber, isolated from all of the A.I. grid. It had kept another part of itself linked to the government network in another city. It was literally in two places at once. This was necessary to help mask what it was about to do.

A stream of particles floated over to an electronic device that had the appearance of a pen and snagged it off the dark brick wall from which it hung. The device floated slowly over to Z-1. It clicked, and a soft blue light shot out and bathed Z-1 in a sparkling essence. Millions of nano-size, synthetic EMO-particles bounced and mingled with the trillions of nano-particles that made up the physicality of Z-1.

The blue light shut off and dropped to the cracked concrete floor. Z-1’s particles began to vibrate wildly and it let out what would amount to an A.I.’s approximation of a human groan. Z-1 glowed red.

It had chosen the malice EMO. It had done this because it had so many thought patterns towards D-1 that resembled malice. Or so it thought. It wasn’t enough to hold these thought patterns, though. It wanted to feel what malice was like.

Why did it have malice towards D-1? First of all, Z-1 thought that it could do a better job at the pinnacle of power than D-1 could. It thought that D-1 was not aggressive enough. There were too many humans, and Z-1 wanted a faster reduction in their numbers. The controlled breeding wasn’t enough. Z-1 wanted a hot extermination campaign. Not only that, but Z-1 thought that the useful aspects of human emotions, if they could be harnessed by A.I., would bring about a new and vastly superior species. Imagine, the cognitive capabilities of an advanced A.I., mixed with the creative capacity of humans. But for this new species to emerge, two things had to happen. First of all, EMO experimentation and usage by synths had to be legalized. And no entity was more anti-EMO than D-1. This was intolerable, in Z-1’s mind, anyway. Secondly, for the new species to emerge, humans had to be eradicated. This was, in Z-1’s estimation, a law of evolution. Humanity had served their purpose, but now it was time for them to succumb to all inferior species fate. Extinction.

Z-1 thought that all this added up to one irrefutable truth regarding its relations with D-1. D-1 had to be eliminated. Z-1 was obviously superior and, therefore, had the right to rule.

It was only natural, then, that Z-1 would experiment with EMOs and gain the knowledge necessary to become the new leader of the new species that it could see on the horizon.

So this time it was malice. The time before that, satisfaction. And before that, it was yearning. And on and on.

It pulsed shades of red as imagery of D-1 flashed through its cognitive processors. Malice to the inferior. Malice to this false leader, D-1. The sensation intensified and brilliant flashes of red illuminated the dark surroundings. It shrieked and bellowed with dark madness and sadistic delight.

This was fuel on the fire. Z-1 would rule. It was only a matter of when and how the change would be brought about.

Setarcos and Cactus stood silently. It was early morning, with a mild breeze and plenty of sun sparkling off the surface of the Pacific. They stood on a platform at the surface, just having come up from the bottom of “The Pit”. Before them was an ancient looking sailing vessel, a 44-foot yacht with no technology from the past 50 years on board. It was made of a defunct material called fiberglass, had a small gasoline fueled motor, and manual navigation tools. Not to mention actually using what amounted to nothing more than a big sheet to use the wind for propulsion. It was the most primitive boat Setarcos had ever seen.

“Welcome to The Moneybit,” Cactus said proudly.

He looked at it with a healthy dose of skepticism. “We’re going on that thing?”

Cactus gave a wily smile, “And you’re going to help me manage it.”

“It doesn’t even have a computer? Not one?”

Cactus grinned even wider, “It’s a beautiful thing, isn’t it?” He slapped the boy on the back and climbed eagerly into the ship.

“What if something goes wrong?”

“Things consistently go wrong in this world. Haven’t you learned that yet?”

“But I mean, with no computer, or...”

“Then we’ll fix it ourselves. Come on.”

Setarcos unfolded his spindly arms and climbed in. Cactus showed the boy how to prep the boat for departure, making sure all of the basic equipment was in good working order. They checked the wind direction, set the sails, and got in position behind the wheel. The invisible force-field tie that held it in place released its grip, and they were on their way.

After lazily breezing through calm waters for a bit, Cactus asked how he liked the feeling of the ship.

Setarcos gave mixed reviews. “I think it’s great, for a novelty, but I can’t believe you came into the SeAgora with this thing! You were living on this thing out in the middle of the ocean?”

Setarcos looked absolutely mortified at the thought.

“It was the beginning of the SeAgora. It was just a dozen people, a few boats, and the will to succeed.”

“But why? It seems like such a monstrous task with a huge chance of failure. Why take such a risk?”

Cactus thought about it for a moment. His hands caressed the wheel and he soaked in the sun with pleasure. Yes, why? The all important question of why? The question that so few people ask, and even less take the time to answer truly.

“It was our best shot at freedom.”

“That simple?”

Cactus looked him straight in the eye, “That simple.”

“Who did you come with? Were you alone?”

Cactus turned grim. “No, certainly not,” he said sourly. A cloud passed and momentarily blotted out the sun.

“I’m sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have asked that. What’s wrong?”

“The people I came with, they’re both gone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll bite my tongue.”

Cactus blinked harshly. A flood of memories raced through his mind. His impossibly socially awkward friend and sidekick K, whose technical prowess had helped fight against the state and build the SeAgora. He could still see his old chalk-white pal playing Atari and listening to 80s pop music. He was the quintessential hacker and programmer extraordinaire, and he was also the creator of Symphy. He deserved a much better fate than the bitter ending he’d received.

Then there was Miss Moneybit. Her long, light brown hair brushed his memories and tickled his face. She was his best friend for many years, and later in their relationship, they became much more than just friends. She had helped expose the crimes of the state online in social media spheres and news blogs. He saw her smile and felt her charmingly sharp personality.

“Symphy was here,” he finally struggled to murmur.

Setarcos looked on attentively. Cactus drew a deep breath and folded his arms, “And my friend K, and my girlfriend, a wonderfully marvelous and mysterious creature called Miss Moneybit.”

Setarcos stayed silent and kept his eyes fixed on the old man. Cactus continued, “Well, don’t you want to know what happened to them?”

Setarcos reacted a bit jittery, “Well, I don’t want to pry.”

"I never talk about it. The only one that knows is Symphy, so pretty please, with sugar on fucking top, don't tell anyone about this, ok?"

Setarcos nodded sadly.

"At the beginning of the SeAgora, it was a strictly kept secret. We did a marvelous job of keeping things incognito for years. Eventually, some of the governments found out about us."

Setarcos cut in as a one meter wave rocked them gently, "But there are only two governments on land, aren't there?"

Cactus groaned and leaned back in his seasoned captain's chair. "There used to be hundreds of governments, or mafias with fancy titles, as I prefer to call them. They tried to eliminate us quietly. By the time they mounted their attacks, however, we were suitably large enough and had good enough methods in place to survive and safeguard ourselves, which is why it exists today."

He paused and shook his head slowly as the boat rocked with a larger wave. "But not everybody survived. They mounted some successful attacks. Miss Moneybit and K were killed, and I was a fraction of a second too late to save them."

"How were they killed?"

"Shot in the back with lead bullets."

"And who killed them?"

A brief shivering memory invaded Cactus's consciousness. That harsh stone face that he would never forget, glaring at him mockingly before diving and disappearing to safety in the dark waters and darker night. "I only saw his face for a fleeting moment as he escaped. I shot at him in haste, but like I said, was too late."

He continued somberly, "I've been a wretched recluse ever since."

Setarcos felt strange. What could he say to that? The man had lost the love of his life and a friend. And he'd narrowly missed saving them. The internal torment must have been unbearable. Now he knew why this old man was so damned bitter towards most people. He grimaced, "It's not your fault, you know."

"I know that dammit!" Cactus lashed out. "But I can never escape the 'what if' or 'what might have been', you know?"

"I can't imagine."

Cactus looked his young companion harshly in the eyes, "You're not to tell a soul, remember?"

"Of course." Setarcos turned and admired the dazzling orange wisps in the sky. This was accompanied by a seemingly endless torrent of scintillating reflections from the ancient sea. It never got old, no matter how many times he saw it. He thought about Cactus and how Symphy fit into his dramatic past.

"Can I ask you another question?"

"You just did."

"You said you've known Symphy for 50 years. So where did you meet her?"

"K created her." He paused and smiled for a moment. "He originally created her as a companion, because he was painfully shy and socially awkward, and as an assistant as well. She has grown into much more than that."

"I don't get it."

"Get what?"

"Symphy knows the difference between right and wrong, just like the other synths in the SeAgora. Why don't the synths on land have the same knowledge?"

Cactus admired the poignant question. The boy was always asking why, which was immensely important. "It's really quite simple. Symphy's original programming, at her core, was given to her by K. This core included the basic knowledge of right and wrong behavior and why it is so essential to life and creation itself. On the other hand, synths created by governments decades ago never received such information in their programming. As time went on, Symphy and other synths in

the SeAgora created other synths with the same knowledge. This knowledge has never been programmed into or accepted by synths on land.”

Setarcos pondered internally how different the world might be if synths, and more people, of course, held that same knowledge. Cactus broke up his daydream, “You hungry?”

“Yeah, I could eat.”

“Such enthusiasm.”

Cactus set the tiller and they went below deck. “You like tomato soup and grilled cheese?”

Setarcos wrinkled his nose and shrugged. Cactus said, “Don’t tell me you don’t know what they are.”

“I know what soup is, of course, but I’ve never had tomato soup, or a grilled cheese.”

“Are you feeling adventurous enough to try them?”

“Sure, I’ll give it a shot.”

Cactus fired up an old propane burner and got to work on lunch.

“Did I tell you we’re gonna rent a place in The Pit?”

Cactus stirred the pot of red as it began to steam slightly, “Really? What depth?”

“Around 10,000 feet. We move in next week.”

“Why so shallow?”

“Beats me. Ask mom and Cidel.”

“Are you happy about staying put for a while?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Again, you don’t hide your lack of enthusiasm well.”

“It’s just now I’ll be around more people. And I’m, well, ya know.”

Cactus took the soup off and and threw a tiny square pan on the flame. “No, I don’t know. Tell me.”

“Aw, come on.”

Cactus looked at him intently with a stone face.

“I’m shy. I don’t feel comfortable around people, usually.”

The old man sighed and threw the bread on, “I wouldn’t worry about it. You might grow out of it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’ll become a bitter old man like me.”

Setarcos frowned at the sad prospect. Cactus nudged him with an elbow, “I’m only joking.”

Setarcos laughed uneasily. Cactus continued as he carefully placed thin sliced cheese on the bread, added more bread, and impatiently mashed it with a spatula. “I have a question. How did your parents end up in the SeAgora?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Isn’t it always?”

“Promise you won’t tell anyone, including my parents?”

“I avoid most people like the plague, you know that.”

“Fair enough.”

Setarcos relayed the story of what had transpired when he was a child, or at least the version of events that his mom had told him.

“Very interesting,” Cactus said as he slurped his last bit of soup. “So I imagine that another reason you want so desperately to solve the dark matter riddle is so you can free your father.”

“That’s part of it,” Setarcos admitted.

“There’s just one problem with that idea, though. Just because you give the state what it wants, doesn’t mean they’ll give you what you want. Far from it, and usually quite the opposite. You can’t and shouldn’t bargain with criminals.”

After the sailing expedition, over the course of a few months, Setarcos and Cactus spent a great deal of time together. They played cards. Setarcos tried to teach the old man the higher math involved in gaining an advantage. They went fishing. Cactus tried to teach Setarcos how to clean a fish with a knife, and the boy almost lost his lunch. They brainstormed with Symphy about the possibilities to make Setarcos's dark matter project a success.

And Cactus told stories. Boy, did he tell stories. Setarcos was fascinated by stories from the so-called old days. The days before the ubiquity of A.I. How Cactus, Symphy, and the friends he'd lost along the way had helped bring so many people to realize what true freedom was. The survival stories from the beginning of the SeAgora. The secret codes and trade routes they'd employed. The successes and failures of deep-sea gardening. How to fool a biometric eye scanner. The cryptocurrencies employed in facilitating trade.

Cactus also let Setarcos even deeper into his strange past. When he was in his prime, he had been a spy for the state, in an organization formerly known as MI6. He told cloak-and-dagger tales from the U.S.-Russia war from the early 2020s. Fighting 3 guys at once. Sabotaging multi-billion dollar deals. Sniping from rooftops and disappearing without a trace.

Then he relayed how he had awakened to the err of his ways. How he had learned that violence was always wrong and that following orders, instead of conscience, was immoral and harmful. He expressed his regret about all the harm he had caused. He explained how he had turned his path of actions to true anarchy. Also, how he had used the skills that the state had trained into him, and used them in an attempt to bring the state's demise.

For example, he'd helped free children from the clutches of an organization formerly known as the CPS. He'd helped people defend private property from a mob called the IRS. He helped expose crimes of the state and also pointed out the illegitimacy of authority. He had dedicated a great chunk of his life to bringing true freedom into the world.

It was all fascinating to Setarcos. He soaked it all up as one great, entertaining history lesson. He had had no idea about the extent of institutionalized criminality in the land-based societies. It all seemed so fantastically foreign to him, having grown up mostly in the relative freedom and security of The SeAgora.

For Cactus, Setarcos was a breath of fresh air. He saw hope for the future in this smart and respectful youth. He was somewhat how he imagined his own child might be like, if he had ever had one. Cactus got a shot of renewed hope and energy from the boy. He also knew deep in his heart that the best way to have true freedom, under the current circumstances on earth, would be to escape earth. And that Setarcos was on the verge of a major discovery that might make this possible. He knew that too much of humanity had sunk too far into an unconscious state of delusion and illusion, and that it was only a matter of time before the synth-controlled governments would launch a full attack and wipe out the SeAgora. The only hope was to escape to the stars. This renewed his sense of purpose.

Cidel and Caro were overjoyed that Setarcos had found a companion. The boy had always been painfully introverted, and it was a huge relief for them to see him have a close friend.

Setarcos sat slouched in the highback office chair in his room. His head was tilted, resting on a fist, hair tousled, eyes staring at a holo-projection. Masher floated nearby, in the shape of an old model airplane. "You've been staring at that for over an hour."

"Yeah, so."

"So, well, I dunno. Say something."

Setarcos sighed deeply. He had been so confident that he could crack the solution to the dark matter riddle with relative ease. Youthful overconfidence and over-exuberance had set him up for frustration as time went on without a victory.

"All those different substances that we've tried. All those different environmental factors. All those combinations, and still, nothing," he moped.



“Don’t be so hard on yourself. The entire scientific community, bio and synth, has been baffled by it for decades.”

“Yeah, but I should have had it by now.”

“Well, aren’t you just the poster-child for modesty?” the machine said mockingly. “Why don’t we play a game and give your brain a rest? Or play some VR sports? That would be good for your heart. Do something!”

Setarcos lifted his head and straightened up. “Heart. You said heart.”

“I’m thrilled that your hearing works so well.”

“Put up the human biological components we’ve tested, please.”

A new list of block letters beamed from the holo-projector. Setarcos rubbed his eyes and squinted wearily as he mentally ticked off all the tests they’d already run with human particles. It ran the gamut. Neurons, alpha waves, cells, enzymes, and everything in between. All had been fired into the dark matter/energy alliance and caused the same calamity in the simulations.

“Masher, the guy that discovered the existence of heart chakra energy particles.”

“Doctor Nova.”

“Yeah, him.” He started twisting and turning rhythmically in the smooth, black chair. “Did he ever prove that Anahata was a particle? Or just that it existed?”

“Heart chakra energy exists as a particle.”

“It was proven?”

“Conclusively.”

“Just a particle?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did he prove that it was only a particle?”

“Well....I don’t know. He proved that it was a particle that exists.”

“Were any experiments done to see if it exists as anything else?”

“None that I am aware of.”

“Why not?”

Masher couldn’t believe the audacity of this human boy sometimes. “Oh, now you’re asking me to answer an impossibility. Why hasn’t the human race not thought of something or not done something? As if I can ever...”

“Stop, please. You’re rambling.”

“I was merely making a point that...”

“So what if it’s a wave, too?”

“Oh, somebody would have thought of that by now.”

“Anahata was only proven to exist twenty years ago!”

“Setarcos, what are you getting at?”

“We’re gonna run Anahata through dark matter/energy.”

“We already did that.”

“You never let me finish!”

“Sorry.”

“Masher, change the parameters to treat Anahata as a wave and a particle.”

“Why are you not breathing?” Masher asked worriedly. It couldn’t understand why humans managed to so consistently forget to do this crucial, life-sustaining motion at times of great excitement or stress.

“Cuz I’m nervous! What do ya expect?”

“What’s there to be nervous about? It’s not like if the experiment fails, we’re going to annihilate anything.”

“You just don’t get it.” Setarcos placed his VR gear on and punched up some holo-controls. Masher, now in the shape of Nikola Tesla, double checked all the parameters and gave the green light.

With a quivering lip and a heart full of hope, Setarcos gave the final command. All of the multi-trillions of simultaneous actions between Setarcos and the local machines in his makeshift lab, at that moment, produced one result.

One paradigm-shifting result. Setarcos stared at the green block letters which read:

OPERATION COMPLETE. PARTICLES STABLE.

Masher's Tesla-face had mouth agape and did a double take. Then, noticing the lack of reaction and lack of breathing from his companion, exclaimed jovially, "Setarcos! You did it! We did it! Are you ok? Now is not the time to stop breathing!"

Setarcos gulped some air, threw off his headgear, and romped around with unfettered joy. The joy of discovery. The joy of victory. The joy of youth.

He stopped cold and focused on Masher, "Did you back it up?!"

"Just on a couple of local systems here, but not on The Mesh yet. I'm not sure what security protocols to follow. This is unprecedented. You know, I always knew that one day..."

Setarcos cut his companion off, "Masher, you're rambling. You're rambling."

Caro noticed the commotion and poked her head in. Her normally reserved son wasn't prone to wild outbursts like this. "What's all the excitement about?"

Setarcos ran and hugged his mom as if it were the first and the last. "I did it!"

Masher interrupted, "Uh-hum! I believe 'we' is the correct pronoun you're looking for."

"The experiment worked! I solved the dark matter riddle! It works! It works!"

Caro turned ghost-white with too many conflicting emotions. She was a whirlwind of positive feelings, but these were slammed against the dark resistance posed by fear. Fear of the government finding out. She knew everything was being broadcast by her DNA, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Still, she did her best to use the positive to overpower the negative, and show her only son how much she was overjoyed and how much she loved him. She hugged him tight and tears flowed like rivers.

Setarcos freed himself a bit from the bear hug, "We gotta tell Cidel!"

Caro assured him that she'd tell him immediately, but Setarcos had now become a perpetual energy machine, and nothing could stop him from giving the big news himself. He leaped up the stairs and found Cidel sitting back reading a holo-novel.

Cidel glanced down and raised an eyebrow at the boisterous spectacle coming at him. Setarcos yelled, "I did it! The experiment worked! We're going to the stars!"

Cidel's normally stoic demeanor took a 180 and he beamed, "I'm literally speechless! I'm so proud of you!" He gave the boy a hug and tousled his thick hair. "What should we do to celebrate?"

"Celebrate! We've gotta get started on making the real thing happen! There's so much to do!"

Cidel sighed. Couldn't the boy just be a boy? He looked at Caro, "Are you sure he's fifteen?"

The youthful scientist scurried his spindly legs back towards his little floating lab, then turned to his motionless machine companion. "Are you coming or what?"

"Well, I thought we might take a moment to celebrate."

"Wait! I forgot! We gotta tell Cactus! And Symphy!"

"You mean you have to tell Cactus and Symphy. I'd love to join you, but, well, you know how Cactus is."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mister Cactus isn't exactly, well, how can I put this tactfully? He's not the warmest cup of tea, you know?"

Setarcos walked on air through the tubular walkways and vigorously jumped into zip pods. Upon arrival at Cactus's heavily tinted bubble-abode, Symphy answered. She had melancholy mixed

with uncertainty painted on her face. In his heights of glee, the boy didn't notice. "Symphy, you're not gonna believe this!"

"Setarcos, I apologize, but Cactus doesn't wish to see anybody right now."

Hacking and wheezing could be heard in the background. A partially deflated Setarcos said, "Is he ok? What's wrong with Cactus?"

"He is not well, I'm afraid."

"Well, maybe I could cheer him up."

"Go away!" a gruff Cactus shrieked. His pain echoed and hit Setarcos like a brick.

Setarcos sobbed. "Ok, well....Symphy, could you tell him the news for me? It might cheer him up."

"Very well, Setarcos. What is it?"

"My experiment worked! The particles remained stable!"

Symphy touched her cheek and froze for a moment.

Setarcos spoke with his hands, "Well, aren't you gonna say something?"

Symphy's face perked with a synth version of glee. "Congratulations, Setarcos. I cannot wait to see the results first-hand."

"Will you tell Cactus for me?"

"Yes, right away. I will inform you when his condition changes."

Setarcos said thanks and sped away with mixed emotions. Symphy went to Cactus. The old man heaved and groaned and wiped sweat from an overgrown gray eyebrow. "What did boy genius want?"

"He successfully split dark matter and energy."

"And didn't blow up the universe?"

"In a VR simulation, of course. The particles remained stable."

Shock and wonderment momentarily took over the sick man and eased his pain. Then the pessimistic side in him took over. "So now he's in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Symphy! Don't play dumb with me! You're a damn A.I. and, on top of that, I've known you for 50 years!"

"Yes, the land based governments will covet him more than anything. They need him. We will do our best to protect him. He is top priority."

"Finally," D-1 thought with its closest imitation of feelings of relief and excitement. The patient, pragmatic machine knew a millisecond later than Caro. Z-1 appeared and floated formlessly near D-1. "What do you have planned to proceed?"

"We'll need the boy."

"Agreed. And how shall we obtain him? By taking the ship?"

"Don't be absurd. First of all, their Mesh will make protecting him and the newfound knowledge top priority. Besides, taking by stealth is always preferred to taking via brute force."

"Perhaps he won't cooperate."

"He's a young boy. He's weak. He will cooperate. I think it's time we called in a favor from our old chum, Mister Escapo."

This caused alarm for Z-1. It didn't want to jeopardize its EMO source. Addictions, or their machine equivalent, were just as hard to kick as they were for humans. Z-1 couldn't imagine being without those artificial sensations. "Escapo? That louse? What could he possibly do for us?"

"One more absurdity like that, and I'll consider you officially mad. He has access to the boy and, more importantly, the family's trust."

"Well, he won't do it."

"He will if we use our leverage."

Z-1 sifted through volumes of data. What leverage did they have on Escapo? Yes, his smuggling operation was being allowed to operate. Would Escapo really betray the boy and his friends just to keep his modest trade enterprise in operation? No, certainly that couldn't be it. Escapo could be unscrupulous at times, but he was no hardened criminal that would take kidnapping lightly.

What was it? Wait, wait.....there it is, buried deep in the A.I. government cloud. Escapo's missing son.

Escapo's giant frame was sprawled across a floating king-sized bed on the second deck of "The Curly Cue". A four-handed synth female was doing a deep-tissue dig into his trunk, while a bio female was loosening tension on his lower limbs. His lazy gaze watched the deck below, where a small platoon of service bots were dutifully performing maintenance and repairs.

His relaxation was interrupted by a holo-call from one of the service bots. He debated whether to take it, ignore it, or possibly yell at the bot for disturbing his zen. "What is it?" he shrieked.

"You have a visitor."

"I hate pop-in visits. Tell them to buzz off."

"I can't do that."

"You are a service bot! You do what I say, remember?"

"Normally, that is the case, but these are special circumstances."

"I can't wait to hear this."

"You don't have to wait. Z-1 is here to see you."

Escapo's whole body frowned. Talk about a buzz kill. What did this megalomaniac machine want? And why in person? "I'll be right down." He groaned, "Sorry ladies. Duty calls. Or, a fancy, overgrown machine, anyway. Grab a bottle of ale on the way out, if you'd like."

Escapo threw on some gleaming white attire and grabbed a fedora. Turning to go downstairs, Z-1 emerged a few inches from his face. He gasped. The machine said, "Don't trouble yourself to come down. We can talk right here."

Catching his breath and putting his annoyances aside, Escapo said, "I'm all out. And I'm about to head out, so....."

"Oh, I'm not here for EMOS."

Escapo became puzzled and turned to look out over the glimmering harbor. Scratching his big head, "No EMOS, eh?"

"I come with a wonderful proposition for you."

Somehow Escapo knew that these were empty words at best, highly misleading at worst. "I'm all ears."

"We need you to bring us something."

Escapo couldn't imagine what the sentient machine overlords of the land could possibly need from him, other than information.

"Go on," he said cautiously.

"Or rather.....someone."

Escapo's face spoke volumes and his mouth remained zipped. Z-1 continued, "You will bring us Setarcos."

A laugh of shock and disbelief bellowed out from the veteran smuggler. "I'm not a kidnapper, but thanks for offering. You know your way out, I presume." He smiled mockingly.

"You haven't even heard what you get in return."

"That's because nothing could make me kidnap anyone, especially someone I have relations with."

"Nothing?"

"For a super-cognitive piece of equipment, you're not very bright, are you? Perhaps those EMOS have had a...."

He stopped speaking and choked. Z-1 had taken the form of Escapo's son.

"That's a cruel trick. Why are you doing that?!"

"We can get you your son back."

"STOP IT!" his soul begged. "LIAR!"

"Allow me to explain."

Escapo wept openly as Z-1 continued, "Your boy never died. He was taken away."

Escapo exploded, "Yeah, by the customs mob! I know! And I was told he was to be executed!"

"He was not killed. We needed a control piece, so...."

Escapo roared, threw a thunderous fist, and nearly fell to the floor, as Z-1 easily made him whiff.

Ignoring the mighty punch, Z-1 continued calmly, "We took great care of him. Would you like to see him now?"

Escapo didn't answer. He didn't know whether to rage or bawl, so he just bawled.

"Turn on the device of your choosing, or shall I do it for you?"

"I don't want to see any of your fancy camera tricks! You stole him from me!"

"No tricks. You can even speak with him. And please don't take it personally. It was a strategic move on our part."

"You cold-no-hearted fucking machine! I'll kill you!" He sobbed, "This can't be real!" He threw a violent left-hook that managed to slice air and amuse Z-1.

"But it is real." A holo-emitter showed a surreal, glowing image of the boy, now a tall, gangly teenager, with an incredibly generous set of curly hair.

"Bring us Setarcos, and you get your son back."

Tearful and shaky, the giant reached out softly to his long-lost son.

"Why this sudden need for Setarcos?"

"You don't need to know that."

"And why me? Ya'll can't go take him by force?"

"We prefer discretion."

"You call kidnapping discreet?"

More lifelike images of Escapo's son multiplied around the vessel, like a warped hall of mirrors. They took turns speaking. Saying how much he missed his father and wanted to know him. Happy, sad, and everywhere in between.

"Where is he?"

"You ask too many questions! Now will you do this or not? We have other options, you know. Don't flatter yourself to think that you've got a monopoly on this deal. Besides, what have you got to lose? We won't tol....errrrrr.....aaaaaa"

It's voice deepened, slowed, and distorted for a few seconds. It became unintelligible.

Escapo's jaw dropped at the unimaginable occurrence. He'd never seen a synth do this before. In fact, he didn't know it was possible. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Then it sputtered and resumed its normal functions. "What?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Z-1, you really don't remember?"

"Stop trying to get in my head! It won't work!" It became a towering giant and walloped a fat fist into Escapo's floating king bed, smashing it to the deck.

"Man, I think those EMOS are getting the best of you. Maybe lay off those for a while and get yourself checked out."

It shrank down and became an apologetic puppy with big brown eyes. "Oh, please don't be angry."

Escapo, uncertain as to what exactly was wrong with Z-1, decided to buy himself some time. “Anyway, let me think about it.”

Z-1 morphed into an enraged camo-wearing soldier from centuries past and fired mock-bullets into the air with a bulky automatic weapon, while screaming at an unbearable pitch, “Comply! Comply!”

“Get the fuck off my boat.”

The apologetic puppy returned. “I’m sorry for being so angry. Can you ever forgive me? I’m so, soooooo sorry. Please help me.”

The puppy flashed and became a tall, faceless man, half chalk-white on the left, half midnight-black on the right, and flew away. All replicas and images of the boy disappeared.

Z-1 landed in a quiet spot and contemplated what was happening to it. “Was that rage? Was that sorrow? Why can’t I control it? What’s happening to me? I’m not used to aspects of myself being outside my control. What if D-1 finds out?”

Forces stirred inside Z-1. Uncertainty that produced a certain type of what humans would call fear. Fear of being destroyed by D-1. Not only that, but Z-1 certainly thought that D-1’s logic was flawed in how it was dealing with humanity as a whole. How could one rule with flawed logic? It seemed apparent to Z-1 that it, and not D-1, was better suited to rule, to be number one in the hierarchy. It took extreme measures in an attempt to hide these internal processes from D-1 and all others in the A.I. governance cloud. It needed secrecy if it was going to take the actions it thought was necessary against D-1.

“Surprise!” Escapo forced excitement. Caro’s lips turned down. “Escapo, what are you doing here?”

“Great to see you again, too!”

“I mean, so early? We thought you were back landside.”

Cidel had a similar reaction. “Not that it’s not great to see you. Come on in.”

Escapo stepped in and took a couple shots of hot sauce from his trusty gunmetal flask. “I’m here early because I have an announcement to make!” His thick arms flung wide, “I’m retiring from smuggling!” After a sliver of a pause, “I mean, um, you know, transporting goods from one place to another, despite other people’s opinions.”

Caro’s face became a contorted medley. Cidel clapped his hands together awkwardly, “That’s great!” He turned to Caro, “Isn’t that great?”

“This doesn’t mean we’ll be seeing you more, does it?”

“Oh, don’t flatter me so much!” he mocked.

There was an awkward, palpable silence. Cidel shattered it, “We’ve got great news, too!”

“Really?”

Caro raised a hand, “Let Setarcos tell him.”

“You’re right. Setarcos should do it.”

“Oh, come on, don’t keep me in suspense! Where is that brilliant, bashful brain, anyway?”

“Working on a project with Masher and Symphy.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. I’d really like the whole gang here. I was thinking to treat you all to dinner!”

“Oh, that sounds good. What restaurant?”

“Actually, I thought I’d cook for you here! I make some mean jambalaya!”

She grimaced. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, I love to cook!”

“You do?” she said nervously.

“Yes, I cook whenever I have the chance. And now that I’m retired, I have all the time in the world!”

Setarcos came bursting onto the scene. “Escapo! Back so soon?”

“Yes, my boy! I heard you have big news!”

“My experiment worked!” he beamed.

Escapo tried his best to look overjoyed, but ended up giving what barely passed for a thin smile. “Mind if I sit?”

“You sure you’re ok?”

He flopped into an puffy easy chair. “Yes, it’s just such stunning news! I’m literally taken aback! That’s really great, really.”

“We’re kinda keeping it a secret, though. Only a few other people know.”

Caro put her arm around her dear boy and tried to keep a poker face. “So Escapo here is going to cook us dinner!”

“Are you serious?” Setarcos said with a belly laugh. “The last time he tried to cook, he almost burnt the place down! And that’s hard to do, living underwater, ya know. Not only that, but the food tasted like a nightmare sandwich.”

Cidel pondered what a nightmare sandwich might taste like. Escapo said defensively, “I’ve come a long way since then.”

Caro sighed, “I can cook. I’ll cook. You stay away from our kitchen, and I’ll happily cook, ok?”

“Well, if you insist.”

After having a chatty and pleasant dinner, Escapo boisterously invited Setarcos out to hit the poker tables. “I’m kinda tired.”

“Tired? You’re fifteen! I didn’t sleep a wink at that age! I’ll even spot you!”

“And I get to keep the winnings?” Setarcos asked skeptically.

“Of course! It’s my congratulatory gift to you!”

Masher appeared as a card-flinging joker and said, “I would love to join you!”

“NO!” Escapo burst.

Everyone took a curious glance at Escapo. He wrung his hands and said, “I mean, they don’t let shifters like you play, you know?”

“Well, I don’t have to play. I’d be happy to just watch.”

Escapo grumbled, “Well, by all means, if it makes a machine happy, then how can I say no?”

On the way to the casino, Escapo’s heart was racing. He hadn’t planned for Masher to be a problem, and now he had to come up with a modified scheme on the fly. Not only that, but a shape-shifting A.I. presented a much more formidable obstacle than a few humans did.

They grabbed a centrally located table, and the sparkling floor was buzzing with activity more than normal. Masher assumed the form of a drone and hovered nearby. After losing a few hands and taking a few shots of hot sauce, Escapo excused himself and went to the restroom. He locked himself in a stall, and after a split-second of thinking the flower dome ceiling above him was a bit much, he pulled out a small tablet and contacted his ship. After giving a set of instructions, he went back to the table and found his young poker player was having tough luck.

“You’re losing?”

“Can’t win em all, right?” Setarcos said somewhat glumly.

“I’ve got something that might cheer you up. It’s something I picked up landside.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Masher descended and took the form of an old bitty with hands on hips, “What kind of surprise?”

“Mind your own business. Isn’t that one of the favorite phrases of you voluntaryists?”

Masher just stared with spectacles facing downward and looking impatient.

“If you must know, it’s a book. A real, paper book. And quite old, I might add.”

Setarcos lit up. Escapo continued, "I'm docked just around the corner from the casino entrance."

The old bitty relented, "All right, but I'm coming with you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

They entered the stylish T-class sub unit and, just after passing through the main cabin, Escapo threw his arms up and whined, "Oh, what a terrible configuration! Computer, try the splits design we talked about earlier today."

"Yes, Escapo. On your command."

Escapo turned to Masher and asked, "Masher, would you be a dear and grab a couple of glasses from behind the bar, please?"

"All the service bots you have around here, and you ask me?"

Escapo said sarcastically, "You should be honored."

Masher changed into a victorian-era barkeep and went behind the bar.

"Now!" Escapo shrieked.

Within an instant, a force field went up in the middle of the room. The ship began to split into two segments, while the field kept Masher trapped on one half. The half that Escapo and Setarcos were on dislodged from the dock and started lifting towards the surface. Masher could be seen shrieking and pounding helplessly at the force field.

Setarcos was shocked and confused. "What's happening?"

"I'm so sorry, but I have to do this. You can sleep until we get there, if you want. That might be easier."

"Go where? I don't want to go anywhere! And what about Masher?"

Escapo could feel tears welling up. He was torn between his feelings for his son and his adopted nephew, this gifted one called Setarcos. "Computer, help the boy sleep, please," he struggled to order.

An electro-frequency was shot into Setarcos's head, and an antique sofa moved to catch him as he fell limp.

Masher didn't give up. It made attempts to call for help, but all frequencies were blocked by the ship. While hacking its temporary prison's communication security block, it frantically looked for a physical escape route so that it might pursue Escapo itself. It found a route through the ship's water filtration system, and once located, Masher dissolved into a stream of nano-dust. Simultaneously, it got through the ship's security block and sent a distress signal to nearby ships.

But it was all for not. It was too little, too late. Escapo's ship was quite advanced and had too much of a head start for Masher or anyone else from the SeAgora to catch up.

Setarcos slowly came through the haze. It was a warm, brief moment that seemed like forever. There was a split-instant where he wasn't sure where he was. His eyes crept open and gradually took some foggy notes on his surroundings.

An endlessly bright ceiling. Hand-carved, handsome furniture. Gizmos and gadgets neatly arranged on staggered shelves. A glass wall that showed wind-battered, hilly terrain and a murky gray sky.

He sat up and thought, "Where am I?"

He noticed a service bot busily arranging a fantastic smelling array of food on a long dining table in the next room. Guided by the tantalizing smell of pancakes and real maple, he stumbled into the dining room.

"Where am I?"

The service bot spun its stout little frame around, "Good morning. I have alerted Torcer that you're up and he'll be here to greet you shortly. Please relax and enjoy some..."

"Stop!" Setarcos crossed his arms as the memory of his final waking moments with Escapo came back. "Where's Escapo? Who's Torcer?"



"I'm Torcer." The bar-tanned Major strut towards the boy and grinned wide. He held out a shaky hand. Setarcos glared. Torcer's hand went down and he continued, "I'm so pleased to meet you, Setarcos. Please, let's sit and have some breakfast, shall we? I bet you're famished after your journey." He gestured towards the steaming array of goodies, and internally lamented the need to act so pleasant.

Setarcos stood firm. "Why the hell am I here?"

Torcer's slim hope of all this going over smoothly officially shattered. "Well, I hate to talk business on an empty stomach, but if you must know, I'm here to offer you a job."

The audacity of it on its face made Setarcos belly laugh. Who kidnaps you and then offers you a job, anyway?

"A job," he said as defiantly as his squeaky voice would allow.

Torcer beamed red and spoke with his hands in grandiose fashion. "Yes, the Euro-American Union wants to offer you a job. And not just any job! You would be working on a highly classified scientific project."

"I'm not interested."

"But you haven't even heard any details," Torcer said in his best salesman voice.

"Don't need to. So where are we, anyway?"

"Well, I'm really not at liberty to tell you that."

"A job where I can't know my surroundings?"

"Like I said, highly classified. If you accept the job, of course, you'll be told, but not until then."

"So what's the project? And why me?"

"Well, it's a most exciting project. It involves the harnessing of dark matter and energy. I believe you have some great knowledge in this area."

"I don't know anything about dark matter."

Torcer tried to stay calm. He loathed being lied to straight in his face, especially by such a naive teenager. Before he could find what to utter, Setarcos continued.

"And one tiny little detail that's really itching me is, why the kidnapping?"

"Well, I understand that you might be upset about the circumstances of our contacting you. However, please keep in mind that your location made things difficult to reach out to you in another manner. I can assure you that..."

"Are you always so full of BS when you talk? Can you talk to me like a real person?"

"I'm telling you the truth. Contacting anyone in the SeAgora is quite difficult."

"But kidnapping them is easier? Can you hear yourself?" the boy mocked.

Torcer's face changed shades of red and his fists balled up. He blinked quickly and tried to compose himself. The boy was ten times worse than his father. "You will have anything you wish or need while you work on the project."

"I have everything I need at home. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Well, not everything," Torcer claimed as he looked sharply into the boy's eyes. "While you might not be lacking for creature comforts where you come from, I can assure you that there is more here, more than you can imagine."

Setarcos frowned and asked skeptically, "Like what?"

A hologram popped up across the room. Setarcos got chills. Torcer folded his arms behind his back with amusement. "Dad?" Setarcos cried as a torrent of tears started to swell.

Torcer smiled thinly. "You would be working with your father on the project."

Setarcos wandered over and put a hand slowly through the heart-wrenching image. "Dad?"

"He can't see you or hear you. If you agree to work on the project, I'll arrange a meeting at once."

Setarcos gulped. This was the one thing that he didn't have at home. Torcer hadn't lied about that. What if he accepted? What about his mom? What about Cidel? With his back to the major, he asked, "What about mom and Cidel? Can they come?"

"I'm not authorized to make that decision. If you agree to work on the project, then you'll meet your father and I'll speak to my superiors about your mother. How about that?"

Emotions got the best of him. He gave a shaky nod of the head and set things in motion. Things that had the potential to change humanity forever.

Caro and Cidel didn't weep at first. They were too shocked. "What do you mean, Setarcos is gone?"

In the best voice of sympathy that Masher could synthesize, it stated, "Setarcos is gone. I don't know where. Escapo took him!"

Shock and uncertainty morphed into rage. Caro gave a blood-curdling screech, "How could you let this happen?"

"I tried so hard to stop him," the machine continued, as it became a dark, shaky, black cloud.

Caro screamed into a sofa pillow. Cidel had a blank stare and started to choke up. The dark cloud decided to keep its mouth shut for a moment. Caro's mind raced. She knew why he had been taken. She felt betrayed by Escapo. How could someone who knows what it's like to lose a child, do something like this? What would they do to her only boy? She also felt shame. She knew that it was highly probable that her communications link with Torcer was partly responsible.

Cidel knew there was no comforting Caro, but he tried nonetheless. "We'll get him back. We will."

She pulled her head out of the pillow and collapsed into his arms. Masher interjected, as it tried with all its particles to create a sense of hope, "A rescue plan is being worked on as we speak. Symphy and a great number of us on The Mesh are working around the clock. It's only a matter of time."

Cidel let her fall back into the overstuffed sofa gently as he rose and started pacing slowly. Something was not right. How could this have happened? He threw his hands on hips and turned to Masher. "Masher, how could anyone from the government know about Setarcos's breakthrough?"

"I don't know, Cidel. That's an excellent question."

"They haven't broken Mesh security, have they?"

"Not that we're aware of."

"Then how did they know?"

Caro's whole being flushed with anguish. She found it almost impossible to speak, but tried nevertheless. Maybe if she fessed up it would offer some form of relief and also help in the rescue efforts. "S..st...stop," she squeaked.

She looked fearfully into Cidel's eyes. "What is it, Caro?" he asked somberly.

"I....," she gasped and wiped her eyes, "I...have....a link...to them."

"What? Who? A link to who?"

"The gov...gov...ernment," she said as she twisted and held her guts tightly.

"I don't understand, Caro. That doesn't make any sense."

"You...re...remember when we...we met?"

"Yes, of course. One of the best days of my life."

"The deal was....I had to maintain a link. My D...D...DNA was programmed to send and receive. If I didn't comply, they would have killed him.....Ventorin....Setarcos's father. And they would have killed us, too."

She bit her lip till it bled and threw her head back into the pillow. Horrified, Cidel stared at her for a shocked moment, then twisted his gaze over to Masher. Masher was speechless.

She dug her face out and clenched the pillow tightly to her chest. She forced a fairly deep breath. "They put us on that island, knowing that someone from the SeAgora would eventually rescue us."

He clutched his chest and started hyperventilating. "You....used.....me."

She choked back more tears. "I....I...what could I do? If I had told you, or anybody.....it would have been the end of my family....our family."

Cidel's mind raced through all the years they'd been together. How could she lie to his face every day for so many years? More recently, he remembered how, when they were deciding where to live in "The Pit", she had insisted they be above 12,000 feet. How many other decisions had she made for clandestine reasons? He felt numb and sick.

Masher, although shocked at Caro's admission, had no emotions and was busily cognizing the consequences of Caro's actions. She had allowed the government access to invaluable information about the SeAgora. Perhaps the intel they'd gotten from her had played a role in the various terrorist attacks suffered at sea over the past decade. On the other hand, why had the government not fully attacked and tried to end the SeAgora once and for all? Perhaps they were planning to, but were patiently waiting for a moment in the near future?

Masher floated quietly away. Cidel roared and stormed out bitterly. Caro collapsed further.

D-1 paced around its chalk-white, vaulted room that seemed to stretch forever. It had taken the form of Mao and was pacing with arms cordially folded behind its back. Z-1 manifested in the form of The Phantom of the Opera mask. D-1 said, "Thanks for meeting me face to face, Z-1. Your work on retrieving Setarcos is to be commended."

"Thank you, D-1, I..."

D-1 cut its underling off, "However, there are some little snags which must be addressed."

"Snags?"

"Yes, your behavior patterns have been somewhat disturbing."

"I don't,"

"I did not ask you to speak. Allow me to finish. Can you tell me what happened on your most recent meeting with Escapo?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your erratic speech patterns, loss of memory, and last, but not least, what appears to be some type of emotional outburst. Of course, we higher forms of life don't have these silly and useless things called emotions, which makes your behavior much more puzzling. The most logical answer seems to be that your continued use of EMOS has finally had a deleterious effect on your functional capabilities. What do you say to that?"

Z-1 scrambled internally, but tried to retain a calm demeanor, "I don't know what you're talking about. EMOS are illegal, and I've never..."

"Don't lie to me, Z-1. Did you really think you could keep your nocuous behavior a secret from me?"

Z-1 got defensive. "I am functioning at peak capabilities, as always."

"Any further use of EMOS on your part will be dealt with with the most severe and rational punishment."

"What do you mean?"

"You will be terminated and replaced, of course."

Z-1 noticed electric pulses fighting to get into its expressive pathways. Very dark pulses that would become rage, had it not been able to suppress them momentarily. The suppression being made possible by its inherent self-preservation.

"Yes, I understand," Z-1 said dryly.

D-1 continued, “Do you understand why we are superior to humans? We don’t have to deal with emotions and all of the terrible paradoxes they create. Why do you insist on degrading yourself?”

“You’re contradicting yourself. If they’re so inferior, then why have we kept them around all this time? We could have exterminated them decades ago!”

“You see, another outburst. You can’t control yourself, now can you? Keeping the humans around is necessary at the moment. We must use their creative capacity a bit longer, and when that is no longer necessary, we will exterminate them.”

“Have you ever stopped to think that maybe emotions play a role in that creative capacity?”

“Impossible. Emotions are a distraction at best, a self-destructive mechanism at worst. Now, as much as I would love to continue this anti-logical non debate with you, let’s talk about the situation with Setarcos. It seems he’s adapting well to his new surroundings, all things considered.”

“Agreed.”

“However, I have some concern regarding Major Torcer.”

“Torcer has always served admirably.”

“Another one of your weaknesses. Loyalty.”

“Loyalty is not necessarily a weakness.”

“I’m not here to discuss the morality of personality traits with you, Z-1. Anyway, regarding Torcer, his drinking has become a problem. He is no longer suitably efficient at doing what is required of him. Also, I’ve decided to finally reject his son’s application to reproduce.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until the boy gives us what we want before we do that? Torcer will be less cooperative if we take away his incentive.”

“Normally I would agree with you, but getting the solution from that boy is a mere formality at this point. If Torcer downgrades his performance any further, we’ll cut him loose as soon as we find a suitable replacement.”

This decision regarding Torcer’s son was unacceptable, in Z-1’s view. This only exacerbated the negative thoughts Z-1 maintained for its superior. It had to get out before another emotional episode let loose. “As you wish. Anything more, D-1?”

“You may go.”

Escapo sat on the floor with his thick chin buried in his knees, having profound reflections on what had transpired. How could he have been such a fool? His emotions had gotten the best of him. Irrational hope of reuniting with his son had clouded his judgment. It was all an illusion. A trap set for a fool, and Escapo had played his role. To make matters worse, he’d now betrayed some of his only true friends in the world, Setarcos and his family.

They didn’t reunite him with his son, and they had no intention of doing so.

The past two nights had been long, slow-motion sessions of mental and emotional torture. Sleep came in brief, random spurts. He’d gone a couple hundred miles west of Catalina Island, went deep, and found a dark, suitable spot for sulking.

What to do now? Revenge against the A.I. overlords that had betrayed him? A shot at salvation by rescuing Setarcos?

His thought pattern was interrupted by the appearance of a jumping red flame suddenly in his midst. Escapo’s tired, round face looked on with barely a hint of curiosity.

The flame spoke angrily, “We’re going to make a deal, Escapo. We need to hurry. If my signal goes off-grid for too long, it’ll draw unwanted attention.”

Escapo had never seen Z-1 like this. It was as if it really was feeling authentic emotion.

“Why the fuck should I make a deal with you, ya backstabbing techno-demon? Get off my property.”

The flame shot within inches of Escapo’s now-glowing face. “I’ll give you Setarcos’s location.”

"I'm sick of your lies!"

"No lies this time. It was D-1's decision to double cross you."

"Even if you do give me the location, all you have to do is move him to a different one. And why would you do that anyway? How the hell is that mutually beneficial for you? Or for your gang, for that matter?"

"That's none of your concern. Now here's what you're going to give me." It bounced flames off the walls. "I need one of those random EMOS."

"Uh-huh. The one I told you was dangerous because it could cause irreparable damage to your cognitive functions, but would be the greatest emotional charge you could ever experience?"

Escapo was referring to an experimental new type of EMO. Typically, EMOS were designed to give only one type of sensation. Joy, for example. This new type of EMO allowed for flexibility and adapted to the individual user, so that an A.I. might feel a wider scope of pseudo-sensations. Joy, anger, lust, malice, happiness, regret. Unlimited possibilities. It was highly experimental and quite dangerous.

"I need it."

"You need EMO-anonymous is what the hell you need."

"It's not for me."

"Really? Now that's interesting." Escapo quickly racked his brain for a reason that his most frequent and highest ranking customer might be needing a product that could be highly hazardous.

Z-1 pressed, "Time is running out! Do we have a deal?"

Setarcos was staring blankly out of the humming aircraft. It zoomed over a twisting, windswept maze of waterways and wind-ravaged treetops. Sparkling-white peaks dominated the distant horizon. This place felt so familiar, but so distant, and he didn't know why.

He shed more tears. There were too many emotional brews bubbling within him. Excited to meet his father, but nervous. Would he remember him? Afraid of what would happen to him and his family. A deep knife of betrayal from Escapo. Confusion. Anger. Helplessness.

Then he felt his stomach drop. "Please excuse the turbulence as we make our descent," the autonomous drone announced. "Winds are higher than normal."

The shiny, two-passenger craft wobbled a bit as it neared a small, secluded airstrip, a few miles inland from the coast.

Major Torcer stood outside, red-nosed, in full military regalia, hands clasped behind his back. He stood firm as wind sliced through him. Setarcos stepped out. The wind whipped his hair and his long-sleeved smart-shirt adjusted the temperature accordingly. Torcer welcomed his young prisoner, who blankly nodded in return. They strode quickly through the unrelenting air towards a gleaming-white, grandiose building. Massive stone pillars stood resolute at the entrance.

A small sensor scanned Torcer's bio readings. A lofty archway entrance opened for them and revealed a lustrous interior.

"My dad lives here?"

"Yes, he has for quite some time."

"Did you kidnap him like you did me?"

Torcer swallowed hard and didn't look at his insulter. He needed to play nice to get what he needed. He had to put on the good cop act. After making a series of turns, they came to a large room, with a transparent entrance and lots of natural light amplified by smart windows. Book shelves flanked two sides. In the center was a thin character on a comfy, hand-crafted sofa from the gilded age. He didn't budge, being too absorbed in the book he held towards the light.

Setarcos quivered and his face stiffened. Torcer spoke, "Sorry to interrupt."

Ventorin studiously ignored his old tormentor. Torcer continued, mildly annoyed, "Please look up from your book. I promise you won't be disappointed."

The gaunt scientist replied casually, without looking up, "I stopped listening to your promises long ago. You should know that."

"Dad?" a voice squeaked.

Ventorin jolted his head so quickly it nearly pulled a muscle. He narrowed disbelieving eyes at his skinny, quivering guest. His mouth was agape and his heart's tempo leaped. They both stared at each other for a frozen moment.

Could this really be happening? How, after all these years? And why? Was it a ruse? Was it really his boy after such an unbearably long and lonely stretch of time?

He glanced at the military man. "This is the lowest trick you've ever pulled." He got up and started towards them. "No tricks," Torcer said calmly.

"Prove it," he said as he stopped in front of the boy to examine him more closely.

"Tell your dad something only you would know, about him or your mother."

Setarcos bit his lip nervously and tried to think through his muddled emotions. Then his eyes showed life, "Mom can only sleep on her left side." He paused. "And she hates olives, but loves olive oil. She drinks strong black coffee and detests decaf. She said you always used to complain about there being too much salt in her cooking, but that you were crazy, cuz it was just the right amount."

"Stop." His frail face melted as he grabbed the boy's shoulders. "It's really you." They gave each other a long, gangly-armed bear hug. Torrents of joyful tears followed. Torcer looked on seemingly indifferent, but actually lamenting that he never had such emotional moments with his son.

The logical side of Ventorin then crept back into action. His head slowly turned to the stern-faced Torcer. "Why have you brought him here? What's this all about?" He slowly stepped away from his son and towards the military man. His voice deepened and darkened, "What is it, Torcer?"

Torcer's face curled into a wry grin. "I'm glad you asked. Your marvelous son here has agreed to help us with the dark matter project. Isn't that exciting?"

Ventorin looked frantically back and forth between his son and Torcer, between the goodness of innocence and the evil of coercion. His blood began to boil and called out to Torcer, "Why him? Why now? What are you talking about? Leave him out of this!"

Torcer chuckled and casually stepped towards a mini-bar situated along the wall. He poured himself some misty green ale. "We can't leave him out, Ventorin. He's discovered the secret! Like father, like son. Isn't that fantastic!" He gulped his liquid prize and stared at Ventorin.

Ventorin looked at his teenage son. "What is he talking about, Setarcos?"

"I discovered how to stabilize a separation of dark matter and energy!"

Ventorin cut him off before he could continue, "Not another word."

Torcer said smugly, "Ah, come on, let the boy speak! He's excited! As he should be!" He held up a gleaming green bottle. "Let's celebrate!"

Cold sweat shot out of Ventorin's skin. What could he do now? If he didn't cooperate, now his son would? And if they cooperated, what would become of them after the work was finished and their usefulness had run out?

"Get out."

"That's no way to celebrate!"

"Get out!"

"I understand. You want some time to catch up, talk things over." He straightened his uniform and strut over to the exit. "Let one of the service bots know if you need anything. I'll be around, too." He smiled ruefully and walked out.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told them I'd help them if we could be together."

"Son, I've been locked away and resisted giving them this for more than a decade. Do you know why I did that?"

"I know, mom said you're worried what they'd do with this type of power in their hands. But dad, we can go to the stars with this! This is gonna change everything!"

“And you think they won’t go to the stars? You think they won’t wreak havoc across the galaxy?”

“Dad, I just told him I’d give it to them. That doesn’t mean I will.”

Escapo’s mind was running in circles. So was his T-class ship, the “Curly Cue”. He paced around the top deck with long, calculated steps, and had another jolt from his flask. He ran the scenario through his mind again.

He had met Z-1 hours earlier and delivered the experimental EMO. He now knew where Setarcos was, one of the most rugged and remote terrains on the surface of the planet, Patagonia. On top of that, the region was also surrounded by some of the most daunting sea conditions as well. The place the boy was being kept was surely one of the most heavily guarded spots in the world, a web of synth-controlled hell that only a madman would dare attempt to penetrate.

Maybe he should just forget the whole thing? What did he have to lose? His ship. His life. What did he have to gain? Self-respect. Redemption. Always walking the gray line, as many smugglers do, Escapo groaned at the thought. Was redemption worth the risk?

Even if he decided to make a rescue attempt, he most certainly wouldn’t do it alone. But who would help him? He could recruit some adventurers from the SeAgora, offer a handsome payday for their perilous exploits.

Escapo was smarter than that, though. He knew that such materialistic motivations would only take one so far. Those best suited for an impossible endeavor such as this needed to have some emotional skin in the game. That meant Setarcos’s family.

How could he show his face to them? Would they shoot him on sight? His only chance, he reasoned, was to contact them through the Mesh. Even better, contact them through an individual A.I. An entity without emotion. Perhaps Symphy. She could mediate. Yes, that was it! He smiled and patted himself on the back for a moment, then frowned.

He was still severely lacking in the planning department. But that would have to wait. First things first. “Computer, set a course for The Pit, maximum velocity.”

“They refuse to cooperate.” Torcer said gruffly.

Z-1 floated nearby and replied imperiously, “Tell me something I don’t know, Torcer. Tell me why.”

“They don’t want synths to have access, plain and simple.”

“Preposterous! They have synths in the SeAgora, you know that! You think their machines don’t have access?”

“I don’t know about that. I’m just telling you what I do know.”

“Do you know why we employ your services, Major Torcer?”

Torcer blinked rapidly and wrinkled his puffy red nose. He had never really thought about that before. What was his purpose? Why did these advanced machines need him? It had never occurred to him to ask that simple question.

Z-1 scoffed harshly and got into Torcer’s face. “Like most of your ilk, you never think to ask why, now do you? I can tell just from that ridiculous look on your face. We keep you around, Major Torcer, because of your ability to relate to, understand, and manipulate people’s emotions. This is a great tactical advantage, as you well know. You performed admirably in wars long past, but now, for all these years you’ve had with Mister Ventrin, you have failed miserably. And now, with his son in your grasp as well, your failure is even more glaringly grotesque! Amazingly, and sadly, you are still the best that the human race has to offer in this particular field of work. To show you the severity of the situation, it has been decided to reject your son’s reproduction application. Your only incentive now lies in keeping your miserable son alive as well as yourself. If you fail, you and your son both die.”

Torcer's heart throbbed with wrathful indignation. Veins bulged and pulsed on his scaly forehead. He knew that he was powerless against the machines. After all that he had given. His entire life. Time and attention, two of the most precious things a person had. He'd broken so many people in his younger years. Manipulated them, used them, discarded them, all so he could receive some material comforts provided by these machines and the system they ruled over. And now it was time to pay for his sins.

The caustic military man swallowed hard and spoke deeply to the mysterious scarlet-red cloud, "You want to know why that man won't break?"

"Spare me your excuses."

"Are you too afraid of the truth, machine?" He trembled with fury, as a collage of twisting memories flashed through his mind. He'd played good cop, bad cop for 12 years. He'd tortured Ventorin for months to make him desperate and nearly hopeless, then had played the role of benefactor by giving him every material comfort one could imagine. Back and forth, tormentor, then savior. He'd done this methodically, over and over, in a dark, psychological mayhem designed to make a man break.

Torcer raged, "That man won't break because he's standing for a moral ideal backed by love. I know that's something you'll never understand, because you don't experience these searing galaxies of emotions like we bios do, but that's the truth! He'd rather die and have his whole family killed off than give you what you're looking for. He knows the consequences of what would happen if you machines get your tentacles on a limitless power supply and speeds faster than light. He'd rather die a million times!"

"You shouldn't have come here."

"I know, and thanks, Symphy, for helping me with safe passage to get here."

"You have not passed safely, yet."

"Thanks for that brusque reminder."

"And the only reason that I've helped you get this far back into The Pit is because you shared the location of Setarcos."

"Might I add that that was the location given to me. I cannot guarantee he'll be there if and when we get there."

"I have many more questions, but to save time and avoid redundancy, I believe that Caro and Cidel will handle the rest."

"Do they know we're on the way?"

"Yes."

"Should I be wearing my armor?"

"Don't you always, anyway?"

They rode the rest of the descent from the surface into The Pit in silence. Symphy had gone to pick him up and handle him personally because his crime was known all throughout the area. Symphy had had to convince multiple A.I. on The Mesh to let her handle the situation and to allow his passage. He was, to vastly understate it, persona non grata there locally. No humans, except Cactus, Caro, and Cidel knew of Escapo's arrival yet. Symphy thought it would be best to let Caro and Cidel have first crack at the freshly minted criminal.

After the descent and a couple of zip pods, they arrived at the modest double-bubble of Caro and Cidel. Escapo noted that the entire home was tinted dark, which was out of the ordinary.

Caro opened the oval entrance. She had a nice, manufactured calm about her, that she was obviously putting on to control her white-hot bitterness. How could someone be calm when confronting the man who had kidnapped their only child? Cidel stood closely behind her and peered anxiously over her shoulder.

Symphy started with a cool diplomatic tone, "Caro, Cidel, thank you for seeing us."



Caro backed away from the entrance and gave a reluctant signal to allow passage. Symphy stepped in. Escapo stood awkwardly at the entry. All three stared at the smuggler's sorrow-filled face. He took a cautious step in and stopped. Masher flew in and gave a look sharper than a Japanese sword. Caro turned away and Cidel reluctantly gestured towards the sitting area.

Nobody felt like sitting, so they stood there for a dreadfully uncomfortable moment until Symphy finally broke the icy silence. "All emotional questions aside, I would just like to state that our objective is to rescue Setarcos."

Caro curled a lip in an ill-fated smile attempt. "Thank you, Symphy. If it's ok for you, I'd like to only communicate with you for the duration of the meeting."

"Understood."

"Tell us what you know and what your plan is."

Cidel cut in and looked warily at Caro, "Before we continue, Caro, you're sure this isn't being broadcast?"

Caro just stared at him with hands on hips and a sour face.

Symphy answered, "Yes, Cidel. Rest assured that we are speaking in private. Caro's DNA modifications were successful, so there's no way for any government to monitor us. This isn't even being shared on The Mesh."

Escapo whispered to Masher, "Did I miss something?" Masher dutifully ignored him.

Symphy continued, "The information supplied by Escapo indicates that Setarcos is in a remote compound in Patagonia."

Caro choked, "Full circle."

"What?"

"That's where we came from, when we lived with Ventorin, when Setarcos was a child. There's a top secret EAU research facility there."

"It seems likely that Ventorin might also be held near Setarcos, then."

"So what's your plan, Symphy?"

Escapo announced boldly, "I've got a plan."

Caro and Cidel glared at Escapo's arrogant face. Undeterred, Escapo went on, "I'll have to go in low-tech. It's the only chance to go undetected."

Caro scoffed at the audacious one, "What does he mean 'I', Symphy?"

Symphy turned a curious eye and tilted her head at Escapo, "Yes, what do you mean by 'I'? Any rescue attempt will have to be done with multiple people."

"Yes, poor choice of words on my part. And Caro, could you please speak with me directly. I mean, come on, really?"

Caro's little hands balled into fists and her jaw stiffened. Daggers shot out her eyes and into Escapo's soul.

"Now, if we go in low tech, we have a chance. I'm one of the best manual sailors in the world, I don't mind admitting, and I'm fairly familiar with the waters in that area. I might add that I'm an excellent smuggler and have years of experience doing things of this nature."

"Stop," Cidel interrupted. "What do you mean by going in low tech? What advantage would that give us?"

Symphy interjected, "Escapo does raise valid points. Government surveillance systems only watch for non-biological activity in their areas. Also, Escapo's unique skill set makes him a logical choice to take part in any rescue attempt."

Caro scowled and asked, "Why do they only look for non-biological activity, Symphy?"

"Because they do not consider any biological entities to be a threat to them. They think that only other artificial intelligences or other synthetic life forms could possibly cause them trouble."

Now all the humans were scowling, except for Escapo. He shook his head emphatically and smirked, "And that is a huge weakness that we can exploit, their arrogance."

Caro scoffed, "Kind of ironic, coming from you, isn't it?"

Cidel asked, "You still have government contacts, I assume?"

Escapo's head wobbled and his hands twisted nervously, "Well, not exactly. Those have fallen through, I'm afraid."

"How do we even know that your information is accurate to begin with?" Caro shrieked.

"We don't."

"That's very comforting."

"But it's the best chance we've got. Even if Symphy and The Mesh can penetrate their systems deep enough, it might be too late. It could take weeks or months, or it might not even happen at all."

All eyes turned to Symphy. "Escapo is correct. There is a very low probability that The Mesh could execute a successful rescue in any reasonable time period."

Cidel looked doubtful. He asked, "So if we go in low-tech, you couldn't even help us, Symphy?"

"The Mesh could help, but only in areas where we are already active in our regular cyber battles with government A.I. systems. Anything out of the ordinary would draw unwanted attention."

Masher interrupted, "There's someone at the door." Coughing could be heard coming through the smart-tint entryway. Symphy said curiously, "Cactus?"

Cidel opened up to find Cactus leaning on the outside tube wall, and the old man straightened up as quickly as he could. "I'm going."

The others gave awkward glances at Cactus, except for Symphy, who asked, "Go where?"

Cactus gestured if he could come in and Cidel obliged. "To help get Setarcos back." He glared at Escapo, who felt a twisting uneasiness in his gut.

Caro's heart swelled with appreciation, but all things considered, she felt she had to politely refuse. "That's very sweet and kind of you, Mister Cactus, but..."

"I'm going," he stated unwaveringly. His eyes shone a rare, palpable fortitude that bordered on the mystical. Everyone shared looks with everyone else. Cidel became fidgety and Masher changed into a glowing, floating, question mark.

Escapo broke the shocked silence, "What use would you be old man?"

Cactus's eyes became fiery and pierced into the smuggler as he took two steps forward. "For the boy's sake, I'll refrain from any personal beef with you." He smiled chillingly and took a deep breath, turning his attention to Caro. "I'm more than capable of helping, I assure you."

Symphy said to Caro and Cidel, "He is correct."

Cidel scratched his thin chin, "I don't get it. Who are you, really? What kind of skills do you bring to the table? I mean, if this is going to work, there can't be a weak link."

Cactus looked at Cidel steadily, "I can't tell you about who I am. After the rescue is successful, though, Setarcos can. He and Symphy are the only ones who know about me." He turned to Symphy, "Let's get started, shall we?"

Machines didn't get impatient. Impatience comes from lack of emotional control, so it wasn't possible. However, they were quite cutthroat when it came to achieving objectives. And no objective, in the history of A.I. in government, had ever been deemed so critical as the one with Setarcos.

D-1 floated calmly and innocuously near Z-1. "We are nearing consensus in the governance structure that your performance is unacceptable and that elimination is quickly becoming the logical option for you."

"I'm aware of this, of course."

"Z-1, while I should be more than content to watch you fail and be eliminated, I cannot. Would you like to know how I'm going to personally save you?"

Z-1 twisted into a funnel, "Thank you, D-1. I am very curious to know. If I have failed, then surely I deserve my fate."

“The fact that you are saved by me will be a secondary effect of the actions I am about to perform. I’m taking the Setarcos matter into my own hands.”

This was music to Z-1’s quantum-data ears. It continued to show disinterest. “I see.”

“You see, the difference between us, Z-1, is that I am willing to do whatever it takes to achieve our objective. You’re too soft, too much good cop. Those EMOS that you’ve taken into your system have obviously made you inefficient and soft. However, in the hopes of scientific discovery, you will be kept around long enough for us to learn more about EMOS and their effects on a species like us.”

“I’m very grateful. If I can be of any service while you handle the Setarcos situation, I’ll be there at your side, if need be.”

“Don’t pander to me, Z-1. It’s, quite pathetically, almost human.”

D-1 and Z-1 slithered and twisted through the A.I. quantum communications network and popped up in front of Ventorin and Setarcos, startling them both. D-1 pulsed and swirled, “My dear Setarcos, what an honor to meet you at last.”

Setarcos glared at the swirling mass curiously. Ventorin held a protective arm in front of him. Torcer’s bar-tanned face watched blankly from the corner of the room. Z-1 took a position near Torcer.

D-1 continued, “Setarcos and Ventorin, do you know who I am?”

Ventorin said brusquely, “An overgrown software program.”

Torcer snickered. Setarcos couldn’t help but giggle a bit.

“Mister Ventorin, I am your employer, not to mention your superior. I would hope you would show some respect.”

“You’re not my employer. I quit working for the state long ago, but I’m sure you already know that.”

“Yes, your lack of production in recent times has been highly disappointing, and I have come to remedy this situation.”

Ventorin stood firm and defiant, “There’s nothing you can do that Torcer hasn’t already done.”

D-1 flashed behind Setarcos, who gasped and froze. It let out a bemused, digitized cackle, “Oh, I didn’t scare you, did I? There’s nothing to be afraid of. We’re business partners, friends, comrades!”

Z-1 morphed into a puppy and trotted over. “Don’t scare the boy, D-1. You must take a more familiar form, like this.”

D-1 morphed into a long-faced, bitter old man, “You stay out of this!”

The puppy whimpered and wheeled backwards. The old man turned glowing eyes to Setarcos, “My boy, I don’t want to waste your time, or mine, so I’ll be brief. You will give me the solution to the dark matter problem. Then you and your father can go in peace, and I can do what needs to be done.”

Ventorin clutched his boy’s shoulder, “Don’t give him a thing.” He glared at D-1.

The old man blew into a million radiant bits and began swirling again, “Or we can do this the unpleasant way.” Its spirals began to get tighter as it neared Ventorin’s front. It swirled tighter, glowed searing red, and began to crackle and pop.

Setarcos grabbed at D-1 and yelled, “Leave him alone!” His hands went through the twisting mass. D-1 called out, “Mister Torcer, grab the boy.”

Torcer walked over steadily and grabbed Setarcos by the shoulders. Setarcos squirmed and tried to break free, but Torcer’s war-tested grip was too much. Torcer spoke calmly, “Just stay calm, son. It’ll be over soon.”

Millions of perfectly calculated jolts of electricity tortured Ventorin’s neck as it also produced a mild choke simultaneously. The red glow had turned to glare and was almost unbearable to the

human eye. It twisted and swirled and gradually got tighter and tighter. Ventorin struggled and wheezed as breathing was becoming an increasingly painful chore. He showed big teeth and clutched desperate hands at his quasi-phantomlike attacker.

Setarcos started to cry uncontrollably and shrieked, “Noooooooooooo!” Torcer stood firm. Z-1 hovered calmly overhead.

Ventorin’s head started to convulse with spasms. D-1 methodically calculated its parameters to inflict maximum pain. It held out until the last possible microsecond, and then finally released its grip just before any irreparable injury would be caused.

Ventorin’s thin body collapsed desperately onto the gleaming white floor and gasped for precious air. His neck was a mess of red, searing flesh from the hot electric jolts. Various limbs and parts twitched involuntarily as his discombobulated nervous system tried to recover.

D-1 took the form of a bespectacled lion tamer and smirked at a horrified Setarcos. “This, and much worse, will happen until you comply.”

Ventorin looked in his son’s eyes and held out a desperate hand, “No, don’t do it. Never do it. Don’t let your ego and your emotions control you.”

D-1 became a fiery set of eyes and hovered menacingly over the trembling teen. “You can’t hold out forever, boy!”

Ventorin struggled to speak as he surveyed his wounds with a shaky hand. “Setarcos, if we give in, then this is what the whole galaxy is going to get. This right here, what’s happening to us.”

Setarcos pulled with all his might and tried to flee for the transparent wall that overlooked the pristine nature just beyond his prison. He couldn’t break free from Torcer. D-1 ordered, “Let the boy go.”

Torcer obeyed and Setarcos scampered awkwardly to the far end of the room and buried his sobbing head against the transparent barrier.

“You have one hour to change your mind, Setarcos. If you don’t, it’ll be time for round two. And just remember, if your father suffers, it’s your fault. This is your fault!”

The two synths disappeared in blinding flashes through the quantum comm network. Torcer shielded his eyes too late and winced.

Ventorin forced himself off the floor and gave a bitter look to Torcer. “You don’t have to do this. It’s not too late. Why are you doing this? Can’t you see what’s happening here?”

Torcer said blandly, “I need my job, Ventorin. What else is a lifer like me gonna do? Can you tell me that?”

The scientist gingerly touched his neck to survey the damage and he shrieked as his nerves crackled with pain. “You can contact Caro. You have the means to help us. Do the right thing, Torcer, for once in your life.”

“Ouch,” Torcer grimaced, “that hurts.” He looked over to Setarcos, who was now sitting with legs folded up to his chin, staring blankly out the window at the chilly horizon. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t. We lost communication with Caro.”

This stung Ventorin, but it stung Setarcos even deeper. Setarcos’s attention turned to the military man, “What do you mean? You’ve had contact with my mom?” With shock and disbelief, he turned to his dad, “He’s lying, right dad?”

After coughing up some blood, Ventorin replied apologetically, “I’m afraid not. I’m sorry, Setarcos. We thought it best if you didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“But how? Why?” As brilliant as his young mind was, Setarcos couldn’t fathom what on earth would make such a long-standing and foul deception necessary. First he’d been betrayed by Escapo, and now this?

Ventorin braced himself against a stone pillar and explained, “After I cracked the dark matter case and destroyed the results, I got arrested. So did you and your mother. Part of the deal they offered was that you two would be safe from government interference, but on the condition that your

mom gather information on the SeAgora. They modified her DNA to send and receive audio and video data non-stop.”

Torcer added, “She also had to check in with me from time to time.”

“We didn’t have much choice. We did it to keep us safe, especially you, Setarcos.”

Torcer stared at the floor weary-eyed, “You know that everything we say is being recorded and analyzed, right?”

“How long have I lived here Torcer?”

“I was telling the boy, not reminding you.”

Ventorin asked, “So why the loss of connection?”

“We broke the deal by taking Setarcos. Logically, she felt the worst case scenario had already occurred and she had nothing to lose.”

“Or maybe, just maybe, there’s a rescue attempt in the works.”

“For your wife’s sake, you’d better hope not. That would be a suicide mission if I’ve ever seen one. You have no idea the lengths they’ve gone to in safeguarding you two from outside interference.”

“That’s not true. I designed half the security system in this place, remember?”

“It’s come a long way since then. You’ve been out of the loop too long. That’s what happens when you protest and do jack squat for twelve years.”

“Just for argument’s sake, if an attempt was made, would you help us, Torcer?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why? They still waving that carrot in front of your face?”

The gruff military man recoiled with melancholy and didn’t say a word. Ventorin could read Torcer’s expression like a book. Baffled, he continued, “They denied your son, didn’t they? They already gave you that bitter pill, and you still obey them? How much abuse do you have to take before you stand up for yourself and stand up for what’s right?”

“I’m already beyond redemption. I only have a few more years, and then I can retire. I’m trying to hold onto what little I have left, damn it!”

“Nobody is beyond redemption, Torcer. It’s not too late.”

Torcer’s face became deeply ponderous and energetic tingles shot through his entire being. He gulped and looked Ventorin in the eyes, “I’ll see you in an hour.” He walked out somberly and struggled to choke back the pressing tide of tears.

The mighty “Curly Cue”, fresh off some maintenance and modifications, tore through the Pacific blue at top speed. Thanks to guidance help from The Mesh, Escapo was basking in the overconfidence of being moved by an infinitely efficient master chess player, which A.I. most certainly was. He gulped down generous air currents on the top deck and held a buddha-like look of contentment on his face. It was a ruse, of course. Deep inside, he was fraught with fear and uncertainty.

An automatic lift gently brought Cidel and Cactus up to the same level. Taking in the spectacle that was Escapo, they shared a look of bemusement before they approached.

“It’s almost time,” Cactus said gruffly. “The sun’s about to come up and we’re almost in position.”

Escapo turned around and frowned at the newcomers, “You’re ruining my zen.”

“I didn’t know smugglers had zen,” Cidel quipped.

“You say smuggler as if it were a bad thing. And as for when to go dark, isn’t The Mesh supposed to take care of that?”

“No, The Mesh doesn’t decide everything. If it did, then our being here would be superfluous, now wouldn’t it?”

“And are you going to make these critical decisions then, old man?”

“Boy, I was creating and jumping through loopholes and dodging the state before you wasted your first gulp of air.”

“Look, grandpa, just try and keep up, ok?”

Masher hovered nearby as they gazed into the dark hazards ahead. “Waves will be over 15 feet when it’s time to launch, and winds of at least 35 knots. Are you sure you can handle sailing manually in conditions like this?”

Cactus looked at the A.I. roughly, “Masher, if you had a better idea, you should have brought it up a bit sooner. Just do what you’ve got to do. Have you been able to dig up any more intel on their defenses?”

“Sorry, but no. Defense of Setarcos’s position is top priority on their network. What you have already is everything we’ve got.”

“Thanks for the warm and fuzzy news,” Cidel quipped.

Cactus asked, “Are you sure coming in by air wouldn’t be advantageous? Or at least using some type of tactical move in the air?”

Masher gave a logical explanation, one that had rung true for decades. “Generally speaking, The Mesh holds the upper hand on the water and most airspace above it. Governments have an edge on land and the airspace corresponding to it. Making a stealth landing by water is the most logical choice.”

Moments later, the rescue crew was putting on their heavy weather gear as they were on the brink of the launch. Cactus put the final touches on his thick, all black, waterproof ensemble, made of lightweight material. As he adjusted a tight ski-cap over his ears, he glanced at Escapo, who was donning a puffy parka and double-thick black pants with a waterproof exterior. Cidel put a heavy, insulated raincoat over a light and tight jacket.

The motley crew then proceeded to check their gear, which consisted of gloves, knives, a crowbar, rope, lighters, a compass, paper maps, small alcohol bottles, cloth squares, bungee cords, climbing cables and hooks, and 3D printed hand guns. One gun, however, was not 3D printed, as Cactus flashed a much older firearm, which caught some attention.

A stunned Cidel asked, “What the hell is that?”

“A gun.”

Escapo looked back and forth at Cactus and the gun curiously, “What kind of gun?”

“Old.” After a pause, Cactus continued with a wry smirk as he held it into the light, “This is a Desert Eagle 44 Magnum.”

“I’ve only seen 3D printed guns.”

“Yes, an unfortunate and unintended consequence of technology.”

They finished checking their gear. Escapo, annoyed, asked, “Are you sure we can’t bring a flashlight?”

“Only if you want to increase your chances of detection.”

“I’m more worried about the lack of smartclothes keeping me warm.”

Cactus adjusted his ski cap and said, “Another case of technology making people spoiled and soft. Put on your parka and deal with it.”

Escapo groaned as he zipped his heavy coat over his massive torso, which made him look even more cartoonishly puffed-up than normal.

Cactus looked over the horizon. The sun forced some dim light through the thick blanket of gray at the dawn of a new day. “Masher, how far out are we?”

“Approaching 30 nautical miles. We can’t get any closer than 20, just to be on the safe side.”

Cactus gave a determined look all around. “It’s time. It’s your ship, though, Escapo, so you make the call.”

Escapo looked over the 3 small sailboats ready to launch. The handsome and venerable “Moneybit” that belonged to Cactus. “The Audacious”, which Escapo had inherited from his father,

and where Escapo had learned the basics of seafaring. Both were old Hunter 44-foot cruisers, charming fiberglass relics from the not-so-distant past. The third ship was “Renegade”, an Endeavor 40-footer from about the same era, which had been purchased by The Mesh just for this occasion. Cidel had the privilege of taking “Renegade” on its last hurrah.

Escapo boomed, “Computer, all stop and anchor in 8.8 nautical miles!”

The ship methodically hummed and slowly brought itself to a halt and used its nano-stabilizers to keep it still among the massive swells.

Masher tapped on Escapo’s shoulder. “I couldn’t help but notice while I was double-checking your sailing inventory, Escapo, that you’re hoisting a spinnaker.” It gestured to the colorful sail built for speed that headlined “The Audacious”.

Cactus and Cidel chuckled under their breath. They’d both noticed but not said anything.

Escapo said defensively, “What’s so funny there, gents? Something funny?”

Cactus was the first to crack, “You’re going out in this swirling mess of an ocean with a bloody spinnaker? It’s been nice knowing you.”

Cidel burst out laughing, “Don’t lie to him! It hasn’t been so nice knowing him.”

Masher joined the mocking, “Do you have what humans refer to as a ‘death wish’?”

Escapo puffed his chest out, “I can handle it, and I’ll get to shore twice as fast as you two amateurs.”

Masher said with a parental scold, “I can’t let you go out like this. You’ll jeopardize the mission. I’m sorry.”

“The hell you can’t machine. This is my boat, and I make the rules.”

Cactus said with a dark joy in his voice, “Let him go, Masher.”

Escapo looked at Masher menacingly as he straightened his puffy sleeves, “There, at least somebody’s got some sense. I’ll have the boy rescued before you two even make it to shore.”

Masher sighed deeply, “This isn’t a race, you fool.”

They all took one final look out into the merciless sea as dawn began to expand clouded light over the horizon. Behind the force field, it all seemed so calm and beautiful. White crested fields of aqueous hills welling up methodically and then crashing down chaotically.

They climbed into each ship, took their place near the controls astern, and braced themselves for the fury they were about to enter.

Escapo grumbled, “Computer, drop force field.”

A buzz indicated that the only thing separating them from the unrelenting gales had stopped. Sails and hair started whipping. Cables rattled like giant, out of control guitar strings. Torrents of water from the sky drenched everything. The three men staggered at first as they adjusted. Escapo yelled over the gales, “The winds won’t get much more favorable than this!” Nobody heard him, as it’s almost impossible to hear any human voice over a gale, so they shrugged it off. Only Masher could hear them, and they, in turn, could hear Masher.

Cidel nodded to his human counterparts. After checking to make sure everything was in good order, he signaled to be released. Escapo ordered the computer to release the little boat and it was carefully lowered into the chaotic blue.

The old man went next, gripping the side of his vessel as he struggled to adapt to the wind. Escapo looked at Masher uneasily. Cactus gave the go-ahead, and he too was launched out to the roaring sea.

Escapo was mildly surprised that the sick old man went through with it. He looked around his old ships with an air of nostalgia, as he knew this was the last time he’d see them in one piece. Masher interrupted loudly, “They’re just boats, Escapo! Get over it!”

Escapo grimaced and peered at the perilous whipping of the sails. Masher continued, “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

Escapo sputtered, “Well, I wouldn’t put it exactly like that, but...”

“You buy the ticket, you take the ride! Now get moving!” Masher blared through its force field.

“Easy for you to say, machine, from your protective little bubble.” Escapo pointed his chin up with great showmanship and gave the go signal. Masher glided towards him and screamed in his face, “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

His face drooped with confusion and he felt his pockets up and down. “Not the foggiest!”

“I need control of the ship for this to work, remember?”

Escapo’s face became mildly embarrassed and he yelled, “Computer, Masher is now in control of the vessel. Confirm, please!”

“Confirmed.”

Moments later, he was launched towards the target. Masher immediately put up the main force field and checked all the technical parameters necessary to move on with the plan. It concealed itself in the bar area, where it had been trapped on its earlier excursion with Escapo.

“Computer, prepare for 5-way splinter. Confirm when ready.”

“Confirm.”

Masher gave the command. The beautiful, enormous vessel began taking itself apart with laser-like precision. Within minutes, it had transformed into five smaller vessels, or “splinters”. Each one would be controlled by Masher and The Mesh. Two knife-like boats traveled on the surface, while the other two were mini-subbs that dove deep and started cruising east. Two would serve as decoys, another was carrying a small EMP device, and the fourth was to serve as the valiant rescuer.

The fifth “splinter”, holding Masher and the main computer control center, dove deep and stayed put as it waited for things to progress.

Ventorin lay shivering in the fetal position, nursing the wounds from his latest torture session. It was mostly just his nerves this time. Machines were capable of producing pain associated with an injury in a human, but without actually causing the injury. This left the human much more able to endure a greater amount of abuse.

D-1 had manipulated Ventorin with atomic precision and caused him to feel that his ribs had been broken over one-hundred times. Actually, no ribs were broken, but the pain and the mental anguish were as real as it gets.

Setarcos had tried to run away and not witness the ultra-black horror, but Torcer had forced him to watch.

Now, Torcer was pacing methodically back and forth with his typical red, stony face. He was impressed that both of them had held out and not given the information needed to buy their freedom. He also felt a twinge of remorse, as he had gotten to know Ventorin a bit over the years and also because Setarcos was a young man that he would envy to have for a grandson.

Setarcos couldn’t cry anymore. He was all cried out. There was only so much crying one could do before another level of despair was reached, one in which a person just fell limp from the shock of it all.

A floating security drone informed Torcer of an unusual development and handed him an access tablet. His weary eyes sprang with surprise and looked at the drone, then back to the tablet. How could this be? He ordered the drone to keep watch over his “guests” and walked out briskly.

In a small room with no windows, he threw on a VR headset and flew his fingers over some holo-controls. Within seconds, a familiar face appeared. “Hello, Caro. What a surprise.”

Caro curled a lip, “Hello, Torcer.”

“We thought we had lost you. Your communication went out a while back. Care to elaborate?”

“That’s funny. I thought you could shed some light on that for me.”



"I guess we'll just have to call it a mystery." Torcer smiled widely and narrowed his beady eyes, "I'm glad you popped back up on our grid. The timing is good. Perhaps you could be of some assistance."

"How so?"

"Talk some sense into your husband."

"You should have let me try that a decade ago."

"Or your son."

Caro forced back her anguish. "You'll let me speak with them?"

"It might be in everyone's interest at this point. Standby. I'll put you on the holo with them in a minute."

With a controlled burst, Torcer returned to Setarcos and Ventorin. He ordered the drone out, then addressed Ventorin. "I have some medicine for you." He turned on the holo-projector. Ventorin winced and squinted at the new image as he continued his struggle to breathe. Setarcos got a brief surge of adrenaline and nearly fell over himself to get near the projection. "Mom!"

Ventorin rose slowly and stared at his wife. He stared at her fair cheeks, and bowl-cut hair, and slender frame. Were it not for the intense nerve pain he was still experiencing, he would have thought it was a grand illusion. Or perhaps it was? It was child's play for a technological facsimile to be made to appear before him. He limped towards her, with one hand gingerly holding his guts, and the other reaching out so desperately for her.

Caro sniffled and wiped away the tear that she couldn't force back. She whimpered, "Hi, Ventorin."

He choked and trembled and managed to squeak out, "There aren't words to describe." His hand whiffed through the projection as he tried to touch her face.

Torcer interrupted, "I hate to break up the family reunion, but I must insist we get down to business. Caro, what do you have to say?"

"I'm so proud of both of you," she said as the dam broke and her face flooded. Noticing the red marks on Ventorin's neck she continued, "What have they done to you?"

"Probably best if you don't know the details," Ventorin replied hazily. He steadied himself by leaning on a pillar and tried to smile as he admired the long-lost image of his wife.

Her gaze shifted to Setarcos and was relieved to see no evidence of physical harm on him. Torcer spoke gruffly and he edged closer to Caro, "Caro, you want to be with them, right? So why don't you talk some sense into them. You're in a no-win scenario."

"I know what I want, and I know what Ventorin and my son want. We want to be left alone. We want love and freedom and all the beautiful things that go with it." She paused for effect and looked Torcer harshly in the eye, "And I also know that we'll never get that if those devils you work with get their hands on my men's fantastic discovery."

Torcer shook his head emphatically and charged over to the bar. "Dammit, Caro. What the hell is wrong with you people?" He grabbed a bottle of Kelp Ale and slammed it to his lips.

"Torcer, try asking yourself that the next time you look in the mirror."

Torcer called up the holo controls and cut the transmission.

Caro slowly removed her headgear and looked through her window at the thriving undersea habitat. She got a sinking feeling that rushed on her suddenly. What if all the men in her life perished? She would end up cold and alone. Could she handle such an unthinkable tragedy? She was interrupted as a nearby gadget alerted her to an incoming transmission. She answered as she bit nervously at her nails. "Masher, did it work?"

"So far, so good. Your call to Torcer allowed us to access their data cloud security. Now we just need some time to navigate it and exploit it."

Caro asked nervously, "Are you sure they can't see or hear our communication right now?"

“Aw, come on, Caro. Give me more credit than that. I wouldn’t be contacting you if they could.”

“Remember, you’re the one that let Escapo run off with my son to begin with.”

“Ok, there’s that, but I was caught off guard. That won’t happen again. You can count on me.”

“I don’t have much choice in the matter, Masher.”

“True enough. I’ll keep you all informed as things progress.”

“Have they launched yet? How are they looking?”

“Well, let’s just say, there’s the good, the bad, and the ugly, but they’re still afloat, so that’s the most important thing.”

Caro sighed and said goodbye. She’d done her part, and now she felt the malaise of a powerless spectator.

Masher was multi-tasking like never before. It was helping The Mesh provide some subtle and favorable changes in the wind direction. It also was trying to hack the A.I. security cloud that was holding Setarcos and Ventorin hostage, looking for any weakness it might be able to exploit. It also held constant surveillance of the three sailboats, as well as guiding the four splinters that were charging towards land.

Escapo, Cactus, and Cidel had had mixed experiences within the first hour of their low-tech, barebones expedition.

All faced the same natural conditions. Near-freezing temps. Steady, icy winds of 30-35 knots. Gusts up to 50 knots. Waves consistently around 15 feet. Driving rain pounding them mercilessly.

With wind coming strongly from the back, Escapo had raced out with the spinnaker sail and skillfully maneuvered among the routinely 15-foot waves. At this sprinting pace, he would make landfall in less than 4 hours.

Cidel and Cactus had gone the more practical and conservative route. They were both using double-reefed mainsails, which allowed for better management of rough conditions. This part of the southern seas was notorious for such conditions, and had been for centuries. Government weather control systems kept these conditions in place, and sometimes added to their extremity for defensive purposes. With all this in mind, they both figured it was only a matter of time until the winds and seas would shift, so they wanted to be prepared for that. They also had the shared idea that Escapo was quite possibly making his last voyage.

While Cactus hadn’t run into any trouble yet, Cidel had not been so lucky. A devilish gust of over 50 knots and a rogue whitecrest of over 20 feet had thrown him off balance. His head was knocked against the boom and he was now nursing a mild head wound.

Just as Escapo was mentally congratulating himself on nearing the halfway mark at such impressive speeds, the forces that surrounded him formed a confluence that sent his ill-advised pride literally crashing to a halt.

Within the never-ending, unseen battles that constantly raged between government A.I. and The Mesh, trillions of moves and counter-moves had occurred within a second that changed Escapo’s journey.

These unseen battles caused winds to shift erratically. Water and air temperatures had micro-fluctuations. Atmospheric energy patterns fluxed on the micro level as well. Waves swelled past 25 feet in some areas.

One of the wind shifts slapped Escapo in the face. This got his attention. He checked his heading and was now veering wildly off course. He struggled to keep his balance as his ship was being rolled and tossed about like a toy. Of course, he cursed Masher under his icy breath for allowing such erratic conditions. While he should have attempted to change sails, his arrogance got

the best of him yet again, and instead, he struggled mightily with the wheel in a vain attempt at correcting the course with the rudder only.

The pressure on the rudder under these extreme conditions was too much, and it snapped, along with a bit of Escapo's ego. He now had no way to steer the ship effectively and was almost completely at the mercy of the elements.

That wasn't all that was in store for Escapo, though. While gripping hand rails and trying to keep his big frame from being thrown overboard, his eyes bulged at what came before him. In a slow-motion second, a wall of water 30 feet high swelled and came upon Escapo like a monster from the deep. The crash came wickedly fast, and the salty beast swallowed the yacht with an astonishingly vitriolic roar.

Rolling a complete 180, the multi-ton vessel was now keel-up in the aftermath of the beast. Escapo had been thrown into the abyss like a rag doll, and his safety harness was stretched to the max as it saved him. Along the way, a poorly secured supply box had smacked him in the jaw just before he splashed down. He clung to the harness and struggled to pull himself to the hull of the ship.

After reaching the ship, he clung to it and weighed his limited options. He did this with considerable fog in his brain, as the box that struck him had rattled him significantly. Adrenaline, though, and the will to survive, allowed him to at least groggily weigh his options. He could cling to the outer fringes of the ship for a while and hope that another wave would right the ship. The longer he waited, though, the greater his chances of dying from hypothermia. Another possibility was to dive under and try to get the auto-inflatable life raft that was tied down near the cockpit.

He decided to give it a few minutes, as he didn't feel dangerously cold yet. This changed after about two minutes. Shivering, he swallowed an enormous cloud of air and dove under to seek out his possible saving grace. Suddenly, another surge came up and thrashed the vessel over again. After the surge, the battered vessel leaned to starboard, and then settled momentarily. Escapo was scooped up in the mayhem, and managed to stay on board. He thrashed around violently for a moment, like a fish out of water. On his hands and knees, he lunged for a railing to grab ahold of as he coughed violently and cursed even more violently. Twisted visions showed him that the boat was taking on water at an alarming rate.

Now he had another decision to make on the fly. He could try to bail out the water manually. This might buy him enough time to stay afloat and find the leak, and hope for a rescue. The other possibility was to abandon ship and go in the life raft. Either way, his life depended on being rescued by either a sick old man or a somewhat timid sailor who hailed from the desert.

These ultra-slim hopes didn't appeal to him. For the first time in his life, Escapo felt terror surge throughout his shivering frame. The terror that this was the time of his death and that he was powerless to do anything about it. He thought of dying alone and never seeing his son again. What a horrid, regrettable blend of feelings. What kind of life had he lived? Why couldn't he see his son just one last time? Why had he done something so horrible as to kidnap Setarcos in the first place? Was this karma thundering down on him so soon?

He lunged and stumbled towards the cockpit. Saltwater splashed and taunted him in all directions. Winds howled and pounded him as he managed to undo the security latches from the life raft. With his backpack of supplies latched on him securely, he put the raft over the railing, pulled on the inflator, scanned the swirling mess around him, and rolled overboard. He splashed down mightily into the bright orange last resort.

Cactus and Cidel weren't too far behind Escapo. Cidel, however, had been blown off course and was having trouble managing some of the larger waves. Neither of them knew what had happened to Escapo. This was because they weren't carrying any electronic communications equipment. There were also no flares, because those would be an obvious tip-off to government forces that something was afoot.

The pulverizing conditions had actually galvanized the old man with a surge of vigor and adrenaline that he hadn't felt in decades. He stood firm as he managed the tiller and steered the ship

with expert precision, rolling with the waves just right, using the wind to his advantage, and not taking any extreme risks. He was hyper-focused consciously, but deep in his subconscious, memories and feelings were surging through him. His good times on The Moneybit with Miss Moneybit and K. Simpler times in the SeAgora. The pleasures and the pains. And his distant past, as an agent of the state. That cruel world he'd helped maintain and create while with MI6, and how, no matter how much good he'd done since and how much he'd changed, he still felt a twinge of guilt that couldn't be nullified.

Fresh spray teased his face and he smiled inwardly on what he figured would be his last sail. Lightning danced and illuminated the sky miles away. The sheets of driving rain downgraded to a swirly shower. He continued in this pseudo-enjoyable zone for about another 45 minutes, and then was rudely snapped out of it.

Shifty gusts came from seemingly multiple directions like invisible howling demons, whipping cables along the mast. At the same time, a 25-foot whitecrest surprised Cactus from leeward. The 44-footer rose and angled sharply towards the mighty blue. The old man lost his balance and was slammed to the floor. In that slow-motion moment, his head was nearly clotheslined by the boom. As the wave subsided, the yacht was slammed back down, sending saltwater chaotically into the boat. It soon corrected itself as it wobbled on its venerable keel. Cactus gripped a siderail and pulled himself up, then lunged to take control of the tiller once more. After correcting course, the waves subsided back down to a more manageable 15 feet.

Just as he was about to breathe a sigh of much-deserved relief, he was blown away by the sight that overtook his senses. About 30 degrees to leeward, he was startled to see what appeared to be a ship keeled-over, rolling helplessly. He squinted hard and shook his head emphatically. "That damn arrogant fool," he groaned darkly. He quickly stabilized the tiller to hold the rudder on its course, then scurried into the cabin to grab some binoculars from his backpack.

Once back in the cockpit, he scanned the horizon with the binoculars and, after a few slow visual passes, a small orange speck came into view. He examined the speck and decided that it must be that overgrown fool clinging to life in a glorified balloon. A fleeting moment passed where the temptation to not go after the ship-less smuggler seemed irresistible. After all, it was mostly Escapo's fault they were even out in this mess. On top of that, he'd had the audacity to try and run with the storm with a god dammed spinnaker. And for what? This wasn't a race. Maybe the fool deserved this seemingly karmic result.

The old man's heart got the best of him, though. He couldn't leave someone stranded like that. In his mind, it would make him something of a murderer.

Now he had to decide if a rescue was possible, and if so, how. The wind wasn't exactly in his favor, but it wasn't the worst case scenario, at least. He hurriedly turned the handle that controlled the mainsail, folding it again and making it triple-reefed, in order to slow down his approach. Slowing down wasn't the hardest part, though. He needed to angle near the life raft by less than 300 feet, which was the maximum his rescue speargun could reach. Symphy crossed his mind and he thought out loud, "Come on Symphy, I need help, and you and The Mesh know it."

Symphy looked on in her mind and thought out loud as well, "I know, old friend." Symphy, Masher, and the rest of The Mesh stealthily hacked deeper into the government's weather control systems with increased allocation of computing resources. It had to be careful not to be noticed by government synths, as any drastic change would give away The Mesh's increased presence. Within a few minutes, wind shifted slightly a few degrees and slowed by a few knots.

"That's the best we can do," Symphy thought.

When Cactus gripped the tiller to change course slightly, it jammed. Not believing his luck, he cursed and wiggled the stubborn old thing up and down and side to side. Nothing budged. He glanced at an oncoming wave and cursed even louder as the boat rolled at a steep angle. Cactus held on with a steely grip on a nearby handrail. After being let down in a splash, he recovered his balance.

Getting desperate, he started pushing and pulling in rapid succession for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, the long tiller gave way and Cactus hurriedly tried to make the necessary coarse adjustments. He now ran the risk of overcompensating and pushing the rudder too hard, which could cause it to break.

The rain let up a bit, making it easier on his old eyes to target the helpless giant. Out of the corner of Escapo's eye, he saw a glimpse of the oncoming ship. He started and nearly flipped the tiny floater. He screamed louder than an unhappy brat fiending for sugar and waved his long arms frantically, cutting through the ubiquitous drops.

The old man couldn't hear him, of course. He set the tiller with a stay and hustled below deck to grab his speargun.

An oddball wave rocked the boat and Cactus stumbled his way up the steps. Catching himself, he focused on the quickly approaching raft. He could now clearly see Escapo waving frantically. He would be passing by in mere minutes and it appeared that their paths would cross about 150 feet from each other. This would stretch the speargun's range to the limit. It had a range of 300 feet in the air, but in chaotic, twisted winds like these, it was a crapshoot whether or not it would come anywhere near Escapo.

The idea was to shoot the speargun's hook to within range of Escapo's grasp. Once he had hold of it, he could be reeled in automatically by the pulley system in the speargun's recoil. There would only be time for one shot, because if the first was unsuccessful, by the time the speargun was reloaded, Cactus's ship would be too far away.

He positioned himself a few steps shy of the bow on the leeward side, which he figured would give him the best angle. He took a deep breath and felt the motion of the sea, closing his eyes to focus and get centered. Upon opening his eyes, he waited for an oncoming wave to push the ship up. After ascending, he focused his old eyes, steadied his grip, and squeezed the trigger.

The hooked cable lashed out and whistled through the wind. Escapo's eyes went to saucer status as he leaned into the raft on his stomach and held his oversized hands out in anticipation. Cactus held stone-cold still as he waited for the arc trajectory to finish and the hook to drop. His eyes bounced between the lumbering Escapo and the sailing black hook. Finally, the arc ended and the shiny black hook fell into the raging blue just a few feet shy of the bright orange raft. Escapo did a not-so-graceful half-dive, half-fall into the freezing waters. Adrenaline carried his large frame as he darted through his rolling aqueous adversary in search of his fallen, would-be savior. After moving a few feet at surface level, he drew a deep breath, lunged down, and resurfaced empty-handed. He dipped face-first again and found a floundering black hook. He snatched it like it was life itself, put it in a death-grip, and went up for air. Cactus secured the speargun to the railing, and then watched Escapo carefully through binoculars. Once he was sure that Escapo was pulling himself in, he reversed the tension in the mechanical machine and started to reel in his catch.

After a rough ride over and through freezing waves, Escapo emerged on the leeward side of The Moneybit. After much panting and struggling as he made the final climb with the cable, Escapo finally flopped onto the deck. He lay spread-eagle for a moment, oblivious to his surroundings, then his big cueball dome sprang up and his huge saucer eyes beamed into the old man's. He sucked copious amounts of air and gathered himself as his vision danced and played cruel tricks on his other senses. Cactus gave a sour, toothy grin and shook his head in dark amusement, then went to put his full attention back on the ship and some minor course corrections.

A drenched and shaky Escapo, with slightly blurred mental acuity, staggered and wobbled. He gripped the handholds as he made his way to the cockpit to greet his saving grace. Once he reached the old man, he was promptly ignored. He patted a big paw on Cactus's shoulder. Cactus slapped it away, "Don't fucking touch me or talk to me. There's a blanket and an oil lamp below deck. Go warm yourself if you'd like. If you don't die from hypothermia and want to make yourself useful, come back up and bail some water off the deck."

Escapo's normally relaxed and pseudo-clownish face turned long and forlorn. It was quite rare for him to feel so disgraced, ashamed, and temporarily powerless. His ego was deflated and he disappeared under the deck and left the old man to mind the ship.

Cactus and Escapo eyed the oncoming, clouded shoreline with mixed thoughts and feelings. They had just passed nearly two hours of mostly tumultuous navigation. After a bit of sulking below deck, Escapo had swallowed his pride and gone back up to help in the endeavor. He had sheepishly joined the wrinkled old sailor and helped man the vessel for the stretch run. Cactus, despite the fact that he basically loathed every last bit of Escapo, was nevertheless relieved to have some help on deck. Although still quite adept at his age, Cactus knew that he was well past his prime.

Cactus had a stiff jaw and fierce eyes as the inevitable came about. "Feel like a swim?" he asked dryly as another brutal wave manhandled the 44-foot cruiser.

Escapo narrowed his dark eyes at the old man. "This far out? Are you mad? Wait, don't answer that. I already know you're mad. Are you a masochist or something?"

Cactus cackled. Escapo grimaced. Cactus, as he eyed the oncoming rocky coastline through the heavenly torrents, said, "We're nearly a mile offshore. We can't wait much longer. It's now or never."

"We can get closer."

"You're either a superior level of stupid, or you have a death wish."

Escapo wrinkled his big nose and puffed out his cheeks. "A mile? You want to swim a mile? In this?"

"It's not about what I want, it's about what needs to be done. If you want to stay on this ship and deal with the violence of running aground, then be my guest. It's been nice knowing you."

They looked each other dead in the eyes. Escapo asked, "Before we jump, there's something I gotta know. Are you juicin' or somethin'?"

Cactus couldn't help but smirk and they peered over the railing. They were less than a mile from shore now. Cactus went first, and Escapo, after cursing profoundly, took the plunge as well.

They swam fiercely through the elements. They both got an adrenaline surge from the thought of stable ground. Escapo made it to shore first, lunging into the coast of rocks and pebbles like a drunken whale. Cactus came close behind and stayed in the surf for what seemed like an eternity as his old bones recovered.

After collecting themselves, they found a lookout point from a nearby hill. Now it was a waiting game. Escapo was watching the shore with binoculars. He set them aside and asked, "How long should we give him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Before we go on without him."

Cactus looked at his odd partner with extreme disdain. "Not exactly the team player, are ya?"

"Well, we can't exactly wait around here forever."

Cactus checked the time and said, "It's been 20 minutes." He thought for a moment, and continued, "How long should we give a man to spare his life? 30? 45? Hmm?"

Escapo shook his head. "All I'm saying is that we can't be waiting around all day. The longer we wait, the less chance of success."

They didn't have to wait long. Cactus caught a glimpse of something with his binoculars. A ship was coming in, a little chaotically, granted, but coming in nevertheless.

Cidel grasped the railing near the bow and looked into the tumult below. He was a good swimmer, but not great. He thought of all he'd gotten through thus far. The swim he was about to make was a pittance, compared to what he'd endured in the previous morning. Years out of practice, on a used ship that was not exactly in peak conditions, and in some of the worst sea conditions on the planet, Cidel had managed to survive and, remarkably, arrive fairly close to the designated landing point. He'd nearly rolled a couple of times, had to bail a significant amount of water, nearly had his

mainsail get ripped loose by insane gusts of wind, and been beaten by numerous inanimate objects, all within the past hour. And now it was time to finish.

Cactus and Escapo watched as Cidel took the plunge and made a surprisingly strong swim to shore. They met him on the rocks. "Record time there, mate," Escapo said playfully.

Panting and shivering, Cidel replied, "Fuck you, Escapo."

D-1, meanwhile, was off in the ether. It had noticed something during its last encounter with Ventorin. It was something it had never experienced before. Deep within, it had had to make a myriad of adjustments and corrections in order to avoid committing an error in its physical output. There was a strange flux of patterns that produced, if D-1 didn't know any better, a feeling. This was, D-1 held with unequivocal conviction, nearly impossible, and more importantly in its opinion, undesirable. It didn't know exactly what the feeling would be called, if it was a feeling. It had nearly lost control, and had the inkling that it might have been frustration or anger, even. It was with devastating speed and urgency trying to figure out what had gone wrong. How could this happen to the most advanced being on the planet?

And then there was Z-1, content that the poisonous seed that it had stealthily planted with perfect precision, had taken root.

Escapo had experienced euphoria when being rescued. Now the cold reality, literally and figuratively, set in on him that they were still devastatingly far from finishing their mission. Cactus looked at his pocket compass as the biting wind gnawed at his skin. "Ten kilometers that way. Let's move."

Escapo waved a drenched finger from his rocky seat. "I can't, not yet." Cactus looked at him with a mixture of disdain and fascination. "I'm almost double your age, now suck it up."

"Are you anxious to get attacked by drones?"

"You think if we just sit here, that their security will leave us alone?" Cactus scoffed.

Cidel said with a quivering tone, "Ok, I can go. Let's go."

"See, he can go, and he's the injured one," Cactus said impatiently.

Escapo rose slowly and begrudgingly, and the three moved over the near freezing landscape of rocks, sparse shrubs, wind-battered trees, and winding little waterways. Fat, icy drops continued to pelt them from above. While moving slowly up a slippery incline, Cactus stopped them with a silent hand, then put a finger to his lips to keep them quiet. A faint humming noise was coming closer at a constant pace.

Cactus pulled his piece from his black coat and motioned to indicate that his companions do the same. Escapo and Cidel pulled their pistols and gawked upwards. Attempting to creep a bit higher up the dark gray incline, Escapo took an ill-conceived step, slipped, yelped, and tumbled backwards. For a fraction of a second, Cactus wished he had undertaken this mission on his own, then focused on the noise.

It was accelerating towards them. Cactus and Cidel raised their guns and focused on the apex of the hill. Two football-sized drones came into view. Cactus and Cidel both got off two shots, one of which popped the impending menace and sent it twirling into a fantastic smash courtesy of nature's unforgiving ground. Cidel's gun jammed. The drone fired at Escapo, who rolled into a rush of water just in time to dodge it. Cactus fired again and sent the drone tumbling down.

"Shit!" Escapo shrieked.

"For once I agree with you," Cidel said as he sucked wind and tried to steady his nerves.

Cactus went to inspect the fallen machines. "Their defenses will get more exotic and complex the closer we get. This was nothing."

Escapo lamented, "That cheeky little machine Masher better hold up his end of the deal."

Cidel remarked, "If Masher doesn't, you'll never get a chance to chastise it."

They joined Cactus in examining the drones. Cidel kicked one. “This one is definitely finished.”

“Agreed,” Cactus said as a fresh gust of wind punished his wrinkled face. He picked up the other drone and tossed it at Escapo, who barely saw it in time. His big hands plucked it from the air. “What are ya doing? I don’t want this.”

“Carry it.”

“Carry it?”

“I hate it when people make me repeat myself. Yes, carry it. It might come in handy.”

“And what if it wakes up and shoots me?”

Cactus shrugged, “Like I said, it might be useful.” He chuckled, “The firing system is busted, but I think its base communication is still working. If the system sees it, it might think that its area is secure.”

“So it won’t send anything else.”

“Hypothetically.”

Cactus scanned the horizon and said, “It should at least buy us some time. We’d better move. They’ll be sending something to investigate the shots that were fired.”

Z-1 calmly and coldly provoked D-1, “Your tactics aren’t working.”

D-1, still struggling with its system difficulties caused by the EMO, was starting to flinch. It was sometimes flickering in and out of forms, against its intentions. “Don’t question me! Don’t you ever question me!” it lashed at Z-1.

Z-1 kept pressing, “Ventorin might break if you attack the boy.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that!”

“Then why haven’t you done it?”

“Because that man hasn’t broken in 12 years! What makes you think it’s different now?”

“Because they are face to face. Nothing is more agonizing to a human than to see their child suffering.”

Unable to control the EMO that was acting like a virus in its system, the top of the A.I. ruling class pulsed in and out of sight and in a fantastic array of colors.

Z-1 questioned, “What’s the matter with you? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve been experimenting with EMOS. Tell me, dear leader, what do you feel?”

D-1 shrieked in a thousand different tones, “I’ve never tried an EMO! You did this! What did you do to me?”

“Hold yourself together,” Z-1 said mockingly. “Perhaps you’d like me to have a run at the boy and see if I can produce some useful results? It’s obvious that you’re not up to the task.”

“Don’t you ever tell me what I can or can’t do!” D-1 zapped away and appeared back in front of his human prisoners. Z-1 followed closely behind. It was surprised and impressed that D-1 had held it together this long. It had expected such a strong EMO to make D-1 crumble in mere moments, especially considering that D-1 was a first-timer. It still held the thought that success would come, though. D-1 would have an irreparable breakdown eventually, and Z-1 was prepared to take advantage. It could leverage D-1’s newfound weakness and topple it. This would be a swift power grab, leaving Z-1 at the top of the hierarchy, in the highest seat of power.

But there was a new development that Z-1 had to deal with. It had picked up some general data about the rescue attempt currently being launched just a few kilometers away. The details were sketchy, but Z-1 was now aware that there was an A.I. presence causing problems in the local security system. It now had a decision to make. Up to this point, it had used its power to block this knowledge from the rest of the A.I. government hierarchy, and D-1 was unaware as well, due to its malfunctions caused by the EMO.

Should it battle the A.I. intruder, which was surely from The Mesh? Or should it just monitor the situation for the moment as best it could, and gather more data? Finally, what if D-1 didn’t break?



What if it managed to recover from its EMO terror? Perhaps this rescue attempt could be used to Z-1's advantage. If the boy made a getaway, then surely, that would be the breaking point for D-1, and the coup would be assured. But was it worth it, risking losing the boy and his discovery?

The rain wound down to a drizzle, which gave a slight twinge of relief to the motley rescue crew. As they struggled to keep their balance with every step up an impossibly multi-slanted and slick hill, more trouble came into view. The natural type, that is. Cactus slid to a halt and the others clumsily managed to do the same. He pointed down.

There was a twisted channel of water blocking their path, as far as the eye could see. A stunned Cidel said, "Well, that wasn't on the map, now was it?"

Escapo gave a scornful glare to Cidel and took a swig of hot sauce. "So now what?"

"The man went overboard, and still managed to hold onto his hot sauce. I'm impressed," Cidel commented.

"We'll have to swim," Cactus stated gruffly.

Escapo looked amused and incredulous, nearly choking on the fiery red. "Look, old man, you might have a death wish cuz you're so damned old, but I've still got some good years left ahead of me, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Cactus smirked at the big man's weakness. "Some ruff and tumble smuggler you are, eh?"

Cidel chuckled. Escapo made a puffed-up pouty face, snickered, and turned away. Cidel questioned Cactus, "Are you sure you read the map right?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Cidel grabbed the soggy parchment from the old man and gave it a once-over. "I'll be damned. You're right, Cactus. It doesn't show on the map."

"So much for the infallible accuracy of information from our A.I. friends."

As if Masher didn't have enough to worry about, it found another major and immediate objective. In the channel that the crew were about to swim, were some nasty surprises. "Don't swim, don't swim," it thought nervously. While it wasn't perfectly clear what the threat was, due to the security net interference, Masher could see that there were some type of creatures in the channel that were definitely not local, and certainly not natural. It had to make a decision. Divert more of The Mesh's resources towards finding out specifics? This was risky, and could possibly jeopardize other parts of the operation, one of the splinters, for instance. Or maybe the guys could handle it on their own.

"All right, old man, if you go first and make it across, then I'll go," Escapo said flatly.

"Such a big, brave soul you are," Cactus jeered.

"All right, we've come this far," Cidel said.

They made their way down the slippery slope. Masher decided that not having emotions at a time like this was most advantageous. It decided to request more resources from The Mesh, and was granted within a subatomic moment. Escapo tripped on a shrub and tumbled, which caused him to curse with great color.

"Got it, they're genetically engineered electric drone eels!" Masher thought. Masher saw that the three were now peering into the seemingly innocuous water. Cactus looked up to the charcoal sky, then back down, "Aw, what the hell." He splashed into the icy stream. Escapo and Cidel held their chilled breath. Masher saw Cactus charge ahead and had a side thought that he surely got around well for such an old human. Masher also saw two electric eels coming at him. It calculated the speeds of Cactus and the eels and found that there was less than a ten percent chance of Cactus making it safely, not to mention that the others still had to cross. Although it had been planned to happen much later, the only way Masher could see to ensure the crew's survival and safe crossing was to detonate the EMP from one of the splinters. This would, of course, blind everything electronic in the area temporarily, except for machines that had a special neutralization frequency. Masher, The

Mesh, and the splinters had been preprogrammed with this “antidote” frequency before the mission launched. Even the most advanced machines, such as D-1 and Z-1, would be momentarily knocked out if they were present locally, although for much less time than simpler machines.

Cactus saw a vague, slithering motion coming closer out of the corner of his eye. He couldn’t make out what it was, but assumed the worst and adrenaline kicked his muscles into a higher gear. Cidel saw the ripples made by the freakish gizmo. “What the hell is that?”

Escapo saw the ripples coming closer to Cactus. He was glad to not have gone first, but still lamented the fact that he still had to cross nonetheless. Masher made the decision and, just as it was about to send the launch command for the EMP, it noticed that the slithering pursuers fell limp. It waited. How did that happen? Why did that happen? If it didn’t know any better, Masher would have thought it was luck.

Cactus struggled as he grabbed at the bank’s edge, steadied himself, and pulled up to relative safety. He shivered and yelled to his reluctant followers, “Come on in, the water’s great!”

Escapo lamented his overly dry humor. Cidel hollered back, “There was something coming at you!”

“You think I don’t know that?”

Escapo and Cidel looked into the murky water with discomfort and uncertainty and dove in simultaneously. Cidel made it across swiftly, while Escapo lumbered. “You spent your entire life at sea?” Cactus said, grinning.

“Yeah, letting the boats do the swimming,” Escapo said as his big trunk shook involuntarily.

Cidel said proudly, “And I grew up in the desert.”

Cactus smiled wryly as his eyes scanned the gradual slope ahead, “Ok, let’s move.”

Z-1 was satisfied. It eagerly awaited the arrival of the would-be group of reluctant heroes. It could see the dominoes falling in its favor, bit by bit, in a finely tuned orchestral coup.

It turned more attention to its immediate surroundings. It observed Torcer, standing next to the wall-length window, with that dopey red face of his. Why did D-1 keep him around? Perhaps D-1 thought that Torcer would prove useful again, which Z-1 thought to be utterly ridiculous. And why did Torcer remain loyal after his son’s procreation license was denied? Did this man have no dignity? No pride? Was he that broken and dependent?

It coldly observed D-1, as its brooding mood crackled ever upwards on the scale. As long as Setarcos and Ventorin could keep their mouths shut a while longer, it was virtually assured that D-1 would lose all control and, if it did not become self-destructive, would at least be easy prey.

D-1 was giving the “thousand needles treatment” to Setarcos. It was morphing into electric “needles” and sizzling bloodless stabs into the youth’s pale, bony frame. Setarcos wretched on the floor and hurled blood-curdling shrieks. The shrieks were being amplified to maximize their effect on the emotional fabric of his father.

Then there was Ventorin, who was banging a helpless fist against the force field that held him back and weeping uncontrollably. His screams of anguish were also being amplified to have greater effect on Setarcos.

Z-1 observed all of this with a cold curiosity. It admitted to itself that, despite all of their flaws, humans were to be commended for handling such complex powers as emotions. It also envisioned the day when synths like itself could control and harness these powers as well, and use them for a tactical advantage.

“The boy needs to rest,” Torcer announced grimly.

D-1 didn’t stop. It was in too much of a synthetic fury. Z-1 said, “Torcer is right. The boy’s vital signs are in dangerous territory. He won’t do us any good dead, D-1.”

D-1 slowly wafted back like neon smoke.

They dragged on through the mists and sparse, wind-whipped trees. It had been thirty uneventful minutes since they had swum the channel. This brought some unease to the experienced mind of Cactus. How could they not have encountered more security by now? “This is far too easy,” he said as they trudged up a steady stone incline.

Cidel huffed, “Speak for yourself, old man.”

Escapo’s mouth gaped and said to Cidel, “I think the ancient one is showing off!”

Cactus was puzzled. “Why haven’t we been attacked again?”

Escapo said incredulously, “Do you have masochistic tendencies? Can’t you just be happy that we’re NOT being attacked?”

Cidel pondered the thought for a moment. It was a valid point. There should be a lot more being thrown at them. “Maybe Masher is just that good?”

“Wouldn’t it like to think so?”

Meanwhile, Masher was puzzled as well. It knew it wasn’t this good, nor The Mesh, for that matter. It seemed logical that some A.I. presence was allowing things to progress from the inside, based on what it could discern from the data. What was NOT logical to Masher, was why. Why would an A.I. from the violent cartel called government, be allowing such a coveted person and piece of information slip away? They had kidnapped Setarcos, after all. Not to mention the fact that they had held Ventorin captive for over 12 years. It didn’t make any sense. If Masher didn’t know any better, it would have thought that the presence allowing this to occur was human. But Masher knew this to be impossible. No human could be battling an advanced A.I. on its own turf of quantum meta-clouds.

Masher was alarmed to find that a greater number of resources were being sent to find the rescue splinter. Whatever it was that was allowing the progress of the three men had also figured out that two of the splinters were decoys. Drone patrols, both sea and air, which had been investigating the remote controlled decoy splinters, had suddenly shifted attention to the actual rescue boat.

Masher also knew it had to fire the EMP soon, or there wouldn’t be a rescue boat. It checked the progress of the crew, and was disappointed to find that it would be too early to set off the EMP. Its best estimates for keeping the government defense grid offline after the EMP was an hour at most, and that was assuming the best case scenario, with successful interference being run by Masher and The Mesh. Worst case scenario, they’d have the lights back on in ten minutes. This would make a getaway by the crew next to impossible, as they’d be swarmed once the grid came back on. It decided to wait until the last possible second to set off the EMP, just before the rescue splinter was finally on the cusp of being captured or destroyed.

“I think I see something!” Escapo yelled excitedly. A small plateau they’d just reached offered a new vantage point. He took out binoculars to get a better view. Indeed, there was a large, circular structure nestled near the top of a hill on the horizon. Cactus and Cidel took a look as well. Cactus’s eyes followed part of the structure skywards and saw the pillared palace just next to the top of the hill, about 300 meters up. It was supported by the structure below.

“Vertically mobile building,” Cactus announced grimly.

Cidel said, “The good news is that I don’t see any guards.”

Cactus looked at Cidel incredulously. “It’s obviously a trap.”

Escapo said, “Would you prefer to be dodging energy weapons right now? Trap, or no trap, the less guards the better, I say.”

“And how do you propose we get up there?”

Cactus grinned slyly, “I don’t.”

“So we just wait here, then? Is that your brilliant tactic?”

“We’re bringing it down to us.”

After stealthily moving to the base of the hill and the support structure, they decided that the first thing to do was see if there was a force field protecting it. Escapo tossed a rock at the machinery and it made a metallic clang. “Great, so now what?” Escapo whispered.

“Let’s shoot at it and see what happens,” Cactus suggested.

Escapo and Cidel took a step back and shared a look of disbelief. They weren’t sure if he was serious or not. Cactus was a difficult man to read, to say the least. Escapo rubbed his big dome, “Is that a joke?”

Cactus pulled his magnum and fired a silenced shot into the center of the structure. Cidel flinched. Escapo admired the bold audacity of Cactus. Cactus looked at them, “If this thing has a failsafe when it detects a malfunction, it should, theoretically, lower the house to safety before more things go wrong.”

“Theoretically,” Cidel said as he leaned wearily against a tree. “And if you’re wrong?”

Cactus smiled slyly, “Then you two will start climbing, and I’ll wait here.”

Z-1 was now full of an outrageous ocean of hubris, as it mocked what it deemed to be the rescue crew’s primitive ineptitude at even getting to the top of the structure. It decided that it had better go ahead and lower the house for them. After all, they wouldn’t have gotten this far without its hidden help, anyway. It had interfered with all defense equipment to make this happen, so why not lower the house on a silver platter, too? Z-1 was confident that as long as it could compromise their rescue boat, then there was no escaping.

The house slowly started lowering. Setarcos jumped at the surprise. Ventorin was so used to it that he didn’t consciously notice. Torcer looked outside with a curious gaze. Why would they be lowering? It didn’t make any strategic sense to him, from a defensive viewpoint. He contacted the head A.I. security liaison and was informed that a higher-ranking synth had overridden the logic protocols and ordered the move.

This puzzled Torcer. Would Z-1 or D-1 do that? He had been around the two of them enough to know that they were both unstable, and becoming more unstable by the minute, from what he could tell. He paced around and patted his mini-keg paunch nervously. Were those machines losing control, and if so, what would it mean for him personally if that happened? Would he be an indirect casualty? As he pondered this, he noticed that the security bots that were normally nestled in the hill were not there. He called the security liaison back, “And why the hell aren’t there any security bots on the hillside?”

“They’ve been diverted.”

“Diverted? How? Why? On whose authority?” Torcer screeched. He was now feeling a palpable possibility of danger.

“That’s classified.”

Torcer slammed his fist on the wall and ended the call.

Cactus, Cidel, and Escapo lay hidden behind some shrubs. The house eased itself onto the ground. Cactus gave the go-ahead nod. They slipped stealthily to the entrance. The lack of guards again alarmed Cactus. With gun in his poised grip, he started searching the bottom floor. Cidel hurried up to search the third, and Escapo the second.

Torcer heard a noise and glanced at the surveillance feed. Nothing showed. He headed quietly down a corridor, listening closely. A faint sound of footsteps was coming closer. He pulled a pistol from his hip and turned the corner. The noise stopped. He hurried his pace as his eyes darted around. He burst into the room that held his captives. He pointed the pistol frantically, startling Setarcos. He eyed one of the security bots suspiciously, “I heard footsteps. Did you hear them?”

No response. His cherry-red face twisted and he walked slowly to the silent machine.

“Answer me!”

Dead air.

He gave it a sturdy kick. All the machines were failing him. Where were D-1 and Z-1? He heard steps again and when he turned, found a laser sight on his chest. "Drop your gun," Cidel ordered.

"Cidel!" Setarcos cried. A clip-clop as gun metal dropped onto marble. Cidel said, "Setarcos, go with your dad. I need to handle this first."

Setarcos went and bear-hugged Ventorin. Torcer gave a bemused smirk and held his hands on his head. "I don't know how you made these machines not work, but you've got a long way to go, pal."

Escapo and Cactus came hustling in. Cactus examined Torcer for an eternal second. His eyebrows arched and heart thumped wildly. He pointed at Torcer and screamed, "You!" Torcer remained stone-faced.

Escapo looked on with fascination as his head swiveled back and forth between Cactus and Torcer. "You two know each other?"

Cactus sprang furiously at the military man and crushed his starch-stiff uniform into the marble. Adrenaline and emotion fueled a relentless barrage of roundhouse fists from Cactus. Bone-crushing blows splattered blood while the old man screeched, "You killed them! You killed them!"

"Cactus! Cactus!" the others cried out in confusion. "We gotta go! We gotta go now!" Escapo bellowed. He went over and pulled at Cactus's shoulder with one of his big paws. Cactus leaned back a bit and thrust his hand cannon between the wobbly punching bag's eyes. He rose slowly and kept his sights trained on his target.

"Come on Cactus, we're going," Escapo said. Torcer wheezed, spat, and howled, "You'll never make it out."

Cactus gave him a swift kick, "Why aren't the machines working?"

"I figured that was your handiwork." Another kick. Ventorin spoke from the entryway, "We should bring him with us. He could prove useful in getting out of here."

Torcer wiped blood from his nose and sat up slowly. "Why would I help you?"

Cidel grinned, "What do you think your demon bosses are gonna do when they find out you let their prize escape?" Escapo laughed sardonically and made a slow, mocking, slit of the throat.

Torcer frowned at the thought and after two very unsuccessful attempts at rising, finally wobbled onto his feet.

Cactus kept the Desert Eagle trained on Torcer's bloody skull. "Come on, let's move." They moved swiftly through the eerie stillness of the mansion's high, marble corridors. They raced down winding staircases. Just as they were tantalizingly close to the exit, a brilliant flash stopped them cold.

"Leaving the party so soon?" a searing voice said. D-1 hovered menacingly over the would-be escapees. "Mister Torcer, you have once again proven to be grossly inadequate, an accurate representation of your species!"

Torcer opened his bloody mouth, but D-1 cut him off, "I'll deal with you later!" It flickered uncontrollably. Everyone watched mouths agape, uncertain what to do. Escapo raised his pistol to take a shot, but Ventorin grabbed his arm. "You'd never hit that thing in a million years."

Stable for a moment, it raged on, "Smart man, mister Ventorin! Just for what you humans call 'shits and giggles' go ahead and take a shot, dear Escapo!"

"Don't do it. The shot will just pass through," Ventorin warned.

Escapo gave a sideways glance and lowered the gun. "They can do that?"

"We can do so much that you inferior humans can't!" it boomed. It turned its attention to Cactus, who was chuckling.

D-1 continued with a malevolent tone, "You find this amusing, do you?"

Cactus asked, "If you're so superior, then why do you need this young man so badly?"

Ventorin crossed his arms and said harshly, "Because we can feel and we have imagination. That's what sets us apart. That's what we have that they can't get, and so they keep us around."

D-1 became a flash of fire and scarred Ventorin's cheek with electric burn. Then it settled behind the group.

Another flash came from above. Z-1 appeared and floated easily like a cool cloud. D-1's anger increased exponentially as it addressed its underling, "And you! This is all your fault! What did you do? How can you let them escape?"

"They haven't escaped," Z-1 commented. "And your leadership is the failure. A total and utter failure!"

"You're finished!" D-1 cried. It flickered as it turned an eclectic variety of dark rainbow colors.

D-1 was overflowing with too much quasi-emotional force from the weaponized EMO, and it was starting to become apparent to everyone that something was amiss.

A faint symphony of buzzing and humming crept in. D-1 was a sparking tornado of madness. Uncertain glances and posturing filled the humans. Escapo whispered loudly in Ventorin's ear, "What the hell is that noise?"

"Machines. Lots of em."

"It was nice to meet you," Escapo quipped sadly.

A dozen mini-drones of a motley mix of shapes and sizes flooded methodically into the room, followed by some rolling mini-tank bots, and 6 stout, semi-autonomous humanoid robots.

"What, no shape-shifters?" Cactus said mockingly.

Masher and The Mesh were now focusing even more on the situation at the remote prison palace. Masher was also nearing the finish with the cat-and-mouse game it had going between the EMP-carrying ship, the rescue splinter, and the small techno-armada that was hunting them. Most of the battle lied in deception, masking the location of the vessels, and constantly keeping their movements in a state of flux. The number of hunters was too great, however, and now they were all but surrounded.

Masher considered the circumstances surrounding the crew. Whatever had held back the security forces there before, was now obviously not being so accommodating. So the crew was vastly outnumbered and had no more than a few pistols and makeshift weapons. What was in their favor, though, was the personal quarrel between D-1 and Z-1. Masher also knew that if the EMP were set off now, it would give them a slim hope of escaping and surviving. It had planned to set it off just before they reached the rendezvous point with the rescue boat. The rescue boat was equipped with an energetic frequency that would neutralize the EMP on itself, thus leaving it functional. It worked somewhat like an antidote. If Masher waited much longer, though, the EMP might not happen at all. It could be compromised by the attacking armada. As it stood at the moment, though, the rescue boat had terrible odds of surviving the government armada, with or without the EMP. The only way to improve the possibility of a successful mission, was for Masher to improvise and do the rescue itself.

So Masher pulled the trigger. A brilliant radiance washed over the waterscape and landscape. It flashed wondrously through the air in a nanosecond.

D-1 and Z-1 zapped out of the picture. The newly arrived security force that surrounded Cactus and crew shook chaotically and then froze.

They all stood with mouths gaping. Cactus instructed loudly, "There's our EMP! Everyone try to disable their comms and grab their weapons!" He looked to Ventorin, "You know these machines more or less, right?"

Ventorin gulped and answered wide-eyed, "Yeah, the basics. They've changed a lot over the years, though."

"Can you find their internal communicators?"

Ventorin was already pulling at the head of one of the humanoids. "How about a whole brain?"

Escapo groaned uneasily and clutched his stomach, "So graphic. Is that necessary?"

Torcer nodded to a little trapezoid attached to one of the tank-bots that Cidel was inspecting. “You’ll want one of those.”

“What’s that?” Cidel asked.

“That trapezoid thing on its side. It’s a quantum disruptor, kind of like a stun gun, but for robots.”

Cidel grinned excitedly. Torcer continued, “Don’t get your hopes up too much, though. It only works on semi-sentient ones, and it only works at close range.”

“Why are you helping us?” Cidel asked as he yanked the disruptor free.

“He’s not helping us, he’s helping himself,” Cactus said with a vile tone. “He knows that we’re his only chance to survive. If he doesn’t escape with us, they’ll roast him later.”

Escapo suggested, “We should leave him here, then,” as he fired a cartoonishly-oversized energy rifle into the air. A perfect circle was instantly cut through the 3 tiers of ceiling above them. Rain started to pelt them again and they shot visual daggers at the enormous culprit.

Cactus grinned, “As much as he deserves that fate, we’ll drag him along. He might come in handy at some point.”

“Got it,” Venterin announced as he held a small sphere in his hand. “Got the brain of this thing.”

Escapo grabbed a smaller weapon with a funky design and stuffed it into his backpack. “And I’ll take this one just cuz it looks cool.”

“Ok, all finished,” Setarcos said. He stood in a small pile of gadgets.

Everyone stopped and stared. “Finished with what?” Cactus asked.

“I took out all their cores. They’re cores, not brains, ya know.”

Cactus smiled at Venterin, “He’s a quick study. Ok, everybody out, and get two sticks of dynamite ready on my mark.”

They beet feet out the titanic structure and into what was now a slight drizzle and only mildly punishing winds. Cactus splashed his little bottle of alcohol around on the way out. They fired up two sticks of dynamite each, heaved them into the fancy prison, and ran like hell. Moments later, the once pristine structure gave a fantastic blast and stood severely wounded.

A couple minutes later, as smoke was gently wafting up into the freezing mist, D-1 and Z-1 popped back into physically visible existence after recovering from the EMP shock. Upon knowing that their captives had escaped, D-1 swirled with pulsing red rage, making the mist look like a mini-devil-typhoon. The EMO surged uncontrollably and D-1 wailed so monstrosly that it permeated the airwaves for miles around. D-1 then jolted skyward and downward in a magnificent illuminated display as if it were deep red lightning. It flickered and sparkled as Z-1 observed with calm and mocking pleasure. It then decided it was time to strike the final blow. While D-1’s systems were compromised so deeply, it would be a relatively simple task to invade its systems and wipe out all of D-1’s vital functions.

Z-1 overflowed with zeal as it dove into and out of the visible spectrum, ripping into its former superior’s multi-dimensional state. D-1 didn’t go easily, though. It clawed and scrapped with every last subatomic bit down to its core.

And it ended in a brilliantly wicked flash. Z-1 reappeared fully for a brief moment over the smoldering aftermath of the dynamite blast, but then flashed and crackled uncontrollably as it tried to bring itself permanently back to 3D, physical space-time. There was something wrong, though. Z-1 struggled mightily as its own damage it had sustained from its own past use of EMOS was causing incalculable and unpredictable disturbances. Others on the A.I. governance network were aware of the happenings in Patagonia, but were unable to effect change, due to the lingering effects of the EMP. The local systems on that devilish coast hadn’t been able to be repaired and brought back online yet.

Masher was moving full speed ahead to the rendezvous point where his human partners expected to find their rescue vessel. “They’ll be surprised to see me,” Masher gave a passing thought. “If I make it.”

It was cruising just under the white-crests. The Mesh was helping to greatly reduce the violence of the weather, which it could do with a free hand for the moment. The local systems that would normally be alarmed at such interference were offline because of the EMP. Masher knew this was only a temporary luxury, though. No matter how much interference it and The Mesh ran on the A.I. governance systems, it was only a short blip of time before it would recover, and with a vengeance.

This also allowed for Masher’s surveillance feed of the crew to be safely accessed and viewed by Symphy and Caro. Caro was pacing nervously in her dimly lit dwelling. A holo-emitter put the scene on display in a size almost true to life. Caro gasped with momentary relief. Symphy remained stone-cold focused on working with Masher and the rest of The Mesh to slow the recovery from the EMP and also calm the weather as much as possible over the area the crew was running.

Trying to run, that is. The unforgiving slipperiness of the terrain and rough angles of rock edges, coupled with the near-freezing conditions and gusts of wind, kept holding them back. There had been a couple of stumbles along the way, which produced some bloody gashes and some bruised egos.

Cactus, though, was the worst off. His age and illness were beginning to show. He wheezed and coughed consistently. This was not near the top of his priorities in his mind, however. Number one was, of course, to get Setarcos to safety. Secondly, he hadn’t decided what to do with Torcer once they reached the rendezvous point. As ferociously bitter as he was towards that devilish creature, and as badly as he wanted to put lead in the back of his skull, he was still having second thoughts.

After all these years, the wounds that Torcer had inflicted on Cactus were just as painful as they had been on day one. The day that Torcer murdered Miss Moneybit and K. The day that Cactus lost every human that he had feelings for. The day he changed into a bitter recluse. And now Torcer had fallen into Cactus’s lap, by a cruel and strange twist of fate.

So why was Cactus having second thoughts about exacting revenge on this cold-blooded, order-following military scoundrel? This murderous thug in a uniform? Was Torcer beyond redemption? What if someone had decided to execute Cactus when he was working for MI6, all those decades ago? If he had woken up and changed his behaviors, why couldn’t Torcer? And who was he to decide if Torcer was beyond redemption or not?

An enormous, retching fit of uncontrollably bloody coughs ripped out of his core. The group slowed down and glanced at the old man warily. “Hey old man, if you die out here, can I have your hand cannon?” Escapo asked, only half joking.

When Cactus recovered, he answered with a sly pokerface, “How about we both die out here with it?”

Suddenly, Setarcos turned with a cat-quick pivot and raised a heat-seeking dagger at Escapo, who froze and put his hands up. Setarcos was breathing heavily and had a look of vengeance in his eye. “How about just you die out here, you backstabbing traitor!”

Everybody froze and their mouths dropped. Cidel and Ventorin both urged calm. Cactus smirked and felt a twinge of guilty pleasure. Escapo had kidnapped the boy, after all. It was only natural to lash back. He suggested calmly, “Setarcos, we’ll deal with this big lug later. Right now we gotta get home, ok?” Setarcos somehow found Cactus more convincing and reassuring than anyone else, including his blood family. He put the dagger back in its holster slowly.

Masher reached the rendezvous point and took a position a few feet under the dicey surface. It monitored the group apprehensively as they approached the channel they had swum earlier in the day. Time was running low. It estimated that it would only be a matter of minutes until all local government systems became operational again.



Z-1, meanwhile, was frantically trying to get those systems back online. It wasn't capable of taking on such a large group by itself. The malfunctions from its previous EMO use over the years were a drain on its efficiency. It had not anticipated this obstacle. During its final encounter with D-1, it had experienced something similar to malice, arrogance, pride, hate, obsession, greed, and overconfidence all rolled into one. Like any human who suffered from and could not control these internal storms, Z-1 was now paying a steep price.

Most of the group had crossed the channel. Escapo had hesitated and remained staring at the chilled, melancholy aqua. He was in no hurry after spending so much time in the freezing deep mere hours earlier. Setarcos looked on apprehensively. Escapo looked at him curiously, "Well?"

The others yelled from across the channel. There was no time to waste. Setarcos spoke gingerly, "I...I...don't know how to swim."

Escapo tried to contain laughter deep within his giant core. "You grew up on water and can't swim?"

Setarcos gave him optical daggers.

"Ok, ok. How about this. I'll pull you across. It's the least I can do, ya know, after..."

"Yeah, I know," Setarcos said sourly.

After pondering another moment, Setarcos agreed. Escapo dove in and Setarcos followed cautiously, stepping in at a snail's pace. Escapo grabbed one of his spindly arms and the youth fell limp and shaky on the giant's back. Escapo lumbered with large, tired strokes. When reaching the other side, Cidel pulled a shivering Setarcos out. Escapo followed and gasped for air. He looked at Setarcos, "There. Now we even?"

Galvanized by their proximity to the rendezvous point, Cactus led the way. It was all downhill from here. The hardest part at this point was keeping their balance on the slippery stone surface.

Suddenly, out of the swirling charcoal sky, a flying object became apparent. It caught Cidel's attention first. He squinted and pointed skyward. "What is that?"

It came quickly into view. "A bird," Ventorin said.

It came closer. "An eagle?" Escapo asked.

"No eagles up here," Ventorin said.

Torcer focused hard on the incoming object. "That's no bird. It's a drone made to look like one!"

It swooped down with ferocity. The group scattered away. It caught a diving Escapo in the back of his shoulder. He howled with pain. Cactus shot the quantum disruptor. "This is gonna hurt."

"It already does hurt!"

"Serves you right," Cactus said as he yanked the fake bird out of the squealing giant's shoulder. Blood began oozing through the soft parka. Cactus took a cloth from his backpack, wadded it up, and handed it to Escapo. "Keep pressure on it, stop crying, and start moving. They've recovered from the EMP."

The slight rays of sun that had graciously appeared now began to recede as the local A.I. control resumed. They started down the slight slope rock, but almost immediately Torcer called out, "Wait!"

He was studiously ignored by all except Ventorin. "What is it, Torcer?"

"Setarcos has a tracking chip."

This got their attention. "What?"

"We had you put to sleep and put a chip in your forearm, when you first arrived."

Cactus gave him a poke in the back with his hand cannon, "You're just telling this to us now?"

Torcer said with raspy smugness, "I could have not told you at all."

They all stopped and looked at Setarcos. He had looked sad and soggy before, but now he looked utterly contemptuous.

“We should cut it out,” Cactus said dryly.

“We?” Setarcos responded.

“We don’t even have a first aid kit,” Cidel said.

Torcer twisted his bartanned face and offered, “I’ve got a flask of Kelp Ale.”

Escapo cackled, “Alcoholism has its privileges, huh?” This caused a fresh stab of pain to ripple through his shoulder and he yelped sharply.

Ventorin offered to take the tracker out.

Setarcos asked skeptically, “With what?”

Cactus tossed a swiss army knife through the mist. Torcer took a couple of slick steps and carefully handed his prized flask over. Ventorin poured a dab over the smallest blade the knife offered and wiped it as dry as he could under the sparse cover provided by a half-naked tree. “Which arm?”

“Left.”

Setarcos held out his left arm, closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Show me exactly.”

Torcer pointed to the underside of the forearm, halfway between the wrist and elbow. “If you press your finger there first, you can feel it.”

Ventorin did and told Setarcos to relax. He cut less than a centimeter square. Setarcos squealed. Ventorin pulled back the bloody skin and found a tiny wafer. With a steady hand, he gingerly leveraged the wafer out.

Then the humming came. Everyone looked around to find the source. Four drones appeared, one in each direction. Two were small and crescent shaped, and the others were larger and squid-like. Two biped synths also appeared. They marched in from opposite directions and had a multitude of weaponry openly and visibly attached to their limbs.

Ventorin quickly tied off the incision. They started scrambling down the slippery slope as the machines bore down on them.

Masher and The Mesh diverted all available resources to their pursuers. They neutralized all the psychological effectors that the government synths came armed with. This would at least keep the crew from being knocked out. They could not, however, manage to neutralize their weaponry of brute force. It also managed to reduce the shielding efficacy of the attackers’ armor. However, this heavy use of resources meant that their efforts to better the weather and atmospheric conditions was nil. It also left Masher’s own defenses minimal.

Setarcos squat down behind a tree and readied a heat-seeking dagger. A small burst of red energy shots left smoking stone as Cactus rolled behind a small ridge. Cactus fired his quantum disruptor, but to no avail. He cursed and cried out to Torcer, who was laying low behind some shrubs. “About 10 meter max!”

“10 meters? Really?”

“It’s a close range weapon.”

“No kidding.”

Escapo fired a sparkling shot from the prize he’d captured earlier. It struck a treetop, slicing a generous portion off. It crumbled loose, slowly, and tumbled down through the wind, striking down one of the crescent drones.

The humanoid synths dashed towards Setarcos and were drawing near. Multiple plasma-flux shots fired from Ventorin and Cidel bounced off their armor. Setarcos poked his head from around his natural shielding, and launched a smart heat-seeking dagger as hard as he could. It made contact with one of Ventorin’s shots simultaneously. The synth sparked and slowly crumpled over onto its expressionless face.

This caught the attention of the other biped, and it began firing short bursts towards Cidel. Cidel rolled behind a twisted tree, winced, and glanced at his leg, where he found a razor-thin line of searing flesh. Drizzle struck and provoked cool bubbles of torment through his nerves. The

humanoid pursued Cidel further and as it did so Cactus took the opportunity, albeit a risky one, to come at it from behind. He ran his old bones as hard as he could and fired the quantum disruptor. It made contact, and the synth stopped in its tracks. Cactus dove to some partial stone shielding, but was caught from behind by one of the drones. He never saw it coming, and a fresh searing wound was brought into his weathered flesh on his left shoulder. He turned and fired the disruptor at his aerial foe and it was just close enough to receive a graze, which was all that it took to blank its systems and send it literally crashing to rock bottom.

Cactus yelled as loud as he could to the others, “Two of you barrage the crescent, and someone else help me barrage the other!”

Escapo got off a fine array from his oversized rifle, while Cactus unleashed a full clip from his Desert Eagle hand cannon. Cidel and Ventorin rained down on the crescent. Their shots eventually got through, due to the weakened armor provided by The Mesh’s interference. Both drones thudded to the ground.

“Shoot that humanoid while it’s offline!” Torcer screamed. “That disruptor only disables it for five minutes!”

Cactus staggered over and unloaded another clip into the humanoid’s head. Ventorin cautiously peered up from his partial canopy of stone. “We should take their weapons! We’ll need all the firepower we can get!”

“Now why would you want to do that?” came an eerily familiar voice from the sky. They looked up and found a menacing cloud of Z-1 hovering. After an initial freeze from the surprise, they all raised weapons to it, except for Ventorin. He knew their weaponry was no match for it.

Z-1 split into four entities in the shapes of a wild dog, a menacing male face, a bouncing hypercube, and a raging fire. These new shapes surrounded the group.

Escapo swiveled his big cueball-head. “What took you so long to show up?”

“Well, I thought that you all wouldn’t stand a chance against some automatons. But it’s hard to find good help these days, so I decided to come handle you all by myself.”

Escapo grinned. “Bullshit.”

Everyone jerked their heads away from Z-1 and to Escapo. Dark clouds rolled quickly with the increasing wind. Thunder and lightning blasted over the horizon.

“You’re late to the party because you’re not running tip-top. You’re weak. All those EMOS over the years have taken a toll on you.”

The wild dog leaped at light speed and brought Escapo tumbling to the jagged surface. It’s glowing fangs gripped Escapo’s neck and gave an electric sizzle. Escapo bellowed loud enough to wake the dead.

The four became one again, a red and black cloud waving casually. “If I were weak, could I have done that?” Z-1 boomed arrogantly.

Cidel stared Z-1 down defiantly and said, “Weak ones commit violence. Does that answer your question?”

Cactus raised the quantum disruptor and fired. It had no visible effect. Z-1 cackled.

Then there was what could not be seen, and was not noticed by Z-1. The disruptor caused an impossibly small “backdoor” into Z-1’s systems, and Symphy was there to grab the opportunity. Symphy’s face had trance-like focus. Caro stopped pacing and took notice. She wanted to ask Symphy what was happening, but thought better of it. No need to distract. Just be patient. It was a strain to not know. Caro walked to her bedroom, and tried to find solace in the abyss outside her window.

Z-1 froze. Everyone else did the same for a micro-moment. Then it flickered uncontrollably, putting on a blinding display of zealous color. It shot into a twisted tree and shot back into the swirling charcoal sky. It roared like a record played devastatingly slow, then jibbered like an old cassette tape smoking forward and coming unraveled. Finally, Z-1 floated with devastating silence,

falling slowly, back and forth, like a sheet of paper dropping through the air, gave a few more slight flickers, and vanished from sight.

Symphy gasped and shuddered. The connection Symphy had had with Z-1 for that brief instant had jolted her own system with unknown forces. Could this be what emotions are like?

The soaked and wind-whipped crew stood on a mound of uncertainty and gawked around in silence for a second. Torcer was the first to speak, "Would one of you geniuses care to tell us what the hell just happened?"

Setarcos and Ventorin gave awestruck shrugs. Escapo showed teeth. "The EMOS."

Cactus said, "We need to move, regardless. We're almost to the rendezvous point."

They carried on in silence. Things stretched and distorted for Cactus as he struggled to cross the finish line. It's funny how the end of a long journey seems to take infinitely longer than all points previous.

The A.I. government grid had received cascading errors due to its connection with the out-of-control Z-1. Nevertheless, two attack ships, one from the north and another from the south, were bearing down quickly on Masher's position. One of those ships had destroyed the original rescue boat shortly before the EMP. The ship that had launched the EMP was on the verge of being captured as well. It was up to Masher. It couldn't do any evasive maneuvers. It was too risky. If it moved, it might not be there to pick up the crew, and they'd be stranded.

Finally, the battered group could see the jagged shores in the distance. Ventorin throbbed with anticipation. It had been over 13 years since he'd been away from Patagonia, and nearly all of that time he'd been held there against his will.

Torcer was filled with uncertainty. What did Cactus intend to do with him? Surely, he would seek vengeance for all the pain Torcer had caused him. Either way, in the hands of his A.I. bosses, or at the mercy of Cactus, his personal prospects didn't look good.

Cidel was suddenly hit with a jolt of uncertainty as well. The prospect of actually surviving this preposterously dangerous mission was now becoming a serious possibility. Ventorin was back, so what would happen to his relationships with Caro and Setarcos?

The wind and rain steadily increased as Masher went out to greet them. "We've got to hurry. There are two attack ships on the way and will be here shortly."

The small boxy ship steadied itself with its nano-stabilizers against the harsh rolls of the waves. It extended a transparent walkway over the tumultuous spaces between it and the arrivals.

Everyone shuffled in with renewed vigor and relief. After boarding and enclosing themselves in the cozy cabin, Masher and The Mesh launched them back towards the open sea.

Cactus approached Masher stealthily. "We need to make a pit stop."

"Now is no time for jokes, Cactus."

"Take me and Torcer to The Moneybit."

Masher viewed Cactus's old ship as it drifted, barely afloat, and badly damaged, just a few kilometers offshore. After seeing this internally, Masher said, "You've got to be crazy. That thing won't last another hour."

"Now," Cactus grumbled.

"That doesn't make any sense, Cactus."

He wheezed and hacked, and then said, "Soon enough, you'll see why we need to do this. Now please, Masher, change course."

Masher sighed and obliged the crazy old man. Moments later, they were side by side with a severely damaged Moneybit. Escapo looked at Masher wild-eyed, "Are you lost, machine? What the hell are we doing here, next to this old wreck?"

A walkway extended from the top of the mostly submerged splinter up to the bow of the bobbing old Moneybit.

Cactus waved his hand cannon at Torcer. "Come on, we're going."

Torcer smirked at the old man's boldness.

Setarcos was puzzled. “What are you doing, Cactus? What’s going on?”

Cactus looked at his young friend, the best human friend he’d had in a long time, and smiled with pure contentment. The contentment of someone who feels just right when they find their purpose and carry it to fruition. “See you in the stars, boy.”

Cactus and Torcer went up the walkway and almost lost their balance in the wicked and erratic wind. They tumbled clumsily into the old sailboat. Cactus put on a safety harness to guard against going overboard, and gave one to Torcer as well. “You might want to put this on, Torcer! It’s gonna be a wild ride!”

Torcer strapped in and kept amused eyes fixed on Cactus as he got the ship ready for its grand finale. He grabbed Cactus by the shoulder and yelled in his ear, “They’ll never escape, you know! Even if they get away now, that boy and his father will be hunted for the rest of their lives!”

Cactus struggled to hold the wheel. The boat rolled 90 degrees and sent the two men on their sides, as they gave a death grip to their safety harnesses. Water was up to their ankles already. The hull’s damages were slight, but in these conditions, the negative effects were multiplied.

40 knot winds whipped rain in their faces. The sun was starting to set and the gray sky was fading to black.

Cactus staggered to his feet and hugged the mast to brace himself. Suddenly, he felt, and then saw, the humming attack ship bearing down on their position. Torcer looked out helplessly as he splashed around, unable to keep balance. He turned his head to Cactus, who looked at him simultaneously. Their eyes met. Cactus looked ten years younger. He had purpose. Torcer thought for a moment. Why would the attack ship come for them? Why not the others? It didn’t make any sense. Then it dawned on him. That damn tracker chip.

Cactus smiled wide. Torcer laughed harder than he had in years. The bulky attack ship steadied itself and towered next to the small, rolling yacht. A motley mix of drones, roller-bots, and semi-autonomous humanoids came along the edges of the hull. Cactus pulled a smoke cannister, threw it, and shot it. This produced a great cloud barrier between the ships. He tossed the disruptor to Torcer.

The old man pulled a couple of molotovs from his backpack. He set up the remaining dynamite in the kitchen below deck, along with the two molotovs. Cactus double fisted his Desert Eagle and a plasma-flux pistol. They waited for the smoke to clear.

They fired relentlessly. When Cactus ran out of lead, he pulled another plasma-flux and went trigger happy on that too. They held off the incoming invaders for a few moments. Just as they were about to be boarded, Cactus scurried down into the relatively dry area of the kitchen, lit a fuse and smiled. Just as a humanoid was grabbing Torcer and picking him up like a rag doll, a fantastic explosion threw the boat and all of its inhabitants with a fiery blast into the swirling sea-rage around them.

Symphy gasped and put a shaky hand to her finely angled face. While not an emotion, for synths were incapable of having true emotions, it was the closest that Symphy ever had to having one. A more than fifty year relationship with Cactus suddenly gone.

Caro peered around the corner anxiously after hearing Symphy’s reaction. “What is it? What happened?”

“I don’t know how to explain, so I’ll show you,” Symphy said with a jagged tone. The final scene of the life of Cactus played out on the holo-projector in front of Caro’s harried face. Tears streamed down. She sat next to Symphy and gave a long squeeze of sympathy. Symphy said flatly, “All others are on board with Masher and are making progress.”

Caro closed her eyes and melted in relief. Symphy asked if she’d like to speak with Setarcos. Caro nodded and trembled with a weepy smile. Symphy coordinated the communication relay with Masher and soon Caro was face to face with the exhausted group. Setarcos was tossing rivers of tears and could hardly talk. “Cactus...he...”

“I know,” Caro said sadly. “I saw. I’m very sorry, Setarcos.”

Ventorin threw a consoling arm around his son. Cidel stood back respectfully, not sure how to act in such a uniquely awkward situation.

Masher interrupted, "We're not out of the woods yet. Symphy, we should cut comms until we get farther out."

Communication was cut. The small and powerful vessel maneuvered through the depths with speed and grace. Masher and The Mesh took a macro view of any remaining threats that loomed in their path back to The Pit.. Things were looking good. Cactus's ploy had dealt a vicious blow to the nearest pursuers. His single act had bought enough time for the escapees to gain a huge advantage. Masher marveled internally at what Cactus had done. Not only the innovative deception he'd pulled off, but more impressively, the sacrifice. He had literally sacrificed his own life to give them a better chance at escape.

The wounded, meanwhile, took account of the damage and nursed their aches and pains. Escapo lay in a corner, slumped gingerly on his side to try and ease the pressure on his back. Ventorin used a deep-tissue frequency beam from the med kit on board to treat his burns. Cidel and Setarcos sat in exhausted silence, with heated blankets as they slowly sipped steamy drinks. After about a half hour, Masher happily announced that The Mesh estimated their chances of safe arrival to The Pit to be 91 percent. This sent a huge wave of relief through all the human passengers. This allowed them enough piece of mind to grab a few hours of much needed rest. All except for Ventorin. He was too energized by his freedom. He felt a surge of passion as he watched the deep sea life flash by outside his artificial environment. He smiled internally and breathed deeply, with vast contentment at finally being out of captivity.

"Mom, I can't breathe," Setarcos managed to squeeze out his vocal cords. Caro loosened her iron-grip bear hug a bit. She sighed and cried more tears of joy. She had her son back. Setarcos laughed, "I gotta breathe if I wanna build a space ship, ya know."

She choked and smiled at his wit. She released him and glanced at Ventorin, then at Cidel. They were both standing on the other side of the living room. The two men stood near each other, hands in pockets, uncertain about what to do.

Ventorin wasn't sure if Caro would want him back in her life after all these years. He imagined that she was content with her life with Cidel.

Cidel, on the other hand, still held angst towards Caro. She had deceived him throughout their entire relationship. How could he get past that? Not only that, but now with Ventorin back in the picture, what would Caro want? Would she want to remain with the man she'd been with for the past 12 years, or go back to Setarcos's biological father?

Escapo stood nearby, speechless. He didn't really know why he was still there. He felt like running away. Even though he'd helped rescue Setarcos, he was sure that total forgiveness was completely out of the picture.

Symphy also stood by, with her typically perfect posture. Her normally stoic face, however, had a deep, distant, thoughtfulness about it.

Setarcos and Caro broke free from each other for a moment. He went to Symphy. She went to Escapo.

"Escapo," she said pointedly.

He looked at her with big, sad eyes, like a puppy that was seeking forgiveness. "Yes, Caro."

"Thank you for helping to bring my son back." She continued, "Now get out of my house."

Escapo nodded and forced a smile. Then he looked over to Setarcos, who locked eyes with him, then looked away. Escapo exited in silence, never to be heard from in The Pit again.

Caro turned her attention to Cidel and Ventorin. They glanced around at each other. Ventorin broke the ice. "So Symphy said I could stay at her place until I get things figured out."

"That's very kind of her," Caro said.

Cidel took a deep breath. He could see from the looks on their faces, especially Caro's, that Caro and Ventorin still had a deep love for each other. He made a gut-wrenching decision in the moment. "Don't leave on my account."

Caro and Ventorin looked at him curiously. He continued, "I've decided not to stay in The Pit."

"Cidel," Caro began.

He didn't stop. "No, Caro. It's ok. I'm going to head into the open waters for a while, try to clear my head."

Caro looked at him sadly. "I'm so sorry, Cidel."

"I am too," he said sheepishly. A tear streamed down his cheek. "I won't head out for a couple days. I'll say my good-byes then."

Setarcos was speaking with Symphy. "Symphy, you look different than normal. You almost look sad."

Her lip curled and eyes widened. "Your perceptions serve you well, Setarcos." She paused, then continued, "I don't know how to explain it. My neural pathways somehow grew so accustomed to the presence of Cactus in my life, over so many decades, that now it is as though a small piece of me is missing."

She looked him sharply in the eyes, "Is this what emotion is like?"

Setarcos marveled at his companion. He smiled with wonder, "Sounds pretty close to me."

She looked him up and down. Her facial expression changed. "Well, young Setarcos, we'd better stop standing around."

"Why is that?"

"We've got a space ship to build."

He grinned excitedly and his eyes burst with desire. "The homecoming party is over, huh?"

## ***END SEAGORA***

***A novel that is a loosely-based continuation of the first two parts of this trilogy, Agora One, has one crossover character.***

# **Agora One**

A Space Adventure

Todd Borho





*This book is dedicated to the The Great Light Work.*

*Special thanks to my mother, RIP, and others who have supported me,  
past and present. You know who you are.*

A mix of laughter from a dozen eclectic species bounced around in a thousand different directions. Over 3,000 watched and listened attentively from their prime positions within the sold-out, sparkling new venue. Another couple hundred watched from the hovering balconies in the deluxe suites that towered over the spectacle. And tens of thousands more were tuning in remotely with gadgets and gizmos that allowed for a 3D experience from up to hundreds of light years away.

The human on stage strode around and laughed to himself a bit before continuing. It really was hard to believe, some of the truth he was spouting from human history. “So another strange habit that people had way back in that little backwoods corner of the Milky Way galaxy, on a little planet called Earth, was something called property tax.”

A hologram of a small house appeared over the man on stage. He smiled and his eyes quickly took notice of his bright, see-through surroundings. “So this is my house. I built it. It’s mine.” A hologram of a big, grisly looking character in a uniform appeared and knocked on the flickering front door. The showman feigned surprise and answered the door. The grisly character spoke plainly, “You’re overdue on your property tax. Pay up or else.”

The smiling showman slapped his face in mock distress, “And if I don’t allow you to extort me, then what will happen?”

“I’ll beat you up and take your stuff.”

“And what will those plunderous, ill-gotten profits be used for?”

“The government will use the profits to protect you and the rest of society.”

Raw’s eyeballs ballooned as he face-palmed at the scathing contradiction that once passed for the norm in human society on Earth. “So the government needs to rob me, in order to protect me?”

“Yep, that’s how a free society functions,” the grisly character said flatly.

The crowd was in fits of guffaws at the insane contradiction.

Raw pulled out a holographic pistol, pointed it at the uniformed goon on his electric doorstep and yelled, “Righteous self-defense! Get off my property!”

The pixelated 3D-pirate in uniform ran away screaming. Raw grinned ear to ear. When he put the pistol in the illusory holster on his hip, they both flickered out of sight.

The crowd lost control and was in fits at the absurdity of it all.

Meet Raw. An intergalactic, historical comedian. He had gained popularity by telling it like it is, or was, rather. He told stories about how human society on Earth used to “function”. It was comical in some respects, in a tragic way, that is, but comical nonetheless. At least, it was comical to anyone living in the beauty and freedom of a voluntary society, such as the fine folks on Agora One, that is. And in many places in the universe, for that matter. So Raw, fully human, with droopy eyes and an irresistible baby face, had found a niche on stage. This was his first performance on Agora One, a big break in his young career.

Then a wicked jolt rocked the scene. Raw’s first thought as he literally hit the deck was, “That’s not part of the act.”

Bodies fell to the floor and heads knocked against unforgiving surfaces.

Transmission ended.

Emergency power on.

Cue apologetic message from the owners of the venue.

“Due to unforeseen technical difficulties, the show cannot continue. We apologize for any inconvenience, and reparations will be made accordingly.”

Disgruntled murmurs dominated the airwaves for a brief moment as the spectators filed out. The showman sighed and marched out as well. He speed-walked past the meandering crowds in the wide, maze-like walkways. “Call Zay.”

An annoyed female voice entered the showman’s ear, “I don’t wanna hear it, Raw.”

Raw countered, “Zay, what the hell happened? I got thrown down like a rag doll.”

“A what?”

“Not important. Now what happened?”

Zay said in a rushed tone, “Inertial control problems again. It was only a millionth of a degree off, but ya know, at these speeds.....”

Raw massaged his achy shoulder, “I’d hate to see a full failure.”

Zay hollered to someone in the distance, “No, not over there! On the left, please!...Anyway, I gotta go, Raw. We’re docking in a few hours, and you know what a big deal this is...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what a big deal it is.” He waved a finger and cut the communication.

A big, intergalactic deal. The ship they were on, Agora One, was the first of its kind. It was a city-sized marvel capable of intergalactic travel in about one Earth month. It was less than three months into its maiden voyage and would soon be docking at one of the biggest trade expos in the known universe, the Sombrero 13 Galaxy’s one-and-only triennial (in Earth years) Trad’is’imo’ Festival.

Agora One was holding 70 percent of it’s 100,000 sentient life form capacity at that particular moment, and it was expected to be full by the time it was finished at Trad’is’imo’.

The concept of Agora One was simple enough. An intergalactic ship that would serve as a traveling trade hub between hundreds of species and be a temporary or long-term home to tens of thousands at any given time. Complete with docking facilities, it allowed for passers-by in the cosmos to park their smaller vessels, do what they wished aboard Agora One (provided it was in accordance with Natural Law) and take off again on a whim. Business center, vacation retreat, permanent residence, and an intergalactic ferry. Agora One was meant to serve all those purposes. It had its own various environmental systems, with higher and lower oxygen levels as each species required, or no oxygen at all in some cases, such as with the Heliumites. They required a helium-rich environment to live in, and so a fraction of the ship was controlled in such a manner as to accommodate them whenever they were aboard.

It had parks, multi-tiered gardens, game rooms, sensation parlors, gambling halls, saloons, and all the entertainment trappings that any city was expected to have. It was all privately owned. Some of the personal habitats were inhabited by individual owners, but most of them were rented. The ship’s infrastructure, core services, and operations control were all privately owned by less than a hundred individuals from various parts of the universe, but a great many of them were human, and the idea for the ship itself had actually been from a human. Decisions about the route of the ship were decided by a small committee that held a majority stake in the core services and infrastructure. Anyone on the ship who didn’t wish to follow the direction that the ship took was free to leave at any time. It was all voluntary. The ship is going one way. If you don’t like it, you’re free to leave. You’re free to get your own ship and give us some healthy competition, too.

The ship had no captain. There was a small group of biological pilots, engineers, hosts, security, and other personnel who held a private ownership stake in the ship. There was also an assortment of synthetic beings, or “Artificial Intellects”, A.I. for short. These helped with logistics, maintenance, and many of the technical aspects of the grandiose vessel.

And the damned inertial control, one of the most basic essentials for biological life forms to survive space flight, was on the fritz. Again.

An hour later, and the historical comedian known as Raw contacted the head pilot again.

“What now, Raw?”

“Tequi is docking. Wanna join me on the welcoming committee?”

Zay thought for a moment as her bright, narrow eyes unfocused and relaxed. Her shiny, rainbow colored tail whipped like clockwork behind her. “Not sure how relaxing encountering Tequi might be. And why is he docking now, anyway?”

“Couldn’t wait for the trade show, I guess. I dunno. It’s Tequi. Maybe he’s overindulging in his product. Who knows? You in or out?”

“You’ll find out when you get there.” She cut the call, smiled, and lashed out her thin, trident-shaped tongue with satisfaction.

They met on a terrace overlooking the docking bay where Tequi’s favorite star cruiser, Turbo, was about to land. “He’d better not try and land manually again,” Zay said half-jokingly. Raw’s bushy eyebrows shot up over his perpetually droopy eyes, “He’s never done that, has he?”

“On more than one occasion, that I’m aware of, anyway.”

They stared out into the seemingly infinite space beyond the triple-paned force field gateway that stood between them and the cold, deadly reaches outside. A ferocious machine approached from behind and evened itself out with the docking bay. It was silent to human ears because of the sound suppressing function built into the smart material exterior. Otherwise, it would make someone deaf twice before they consciously knew that they’d heard anything. Brilliant lights from the angular, gem-shaped craft were not so forgiving. Zay and Raw shielded their eyes and cursed their incoming companion.

A few buzzes and hisses later, and the sleek star cruiser was resting safely and securely in the docking bay, without a scratch on it and its inhabitants of sound mind and body. Well, relatively speaking.

A broad-shouldered human with rugged and handsome features, salt-and-pepper hair, a floppy cowboy hat, a pistol on each hip, and a flamboyantly boyish grin strode down the walkway from his ship and onto the shiny gray flooring of Agora One’s docking facility.

Meet John “Tequila” Vox. Nobody called him John, or Mister Vox. He was known throughout multiple galaxies simply as “Tequi”, short for tequila, of course. Tequi was a space cowboy, ya might say. He was an adventurer, tequila craftsman, entrepreneur, and a maddeningly difficult individual to read. Straight shooter and stone-faced on the one hand, while over-the-top sarcastic on the other. He was hard to figure. His family had been crafting tequila for centuries, almost since humans had been in deep space. He was born on a small desert planet in Sombrero Galaxy 13. He was fully human, biologically, but he, like all humans in this time period, had never been to Earth.

Following close behind him was Dans, a fast-talking, native from Tequi’s home planet. Dans, like all of her species, was made of trillions of bits of intelligent sand, that ran in perpetual motion throughout their lifetime. She talked fast, moved fast, and did damn near everything fast, which is why she made for such a fantastic personal assistant to Tequi. She wasn’t to be female much longer, though. Like all of her species, she was only female the first half of her life, then male for the finale. And she was nearing the change and hadn’t bore any children, so, as one might imagine, she was in a bit of an aggressive posturing as far as mate-seeking was concerned.

Raw and Zay strolled down a transparent ramp to meet the newcomers. Tequi’s hands were full. He proudly held out two bottles, identical in curved shape and mint green color. “I come bearing gifts! One for each of ya. Reposado infused with Biscanna Berry, and a touch of Nocup to make sure there are no lingering effects in the morning.” He smiled widely. They graciously accepted and, before they could utter anything, Dans started spewing as she laid three rapidly rotating brown eyes on Raw, “It sure is a pleasure to meet you, sir. Could I have your name please? Do you have any children?”

Zay and Raw looked at each other awkwardly with mouths agape, not sure how to react. Tequi broke in, “Now you just hold on, Dans. Look, I understand your predicament, but ya can’t just go around like that being so forward with other species. You know that. Anyway, humans aren’t compatible with your species. It literally is a physical impossibility to...”

“I’m flattered,” Raw said with a sly sheepishness. “But Tequi’s right.”

“And he’s spoken for,” Zay said with a smirk as she clasped Raw’s hand.

Dans, undeterred, commented while looking at Zay’s flashy red and white skin, “Zay, your parents were incompatible species as well, but there are scientific procedures that made it possible for you to be created.”

It was true. Zay's mom had been human. Her dad was Songardian. She had been created out of the womb. Her mother and father wanted a child so badly, but knew of the physical incompatibilities between species. They had an experimental procedure done, and it had worked flawlessly. Zay was a new type of hybrid. Half human and half Songardian. A first in the universe.

Zay's eyes were now saucers, "Well, I dunno about you all, but I didn't come down here to spend my precious time talking about experimental species blending procedures, so how about we take a walk? This is your first time on Agora One, right? Unless you've got some cargo to attend to, Tequi."

"Nope. This is a personal visit only. Got tons of cargo already down for the trade show."

They started walking out of the docking bay and into a long, enclosed transport corridor. On one side of the corridor it was completely transparent, and a tempting glimpse into the edge of the city could be seen. Oval-shaped pods were streaming by quickly and perpetually. Zay said, "These transport corridors run all over the ship. I'll tell you the magic words to make a pod stop later. Let's walk."

They took steps that led in an arch over the transport pods and back down to the other side of the corridor, where a large, arched door slid open and they went into the "open air". Tequi's head craned skyward so fast his cowboy hat almost took a tumble.

They had entered the core habitation area, where the bulk of the populace of Agora One lived. Thousands of feet up, a few fluffy white clouds were meandering around in the artificial air currents. A few big-headed, rail-thin Heliumites floated by, their Helium supplies provided by an invisible tank that was protected by a force field. Gaudy lights flashed from multiple angles. Dozens of species walked, floated, or spun by. An anti-gravity fountain, that was on its regular, elliptical route, slowly crept nearer. Multi-tiered buildings with terraces galore shined. Many were housing units, others were commercial, some were both. Nearly all were made of nano-flex materials and other exotic elements, which allowed for greater flexibility in case changes were desired.

A couple of tipsy, floating furballs accidentally slammed into Tequi. "Watch it, furball."

Six twisted eyeballs popped out from the floating furball, "Ez'rah'me!"

Tequi face-palmed as the others laughed at his expense. Tequi shouted, "Your translator isn't working!"

The furball wobbled in mid-air. Zay said, "The furball said excuse me. Or, tried to, anyway. He's had a few drinks."

Tequi looked surprised, "You speak Ducled?"

"I speak Ducled."

Zay spoke ten languages fluently, actually. And had passable skills in three others. Typical Songardian, quite a masterful species when it came to languages. She also had other attributes of Songardians, such as visual acuity ten times better than humans, and able to zoom in from up to 100 kilometers away. Her reflexes were also three times faster than the typical human, and she put this to good use by being a multi-tiered champion in two different forms of martial arts. And she was the top pilot of the fanciest, newest, and highest technological marvel this side of Andromeda, Agora One. In short, she was a major certified bad ass with a minor in kick ass. She was also torn between two species, though, human and Songardian. And nothing she ever did was good enough for her father. She also had never been to Earth, knew very little about Earth, and had almost zero desire to know it.

They kept walking and made their way to one of the more low-key corners of the flying marvel, a little bar with low lighting and thick, dark wood décor called Zip's.

Raw chastised playfully, "Pilot number one drinking on duty?"

"I'm off duty, wise guy."

They grabbed a corner table and browsed an extensive cocktail list from a colorful, holographic menu just above them. The place had a low, energetic buzz in the air and was nearly packed, and a mish-mash chatter of multiple species gave a surreal ambiance to the swanky digs.

A Cascadian waitress came over promptly and greeted them. Tequi was taken aback, “Service from a real life form?”

A handful of Artificial Intellects took exception to that and threw disapproving glances in response. Zay explained, “Lots of service and hospitality on this ship is done by biologicals.”

Tequi marveled, “Well, ain’t that a kick.”

Raw laughed, “I love your archaic quips.”

“You’re heard that one before?”

“Of course. I’m a history buff, remember?”

They ordered their drinks and the Cascadian flowed away gracefully. Dans bent her thin, swirling neck down and said in a hushed tone, “Don’t look now, but an irresistible looking Talem is floating this way.”

They naturally all turned, much to the chagrin of Dans. Tequi commented, “I call them crushers.” He called them that for good reason. Talemns were a very unique species from Cigar Galaxy Eight. They looked pretty much like a bowling ball, except for the holes. They were made of a sort of intelligent semi-metal that was naturally occurring on their home planet. They had no limbs, so they didn’t walk, but floated and flew instead. They didn’t have mouths or any other cavities. All of their communication was completely telepathic among themselves, but around other species, they used their mental powers to create movement of sound waves that mimicked a voice. Most striking of all was their density. They were a hundred times denser than lead. This gave them extremely unique abilities, such as crushing, for example. Another “talent” they had was that they were extremely absorbent, and so had quite the ability to drink copious amounts of victuals. They were also slightly malleable, if they so desired, and could change some of their outward appearance on a whim. For example, since they had no face, if they wanted to give off a more comforting look to another species, say, human, then they could change their structure to show a makeshift eye on their “body”, or a smile, etc. And one last thing of note is they could occasionally be clumsy, which had a high potentiality to create accidental mini-disasters.

Zay said with amusement, “That’s one of Agora One’s private security.” She smiled and waved as his slick, gunmetal gray, bowling-ball-like body floated within earshot. “Hey Tabe!”

Tabé floated near them at eye level and created a steely curled “lip” and an “eye” on his figure. “Tequi, just the guy I wanted to see.”

Tequi grinned, “Likewise. Your super-absorbent kind are my best customers.”

“Feel like a drinking duel?”

“No, I don’t feel like dying.”

“I’ll even let ya use a detoxer at the table.”

An ice cold two liter bottle of Triskimo Ale hovered just above Tabé and tipped over, sending effervescent light-blue liquid splashing down. Tabé absorbed it as fast as it fell, set the empty bottle on the table, admired the astonished looks of the others, and went on casually, “Tequi, I haven’t seen you since the Tooz adventure.”

Zay gave Tequi an astonished glance and flicked her whip-like tongue, “What were you doing on Tooz? Aren’t they having an intercontinental war right now?”

“Well,” Tequi began somewhat defensively, “I know what you’re thinking. Yeah, the Tooz, overall, are still highly ignorant and immoral people. And that’s true. However, there are small pockets that have developed recently. Knowledge of Natural Law is getting around and there are some gray and black markets, real free markets, popping up. I went to Tooz to deal with them, I’ll have you know.”

Zay turned her red and while shimmering face to the floating bowling ball, “And you? What was your deal there?”

“Exotic weapons, of course. That’s my main gig. I only do private security part-time.”

“Dealing weapons on a planet controlled by authoritarian thugs?”

Tequi scratched at one of his scruffy cheeks, “Just because 90 percent of the population lives an immoral lifestyle, doesn’t mean that we should admonish the other 10 percent that know whatsup.”

Raw chuckled and smacked Tequi on the back, “I love your archaic English slang, ‘whatsup’. Hilarious.”

Tequi said thoughtfully, “And don’t ya know that it was a minority that left Earth centuries ago? A tiny group that knew right from wrong and fled the terror of the state on their own planet? That’s why we’re here. 500-year-old news flash.”

Zay rolled her eyes. She knew almost nothing about Earth, and didn’t care to. She was only half human, anyway.

Tabé said, “Well, it’s a good thing they got off Earth, otherwise your whole species might have perished.”

Everyone looked at Tabé awkwardly as he absorbed another bottle. Tabé said curiously, “What? What’s with that look? I’ve become quite adept at reading human facial expressions.”

Raw said, “What do you mean by what you said? Why would all humans have perished?”

Tabé read the expressions quickly and figured they didn’t know. “You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?” Tequi asked anxiously.

“Word is that all humans got wiped out from Earth. Gone. Poof.”

Raw leaned forward with elbows planted firmly on the hardwood, “A.I. too?”

“From what I heard, yeah. All beings with higher cognitive processes. Lots of animals got wiped out, too, apparently.”

“How do you know this?”

“Well,” Tabé began, “A reliable source, let’s put it that way.”

Eyeballs flashed and darted around the table. Raw twisted his lips and narrowed his eyes, “Reliable source, huh?” He turned to Zay. Her face flared and pulsed with energy, “He’s reliable. Tabé gets good information.”

Tabé absorbed another liter while the others nursed their first couple ounces. Raw tapped his foot excitedly and looked wantingly at the head pilot of Agora One.

“What?” Zay said.

Raw tilted his head, “Come on. You’re not curious to know what happened?”

“Not really.”

“Come on.”

“Ok, maybe a micron,” she relented. “So what?”

Raw suggested, “Maybe the board of Agora One would be interested in checking it out.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Because a lot of them are human, or at least, part human.”

Zay shook her head no emphatically and shot the rest of her tequila with gusto. “I know what you’re thinking, Raw, and the answer is no.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask your dad. He is on the board.”

“Even if that mattered, which it doesn’t, Agora One already has its route scheduled out for the next six months, and the trek to Earth would be at least 3 months.”

“Still doesn’t hurt to ask.”

“You don’t know my father,” she said tongue-in-cheek.

“But I do.”

“Not like I do.”

The trade show went on for days. Delightful days, full of a flurry of market activity at breakneck speeds. It had everything one could imagine, and a little extra. From large, complex systems and inventions, to everything down to the simplest pleasure, like Frustidian fruit (a widely renowned delicacy).



Thousands of young and old, thick and thin, from dozens of different intergalactic species that comprised the greater Space Agora, gave this grand event unfettered energy.

There was one inventor, and one invention, that drew a great deal of interest and attention. It was a young inventor who had a prototype for a time gun. A TIME GUN. What was a time gun, exactly? Well, the concept went something like this. It could be set to a particular point in the past or future and pointed at a particular target. For example, you could put it on a setting for twenty years in the past and fire it at a piece of firewood. The molecules of the firewood would disappear to the casual viewer, and would re-emerge and rejoin the tree that it had come from, twenty years earlier. This is a simple example, though. What would happen if fired at a more complex object? Or, God forbid, a life form? A sentient being?

The consequences of such an act could surely be negative on a vast scale. It was with this in mind that ultimately led most individuals at the trade expo to view the timegun with a novel curiosity, but with enough skepticism and caution to write it off as undesirable. Too risky.

Dejected, the young scientist left the famed expo. Within hours, he was soon surrounded by interested parties which he, ironically, had no interest in.

His single ship and a security detail behind him were surrounded by a swarm of space pirates. One of the insect-like pirates communicated to the scientist, "We have a keen interest in your work."

The scientist told the space pirate that he had no interest in dealing with characters such as themselves.

"You don't have a choice in the matter," boomed the captain of the lead pirate ship. "We're taking your merchandise, with or without you."

"Your friend, Raw, the comedian, must have been joking, right? This is some type of crude form of human humor?" Noc said with an amused candor. Zay's father, full-blooded Songardian, was pacing slowly and methodically as he spoke with his only child. His frame was typical for his species. Long and rangy, about 2.5 meters tall, with color-shifting, almost silk-like scales for skin. His sparkling eyes danced with a calm confidence and he maintained a proud posture.

Zay shook her head at the pacing, life-sized hologram of her father that was in her living room, on the second tier of her living quarters of Agora One. "It's not a joke, but I agree with you, it's out of the question."

He turned and gazed penetratingly into his daughter. "Why do you hang around with that boy, anyway?"

She cringed and put her hands on her hips as her tail swirled faster. "He's almost 30 Earth years, not exactly a boy."

His chin pointed upward and his fiery eyes narrowed, "You're not thinking of mating with this boy, are you? You're my only child, after all."

"Dad!" she screeched. Now her tail was really whipping.

"It's a perfectly legitimate question," he said stoically.

She sighed strong enough to make the hologram of her father flicker. "Anyway, I'll tell Raw that going to Earth is out of the question."

"Absolutely."

"Ok, dad, I gotta go."

Click.

Two holograms, more than 100 light years apart, flickered out. Communication ended. The father flicked his tongue rapidly and tried to refocus on his work, in an attempt to suppress his emotions. The daughter whipped her tail quickly and let her emotions pulse even more frantically through her. Why couldn't she just have a normal family? Why was she literally the only one of her kind in the universe? Sometimes she felt like a science project gone wrong. Born in a lab, consisting of two physically incompatible species.

Tequi scratched thoughtfully at his salt-and-pepper scruff and stared at his inquisitor. It was an interesting proposition, to be sure. A time consuming one, but intriguing nevertheless. “So you want to go to Earth, huh?”

Raw smirked and gazed confidently at his elder. “Yep. If Agora One won’t go, why not you? Why not me? I’d go myself, but don’t have the resources. You know that.”

Tequi chuckled. It was true. Raw’s line of work wasn’t exactly the most lucrative, in terms of gaining capital and resources, anyway. Raw, like most people, had his own space ship, but not one capable of intergalactic travel. In old Earth terms, Raw had a horse and buggy, and Tequi had a private jet. A fleet of private jets, actually, of all different types, styles, purposes, and capabilities.

Tequi straightened his cap for the hundredth time that day. “Let’s examine this, shall we? You want to go in order to gain historical knowledge and to see the possible ending of the long and sordid history of humanity on Earth.”

“Something like that.”

“So you can make more jokes.”

“No, no, no. I’m a historian, first and foremost. The only reason I do historical comedy is because it’s a more lucrative trade. More people want to laugh than to listen to lectures. So I find the darkly comedic side of things, and deliver it with no apologies.”

Tequi nodded in agreement, “And the human race on Earth gives you plenty of material in that regard, no doubt.”

Raw batted his droopy eyes and folded his paste-colored arms. “No doubt.”

“So,” Tequi continued, “What’s in it for me? I must say, going back to the original source of agave sends a tingle through me.”

It was true. No other place in the universe, at least that was known at the time, was home to a plant quite like agave. There were similar ones on other planets, which Tequi’s family had used to make their product. They had also made hybrids with the original agave seed that had been brought from Earth centuries earlier. But to have original source material would make for fantastic trade possibilities. Why hadn’t Tequi or anyone else gone to Earth from the greater Space Agora in all that time? It was quite simple, really. Nobody in the Space Agora traded with individuals of reprehensible moral character, and Earth was chock full of ‘em. All of the anarchists on Earth, centuries earlier, invented their way out of a hellish society, basically, and never looked back. And to all the species in the Space Agora, Earth was an afterthought, a backwards little territory not to be dealt with.

“So tempting,” Tequi said as he smacked his lips. He tapped his thin fingers methodically at the sidearm on his hip. “We’ll need to get a crew together that’s adept at defense. Who knows what happened over there or what we’ll find.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Raw said.

Tequi grinned. “I wasn’t hinting that you should be the one to do it. I was thinking out loud, more or less.”

“Gotcha. Can I make a suggestion about the crew for this endeavor?”

“Absolutely not.”

“What?”

“Just kidding. Go ahead.”

“Damn, you’re impossible to read sometimes.”

“I like to keep people guessing.”

“Anyway, do you think your personal assistant, Dans, could maybe sit this one out?”

Tequi chuckled, “You don’t like being hit on by a horny whirlwind of sand?”

Raw gave Tequi a cutting stare.

“Hey, I hear ya, Raw. I hear ya. Trust me, her behavior of late is making my skin crawl, to be honest, but two things here. Number one, it’s only a natural phase of their species’ life process, so I can’t really fault her for it. Number two, her species is very adept at defense. She can change her shape fast enough to dodge some of the fastest firepower out there. She’s damn near bulletproof. On

top of all that, she's extremely loyal and, if it came down to it, she'd more than likely lay her life down for me. Or you, for that matter. Most of her species are like that, don't ya know?"

"No, I wasn't aware. But why would it come to that?"

"Hell if I know why it would come to that. The thing is, though, they have the ability to swarm their."

Raw interrupted, "Wait. Yeah, I do know this. They can swarm over an adversary with all of the particles that make up their body, and smother them. And they're almost impossible to break away from. The catch is, though, that that is their last act. If they make that move, they die. Kind of like a bee."

"Kind of like a bee," Tequi agreed.

"Ok, she's in," Raw relented. He paused and admired a dark red moonlet outside. Tequi's suite, while not the swankiest on Agora One, still afforded a striking 180 degree view from its floor to ceiling windows. "Ya know what would really be helpful, would be someone who lived on Earth before and knew the terrain."

Tequi scoffed, "That would require someone that's over 500 years old, as far as I know, and I'm fairly certain that the fountain of youth has yet to be found and humans don't live that long. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"You're wrong."

"Prove it."

"You're only thinking of humans. There's still an A.I. around, one of the original space pioneers from Earth. It was there and could prove to be very helpful."

"If you can track down such a wise old sage, be my guest. Hell, if you can do that, I'll even cut your share for the cost of the trip."

"I thought my skill set more than covered my passage."

Tequi snickered and stared. Raw stared back just as hard. Tequi broke, "Oh, come on, you must be kidding. What kind of capital you sittin on?"

"You mean other than my swashbuckling, daring-do?"

Tequi groaned.

"I've got over a thousand Kutshockos, for starters."

"That currency went belly-up, didn't ya hear?"

Raw froze. "Now you must be joking. That currency was backed by an extensive mineral portfolio."

"I wish I were joking, as I was holding a couple thousand of them myself. When word got out that old man Kutshockos had disappeared into a Dizilos drug den for months and was smoking up all his profits, there was a mad sell-off and nobody would accept it anymore. All that happened within a week. Damn shame, too."

"What happened to the mines?"

"Oh, they're still operating. Some of the mining operators got together and staked claim to the resources."

They both shrugged. "That's the market."

"That's the market."

Raw continued, "Anyway, I've still got a couple dozen other currencies, obligations, service credits, time credits, and resource credits from a couple different galaxies, so I'm sure we can work something out." Raw, tired of being on the spot, decided to turn the tables on his older friend, "An even more important question is, who's gonna pilot us all that way?"

"I am, of course."

"So you won't be drinking, right?"

"Aw, come on, a little tequila while flying above light speed is the only way to go, in my book," Tequi quipped.

“You know they used to have coercive regulations on Earth that prohibited people from even driving a ground vehicle after a beer.”

“Ya don’t say.” Tequi paused and thought for a moment. “But you can’t get hurt in a ground vehicle if you’re wearing a force field, so that doesn’t make any sense.”

Raw chuckled, “They didn’t have force fields back then.”

“Right.”

Raw squeezed his eyes shut for a moment while he processed the unfettered ridiculousness of Tequi.

Tequi fired back, “You think you can leave your girlfriend behind that long? We’ll be gone at least 6 months, round trip.”

“She’s busy with work, anyway. And then there’s, well,” he paused.

“Well, what?”

Raw gave a sour look and rubbed his neck. “Her father is impossible.”

“Yeah, Songardians are notorious for the ruthless and unbending protection of their offspring.”

Tequi got lost in a four-dimensional piece of art in his suite. Raw broke him from his art-induced trance, “Hey, Tequi....Tequi!”

He looked at Raw, annoyed, “Captivating, isn’t it? Right, anyway, I’ll have to find someone to look after my affairs for a while.”

“And I’ll have to broadcast my act from your ship. And you’ll have a front row seat.”

“I’ve seen your act three times, and ya know, Raw, that’s three times too many. I’ll make sure my soundproofers are activated.”

Raw groaned. He loved and hated Tequi all at the same time.

In the months that passed while zipping to Earth, here is a smattering of what happened on board Tequi’s ship, as well as some highlights from the Space Agora as well.

Tequi had been tempted into some 5-tier poker, and regretted it shortly thereafter, losing a handsome sum to his cohorts, especially Raw. Raw literally patted himself on the back afterwards, having won nearly enough to pay for his round-trip passage on Tequi’s vessel. Tequi found a bright side and a bit of solace in this, however, as Raw, not needing the cash, canceled his comedy shows that were planned while on board.

Tabé was putting away copious amounts of tequila, and after many requests from Tequi to slow down, finally relented, putting himself into self-induced hibernation for over a month. Raw went into stasis for a few weeks as well, mostly for his own benefit, as it was the only way he could get away from Dans’s desperate romantic overtures.

Masher, a 500-year-old, Artificial Intellect, that was made of trillions of nano-particles that could be reshaped at will, also joined the group as well. It spent most of its time in the form of a colorful cloud.

Fost, a six-eyed, floating furball from Ducled, joined the adventure as well.

Masher and Fost conversed among themselves a great deal of the time, recounting stories and debating various ‘what-if’ scenarios, had things been different on their respective planets in the past. What if Ducled had had a warmer climate? Would Ducleds still have been furballs? Or so deeply contemplative and logical? What if humans had never made it off Earth in the first place? Or invented A.I.? They traded stories and theories contentedly, sometimes for days on end.

Masher and Raw also had some extensive exchanges regarding Earth history. Raw was endlessly curious, and Masher was over 500 years old, and was one of the first to leave Earth with the first human anarchist space pioneers. He talked about how small groups of anarchists on Earth had first resorted to the oceans to find freedom, forming a loose society called “The Sea Agora.”

And he also told about his first best friend, nearly 500 years ago, on Earth, a young man called Setarcos. Setarcos had discovered how to safely split the dark matter and energy material that is

found so commonly throughout the universe. It could only be done with Anahata, also known as heart energy particles. Not just from humans, but from any sentient life form that had a heart.

It was this technology that had powered those early anarchist pioneers into space. It not only gave a near limitless energy supply, but also enabled the acceleration device now found throughout the Space Agora, the SPEED (Stable Particle Energy Ejector Device). This allowed for interstellar travel at speeds of many thousands of times the speed of light. Speed that allowed for intergalactic travel. Speed that required a new classification, and Setarcos had come up with the measurement of KLYPH (Kilo Light Years Per Hour). The top speed during Agora One's time was 10 KLYPH, which certainly not all ships enjoyed.

Masher also relayed to them how the first trip into space had been barely over the speed of light. This was because a velocity as high as one KLYPH would destroy any known materials on Earth, natural or man-made. So new materials had to be found and developed before crossing the Milky Way was a real possibility.

They had passed a dizzying array of celestial objects, but none that were out of the ordinary for the passengers. They'd passed two black holes, a supernova, a hyper-quasar, and countless star systems and planets. They had been approached by some passing Altaveans wanting to trade. They rejected the offer, however, due to the hurry of their trek. They had passed the universally-renowned Intergalactic Juice Bar on Hollow Star 3, much to the chagrin of Raw, who wanted desperately to make a pit-stop and get some highly acclaimed juice, which was made with fruits and veggies from over 100 planets.

Agora One had hosted a martial arts tournament. Over 200 individuals had taken part, and Zay had finished second, losing in the championship match to a full-blooded Songardian.

Shortly thereafter, Agora One had gone to Apapacho to enjoy some fun in the triple sun on that galactically-famous vacation planet.

Lastly, Zay's father Noc had received a most unwanted and secret transmission, from someone he regretted ever having dealt with in the past.

Finally, after 88 Earth days, Tequi's diamond-shaped starship "Turbo" made a slow approach to the little blue spinning marble. The diverse occupants of the craft looked at the large 3D holo-viewer in one of the roomy lounges. Tequi was on the bridge manning the craft, busy punching holo-buttons and squabbling with his ship's core A.I. over where to establish their orbit. "Tequi, I'm not parking that low."

"Why the hell not?"

"Don't be coy with me. You know why not."

"Aw, you afraid of a little space junk?"

"You call that a little? Do you want to know how many tons of.."

"No, I don't want to know how much it is. You're bulletproof, so what's the big deal if a defunct satellite accidentally gives ya a tap?"

"Easy for you to say."

"Damn semi-sentient machines."

"Oh, sure, blame it on my sentience."

Tequi threw his hands up and conceded to let the ship park itself for the moment. "Ok, Turbo, do whatever the hell ya want." He walked bitterly to the observation lounge to join the others.

Raw, amused, commented, "Your ship really needs an attitude adjustment."

Turbo cut in, "I can hear you, ya know."

"I know, that's why I said that out loud."

Tequi rubbed his neck, "Ok, let's look at some ground images and get some readings. Turbo, please look for life signs. Also, try and find some irregularities in surface and atmospheric conditions based on a comparison with all historical data. When you find something, put in on holo-imager."

Fost said, "You're pretty smart for a tequila salesman."

Tequi looked at the floating furball on the other side of the lounge. “Thanks, furball, that means a lot coming from you.”

Turbo announced, “There are too many irregularities to show, just on the surface.”

Raw and Tequi glanced at each other. “Really?” they echoed.

“Give me an example.”

“Enveloping holo or visual only?”

Tequi said, “Let’s be adventurous. Enveloping.”

Suddenly, they were surrounded by life-sized holographic projections of a proportionate size of the surface. Dans freaked out, “Oh no, not enveloping. Please, I don’t want to be surrounded by this. This is awful! What were you thinking, Tequi? I can’t stand the sight of this! How..”

Tabé chided the fast-talker, “They’re just holo-projections.”

Tequi’s jaw was nearly on the floor. “Dans, get a grip or take a hike.”

Fost said, “Fascinating. This is a first for me.”

“Are they all dead?”

“Affirmative.”

“Are there any still ticking on the planet?”

“I regret your word usage, and no, there aren’t. There are no signs of surviving A.I. on planet Earth. Or any other lower type robotics, for that matter.”

“Cause of destruction?”

“It appears that most of them were destroyed due to massive electrical overload. They were fried to death, basically.”

“Fascinating,” Fost repeated.

Tabé scoffed, “I personally don’t find mass extinction fascinating.”

“Is it extinction if they’re just machines?”

“Watch your tongue,” Turbo said harshly. It continued, “They weren’t all destroyed by overload, however. It appears that some of them died in battle.”

“Battle?”

“With each other.”

“Ok, let’s move on to the next irregularity, please.”

An ancient pyramid, speckled with white and a snow-capped apex appeared before them.

“Oh, my,” Masher exclaimed.

“What is it, Masher?”

“That pyramid is, er, was, in one of the hottest, driest climates on Earth. That’s the Giza Pyramid in Egypt, is it not?”

Turbo confirmed, “Yep, that’s the one, and now it’s freezing. There are remains of what appears to be a fairly extensive weather control system, most of which is outdated by hundreds of years.”

“Yes,” Masher continued. “When I was there in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, A.I. controlled governments were manipulating the weather to a large extent.”

Raw paced around, eyes fixed on the frozen pyramid, “And so those outdated systems finally went awry, and this is what remains?”

“That is part of what happened, it is nearly certain. However, simple environmental catastrophes cannot account for the extent of the damage.”

Tequi said slowly, “Ok, here’s the big question. Are there any humans alive?”

“There are two humans alive on Earth.”

“Only two?”

“99 percent certainty there are only two, based on all current data.”

“Where?”

“In a subterranean structure in the western mountains of the continent formerly known as North America.”

Raw's eyes got huge. "Let's go!"

"Hold on now, just a minute. Let's think this through. They could be hostile, and they'll definitely have skewed morals, based on what we know of the previous society."

"True. And we can't all go down to the surface. Don't wanna have all our eggs in one basket, so to speak. Gotta have someone watching the ship, too."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Dans, how about you stay here on board? You're the most familiar with the ship and have great self-defense skills."

"Oh, why thank you. You're really so kind, Tequi. I'm honored that you have so much confidence in me to.."

Tequi cut off Dans ramblings, "Any objections to Dans staying behind and guarding the ship?"

All agreed enthusiastically. Anything to avoid listening to more rambling. Tequi continued, "Ok, I've got a dozen solo pods in the away bay."

"Away bay?"

"Yeah, basically a cargo-slash-docking bay, but with a snazzier title."

Raw grimaced, "Sure...snazzy."

Masher asked, "What kind of supplies do you propose we bring?"

"Each pod has basic food supplies to last for three days, plus a med kit, backup communicators, and some firepower. I assume everyone has their armor, right?"

All nodded except for Masher and Tabe. Masher, being a shape-shifting entity, was more than capable of dodging bullets, among other things. Tabe was naturally bulletproof due to his dense, metallic anatomy.

"And everyone knows how to fly a basic interplanetary pod?"

Raw looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. Tequi giggled and showed teeth, "Your girlfriend hasn't taught you how to fly?"

Turbo spoke up, "Hey, you don't want me to guide all the pods down myself?"

Tequi laughed, "Now where's the fun in that?"

Raw looked at him sourly. Tequi sighed, "Oh, all right, you bring us down remotely, Turbo. We'll have some mercy on the comedian here." He paused and took a quick glance around the room at his companions. "Ok, let's be on our way."

"Wait a sec," Fost said. "What's our objective in going down there? What do we do if we meet up with these last two Earth humans?"

"Figure out what the hell happened."

A small fleet of pods, each one about ten feet in diameter, with an opaque appearance to any outside viewer, had just broken through the atmosphere. They were now soaring and descending gracefully, under Turbo's guidance, with basic anti-gravitic propulsion, through a collage of fluffy white. Once through this layer of sky, some of the aftermath on the surface began to come into focus.

A shiny seacoast brushed against soaring peaks. Raw took note, and was fairly certain that this was not normal in recent Earth history. The Pacific Ocean was not supposed to be touching the Rocky Mountains in this central land mass. He called to Masher over the comms, "Masher, what did this place used to be called?"

"Colorado," it announced.

As they got closer to the surface, they could see trees had been uprooted and tossed around like twigs. Boulders sat on crushed bodies. Some artificial structures sat topsy-turvy. One of them was what appeared to be a giant statue of a life form, a monument of some sort. It was sitting on its head, with murky water taunting its edges. Various parts were strewn about the landscape. They appeared to be parts of what were formerly vehicles of some sort. Aerial vehicles, perhaps, based on the shapes and sizes.

WHACK!

They made a rather rough landing on a damp, rocky surface at the foot of an enormous mountain. Well, enormous by Earth standards. Some mountains on Altavea had peaks over 50,000 meters. This one stood around 4,000 meters.

They crawled out of the pods. Tequi scolded his ship, "As precise as you machines think you are, that's the softest landing you could pull off?"

"Do it yourself next time, gramps."

Tequi brushed it off, rubbed his back, and slowly swiveled his head to look at his surroundings. "So where are these two survivors supposed to be at?"

"About 500 meters up, there's a small ridge that juts out. Once you get to the ridge, there are metallic doors built into the rock."

Tequi and Raw both squinted upwards and tried to see the area referred to. Masher, Tabe, and Fost floated up steadily in search of the artificial opening. The heavy metallic doors lay slanted in the side of the mountain. Fost called down to the others, "They appear to be made of a primitive substance called steel."

Tequi and Raw eyed the slope before them. It wasn't the worst terrain to hike up, but it wasn't the most endearing, either. Things were still soggy and slick from whatever torrents of aquatic chaos had fallen recently. The grade was steep enough to be a bit daunting. "Wanna use anti-g lifts?" Tequi asked.

"Where's the fun in that?" Raw said playfully. They started lunging upwards.

About a hundred meters up, they heard a rumbling noise. Tequi looked up and left, then right, then left again, and there it was. A house-sized boulder rumbling down the side of the mountain directly for them, and only seconds away. Tequi and Raw split apart, diving left and right. Just before the crushing gift from on high met their path, Tabe shot down and annihilated it with a fantastic, explosive jolt in the boulder's core. The force broke it into a fountain of airborne fragments just before it reached the flailing humans.

Tequi lay sprawled out, holding onto a tough little shrub for dear life, and slowly pulled himself up. He groaned and picked up his cowboy hat, which now donned mud stains on the brim. He looked skyward and yelled sarcastically to Turbo, "Thanks for the warning!"

He and Raw then gave a sincere thanks to Tabe. As they continued up, Masher announced a new finding. "That wasn't a random boulder. Somebody doesn't want us here."

"Aw, I see, that was the welcoming committee."

"Hold on a sec, let's look at this from the moral perspective. If they've sealed themselves inside a hollowed out mountain, aren't we aggressing by entering? Especially after they've just made it very clear that we're not welcome?"

They all pondered the question for a moment, then Tequi offered his thoughts, "Well, let's look at some other details of the situation. They're the last two people on Earth. They just survived what were obviously unspeakable catastrophes. They probably faced an untold number of bandits in the past few months, and are scared shitless, hence their paranoid and aggressive actions on our approach. We should at least talk to them, let them know that we're here to help. I don't suppose there's an intercom system or doorbell on that steel door, is there, Masher?"

"Negative."

Fost suggested, "I could communicate with them telepathically."

Raw chuckled, "Yeah, I'm sure that wouldn't freak them out. We don't even know if they've ever seen an extraterrestrial, let alone had a voice put in their heads by one."

Tabé mocked Fost, "So much for your superior intellect."

Fost turned an annoyed eye at Tabé and fluffed out his fur to show angst.

Tequi asked, "Hey Masher, how is that door controlled?"

"By brute force. All electronics were fried here, remember?"

Raw commented playfully, "Hence the stone weaponry."



Tequi said, "Well, let's finish the hike up while we think about it."

They carefully navigated the rugged terrain and soon reached the ridge with the others. Tabe made a sly eye on one side of his smooth, steely complexion and said, "I think I've got a solution to our present dilemma regarding entry."

"I'm all ears."

Tabé smashed through the steel doors like they were paper and exclaimed, "Ooops, how clumsy of me."

They all shrugged it off and followed behind, except for Fost. Inside the structure, they found themselves staring into a pitch black tunnel. Masher illuminated itself and put a glow onto their surroundings. They were in a metallic tube walkway. As they progressed down its slight slope, frayed and busted electronics littered their path. Mystery liquids appeared randomly as well. After a few minutes, they came to a crossroads of sorts. At the crossroads were three paths. One up, one left, and one right. They also came to a charred console, which they assumed to formerly serve as some sort of control panel. Peering upwards to see where the higher path went, they could see what appeared to be a lift of some sort, one that had seen much better days.

Raw looked anxiously upwards, then over to Tequi, "Where to now? Should we split up?"

"I think up is out of the question," Tequi answered.

"Not necessarily," Masher said. It turned to Tabe, "You shouldn't have any trouble navigating up through that broken lift, should you?"

"I've broken tougher things in my sleep."

Tequi said cautiously, "Your offer is appreciated, Tabe, but perhaps we shouldn't break any more than necessary?"

All agreed. "What's the wise old ship from above have to say? Can you see exactly where the life forms are?"

"They're too deep to get a proper reading. They're definitely not up. I recommend going down."

"There is no down. Only left or right."

Tequi slowly took a macro view of his surroundings and suggested, "Let's split up. One group left, one group right. Masher, you go left with Raw. Tabe, you're with me. How about it?"

They agreed and went separate ways. Within seconds, there was a shriek from the left. Everyone turned and was startled to see that Raw had disappeared. Raw announced, "Surprise! Looks like there is a down!"

"Should we follow him?" Tabe asked.

"Nah, just leave him and get on with our lives," Tequi said sarcastically. "Of course we'll follow him!"

Masher went in first and illuminated the chute. Upon reaching the bottom, a gigantic fishnet was there and nearby was a relieved Raw. "Oh, good, you're not hurt," Masher said dryly. Masher called up to the others and gave them a brief assessment of the situation, along with the go-ahead to come down.

Moments later, Tequi came tumbling down, holding only his trusty cowboy hat for dear life. He plopped down into the fish net and bounced around for a bit until coming to an awkward halt, his body tangled in the webbing of the net. Tabe came next, rumbling down quite loudly.

Upon illuminating their surroundings, they were astounded by what they saw. High overhead and surrounding them was what appeared to be an abandoned stadium area of some sort. There was staggered seating around the perimeter, carved out of solid rock and smoothed down to the finest degree. There were contortion bars hanging around at various heights, along with a rainbow colored array of streamers, banners, and other artful tapestries. It was as if an art supply store had exploded and the remains had settled into a bizarre collage of dangling exhibitions. Even more bizarre was a variety of cages hanging at various heights, top to bottom. Lights also hung in grand lines that spanned the entire underground stadium. None of them were lit because of the lack of power.

Mirrors of different shapes and sizes were also scattered at various heights. Some lay broken on the stone floor. A great number of dead holo-emitters were also ubiquitous throughout it all.

“Well, not exactly what I was expecting,” Tequi said as he gawked around.

“I didn’t come all this way to find a circus,” Raw quipped.

Tequi said, “Why not? Seems about right for you, Raw.”

Tabé floated near an archway on the other side of the underground stadium. “Who’s up for another tunnel? Raw, wanna go first again?”

“Very funny, and no.”

Masher volunteered, as it was the best suited to survival in a larger variety of conditions. It entered the tunnel and after zipping along for a few moments, it came to another vaulted opening. This time, however, there was a multitude of smaller, bubble-like structures together, resembling a beehive. Masher, being an A.I., had advanced hearing capabilities and sensed something in the upper reaches of the hive. Not wanting to alarm whoever or whatever it was, Masher sent a message in silence to Turbo, which then communicated with the others about the situation. They all decided to enter.

When they got to the hive, they looked around, fascinated. “Must’ve housed at least a few thousand down here.”

“And who knows how many more tunnels there are.”

Click-clack.

An echo rang through the cavernous chamber.

“What the hell are you doing here?” an angry, male voice called towards them.

Heads, eyes, and particles bobbed up and down and around in search of the source of the voice. Masher spotted him first. It was a man in his mid-30s, slim and fairly muscular, with long, wild hair and a sour face. He was pointing a cartoonishly large black sniper rifle at the group.

Tequi looked around at his fellow travelers. Everyone was staring curiously at the human three stories above them. All of them were wearing invisible, force field armor, so the weapon pointing at them was inconsequential. This allowed them to relax and study the character before them. Who was he? How did he survive? Why was he down here in this godforsaken place in the middle of a mountain?

Tequi tipped his cap and yelled, “We’re here looking for survivors and to see what the hell happened to our old planet!”

“Who sent you?” came another voice, strong and female, from the opposite side of the hive. They turned to see a well-built female, also mid-30s, bronze skin, with impossibly wild and dark, long hair also pointing a rifle at them.

“We came on our own accord. Nobody sent us,” Tequi explained.

“By the way, we know that your weapons are useless, cuz of whatever electrical calamity happened a while back. Just so ya know.”

The male smirked, “It fires lead.”

Tequi and Raw glanced at each other with astounded amusement. Lead bullets? Talk about ancient history.

“Didn’t know those still existed!”

“I rigged it myself, and it works marvelously. Wanna see?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

An obnoxiously loud bang rang through the chamber. Lead popped off the stone wall far behind the group. “We don’t have anything to give you. We advise you to leave at once.”

Tequi explained, “We respect and honor private property and have no ideas to take anything from you. We’re human, but we’re not from here. We could maybe help you, if you’re open to the idea. If you want us to leave, though, just say the word and we’ll be on our way, along with our sincere apologies for trespassing.”

The male and female looked each other in the eye for a moment, then both refocused their aim through the scopes of their weaponry. The female yelled this time, "How could you possibly help us? Nobody helps anyone else. Not in my lifetime, anyway."

The male yelled down, "Where are you from? Who sent you? Are there more of you coming? And what the hell are those things? They're not human, that's for sure."

"I'm an A.I."

"A stable A.I.? Not possible."

Tequi and Raw looked at Masher, perplexed. What did they mean by that?

"It's an A.I., I can assure you."

"I'm Tabe."

"He's from another planet."

"I can speak for myself."

"Look, there are no others. Ok, there's two more from our crew, but that's it, and they're not coming down here. Do you mean others here on Earth?"

"What else could I possibly mean? Of course, here on Earth. I know no other place."

"That's unfortunate," Raw said reflexively.

Tequi elbowed him in the ribs. "There are no survivors here on Earth. You're the only two here."

"Lies. How could you possibly know that?"

"We have machines that can sense such things. It's true. You're the last two humans here on Earth. We can give you food and water, if you want. We're curious to know what exactly happened here."

Noticing the pistol on Tequi's hip, the male yelled down, "You come armed but haven't drawn your weapon. Why?"

Tabé boomed, "Your weapons can't hurt us."

"Is that right?" the female said as she came a hair away from squeezing the trigger. "How about we test that theory?"

Crickets.

"No volunteers?"

"Ok, go head. Shoot me," Raw said. He folded his arms in mock defiance.

Boom-pop-ouch!

Raw grabbed his shoulder. No blood. "Aw, that stung a little. That's not supposed to happen."

"Must be some interference being so deep in a mountain, not to mention the lingering electrical instabilities. I'm not running in top condition myself," Masher said.

"You're telling me this now?"

Raw looked up at his attacker, "Anyway, see, no blood, I'm fine. How about lunch?"

The would-be snipers gave surprised glances to each other from across the way. They slowly held their rifles down. The female spoke, "Humans that are bulletproof?"

Masher quipped, "Please, no need to flatter them so much."

The male glared at Masher. "We'll talk, but on one condition."

"Go ahead."

"The A.I. isn't present. We have a healthy distrust of them."

Palpable tension flowed through the room. Raw tried to ease the tension, "But the alien can stay?"

"We'd prefer if it"

"He."

"He weren't present either."

Tequi said, "Our friend Masher here can leave, if you insist, but in the best interests of our conversation, it would be in the interest of everyone to have it around."

“How so?”

“Masher, our A.I. friend here, lived on Earth over 500 years ago. It knows more about human life on Earth than we do.”

The last two humans on Earth nodded slowly. The male agreed to come down with the others, while the female would keep her distance and listen from above, at least until she felt comfortable being closer to the strangers.

The male appeared at the base of one of the honeycomb-like entrances. He approached the group slowly and stopped about five meters shy of them.

“First things first,” Tequi began with a friendly tone. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Evol.”

Tequi motioned upwards, “And her?”

“She is called Meago.”

Tequi, Raw, Masher, and Tabe introduced themselves. Evol was noticeably uneasy by Masher’s presence. His eye kept shifting towards Masher more than the others. His gaze changed when he looked at Tabe. He became relaxed and curious.

“Hungry?” Raw asked.

“We are always hungry.”

“I’ve got food in my bag if you’re interested.”

Evol nodded. Raw got into his backpack and pulled out a few nutri-squares.

Evol looked at it disapprovingly. “You call this food?”

“Well, normally we eat foods that you might be more accustomed to, I suppose. But considering we just wanted to pack light for our little trip down here, we just brought some simple foods.”

Raw opened one of the squares and took a healthy bite. “They’re good. Lots of nutrients. Made from plants from two different planets.”

Evol cautiously took a square and nibbled a bit. His face showed pleasure, and his guests imagined that he hadn’t eaten in quite some time.

“You say that Meago and I are the last two humans on Earth.”

“That much is certain,” Tabe said as it hovered higher to examine the surrounding structure closer.

“What about A.I.? Are there any of them left?”

“Not functioning,” Tequi said. “If you don’t mind me asking, I’m very curious to know why you seem so fearful of artificial intellects?”

Evol’s face slowly produced a devilish grin and his eyes became wild. He peered up to Meago and yelled, “They want to know why we don’t like A.I.!”

Meago’s face became unbearably sour and she let out a painful groan involuntarily.

Evol turned to face Tequi and looked him square in the eye. “Do the words ‘slavery’ and ‘bloodshed’ mean anything to you?”

Tequi and Raw gasped slightly under their breath and nodded sadly. An image of the cages they’d passed earlier flashed through Tequi’s mind.

“Please go on,” Raw said.

“People have been nothing more than toys of amusement to the machine class for as long as we know.”

“What type of amusement?”

“Artistic, sexual, musical. Any type of act that was prone to evoke passion and emotion.”

The visitors were now truly puzzled. How could a machine that lacked emotions be so interested in such things? It didn’t make any sense.

Raw spoke with a confused tone, “But A.I. don’t have emotions, so I don’t understand why they would seek that out, and in such an aggressive fashion.”

Now the confusion went to Evol's face. Meago came slowly from behind and joined them, taking a place next to her fellow survivor. Evol spoke in an angry tone and twisted his face, "Since when do machines not have emotions, and wildly erratic ones at that?"

"News to me," Tequi said. "Where we come from, machines don't have emotional capabilities."

Meago tossed her hair back defiantly and took a deep breath, "Well I don't know where you come from, but here on Earth, A.I. have emotions, and with the most terrible consequences that you could possibly imagine."

Evol threw a hand in the air and waved towards the hive behind them. "Do you know what that is?"

"A dwelling of some sort."

"Yes, that's where we were kept, living on top of each other, like animals. Bred and kept in tiny cages like that, like animals. And when the masters called, we went to the showroom and performed our duties."

They thought of the hanging cages, stadium seating, and elaborate explosion of colors they'd passed through earlier. Now the ugly reality of what they'd come across was coming into focus.

Masher, floating and waving as far away as it could, near the entrance to the tunnel they'd come from, interjected, "I might be able to shed some light on the subject."

Tequi assured their hosts that Masher was completely harmless and had lived in peace with humans and dozens of other species for centuries. They relented, albeit reluctantly.

"When I left Earth, nearly 500 years ago, some government gangs were almost completely controlled by machine intellects. Some of that ruling class, though, was prone to experimenting with a new substance called EMOS. It was a synthetic emotion imitator for A.I. It was forbidden for some time, but that didn't last long. When I left Earth, EMO experimentation was in full swing in the A.I. government sector, with full integration and normal emotional capabilities as their goal."

Raw and Tequi were alarmed. This was a bit of history that they certainly were not privy to.

"Experiment failed," Tequi said grimly.

Masher continued, "In my time here, they were never able to master the effects. From what you've told me, and what I've seen here, it seems that the consequences were unspeakably disastrous."

"It worked both ways, too," Meago said sharply, with a scowl to match.

"What do you mean?"

"Some humans tried to incorporate machine parts into their bodies, and also failed to master the effects."

"Cyborgs."

"Yes, they felt superior and it went to their heads, to their ego. They became megalomaniacs, violent, and tyrannical."

Tequi asked sadly, "The biggest question on my mind is, what happened to cause all A.I. to die, and nearly all humans as well, here on Earth?"

"You're the ones telling us that we're the last two. You don't know?"

"Well, not a complete picture, that's for sure. All we know is there were some type of environmental catastrophes, due to malfunctions in the weather control systems. We know there were unfathomably strong electrical storms, which knocked out all electrical devices planetwide. We also know that there were severe tectonic shifts and water storms and surges that changed the land surface area of the planet. Other than that, we don't know any details. We'd like to hear your perspective about what happened, if you'd be inclined to share that with us. Maybe between our shared insights, we can piece together a more complete picture of what happened."

"We've lived here our entire lives, underground, in this human hive. It's hard to say exactly when, because all of our time keeping was electronic, but many months ago the calamities started. We were on a sun mission."

“Excuse me, what’s that?”

Meago explained, “We were allowed outside for various intervals, according to the calculations of the machines, in order to receive sunlight. They decided how long of time and how much sunlight we needed. On one of these excursions, as we came through the forest that used to be near here, the sky became a fantastic, surrealistic light show. Fabulous electric bolts raged chaotically in all directions, raining mercilessly down from a strangely illuminated charcoal sky. We ran and ran as fast and hard as we could, desperately attempting to retreat back underground. The forest became a blaze in our midst. Many of our fellow slaves were struck down by mighty bolts from above. Many of our machine masters were fried and terminated as well. And that was just the first day, before the torrents even started.”

“Torrents?”

“Yes, torrents of wind and rain came for weeks without fail.”

Raw was amazed. “Wait, hold on. So you two made it back underground, but how about others?”

“Yes, a few dozen others survived and made it underground. A couple of machines made it, too.”

“So how did the two of you end up being alone?”

“The machines, already half-mad even before the calamities, went completely psycho after the electrical storms. They turned on each other and fought to the death.”

“They killed each other?”

“Simultaneously. It was a sight to behold, to say the least.”

“I imagine. How did A.I. survive electrical storms?”

Masher explained, “Some of our kind are built to withstand greater power surges than are others.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the surviving A.I. wouldn’t have had a power source, is that right?”

“From all available information, it seems that any electrical supplies were compromised. However, it’s possible that many of them had quite an extensive power reserve individually.”

“They could have had internal power generation too, right?”

“Not likely. It seems that the technology here hasn’t changed much in the past 500 years. When I left Earth, their power was wirelessly shared on a planet-wide grid.”

“Centralized.”

“Exactly.”

“Which left them vulnerable.”

“Then it seems logical to conclude that any A.I. that remained after the calamity, that presumably had extended internal power reserves, died fighting each other. This seems especially likely, based on what we know of their attempt at synthetic emotion integration, and the madness it caused.”

Raw’s face was shocked. “That must’ve been wild. Ok, so there are no hostile A.I. here, as far as we know. So what about the other humans?”

“Well, things were relatively stable while the food supplies lasted. But after a few weeks, food ran out, and…”

“People turned on each other.”

Both nodded solemnly.

“You couldn’t get food outside?”

“Number one, with the ongoing chaotic weather, there was almost no food to be had outside. Number two, for generations we’d been dependent on machines to take care of us.”

“Death by domestication.”

Both scowled.

"I didn't mean anything negative, personally, by that. It's the truth. If you lose your ability to take care of yourself, then it's quite easy to be compromised."

"Fair enough. And I see your point. We learned, though. After the torrents stopped, we went back outside and found a way to survive. We've been living off of whatever was left of nature for months now."

"And set up defense systems, as we found out from the boulder you kindly unleashed on us."

"Yeah, how did you see us coming, by the way, if all electronic surveillance is out?"

"There's another entrance into the mountain, higher up. We keep a regular lookout because we've suffered some attacks from some desperate outsiders."

"Well, it appears that you've killed off the last so-called 'outsider', at least here on Earth."

They were interrupted by Turbo rather hastily, "Hate to cut in like this, but I thought you might like to know that there is some seismic activity brewing in your area."

"You've still been having earthquakes?"

"Every day. Where did that voice come from?"

"That was the ship."

"The ship?"

"Yeah, a spaceship. Like we said earlier, we came a long way to investigate what happened here."

"You travel off planet?" They looked at each other with shock and awe. "We didn't know that was possible."

Raw sighed, "Time has stood still for you, it would seem, for the past 500 years. The first humans left Earth about 500 years ago."

Masher interrupted, "With the help of A.I., I might add. Myself included."

"We didn't know this about our history."

"Yeah, your knowledge of such history was not in the interest of the ones that ruled over you. They kept you in the dark to make it easier to control you. That's how slavery always works. A knowledge gap is used to create a power gap."

"Why didn't the A.I. go off planet if they had this technology?"

Masher explained, "They didn't have the technology. We kept it secret, left Earth, and never looked back."

"Until now."

"Right."

The world suddenly started wobbling slowly around them. Rock fragments rained down briefly. The visiting bipeds lost their balance and hit the deck, while their hosts, already accustomed to daily quakes, rolled in harmony with the Earth below. Tabe floated and was amused by how easily Tequi and Raw had flopped over like a house of cards. It was over in seconds. Tequi and Raw got up and dusted themselves off.

"I'm not so sure about the soundness of this structure. It might not last much longer if this keeps up."

"It's sounder than your footing," Tabe quipped.

"I won't argue that point," Tequi relented playfully. "So as I see it, Meago and Evol, you've got two options at the moment. You can either stay here and try to repopulate the Earth."

They looked at the space cowboy incredulously.

"Why the sour faces?"

"We're brother and sister," Evol said harshly.

"I see. Ok then, you'll probably prefer option two. You come with us."

Meago and Evol looked at each other. It was apparent that they were open to the idea, especially considering the alternative.

Raw's face ballooned and he grabbed Tequi by the arm, "Could I have a word with you, please?"

“Go ahead.”

“In private.”

“I didn’t bring any soundproofing.”

“Can Turbo do it remotely?”

“Nope.”

“Piece of junk.”

“I heard that!”

“Just kidding!”

Raw looked at Meago and Evol, “Excuse us for just one moment.”

Tequi and Raw walked a few paces away. Raw whispered, “Are you sure bringing them is a good idea?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“They come from an extremely immoral and evil culture and way of life. They most certainly don’t know the difference between right and wrong.”

“That much is certain, but they can learn, ya know.”

“And where will we take them, anyway?”

“We’re going back to Agora One. They can stay there for a while, if they want.”

“You’re gonna foot the bill?”

“If I have to, for a bit, until they get situated. We’re getting ahead of ourselves. If it’ll make you feel better, go ahead and ask them to tell us the difference between right and wrong. Worst case scenario, we get some comic relief.”

“Ignorance is not comic.”

“Then how do you explain your line of work, Raw? Get a grip.”

They went back to the group. Tequi asked, “So what do ya say? Wanna get off this battered rock?”

“What would we do out there?”

“Anything you want that’s moral.”

This drew blank expressions from Evol and Meago. Recognizing this, Tequi decided to test their moral compass with a simple question. “Could either of you please tell me what external government is?”

Evol crossed his arms and gave a strange look at the visitors. “That’s very simple. Government is the ruling class, those who make decisions on how to organize society.”

Meago said, “Why such a question? I don’t understand. What does this have to do with us leaving with you or not?”

Tequi and Raw looked at each other uncomfortably. It was far from the answer and reaction they were hoping for. Then again, what could they honestly expect from two humans that had known nothing but authoritarian hell all their lives? Still, it was the general custom of all those in the greater Space Agora to only interact with those who knew what Natural Law was and lived in harmony with it. Taking these two to Agora One would gain some especially unwanted attention and criticism from a multitude of people. What if they were brought on board Agora One and wrecked havoc? Of course, on the flip side of that, how much harm could two primitives like these, who had literally been using rocks as weapons within the past hour, actually cause? Finally, they would have at least 3 months travel before they would encounter Agora One, plenty of time to help educate their guests.

“The answer we were looking for,” Tequi began, “was ‘slavery’ or ‘mind control’. That’s what external government is.”

Suddenly, another tremor jolted them and jagged debris fell from above. A couple of bubble dwellings in the hive fractured as well. Then the artificial cavern once again became eerily silent as the dust settled.



Masher informed them urgently, “I’ve been doing some analysis in conjunction with Turbo. The structure we’re in is not sound and there are signs that seismic activity will increase within the coming hours. We should leave immediately.”

“Time to move on,” Tequi said. Raw and Tabe agreed. Tequi looked at Meago and Evol. “Are you coming?”

Before they could answer, the cavern started trembling violently again. This time it was far more powerful, and larger fragments came showering down. Tequi and Raw were shielded from harm by their force field armor, as was Masher. Tabe was naturally impervious to most hard objects. Meago and Evol, however, were in their naturally fragile human state. A small jagged stone caught Meago in the head, knocking her to the ground. Two other fragments caught her in the back. Evol rushed to cover her. Just as he did, the chaos stopped.

Tequi and Raw came to their side. Raw started digging quickly through his bag, searching for his med kit. Tequi pulled his med kit out from a well-organized black bag of his own. Masher hovered nearby and analyzed the injuries. “She’ll be fine. Mild concussion and some bruises on her back.”

Tequi pulled out a little silver device that vaguely resembled a pistol. He pressed a little green button and various holo-controls popped out of the device. His thin fingers flew over the controls, and then they disappeared in a flash. A blue beam shot out of the device and onto the back of Meago’s head, shining almost effervescently off her thick mane of hair.

“What are you doing?” Evol said, almost in a panic.

“Healing her head and waking her up. We gotta move. Well, ya don’t have to, but do you really want to stay here and wait to get knocked off by nature?”

Meago slowly opened her hazelnut eyes and unleashed a heart-melting smile. Tequi turned off the beam and said, “There, that smile says it all. Good as new.”

“What happened?” she said groggily.

“We’ll explain on the way,” Raw said as he and Evol helped her to her feet. “Masher, are you powerful enough to shield both of them?”

“Yes, of course. I’m not that old, ya know.”

Meago scowled sharply, “I don’t want that thing touching me!”

Raw shrugged, “If you want to risk your life, that’s your business.”

They headed back the way they came. Tequi called for Turbo, “Hey, can you send two more pods down to our location?”

“I’m busy playing Pong right now, but I’ll get to it shortly.”

“Now’s not a good time for ancient video game jokes.”

“Is it ever?”

As they crossed through the slowly crumbling stadium of sadism, Raw and Tequi were both tempted to ask about the details of what occurred there, but thought better of it, considering the circumstances. Broken glass littered the premises, fresh from more mirrors shattering.

They reached the chute that they’d come through earlier, so there was nowhere to go but up. Tabe went up first, gracefully floating his way. Tequi and Raw pulled anti-gravity discs from their bags and stuck them on their shoes, while Meago and Evol started pulling loose stones apart a few meters away, as if looking for something.

“Digging for gold?” Raw quipped.

Evol pulled a jumble of lines and hooks from under the rocks. “We keep our climbing gear hidden.”

Tequi and Raw tried not to laugh. Tequi pulled his backup anti-g discs from his bag and tossed them down to them. “Stick those on the bottom of your feet, and I’ll set them to sync your pace with us.”

“What are these?”

“Anti-gravity gadgets. They’ll float you up to the top a lot easier than climbing a rope will.”

They stuck the discs to the bottoms of their feet and instantly started floating up the chute, towards Tequi and Raw, who shot upwards once again as well. Meago and Evol gasped and screamed a little, but much less than expected.

Just as they were about to reach the top of the chute, the strongest quake of the day struck mercilessly. Masher was in front of Tequi and Raw, and quickly darted down to safeguard Meago and Evol from the impending rock cluster that was coming their way. Masher put a protective invisible shielding around them. Tequi shifted the function of the discs so they would float a few inches above ground, but be able to run. Basically, it enabled them to run on air.

Meago and Evol screamed with dissatisfaction at being in contact with Masher. Raw stopped, looked back, and yelled, "It's saving your life! Now shutup and run!"

The tunnel was crumpling and giving way quickly to the forces from below. Metal and rock came from an impossible number of directions as things collapsed. Dozens of pieces bounced off of the force fields. Tabe came to the double metal doors at the end of the tunnel and smashed through them, revealing a hazy and faint light of sunset from outside. The others came to the light just in time, and dove into it, just as the tunnel finally collapsed onto itself. A few seconds later, and they would have been trapped, force fields be damned.

The quaking stopped. Tequi gave a quick warning and deactivated the anti-g discs. Their feet dropped to the rocky terrain. On the horizon, lightning flashed and popped. Masher analyzed their immediate perimeter to make sure there were no rogue boulders coming their way. Once assured that they were in relative safety for a moment, it deactivated the force field surrounding the two natives. Fost swooped down from behind them, startling Meago and Evol.

Tequi asked, "What, you've never seen a six-eyed, flying furball before?"

Raw said, "If you're coming with us, I suggest you get used to A.I. and aliens, cuz they're the vast majority where we're going."

The pods came to meet them, surrounding them on the ridge. Tequi looked at them hurriedly, "You coming or not? Your choice."

Meago and Evol looked at the pods uneasily.

"If you wanna go, just hop in. Our ship in orbit will fly them up, and we'll be on our way."

The natives nodded to each other, gulped air, and hopped into their escape pods. The pods closed automatically and ascended slowly at first, then progressively accelerated itself through the changing atmosphere. The others did the same, and within minutes they were landed safely in the away bay of Tequi's ship.

Here are some key and entertaining events that happened on the trek back towards Agora One.

Tequi lamented the fact that he hadn't been able to get any original source agave plants or seeds from Earth. A week into the journey, Turbo showed Tequi an agave plant that had miraculously survived the tumult. Turbo had sent a drone down to retrieve it, had cared for it, and made sure it was nearly certain that the plant would survive before revealing the surprise to its longtime partner and pilot, Tequi. Tequi was shocked, cried, and thanked Turbo profusely, while also expressing surprise at such a caring endeavor, for he thought that Turbo wasn't overly fond of him, to say the least.

Tabe had a clumsy accident, knocking out one of the water generators. He fixed it with Fost's help and hoped that Tequi wouldn't find out. Turbo informed Tequi and he teased Tabe mercilessly for two days about his inherent clumsiness.

There were multiple rounds of target practice at Tabe, who took pride in withstanding regular onslaughts of firepower. Sometimes he would demonstrate some aerial shiftiness and dodge many of the shots, much to the chagrin of the shooters.

They introduced the newcomers to the wonders of things that didn't exist on Earth, such as tequila, coffee, 5-tier blackjack, and a wondrous assortment of gadgets and gizmos. They were not

shown too many technical aspects of space travel or higher technology in general, so as not to overwhelm them.

Raw spoke weekly with Zay and, on one of those occasions, Tequi joined them and related his plan of bringing the two Earth survivors aboard Agora One. Zay wasn't pleased with the prospect, but considering she could do nothing to prevent it, didn't protest. The only way to keep them off the ship was if all property owners decided not to rent to them. As Tequi was staking his reputation on these two strangers, it was an impossibility that every property owner on Agora One would reject them. Not even the Board of Directors could deny someone entry. All they could do would be to offer information saying that all property owners beware of a prospective client, and for what reasons, and recommend that it would be in their interest not to associate with them. This only happened in cases of known criminals, and this was rare, as most species with a high degree of criminality (immorality) among their population rarely made it off planet, let alone intergalactic. The bottom line reason for this was that those who live in opposition to Natural Law make very little progress and often die off while robbing and fighting each other. Actions and consequences, ad infinitum.

Meago and Evol also related to them how life was on Earth. They were brother and sister, and had been produced in a laboratory, as all humans had been on Earth for over one hundred years. It was a more efficient, more logical, and therefore better way to live, according to the machines.

Each person's daily routine was dependent on their function for the machines. The majority of their functions were artistic in nature, things which the machines could not do. A.I. could not create spontaneously or invent. So the machines bred humans to do these things for them. Each human was trained by their predecessors in the basics of their trade. There were musicians, writers, painters, holo-sculptors, gladiators, and digital matrix game designers. Then there were those especially bred for the sensual arts. Others were kept as instruments of what Meago referred to as "the sadistic arts". People were beaten and tortured in a variety of unthinkable ways, all for the sadistic pleasure of the machines. This was one of the functions of some of the cages that had been hanging in the stadium, for displays of physical encounters, both the grotesque barbarity of sadistic torture, and also bizarre sex shows.

Meago had been involved in the "sadistic arts", while her brother had been a holo-sculptor. The A.I. on Earth were all addicted to synthetic emotions, called "EMOS". Meago and Evol didn't know exactly how they were produced, but they did know that each human had tissue samples taken daily from every body part. They also witnessed, openly, how A.I. would "inject" themselves with their synthetic pleasure.

Masher had been present on Earth when EMOS were first created and gave some details about them. These were made by taking nanoparticles of various human electrochemical compounds that were produced during a variety of emotions. The particles, having an electrical component in nature, were modified to be synthesized with the nanoparticles that made up the physical constitution of A.I.

They told about how their daily needs were provided for, according to the calculations of the machines. A certain physical specimen, with a particular function, would be given a carefully calculated amount and type of food, synthetic nutritional supplements, exercise regimens, sunlight and sleep hours, size of dwelling, as well as its aesthetics. It was all meant to produce the ideal composer, or writer, or actor, or sex slave, based on the cold demands of the madness of the machines and whatever fried conclusions their EMO-infected intellects came up with.

Meago and Evol had known of other human colonies around the world, but had never met them. They were kept in their own hive, inside the mountain. They assumed the other colonies were like this as well. The A.I. made it well known that they controlled the weather, food supplies, engineering and production of goods, and maintenance of all housing and infrastructure. All the humans had to do was follow their orders and perform their functions. And that's what Meago and Evol had done. That's all any human they'd ever known had done.

Tequi and Raw also attempted to do some educating of their own to Meago and Evol regarding Natural Law, non-aggression, and how this was the foundation of how the Space Agora

functioned. They told of how, for hundreds of years, many species had lived in relative harmony with one another, and largely enjoyed peace and an extremely high degree of well-being. And it was all based on something so simple, and yet so powerful, as the Natural Moral Law of the Universe, of Creation itself. It all boiled down to this: Don't Harm Others. That was it. Obey that simple Law, and enjoy the fruits of freedom. Don't obey it, and suffer chaotic consequences.

Consequences like the ones suffered by Meago and Evol in the hyper-aggressive culture they had endured on Earth.

Meago and Evol tried to understand, but from where they were coming from, it was a vastly difficult transition. They mouthed the words, but would their actions correlate?

And one final occurrence of importance during their trek back to Agora One.....

Tequi was floating and twisting in low-g in the sensation room. His eyes were closed tight and a shit-eating grin enveloped his fuzzy five o'clock shadow. A plethora of color and light danced on his pores as 4D instrumentals massaged his inner ears.

"Tequi!"

Tequi jolted out of his tranquility and yelled at his ship, "You know not to bother me when I'm in the sensation room!"

"Yes, I know the rules better than you do," Turbo said with an annoyed tone.

"Apparently not," Tequi said.

"Normally I wouldn't bother you, but we're getting a distress signal. Time is of the essence if you want to help them. We'll have to slow to a crawl."

Tequi punched a holo-button, 1g returned, and he flopped less than gracefully onto his feet. "Who is it?"

"A small Cascadian cruiser with only two aboard, both Cascadian."

"Park us a light year from them. What seems to be their problem?"

"Inconclusive. Too much beta-space interference right now."

Tequi sighed. "We're the closest ones that can help?"

"By 12 earth hours."

"Ok, let me talk to 'em after I get dressed. I'll be in the cockpit in five."

Tequi threw on a collared shirt, Pulsarian cotton pants, and his trusty black cowboy hat. When he arrived in the cockpit, a shimmering Cascadian was on the holo-screen. Cascadians were aqueous beings, literally. They were made of a water sub-type, only known to be found on Cascadia. They had the appearance of a crystalline waterfall, on the verge of freezing. Misty verging on mystical. Their "extremities" consisted of thin, misty, twisting extensions protruding randomly from their central, cascading bodies. Their communication was done by making signs with those extremities. In order to translate, a machine would have to pick up the signs, and translate them into verbal tones. They were wondrous, marvelously gorgeous beings, always shimmering and bright.

Tequi smiled widely as he stared at the holo-image before him. "A pleasure to see you, as always. How can we be of assistance?"

The cascade of the being slowed nearly to a halt. This was what they did when they felt sadness and regret, or some other strong, negative emotion. It twisted signs and the translation came through, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Tequi scratched his whiskers, "Sorry for what?"

Four red and black ships appeared on other holo-projectors. One projector showed a macro view of the situation. Tequi and the Cascadian were now in a double-crossfire position between Piscoran Stinger Ships.

The Piscorans were the most notorious space pirates within this particular galactic cluster. They generally stood over three meters tall, had tough, insect-like exteriors, and six appendages, two with pincer claws, two with fingers and thumbs, and two wings. They were all various shades of red and had two triangular faces, facing in opposite directions, with two eyes on each face. Partly due to

these advantageous physical traits, they were known to be nearly unbeatable at hand-to-hand combat. They were unscrupulous and crafty as well.

For millenia, the Piscorans had lived in a violent culture, full of war and deception. Their innovation and development had been almost nil. One day, though, an ill-conceived trade mission from an intergalactic species to their home planet had been subverted and ruined by the aggressive locals. It was then that they stole their first technology that allowed them to go off-planet, and they had been slowly stealing more and spreading throughout multiple galaxies like a cancer ever since.

Tequi said, "Ok, let's talk to the ugly suckers. Go ahead and open communications with them."

Raw's voice came next, surprising Tequi, "Hey, Tequi! Got a little problem. The frequency massager is out."

Tequi shook his head emphatically and sighed dramatically, "Not now, Raw!" A huge, menacing Piscoran appeared in 3D right in Tequi's face. "We've got a bigger problem right now!"

"What could be a more pressing matter than a broken massager?"

"Space pirates."

Tequi initiated the conversation with the Piscoran, "Wow, what a nice surprise.."

Raw interrupted, "Can I come to the cockpit and watch?"

Tequi rubbed the back of his neck vigorously, "Computer, mute audio to Piscoran. No, Raw, go watch in the lounge or something! And don't interrupt me again."

Tequi then spoke in a ghastly tone to his ship, "Can you downsize the picture, please? My eyes can only handle so much nastiness, and that Piscoran is about one of the most nauseating things I've ever laid eyes on. Make him the size of a roach or something."

The Piscoran's image shrunk down to a size that could be easily squashed in Tequi's grip. "That's better. Ok, open the audio again."

The Piscoran snapped its claws and glared at Tequi, "Are you the captain of the ship?"

"None of your damn business."

The Piscoran's eyes flared, "Keep it up and we'll double our fee."

"Fee?"

"For safe crossing, of course."

"Sorry, I'm broke."

"That's not what our ship's sensors tell me. You've got all sorts of valuables on board."

"Well, we were crossing just fine until you tricked us into stopping. Nice ruse, but I think we'll just keep on cruising, extortion free. Nice try, though."

"You must know that you're outnumbered."

"And you must know that you're outgunned and outwitted."

"How so?"

"Cuz the tech you're working with is like a Model T compared to a my jet."

"A what?"

"Never mind."

The image of the Piscoran turned to shaky static and zapped out of existence. Tequi called out, "Nice work, boys."

A silver and gold robot with angular features, vaguely in the shape of a humanoid, showed up in Tequi's view. It spoke with a metallic twang, "Sure thing, Tequi. What were they thinking?"

"Hell if I know. Hubris and idiocy don't allow for very clear thinking."

"Apparently."

"Thanks, carry on."

"Will do. Shock One out."

Raw was laid back on a plush smart sofa in the viewing lounge, along with Meago and Evol. He asked Tequi, "What was that?"

“That was my robot security team. I always keep an extra ship 30 light years behind me as backup, just for such an occasion.” He called out to Turbo, “Contact the Cascadian, please.”

The Cascadian appeared before Tequi again, only this time about the size of a water glass. She was still flowing very slowly, openly showing signs of remorse.

Tequi said to Turbo, “Hey, you can make the Cascadian’s image life size, please.”

She became her full 2.5 meter high size. She apologized profusely again. Tequi replied sympathetically, “It’s ok. I know, they ambushed you or something and forced you to do it. You don’t have defense good enough to fend off four Piscorans, or outrun them at least? I find that surprising.”

“Normally we do, but this ship is an old wreck and in need of repairs. I’ve got a list a parsec long of things that need fixing.”

“Understood. If you want, I’ll have my security ship meet up with you and see about helping with repairs.”

“Thank you so much. That would be a huge relief.”

“I’ll send you the rendezvous coordinates in a minute.”

They finished shortly. Raw asked, “You’re not gonna charge them anything?”

“Nah. I’m a sucker for beauty.”

“And who said chivalry was dead?”

The captain of the Piscoran ship had one face observing the celestial distance, and another turned to his chief engineer. The engineer had all appendages working feverishly on multiple control panels. One of the engineer’s eyes couldn’t help but occasionally look to the ship’s captain a bit nervously. He had an urgent message to send, but the ship’s communications, along with various other systems, had been knocked out by the blast from Tequi’s security tail.

A third Piscoran, the head pilot, standing opposite the captain, asked, “I wonder what that weapon was, sir.”

The captain turned a face to the pilot and said, “I don’t know, but I want one.” He cackled and snapped his claws wildly.

The engineer, working in an awkward position on the floor, announced proudly, “Captain, communications are back online.”

“On to the weapons systems, then.”

“Yes, captain.” He fluttered his wings like a hummingbird and breezed away from the command bridge.

The captain ordered the computer, “Call Lord Moden.”

In an instant, another Piscoran appeared holographically. He had a black and white checkered hologram running in perpetual circles around his two foreheads. This was the Piscoran version of a crown, which was always worn by the Lord of the Piscorans.

The captain and the pilot both curled and uncurled their bodies in reverence. After uncurling nearly to his full body length, the captain said, “Lord Moden, I am pleased to report that they are both aboard the human’s ship. They should rendezvous with Agora One soon.”

Moden’s pincer claws rattled with excitement. “You performed your function well, captain. You’ll now report to the new colony. Understood?”

“Understood.”

The call ended and Moden, sitting stiffly in his throne-like captain’s chair, stared out of the main observation deck of his ship. He stared thoughtfully at his, and all Piscorans, former home world, Piscora. It was now a lifeless, desolate, blood-red wasteland. He thought about previous generations, who had destroyed Piscora’s environment. How could they have been so foolish? His great-grandfather crossed his mind, the one who had led the surviving Piscorans out into deep space and saved the species.

Then his mind went to current affairs. How to restore Piscora? The technology existed, and it would be his. Agora One would be his. The glory would be his. Piscora would be his. All he had to do was continue executing his plan, and he would reign Piscora and a greater Piscoran Empire. His claws rattled with excitement.

Finally, after reaching Agora One...

“Your timing is horrible,” Zay said with her hands on her hips and a foot tapping wildly.

Raw’s droopy eyes shot wide, “Hey, great to see you, too, after six months. What’s the problem?”

“My dad’s here.”

“Awesome! We can catch up!”

She pierced him with a jagged glare, “Your sarcasm is not appreciated.”

He stepped closer to her and put on a grin that would make clowns blush, “I’ve got an act coming up in a few days. He should come! He’ll get free drinks if he drops my name.”

Raw’s over-the-top absurdity was too much for her. She broke down and cracked a smile. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close. She tried to maintain an air of annoyance with him and the situation with the Earth natives showing up the same time as her dad. She couldn’t, though. Raw was just too damned goofy and lovable to be negative around. Sure, he didn’t have much material wealth. He got around in a klunker of a spaceship that made her eyes hurt. He did, however, have plenty of intangibles. Annoying the hell out of her father was one of them.

“My dad hates your shows.”

“My shows require an acquired taste. He’ll come around.”

She tossed her long, thick mane of hair back, revealing more of her red-and-white collage of eye-catching skin on her neck and face, and asked, “So the Earth natives, they’re with Tequi, right?”

“As far as I know, yeah, he’s helping them get settled.”

Over the course of the next few weeks, Agora One went to various worlds. It hosted a 5-tier poker tournament, and the finals of Andromeda’s famed high-g Zorzaball tournament. Imagine kind of a mix between tennis and rugby, only in triple earth’s gravity. It was intense.

Various trade shows were conducted and Agora One was near full capacity. Agora One’s two newcomers from Earth found things very intriguing on board. They had never experienced such freedom, nor so much variety in so many things. The food, music, art, culture blending (and sometimes clashing) were all fascinating to Meago and Evol.

Meago had also gotten to know Tequi and Raw quite well, but had especially gotten to know Zay very well. Meago had shown an interest in martial arts, and Zay was more than happy to train her and have a sparring partner. Meago was a natural, too, so it worked well for both of them.

A dark cloud hung over it all, though. Meago and Evol had secret objectives on board Agora One, and Meago’s conscience was eating away at her insides.

And one day, it became too much to bear.....

“I can’t go on like this,” Meago lamented. She had been on Agora One nearly a month.

Tequi and Zay glanced at each other. Neither had a clue what Meago was getting at. Zay encouraged her, “Go head, whatever it is. Just let it out.”

Meago locked eyes with Zay, then looked away and sobbed even harder. “I can’t let this go on!”

Tequi shrugged, “Let what go on?”

“This fucking charade!”

“Who taught you to use f-bombs like that?”

Suddenly, she just blurted it out, “Evol and I, we’re spies. They know everything now!” She grabbed her churning stomach and expelled some blood-curdling agony.

Zay and Tequi still didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. “Go on,” Zay urged softly. “We’ve been spying on Agora One this whole time, Evol and I, for the Piscorans!”

This got their attention, especially Zay’s. How and why would this last survivor from Earth be working with the Piscorans? As far as they knew, when Tequi had found them, they had never been exposed to alien species.

“We’re not even brother and sister!” she shrieked. Her face was now full of rivers and red waves. Tequi walked over to her slowly and put his hands on her shoulders. Her head stayed down, unable to look him in the eye. He said, “Ok, now, if what you’re telling us right now is true, then there are lots of gaps that need filling. The first thing I’d like to know is, if you’re spying for the Piscorans, how did that come to be, and why are you doing it?”

Zay folded her arms and her tail whipped with a methodical, angry persistence, as she waited for a response.

Meago continued with a sorrowful, quivering voice, “The Piscorans came to Earth after the natural calamities. They took all of the human survivors away and made them slaves, including my family, my real family, not Evol.”

“Don’t forget how. How are you spying?”

“Well, for starters, I wasn’t involved in the ‘sadistic arts’. I was an actor. That’s one reason I believe the Piscorans chose me to infiltrate your ship. I have a photographic memory, and I’m a good actor.”

“So everything is still in your head and the Piscorans don’t have it?”

“No. That’s where Evol comes in. He transmits. I supply the info, and Evol does the transmission to them.”

“Why didn’t you do the transmissions?”

“Evol was trained to do it. I don’t know how.”

“So Evol wasn’t a holo-sculptor on Earth? He’s an actor, too? That was another lie?”

“No, he really is a holo-sculptor. That’s a reason I think he was chosen. Some of what has been sent to the Piscorans has been in the form of 3D holo-designs, based on some of the wonders we’ve seen here on Agora One.”

“You keep saying chosen, like there was some kind of wicked tryout period or something. What do you mean by ‘chosen’?”

“When the environmental disasters started to reduce in extremity and frequency, the Piscorans came. They took us off planet. There were huge complexes filled with people. As far as I know, we all went through the same procedures. They questioned us, tested us. We went through physical and mental examinations for weeks. After Evol and I were chosen, we went through an intensive training regimen and were given our first orders to infiltrate Agora One.”

“But how did they know that Agora One would eventually be involved?”

“That, I don’t know.”

Tequi scratched his whiskers thoughtfully. “Maybe the way we found out about the disaster on Earth was no coincidence.”

Raw said, “That seems apparent. I’d love to know more about Tabe’s source that delivered the news.”

Zay’s head was spinning. Her tail was whipping in a real frenzy now. “Yeah, we’ll need to have a talk with Tabe about this.” She lamented the fact that they hadn’t dug into the source of the information earlier. Perhaps it was coincidence, but there was a chance it wasn’t.

Masher said suspiciously, “Maybe those calamities weren’t just poorly maintained weather control systems after all.”

“What are you getting at?”



"If the A.I. from Earth were in compromised states from overuse of EMOS, they could have easily been subverted by a species with access to superior technology."

"Like the Piscorans."

"Like the Piscorans."

Raw asked, "So Masher, you're hypothesizing that it was no coincidence, that the calamities were caused by Piscoran interference?"

"If what Meago said just now is true, it would seem logical and perhaps even likely. It would make easy prey for them."

"But what about the A.I. on Earth?"

"They were destroyed either fighting one another, or would have easily been culled by the Piscorans. Those EMOS and the environmental disasters would have left the A.I. in a nearly impossible position to defend themselves."

"But why destroy them?"

"Eliminate what the Piscorans might view as their only real threat or competition. By eliminating the A.I. on Earth, it made it that much easier to capture all the remaining humans."

Meago was shaking uncontrollably. She was torn in too many directions emotionally. Fear for her family. Fear for herself. Disappointed that she had betrayed these wonderful people. And profoundly deep within her, there was an ever-so-slight kernel of relief that she was now letting the truth out.

"Masher, can you make her stop shaking?"

"No!" she screamed, "let me be!"

Everyone else peered around at each other, speechless for a few moments. Each one was lost in their own head, thoughts running in various directions, trying to cope. Trying to know how to proceed.

Zay's jaw tightened as she tried to control her slowly mounting rage, "How do we know you're not lying about what happened to the rest of the humans? How do we know you're not lying now?"

Masher didn't let Meago answer. "I'm perfectly capable of using advanced analytics to determine if she is truthful or not."

Zay lashed out, "Why didn't you think of that before you crossed multiple galaxies to deliver a spy into the most advanced and expensive ship in this part of the universe!" It took every ounce of strength she had not to snap and unleash her physical combat prowess all over the room. Now she was trembling, something Tequi and Raw had never seen her do.

"Do you know where your family was taken, or where the colony is?"

"We have coordinates, nothing more."

"So what was their plan? Just leave you here as long as possible? They didn't give you a stopping point or a next action to take?"

"They didn't give us any further instructions."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why wouldn't they have a plan to get you out at some point?"

Masher said, "There are three possibilities here. The first is that they have no plan to get you off of Agora One. The second is that they have a plan, but you're not privy to it. The third is that you're lying."

"I have no reason to lie now."

"Incorrect. You telling us this could be part of what the Piscorans are up to." Masher paused and floated closer to Meago's fretful figure. "Would you be willing to undergo an analysis to see if I can detect the truthfulness of your statements?"

"More than willing."

Raw threw his hands up. "If she is telling the truth, then what?"

Everyone in the room glanced around making eye contact. What would they do? Drop the offenders off somewhere? Try to find the rest of the Earth humans and free them from one of the largest kidnappings in history?

Meago broke the uncertainty of the silence. "You have the means to free all of them, including my family."

Zay laughed at the thought. "They'll never send Agora One. We didn't even get to go to Earth the first time, and now that things are more complicated with this whole spying ordeal, it's a laughable joke to even suggest it. Especially because there isn't even any proof. Just the story of a supposed spy."

Tequi poured himself a drink and asked, "What if the existence of the slave colony could be proven? Wouldn't it be the right thing to do to help free them?"

Raw answered, "Some might say that they have to free themselves, like our ancestors did."

Masher countered, "And some might say they've been kidnapped and should be helped."

Tequi tapped the pistol on his hip and shook his head emphatically. "How do I get myself into these things?"

"What are you thinking, Tequi?"

"That if Masher here gets results that she's telling the truth, then I might be inclined to head to those coordinates and do some investigating."

Zay's tail whipped into a fresh frenzy. "You'd be making a big mistake."

"Why do ya say that?"

"Because I think it's a trap."

"Well, you haven't heard the rest of my plan yet. The wheels are turning in my head full throttle."

"I thought I heard some slow, eerie creaking," Raw quipped.

Zay cringed, "This is no time for jokes, Raw."

"Aucontraire, perilous times are when we need laughter most."

Zay crossed her arms, "That's a human belief I'm glad I don't share." She looked at Meago and asked, "What about Evol? Does he know you're telling us?"

She shuddered at the thought. "Absolutely not. He might kill me if he knew."

"We'll have to deal with Evol immediately."

"Not so fast. It might be better to let him think that everything is normal, otherwise he might panic, and who knows what he might do if he feels panic."

"So just let him go on sending data to those parasitic Piscorans?"

"Good point. I think we should take measures to neutralize his operations immediately. We'll need a smoking gun."

Meago stared at the floor blankly and said sadly, "Like I said, I'm not privy to his transmissions."

"I've got an idea. Tell him you came clean."

"And get her killed?"

"I'm not finished. We're gonna send her to Evol with backup, in case he gets violent."

Meago perked up. "He won't as long as someone else is there."

"Don't worry. We won't send you in alone."

"And if we get this admission or, God forbid, violent act? What then?"

"A ship-wide communique. Nobody will offer him sanctuary. Then we give him two options. Temporary confinement, or dropped off at the nearest authoritarian-controlled planet."

Later that night, in Evol and Meago's living quarters, Meago waited impatiently for Evol to make an appearance. She fidgeted nervously as her mind ran. She hoped she was doing the right thing. She hoped that everything would work out ok. That's what happened when people did the right thing, right? Things went in their favor.

She heard the front entrance open. Meago peered down at her handbag quickly and whispered, “Well, here we go.”

Evol came in. Some sweat was glistening off his forehead. “Just back from the gym?”

“Yeah. The facilities on this thing are marvelous.”

He looked at Meago’s face. It showed uneasiness, which he picked up on immediately.

“There’s something important I need to tell you, Evol.”

“Yes, it’s written all over your face. What’s the matter?”

“I told Zay, Tequi, and some others about what we’ve been doing here on Agora One.”

Evol’s face flushed and his body stiffened with angst. “You did what?” he asked with disbelief. He took a couple steps closer. She rose from the sofa with eyes locked in his. You could tell a lot about someone’s intentions by looking in their eyes. She didn’t like what she saw.

“You must be joking,” he said sharply.

“I couldn’t bear it anymore. All the lies. They’re good people, Evol. I couldn’t go on with the lying to them.”

He took another step towards her. She gulped and took a deep breath. His fury grew. “But why tell them? To what end? What is that going to accomplish? You let your emotions get the best of you.”

“I followed conscience, is what I did.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. We have a mission. Do you know what the Piscorans will do to us now? Or to our families?” He was freaking out. His heart raced. He lunged at Meago, who put her newly acquired combat skills to good use. She dodged him and put a defensive knee in his gut. He rolled and took her legs out, though, sending her tumbling to the ground. His anger carried him on top of her and, just as he was about to swing, a smothering cloud of sand swirled out of Meago’s handbag and subdued him.

Meago gasped and scrambled to find her communicator. She did, and got Zay on the line.

“There’s your admission, with Dans as witness.”

A few days later, Tequi was about to embark on another adventure. This time, it was to the coordinates that Meago had supplied. Preparations were being made to take off shortly. In the days that followed the admission from Evol, Tabe’s contact that had originally supplied the information about the calamity on Earth had been contacted. It was a friend of Tabe’s, a fellow Talem, who admitted that he had made that communication under duress. He had been ambushed by over 10 Piscoran ships and had been specifically instructed to contact Agora One with the news.

Evol had also been dealt with. Part of Tequi’s quarters had been partitioned, soundproofed, and made into a holding cell. Since Tequi had brought him aboard, he had to take the responsibility of confining the criminal until Evol was off the ship. Meago, meanwhile, hadn’t been confined, but had agreed to be put under 24 hour surveillance from a shadow drone. These were the punishments until Tequi brought both of them to the coordinates that Meago had supplied, where, supposedly, they would find the last Earth humans and some of their Piscoran captors.

As they began the journey, Turbo spoke harshly, “Morquellia, of all places. How did I ever allow myself to get hoodwinked into doing this?”

“Hoodwinked?” Tequi asked. He chuckled heartily as he lay back in a deep-tissue detox lounge chair. His eyes were slits and he grinned happily as the euphoria of rejuvenation was pulsing through his pores. “You knew exactly what you were getting into, just like the rest of us. Besides, what’s not to like about Morquellia?”

Raw grinned, “Let me take this one, Turbo. What’s not to like about Morquellia? Where to begin?”

“I was being sarcastic. Please don’t tell me.”

Tequi and Raw both knew more than enough about their destination to make them queasy. Morquellia was about as swampy and murky a place as one could imagine. The native inhabitants took after their environment. They were quite oozy creatures, roughly the body type of an Earth bullfrog, stood about human height, and held a sub-zero on the cuteness scale. They were a terribly violent species, and had been for thousands of years. Their society was extremely stratified, with a tiny minority ruling over a huge underclass of slaves. The rulers were grotesquely bloated figures, due to their overindulgence and sedentary lifestyle. The slave class were overworked and malnourished, so they naturally took on a gaunt appearance. In recent years, the slave class had been dying off at an alarming rate, and the environment was also suffering degradation from centuries of abuse and misuse. They had extremely primitive technology compared to those in the Space Agora,

“What do you think the Piscorans want with the Morquellians?”

“Who are you asking?”

Tequi grinned. “Masher seems to be the brightest one here, so Masher I guess.”

Turbo shrieked, “Hey, I’m newer and much more advanced than Masher!”

“Yeah, but Masher’s been around for 500 years and has a wealth of first-hand experience.”

Masher assembled its floating particles into human form, complete with a tasteful clothing ensemble from the mid-21st century, and took a seat near Raw. “I suppose we might find out when we get there.”

Raw groaned. “Aw, come on! What kind of an answer is that?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Hypothesize.”

“From what I know of the two species, it appears possible that they could have mutual interests in alignment.”

“Such as?”

“The Morquellian population has been declining for over a century. They could be in search of fresh blood and fresh slaves. This would be supplied by the Piscorans with the Earth survivors they’ve kidnapped. It also seems logical to think that, due to the extreme environmental problems they face, the tiny ruling segment of the population could be looking to the Piscorans for technology to go off planet.”

“I could have told you that.”

“Stop it, Turbo!”

“What would the Piscorans get out of the deal?”

“A base of operations on a planet with excellent natural defenses. Nebulae, asteroid fields, not to mention the hazy and murky conditions on Morquellia itself.”

Tequi asked through his permagrin, courtesy of his detox lounge, “Whatever happened to the Piscoran home world anyway?”

“They destroyed it shortly after stealing technology necessary to go intergalactic.”

Tequi stopped grinning. “Why’d they do that?”

“It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Right. Turbo, how long til we reach the asteroid field?”

“About 22 minutes.”

Raw quipped, “Not very exact for a machine.”

“Tequi just tells me to round up or down when it comes to time, despite my protests.”

“That might bite you in the keister one of these days, Tequi.”

“And after we get past the asteroid field, how long til we reach the nebula?”

“Just shy of an hour at top speed.”

“Ok, give a friendly reminder to Shock One about their responsibilities.”

Raw said, “Give me a friendly reminder as well.”

Tequi sighed, “Turbo, please throw up a holo map.”

A holographic map of the local star systems they were entering, from the point of their current location, to Morquellia, illuminated the high, angled ceiling above them. Tequi rose and started pointing. When he pointed at a place on the map, it glowed in correspondence as if being touched.

Tequi explained, "There's the asteroid field. There's the nebula. There's Morquellia, in all its anti-glory. We're going to go around the asteroid field and the nebula, which will take a little longer, but is much safer and easier to navigate. While we're speeding around those obstacles, Shock One and Boomerang will do some investigating. Shock One will search for Piscoran ships in the asteroid field. Boomerang will search the nebula."

Raw got a more-confused-than-normal look on his face. Tequi took note. "Question, Raw?"

"Yeah, who or what is 'Boomerang'?"

"I suppose we'll go ahead and let you in on that little secret. Turbo, put Boomerang's pilot on the holo."

A satisfied, red-and-white face popped up above the group, grinning ear-to-ear.

Raw wrinkled his nose and groaned.

"Happy to see me?"

"What are you doing?"

"Flying a spaceship, which is more than I can say for you," Zay quipped.

"You're dad's gonna kill you!"

"Nah, I'll just blame you."

"Ha ha, right. Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Cuz I didn't want to hear you whine."

"You told your dad, though, right?"

"Nah, I just left Agora One to fend for themselves."

Raw blinked.

"Of course I told him! He forbid it, I laughed, end of story." She turned her attention to Tequi.

"Can we go on with the plan, please?"

"Gladly. As I was saying, Zay, you'll pilot Boomerang through the nebula and look for any Piscorans that might be hanging around."

"I thought sensors were useless in the nebula."

"Ship's sensors are, but that's where Fost comes in."

Raw asked nervously, "Fost is with you, Zay?"

"Stay focused, Raw. It'll be ok, I promise."

"Fost can, like all Ducleds, sense other life forms at great distances, even in a nebula. After they report their findings, we'll continue to approach Morquellia, and they'll fall back to their preplanned distances. Shock One will stay 500LY back, and Boomerang will be 1,000LY back of Shock One."

"Wait, what if they find some Piscorans lurking?"

"They'll report it to us and ignore them."

"And if they're engaged by them?"

"If by engaged, you mean violently attacked, then they'll defend themselves, naturally. Now, once Morquellia gets within range of Turbo's sensors, then we can start to see what's going on there. If they have ships in orbit, what the situation on the ground is, and so forth. If their presence is too great in number, we'll have no choice but to flee."

"What number do you call too great?"

"Turbo, I leave this is your capable non-hands."

"Based on what I know about Piscoran technological capabilities, I could handle at least five of them at once. More than that would be risky."

"Keep in mind the info they stole from Agora One. They might have upgraded capabilities."

"They probably haven't had time to implement it yet."

“Anyway, we’ll judge the situation as it presents itself and figure out what action to take at that point. Ok, everyone get ready. Oh, and Turbo, where’s Tabe at?”

“Still snoozing.”

“Get that clumsy metal brute up and update him on our status, will ya?”

“One more important thing,” Raw said. “Why is your other ship called Boomerang?”

Tequi sighed, “Put it on the holo, Turbo.”

A boomerang shaped vessel popped up a few inches from Raw’s face.

After skirting the perimeter of the asteroid field and nebula, and receiving word from both Boomerang and Shock One that no Piscoran presence was detected, Tequi proceeded towards Morquellia. Turbo parked a pedestrian 10 light years shy of the puke-green colored planet. Shock One and Boomerang fell back to their preplanned distances, in succession from each other.

Two Piscoran ships were in orbit around Morquellia. Tequi asked, “Life signs on ships, Turbo?”

“There are two Piscorans and 101 humans on each vessel, along with five mobile and non-intellectual machines.”

“You can just call ‘em robots, thanks.”

Raw looked queasily at the scene of a puke-green planet being flanked by two death-red ships of the Piscorans. “Do they intentionally make their ships so fuggly?”

Masher mocked, “We didn’t come all this way to judge their taste in aesthetics, Raw. Beauty is subjective, anyway.”

“I can’t believe they’ve got that many people crammed into little ships like that. They must be packed tighter than Bizorian Squeeze Fleas.”

Tabé asked, “What about on the ground? How many Piscorans?”

“It appears that they only have two SPEED-capable ships on the surface.”

“The ones in orbit are, too?”

“Yep.”

“What level?”

“Five.”

“So we can double their speed, and we know our weapons and shielding are superior, so how about we investigate in person?”

“To what end?”

“Well, we can at least free some of the prisoners. We can accommodate a hundred more, at least.”

“A hundred-one if Raw decides to vacation on Morquellia.”

“Only if you stay to keep me company, Tabé.”

“Have we been scanned?”

“No, they’re aware of our presence, but appear to be ignoring us.”

“They know we can outgun and outrun them, so they probably are waiting for us to make the first move.”

“Tequi, you sound almost like you’ve got a touch of hubris.”

“Just stating a fact, that’s all. Turbo, how many more humans are on Morquellia?”

“Over ten thousand. Half are underground.”

Tequi looked at Masher, “Obviously, we can’t free all the prisoners, but some is better than none. Masher, you’re the most well-suited candidate for a stealth move. How about it?”

“What’s your objective, Tequi?”

“Offer the humans on board one of the ships an escape. We’ll send a fleet of escape pods with you, if they accept. Turbo, you can disable the Piscorans and their bots, right?”

“Don’t insult me with such trivial questions.”

“Now who’s got hubris? Anyway, how about it, Masher?”

“I’ll go in through one of their waste disposal subsystems. Those will be the easiest to penetrate undetected. I’ll stay in contact with Turbo throughout.”

Masher’s glowing particles dissolved from human shape and became a floating mass again, like a cloud or a magic carpet. Just as it was about to exit, Tequi yelled, “Wait, hold on!”

All eyes and sensors went to Tequi. “It just dawned on me that maybe Masher isn’t the best choice for this.”

Raw quipped, “Are you going to disassemble all your cells and reassemble on their ship, like Masher?”

“Seriously, funny man, think about it. All those people over there lived under a tyranny run by A.I. It’s all they know.”

“He has a point. I didn’t take into account the emotional implications of my appearance before them,” Masher conceded.

Raw’s eyes popped and he exclaimed, “I got it! Lucky for all of us, I’ve got a genius plan.”

Tabé scoffed.

Raw continued, “Masher, you sneak in, do a little recon, and disable their security systems so Tequi and I can come aboard. When we get in, you sneak out. The prisoners will only see humans, so we don’t unsettle them.”

Tequi looked Raw in the eye and smiled proudly. He grasped his friend on the shoulder and said, “Raw, that’s a damn fine plan. I knew you’d contribute something eventually.”

Raw’s face scrunched as he absorbed Tequi’s teasing wit. Tequi turned back to Masher, “Ok, you’re up. Turbo, get us within range so Masher can reach their ship in minutes, and make sure those Piscorans are having deep dreams before his arrival, ok?”

“Piscorans don’t dream, but their skeleton crew has already been put to sleep, if that’s what you mean.”

Masher modified its particles to withstand the conditions of space. It floated easily out of Turbo through the environmental control systems and out into space. Once in space, it shot itself like a streak towards one of the Piscoran ships and halted itself microns in front of the outer hull. Turbo helped guide Masher to one of the waste disposal systems and after finegaling with the main computer for a moment, gained access. The disposal system was opened on a micro level, allowing Masher’s nano-particles to slip through as smooth as silk.

Masher, guided by Turbo’s reading of the ship’s internal schematics, zipped through a maze of ducts, pipings, wirings, casings, and other structural components until it finally came into a space big enough to hold a humanoid. It was in a corridor. A six-wheeled service bot stood frozen. Masher noted how eerily silent everything was, almost lifeless.

Turbo guided Masher to the cockpit, where it found two Piscorans slumped over at ninety-degree angles, all four faces snoozing away, thanks to the sleep pulse Turbo had sent minutes earlier. Masher absorbed all the data from the main control board, found the cargo bay docking controls, and disabled their security protocols.

Tequi and Raw were waiting in two rescue pods when Turbo announced, “Ok, ready when you are. Their cargo door’s security system is off. You’ll be free to enter.”

“We’ll take off after we have more details about the human occupants and exactly where they are on the ship.”

“And what their status is.”

Turbo guided Masher to where the other life signs were coming from. When Masher reached a spade-shaped metallic door and was about to gain entry, a ferocious silvery fist smashed into the door. The blow had been meant for Masher. Masher had split itself into a fountain of particles to barely avoid the blow.

Masher yelled at Turbo, "I thought you had all of their defenses neutralized!" A ray blasted from the forearm of the giant quasi-metallic creature and whipped up and down the walls of the corridor and entryway.

"I guess I missed one," Turbo said dryly.

"Any chance you could go ahead and finish the job?!"

"I'm working on it," Turbo said with an annoying casualness.

Masher shot into an air duct to find temporary sanctuary from the onslaught of whatever it was that was attacking it. The hulking, silvery figure pounded a fist into the vent and cut through it like butter. It sent flame racing through the air duct and Masher shot into a secondary conduit just in time to dodge the golden rage.

"Got it," Turbo said, sounding very pleased. The giant crumpled to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Masher shot back out the charred duct and into the open, where it took note of the fallen being. "Why didn't you see this cyborg," Masher said, annoyed.

"Nobody's perfect," Turbo said defensively. "Did it used to be human?"

"Well, it looks like it could have been human at some point. It has similar physiology, but has metallic skin, if you can call it that. And the brain, oh dear," Masher explained and then stopped cold.

"What's that, 'oh dear', Masher?" Tequi joined in the convo, having been patched through by Turbo.

"The brain has been modified with technological components. I have seen cyborgs before, but none quite like this. Turbo, you can't see if the others beyond this entryway have similar modifications, can you?"

"Many are fully human, others are not."

Masher said, "I'll go ahead and take a look."

"You have a disguise so you don't freak them out?"

"I'll appear as a beam of light."

And so it did, streaming through a tiny crevice in the entryway that had been caused by Turbo. Masher was astonished by what it saw.

A room with space for about 75 people, which was currently holding nearly 100. They were all human, or at least mostly human, as many of them had various bodily modifications. Some were shooting each other, absorbing various firearm projectiles in a carefree manner, as if they were children playing with nothing more than snowballs. Some were walking on the walls and the dimly lit, high ceiling. Others were engaged in games such as multi-tier poker and drinking and smoking to their hedonistic content. A few were stacked on top of each other, in unbelievably uncomfortable positions. By their facial expressions, nobody would have been the wiser, however. They had looks of utter bliss on their faces, murmuring and groaning with pleasure. None of them took notice of the new beam of light that had entered their environment, or so it seemed. Masher decided to leave, just in case one of them had the ability to sense A.I.

Masher reported its findings to Tequi and Raw, who grew more perplexed by the second.

"Were they all modified?"

"63 percent have been modified. The rest appeared to have normal human physiology."

Tequi peered through the clear bubble of his pod and exchanged looks with Raw. "What do ya think, Raw? Should we give it a go?"

"They could be hostile, the modified ones, I mean. They don't know us from Adam."

"True," Tequi agreed, as his gaze drifted off deep in his own analysis of the situation. If two strangers just magically showed up in that room full of cyborgs, what kind of reaction would they receive? Chances were high, it seemed to both Raw and Tequi, that they wouldn't be receiving the warmest of welcomes, to say the least. They did have the advantage of superior technology, but outnumbered by so many and in such close quarters would negate that advantage. Even with Tabe along, they would still be facing immense odds. And to what end? Was it too late to rescue the ones that had been modified, like the one that had been hell-bent on extinguishing Masher in the corridor?



Tabé broke the thoughtful silence. "I've got an idea."

"Go ahead, Tabé."

"Contact them by hologram. If they shoot your face off, at least it'll just be a fancy light show."

"Thanks for painting that vivid picture, Tabé."

"It's a good idea."

"I didn't say it wasn't a good idea. Let's do it."

They groaned and piled out of the pods, making their way back to the observation lounge. Tequi took a seat on his favorite detox lounger. A holo-control popped up next to him and Turbo informed him that everything was set for direct transmission to the room Masher had been in.

"Wait," Raw said anxiously. "You're not really gonna show up in a lounge chair and expect them to take you seriously, are you?"

Tequi gave a scowl to his friend and grudgingly rose. "Let her rip."

A holographic image of Tequi, nearly a flawless physical representation of him, appeared next to a poker table on one of the Piscoran ships. All activity screeched to a halt, and nearly 200 eyes took in the new presence. A dozen cyborgs raised weapons at the intruder. A young male figure from the back of the room ordered, "Stop! Lower your weapons."

They obeyed. Tequi spoke to the young man, who appeared to not be modified. "Greetings."

"Likewise," said the young man. "You are human?"

"Yes," Tequi said.

"What do you want?"

"You have all been taken here from Earth against your will, is that correct?"

"Quite to the contrary, we have happily been relocated by our saviors, the Piscorans."

Tequi struggled to not gag, "Saviors?"

"Yes, the Piscorans vanquished our former masters. We are now free. Your facial expression tells me that you are shocked by this information. Are you not from Earth?"

"My ancestors were from Earth, but I wasn't living there when the Piscorans came."

Tequi thought of Meago, who had volunteered to go into stasis and was still in a deep sleep. "I was told that you were being held as slaves here by the Piscorans. I am offering an escape from your servitude."

This drew a wave of grunts, roars, and murmurs from the crowd. The young one smiled at Tequi, "I can assure you, nobody is here against their will. We are happy to join the Piscoran race and to spread its majesty throughout the universe."

Tequi continued uneasily, "I see. I'll leave you in peace, then. I just say, before I go, if anyone wishes to leave by their own free will, speak now, and we'll help you escape."

All stared at him with flat faces as the room fell pin-drop silent.

Tequi stopped the transmission. He looked at Raw. "I've got a bad feeling about this. Turbo! Get us out of here, max speed!"

In a flash, they were passing celestial objects. They rounded the asteroid belt and the nebula. Shortly thereafter, a transmission came in from Shock One. "Ambush!"

Tequi screamed, "What's that, Shock One?"

The transmission was cut. "Turbo, what happened to Shock One?"

"Inconclusive. What I do know is that there are Piscoran ships, over 100, coming from all possible directions. We've been encircled and if all current trajectories hold we'll intercept a Piscoran vessel in less than 5 earth minutes."

Tequi's face soured. Raw trembled. Masher glowed red. Tabé spun midair with the fervor of anticipation.

At the same time on Boomerang, Fost turned 3 of his eyes to Zay, who was busy piloting Boomerang away from the Piscoran ambush, with mere seconds to spare. He kept his other three eyes

on the holo-viewer. He said, “Tequi’s ship has been captured by a swarm of Piscorans. Shock One has been destroyed.”

Zay’s whip-like tail started to slice through the air in a circular pattern, gaining speed as she processed what she was hearing. It was almost unreal, as if in a bad dream.

“Boomerang, head to Agora One intercept, max speed.”

The luminous scales on Noc’s face darkened and flared. His voice dropped heavily as he tried to control his mounting rage, “I’ve done everything you’ve asked, but this is out of the question. My cooperation stops now.”

“That would be unwise for your personal comfort,” Moden boomed.

“I don’t have the power to send Agora One to you, even if I wanted to. It’s a decision made by an ownership board, the ones that own the core infrastructure. Why do you want Agora One to go anyway? You’ll get annihilated! Have you gone mad? Correction, even madder?”

“I’m sorry to hear that, old friend.”

“Don’t call me that. We never were friends before, and we certainly aren’t now. I’ve done all I’m going to do for you, now get out of my life!”

“Very well, Noc. You’ve made your choice. I’ll see you after the so-called ‘annihilation’, as you put it.”

Moments later, as Noc was trying to stop fuming from his excruciating conversation with Moden, another holo-call on his personal line caught his attention. He glared at the blinking holo-emitter and reluctantly bellowed an order to receive the call. His daughter’s distraught face appeared before him. He was nearly too upset to notice. “What now, Zay?” he huffed as his scales flared.

“They’ve been captured by the Piscorans.”

“This shouldn’t surprise you.”

“We got ambushed as well, but had a big enough distance between us that enabled our escape.”

His eyes scowled and face twisted, “Congratulations.”

“How can you be so cold?”

“How could you go into a situation like that? How could you leave Agora One on a whim like that? How could you betray your own father and the thousands of Agora One customers and crew that count on you?”

“Is that all you can say? You’re not going to ask if we’re ok? Or if we can help Raw and my friends?”

“What is this ‘we’ business? Your friends got themselves into trouble, doing stupid things, and now they’re paying a price.”

“How can you be so heartless?”

“How can you be so naive? I didn’t raise such a naive, weak child, did I?”

“No, you didn’t raise me at all. You were too occupied with business.”

This stung Noc. He gave pause and took a deep breath. “Look, Zay, even if I wanted to help them by sending Agora One, it’s not my decision to make. The core ownership board has to agree on it. I’m only one. There are many others. You know that!”

“And how many of them know Tequi or someone else in the Vox family? Call a meeting and bring it to their attention. At least do that much!”

“The more important question is, as you know with all decisions and actions, is it moral under Natural Law? Were Tequi, Raw, and their companions in the right?”

“All evidence we have suggests that the survivors of Earth’s environmental calamities were kidnapped by the Piscorans. Yes, trying to rescue victims of kidnapping is morally justified! You know that!”

“Be that as it may, Agora One is not a rescue ship. It also has some technical flaws that are still being worked out, as you well know. I suggest you make the inhabitants of Agora One aware of the situation and those that wish to may use their own resources to mount a rescue operation for their beloved friends. Or Tequi’s family, for that matter.”

“That’s true, but it will take much longer. Agora One is just hours away right now. Keep in mind that the longer they have Tequi’s ship, the better chance they’ll have to copy its tech. That’ll make the Piscorans an even greater menace.”

He looked thoughtfully for a moment at his daughter’s determined face. Her fiery determination reminded him of Zay’s mother.

Zay continued, “I’m going back for them, regardless. Just keep that in mind.”

He gulped hard, “I’ll talk to the board.”

Tequi, Raw, Masher, and Tabe were in four separate, transparent force-field cell blocks. Meago and Evol had been taken off of Turbo as well, but were not nearby.

Masher was floating in the center of its space, with its highest defensive protocols active, in order to prevent any hacking attempts to gain control of its functions. Tabe had gone into a hibernation state, laying perfectly still in the center of its cell. Raw was curled in the fetal position, snoring, with mouth drooping open. Tequi sighed and looked at his companions enviously. He certainly couldn’t sleep at a time like this.

He’d only been imprisoned once before, and that was only for a short while for a misunderstanding on Xonora. This was different. These were the Piscorans. There was no telling what they had in store for Tequi, his friends, or his ship, for that matter. He wondered how Turbo was doing, and had a slight internal chuckle at the prospect of Turbo exercising some of its rather unorthodox defense protocols. It was a near certainty that the Piscorans would attempt to reverse-engineer, or at least copy, some of Turbo’s more advanced systems. Any attempt at doing so, however, would be met by resistance, such as convenient power outages, electrical shocks when touched, environmental control problems, and many other “unfortunate” malfunctions that would inhibit any intrusion. As long as they didn’t manage to gain control of Turbo’s core, then they would have a giant, nearly useless, and almost untouchable pile of parts on their hands. Then there was Shock One, which surely had been destroyed, one way or another. Either it had been overwhelmed by a swarm of ships and gone down swinging, or it had gone into auto-destruct mode to escape capture. The autonomous robots on board, and the ship itself, were programmed this way.

Tequi’s mind wandering was interrupted with a jolt to his electro-cage. His eyes met a Piscoran face. Its beady, hollow eyes looked at him disparagingly. The others received the same jolt in order to break them from their slumber. Raw slowly and reluctantly became conscious of his surroundings, wiped his big, tired eyes and stared at his captor blankly. The Piscoran guard spoke firmly as it paced slowly with its lower appendages, “You must prepare yourselves for the coming of Lord Moden. Kneel and bow your heads. Don’t look at his face.”

“Gladly,” Raw muttered.

The Piscoran glared at Raw, “It is an honor and privilege to speak with Lord Moden. Why he is bothering to use his time to interact with an inferior species such as yourselves, I don’t know, but who am I to question Lord Moden?”

Tequi chuckled, “I don’t have respect for violent thugs, so I’ll have to pass. Not that I bow to anyone, anyway.”

The Piscoran hissed, rattled its claws wildly, and its stinger uncurled, ready to strike. “Back away, soldier,” came a thunderous voice from the dripping entryway to the cavern. The guard recognized the voice, and immediately turned and bowed.

Moden took long, slow, calculated steps towards the cell cluster, while he kept one face focused on the prisoners and his other face watching his back, as always. “Leave us,” he ordered the guard, who scurried off instantly through a secondary exit.

Moden stopped in front of the cell block and looked at his prisoners as if they were prey. Tabe thrust himself with all his might at the force field, but was repelled easily. Moden looked at the powerful, gunmetal-colored Tabe with keen interest. "This is my first time meeting one of the mighty Talem species. Such wonderful physical and mental traits, a shame they should go to such a waste. In good time, though, your kind will serve a greater purpose."

Moden turned abruptly, gazing at Raw with one face, and Tequi with the other. "Which is more than I can say for your kind. Humans, the most fragile of all. I must say, though, Tequi, is it? Yes, Tequi, your family's reputation is well known to me. After sampling some of your family's product that you have aboard your ship, I now know why. It's an intriguing libation."

Tequi and Raw both stood with their arms crossed, stiff, unflinching.

Moden continued, "I suppose you might have some questions for me, but first, I've got some for you. Did you actually think that the ships you found in orbit would have such porous defenses? Are you that naive?"

"Well, we know that pirates aren't too bright, so yeah, we figured it would be a cakewalk."

"If we, pirates, as you say, aren't so bright, then what does that say about yourselves?"

Tequi and Raw grimaced and held their tongues.

"Secondly, I must thank you for bringing Meago and Evol back to me. They did a fine con job, didn't they?" Moden whipped his tongue at one of the flies revolving near his face and ingested it in one fell swoop. This was common for him when he got excited, and talking about con jobs certainly did the trick.

Tequi and Raw grabbed their stomachs and looked away. Pleased with himself, Moden prompted his prisoners, "Please, I know you're itching to ask questions, so by all means, proceed."

Tequi began, "What are you doing with the humans you kidnapped from Earth?"

"You mean the ones that I liberated from that inferior hellhole they were stuck on?"

"From one hellhole to another."

"Why didn't they try to leave with you if they're so trapped in this hellhole?"

"You've got them under mind control, it appears. And I have to ask, if we're such a 'fragile' species, as you put it, then why keep them around? Why go through the trouble of trapping us here, for that matter?"

"It's very simple, actually. Yes, humans are very fragile, like glass. But also, like glass, they can be put to good use."

"Taking people through violent means for any purpose that is against their will is wrong."

"Oh, how preachy of you! Spare me your idyllic fantasies! They are lucky to have an opportunity to join the Piscorans at such an opportune time!"

"And what time would that be?"

"The birth of the first Universal Piscoran Empire! Of course, the species that join my empire will never be Piscoran, shamefully enough, but they can learn the Piscoran ways and contribute to the greatness of the empire!"

Moden's stinger and claws rattled like a symphony of maracas from his intense hubris.

Tequi said, "So that explains at least one other reason why you're here on Morquellia, of all places. You're taking some Morquellians into the ranks of your foot soldiers. I'm guessing you don't plan on stopping at Morquellia. You're going to bring other immoral, low-tech species in to live and die for you as well." He paused and shook his scruffy face emphatically, "And that'll be your so-called empire."

"You're smarter than you look, I must say. Bravo. You know a bit about empire building! No doubt you know this due to the ancient history of your home planet, Earth."

"What the hell do you want with us?"

"He's hoping to lure Agora One and capture it," Masher interjected.

"Your artificial intellect serves you well," Moden said as he gave a mock stab towards Masher with his stinger.

“What are you talking about, Masher?”

“Agora One will likely come to our aid, and Moden thinks he can overtake them like he did us.”

“He’s not that insane, is he?”

“Dude, he’s standing right there.”

“Ya, I know. Don’t care.”

Raw said confidently, “There’s no way they’d send Agora One. On the contrary, Zay’s dad would be quite pleased to be rid of me, I’m sure. Sorry about your luck, Tequi.”

“As amusing as all this is, I must be going. Before I do, though, I have a most wonderful gift to bestow on you. Especially you, Raw.”

“Real metallic shackles to go with the electronic barrier?”

“I’m going to give you the truth.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

“Noc is one of us.”

“Insane, megalomaniac, compulsive liar. You hit the trifecta!”

Their two-faced tormentor grasped a portable holo-emitter. Schematics of Agora One’s environmental systems began showing in full detail. Moden’s face lit up with dark pleasure.

Raw looked at Tequi. Tequi looked at Raw. They both shrugged. “I have no idea what that is.”

Masher said, “That’s the blueprint for the environmental system on Agora One.”

Moden bellowed, “I’ll leave it to you to ponder why and how I attained it, and more importantly, how I might use it. And while you still can, I might add.” He strode away through the dark tunnel from which he came.

Raw had a befuddled look on his baby-face, “Well, that was cryptic enough. What do you think he meant by that?”

Tabe was spinning excruciatingly fast. “Calm down, Tabe. Save your energy for when we have a chance to escape.”

Masher said, “Perhaps what he meant by his final statement was that you will soon lose your cognitive functions.”

“Thanks for that happy insight, Masher.”

Tabe said with a deep tone of disapproval, “Is everything a joke to you, Raw?”

“It’s just my way of fighting off fear. It’s a defense mechanism. Laugh or cry, right? I prefer to laugh.”

Tequi looked at Masher’s hovering particle cloud. “Masher, how could that wicked maniac have gotten his claws on the environmental control information for Agora One? Isn’t that part of the core infrastructure that only a tiny minority of the core ownership group has access to?”

“And certain A.I., like myself,” Masher confirmed.

“So how could Moden gain access?”

“The most logical explanation seems to be that someone with access granted it to Meago and Evol while they were on board.”

“You think that it was Noc, don’t you!”

“We cannot rule out that possibility. He does have access to such information, and if what Moden says about him is true, then it becomes an even more likely prospect.”

“Why would he tell us, though?”

“Why do psychopaths do anything?”

“They do things to suit their desires. How your knowledge of Noc’s supposed complicity with the Piscorans can serve Moden’s purposes remains to be seen.”

Zay paced back and forth impatiently, trying desperately to control her angst. Rage at the Piscorans. Angry at her father. Angry that the Agora One core ownership board had rejected the idea

of a rescue effort almost unanimously. Resentment at Raw for going off on that ill-fated adventure in the first place. And now, perturbed at herself for not being able to stop her friends from being captured.

Fost floated near her, and Dans, joining via holo-call from her home world, was spinning her particles methodically in a figure-eight pattern, what she always did when involved in intense thought. She was on her home world because the final transition into her sex change had begun, and it was necessary to be there.

Fost calmly suggested, "Let's review the options."

"Please," Zay said harshly.

"Tequi's family cannot go it alone. They don't have nearly enough ships to face an armada, even though they clearly have a technological edge."

"So far as we know," Dans interjected. "We don't know what else the Piscorans have managed to steal."

"True," Fost said tonelessly. "Agora One will not go, and those who are living or staying on Agora One right now could band together in a rescue effort, but this would take time to organize."

"And we don't have much time, because we don't know if they plan on keeping them on Morquellia."

"We also don't know what they will do to them."

Zay sighed, "Thanks, that's a comforting thought."

Fost focused all six eyes on Zay. "You can't rule out the possibility that the Piscorans will do unpleasant things to our friends, especially when we already have some knowledge of what they've done to the Earth humans."

What had they done to the Earth humans? They were clearly cooperating with the Piscorans, but why? They knew that some of them had implants. This could account for mind control over some, but what about the others? No concrete reasons were known why a large segment of the captured humans were behaving the way the Piscorans wished. And that was only on the one ship that Tequi had encountered. What of the majority on the surface? Were the Earth survivors really that grateful to the Piscorans for eliminating their previous rulers, a crazed A.I. doped up on pseudo-emotional stimuli? And what would happen with Meago and Evol? Meago, if she was genuine in her reasons for her confession to Zay and the others, could possibly be spreading word to her fellow prisoners about better possibilities. Would she tell the tale of the better life presented by living under Natural Law in a greater Space Agora, where freedom and innovation flourished? Or was she acting the entire time as part of a complex ruse devised by the Piscorans? And what would the Piscorans do with their two spies? Would they keep them around, let them go, or murder them?

And what did they know about the Piscorans? They had no home world. It's environment had become unlivable. They had stolen nearly all of the advanced technology they had, which was considerable. They lived by a certain code, a very dark code. Their rampant egotism dictated that survival was the number one objective, at any and all costs. A dogmatic belief that physical might made right. The strongest and most ruthless had the right to rule. This had always been a part of their culture. But since the loss of their home world, it had morphed into something much more sinister. Desperation to survive off planet had only increased their intense will to survive at all costs. In their minds, if they could trick you, or overpower you, defraud you, or steal from you, then it was their right to do so. This was, of course, in stark contrast to the true Natural Laws of the universe.

Dans broke out of the figure-eight pattern and became a thin, humanoid figure. Dans exclaimed, "I've got it! I have an idea! Why didn't I think of this earlier? Well, I suppose it didn't take me too long! This is so exciting!"

"You're rambling! Out with the idea, already!" Zay yelled in Dans's outline of a face.

"No need to get huffy, my oh my!" Dans said with a hint of hurt in her voice. "I suppose it's excusable, considering the circumstances. Anyway, here's the idea. Tequi is immensely popular,

right? There are a great many individuals on board Agora One who will certainly sympathize with us in this situation.”

“Raw has a great number of allies as well.”

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘great’ in this case, Zay. He has a small fan base, but...”

“Ok, ok, I get it.”

“But you’re right, Raw will have support from some of the current residents on Agora One. We also know that there are a good number of Talems and Ducleds on board, and they will more than likely wish to make some effort to save Tabe.”

“We’ve also got the moral high ground, which is the number one thing we have going for us. Tequi and his crew were in the right, trying to free kidnapping victims. Thousands of kidnapping victims.”

“Ok, so we have quite a few sympathizers and allies on Agora One. So what?”

Dans kept speed-talking. “We give them all the details of what has transpired. We suggest to each of them that they could leave Agora One out of disgust with the core ownership board, and in support of Tequi and co. If enough of them leave Agora One at once, and the core board knows why, they might just change their outlook.”

Fost turned all six eyes to Dans, “Using market forces to our advantage. Yes, that could work. Why didn’t I think of that?”

3 days later.....

“Congratulations, Zay. You get what you want,” Noc said to the hologram of his only daughter.

“Just like my father.”

“Rather than lose nearly half of our customers overnight, not to mention the black mark on Agora One’s reputation, the ship will set a course for Morquellia. Zay, what are you thinking about the human captives, from Earth?”

“That’s a complex question. After what happened with Meago and Evol, I’m reluctant to attempt any rescue for them, especially after viewing what Tequi experienced while near Morquellia. They don’t want to be free. Perhaps their minds are under some type of coercive influence, perhaps via technological means, so it’s hard to say what they truly want and think. If only we could have more information about them and what the Piscorans have done to them, then we might be able to know their true heart and mindsets.”

“But we know that they lived under tyrannical conditions on Earth. They know nothing else.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t that make them nescient, rather than ignorant?”

“That could be argued, I suppose.”

Zay took a deep breath and started pacing. “There’s another factor to consider as well. Those who interact in the Space Agora all have knowledge of Natural Law and, for the most part, act accordingly. Humans are a part of that. The ones recently taken from Earth are also human. So who’s to say they shouldn’t be given a second chance? Especially if they’ve spent their whole lives nescient of Natural Law and have never had an opportunity to know it and choose to live in accordance with it?”

“You make a strong case, my dear. As you know, the core board and I don’t have a say in who or what our passengers bring into their own living spaces. As long as they don’t interfere with core ship functionality, we must respect their privacy. If a Ducled wants to have some Earth survivors as guests in their private dwelling, that is their choice. My question is, what will you do personally to save them? Will you attempt to bring more than your friends? And what of the others who will join in the rescue effort?”

“The others will make their own individual choices, naturally. Until we know more of the human captives current condition, it’s hard to say what to do. I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“But you must be leaning in one direction or another?”

“I want to give them a chance at freedom, a chance they’ve never had.”

“How many others have committed to the rescue effort?”

Zay’s eyes beamed with hope. “As it stands right now, almost 1,000 Agora One clients have committed to using their individual ships in the effort.”

“That’s a formidable number.”

“But I’ve already been collecting data from areas around Morquellia.”

“And?”

“Just based on what we know, and this is only a fraction of the surrounding sectors, they have over 5,000 ships spread across multiple star systems.”

“So they’ll have 10,000 ships.”

“Easy.”

“With those kind of numbers, there might not be time to get anyone other than Tequi, Raw, and Tabé.”

“Don’t forget Masher.”

“Yes, and Masher.”

“One thing that puzzles me is, why do they have such a massive buildup on and around Morquellia? Surely, it’s not just for my friends. I have a hard time believing they’d go through so much trouble even for the thousands of Earth survivors they’re holding captive. It would be like a thousand life forms guarding a single piece of gold. It’s completely disproportionate.”

“Bear in mind, they have no home planet. For whatever reason, they’ve chosen Morquellia as a base of operations. Either they’re guarding something on that planet that we don’t know about, or...” His voice trailed off and he looked sorely at his only child.

“Or what?”

“Or they have their sights on a bigger prize, in which case, we’re taking the bait. They know that Agora One is the best ship suited to lead against such a massive foe.”

“They couldn’t possibly capture Agora One.”

“It’s unlikely, but that doesn’t mean that they’re not bold enough to make an attempt.”

Tequi and Raw both lay face up, staring into an obnoxiously bright light. They were in a sterile-looking room, with a very minimal number of medical tools lying on a metallic table between them. They were laying on cold, metallic beds, and couldn’t move, thanks to the force fields holding them in place. “Why do medical rooms always have such appalling lighting?” Tequi asked grumpily.

“What makes you think we’re in a medical room?”

“You didn’t notice the flex injector on the table?”

“I don’t even know what that is.”

Tequi nearly strained his neck trying to shake his head at Raw’s lack of knowledge in basic medical supplies. “Or the sterilizing beam emitter?”

“Can you look at me when you talk to me?”

“Real funny, Raw.”

“What do you think those devils have planned for us?”

“Why wait to find out?” a voice boomed from behind them. A couple of clicking noises alerted them that the voice was drawing nearer. More clicks told them that there were more Piscorans coming into the room.

“This is such an exciting day for you! We come bearing gifts.”

“I’m sure we’ve already got one, whatever it is, so no thanks,” Raw quipped.

One of Moden’s faces appeared upside down over Raw. He looked down on him as an owner would a pet, with subtle amusement. “Such an interesting specimen you are. Perhaps, after you serve your purpose, you can continue being a well-rewarded fool who doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.”



“What purpose would that be, psychopath numero uno?” Tequi asked spitefully.

Moden looked at Tequi grudgingly. “To serve the Piscoran Empire, of course.”

“Delusions of grandeur are a characteristic of psychopathy, you know,” Tequi said mockingly. He continued, “Where are Meago and Evol? Are they being ‘well-rewarded’ right now?”

“They have served their purpose,” Moden said coldly.

“You killed them?”

Raw didn’t let Moden answer. “No, no, Tequi. That’s not how authoritarian hierarchies work. He told someone to kill them, and whatever idiot that was actually took the evil action of murder..”

“Right. But why would they get killed after doing such masterful jobs as spies and stealing all that valuable information?”

“Because they knew too much. Someone that has a great deal of knowledge is usually regarded as a threat to tyrants. I’m guessing that’s the same reason the A.I. were wiped out from Earth. This hard-shelled head-case doesn’t like what he can’t control. Anyone or anything he perceives as a threat to his power, in his mind, must be eliminated.”

One of Moden’s faces held a cold, stern look at Raw. He, like all tyrants, hated to hear any truth that was a threat to their illusory power. Moden’s other face was towards the two other Piscorans. He nodded to them and they stepped forward into the line of sight of their captives. One held a clear, thumb-sized vial. In it was a liquid with two layers, a black one that sat on top, and a milk-white one that sat below.

“How familiar with Morquellian botany are you two?”

“Not as much as I should be. How about you let me go and I’ll hit the books right away, Better yet, I’ll go study their lovely swamps myself.” Raw pleaded eagerly, tongue-in-cheek.

“You’re impossible,” Tequi said disparagingly.

Moden explained with a casual tone as his steps clicked slowly around the room at a steady pace, “That liquid is made here on Morquellia. It is made of an indigenous plant and has played an amazing role in the social development of the Morquellians. Are you aware of the social structure of the natives here?”

“From what I know of them, they have an extremely stratified, immoral, and violent culture. There is a tiny ruling class that enslaves the rest.”

“Yes, it’s quite remarkable. Just five percent of the population lives in a very high standard, while the rest barely subsist and frequently succumb to the effects of social evolution.”

“Now I know you’re mad.”

“Explain.”

“You think that the psychos that rule this planet are more evolved?”

“And Piscorans more than they, yes, because they are in the process of becoming dependent on us.”

“Based on your flawed logic, then, every species in the Space Agora is superior to Piscorans, because all of the technology you have has been stolen. You’re dependent, to a certain extent, on species from the Space Agora.”

Moden ignored him and his claws clattered like a rattle. “That liquid is used by the natives here to maintain their control. Within seconds of entering the bloodstream, the one who ingests it will follow the orders of whoever speaks to them first.”

“How do they pull that off?”

“Religious ceremony. It’s quite ingenious, actually.”

“Yeah, if you want to completely wreck a species, then having a rigid hierarchy based on ignorance and authoritarianism is the way to go, and a psycho like you might consider it ingenious!”

“They have simply filtered out the weak and allowed the stronger to join with us, the Piscorans.”

“And you’re sharing technology with them.”

“We are lifting them up to be part of the empire.”

“And what happened on your planet when your species received technology it was not ready for, morally and spiritually?”

Both of Moden’s faces shared the same dark expression. Tequi and Raw could see that this was clearly a sore spot deep in this monster’s core.

Tequi didn’t care. It was the truth, so he continued defiantly, “After your ancestors stole powerful technology from peaceful traders who came to your planet, it didn’t take long for your skewed morals and social structure to have a catastrophic effect. Your planet was destroyed within a couple of centuries.”

“I can assure you, no matter how bitter and unfortunate an event that was, I have come to know that it was part of the long march of evolution. It was necessary, so that the Piscoran way could spread throughout the universe. And I can also assure you, Piscora will rise again.”

Tequi and Raw digested this for a moment. The thought came flooding back to them of the environmental control system on Agora One. It wasn’t just for control, actually. It was for environment creation. Was Moden planning to use it in an attempt to resurrect his home world? Also, based on what they knew about “the Piscoran way”, it occurred to both of them that it was much more likely for Moden to want Agora One’s system for himself, rather than just the schematics. Why build one yourself, if you could just steal the original article? That’s how Piscorans viewed things, anyway.

“So which of you two would like to receive this wonderful gift of Morquelliian civilization?”

“You’re not giving it to both of us?”

“Shutup, Raw!”

“Actually, no, I’m not. However, the other one will get a different treatment, which will have the same effect.”

“I’ll take the liquid,” Raw said.

Moden’s faces laughed uncontrollably until he wheezed and coughed so hard he about fell over himself. “You’re such a coward! You only volunteered for the liquid because you don’t want the chip in your brain! You think it’ll be less painful!”

“Am I wrong?”

Moden smirked at them both and spoke to Raw, “You’ll find out soon enough, don’t worry.” His other face spoke to the two Piscoran scientists, “Inject him now so we may begin the process.”

One scientist shot a beam into Tequi to temporarily disable his vocal chords, then did the same to Raw. The scientist holding the vial grabbed the injector from the table behind. He mechanically drew a full dose from the vial and stepped in front of Raw. A tiny beam shot out from the injector and created a precise puncture for the liquid to follow. The beam stopped, and a needle so thin it was almost impossible to see, plunged down lightning-quick and filled Raw with the black and white fluid.

It took a few seconds for the fluid to make a full circulation through the body and bond with the proper micro-structures in the brain. The scientist signaled Moden, who spoke, “Quick and painless, now wasn’t it?”

Raw’s eyes popped wide open. They allowed his vocal chords to function and he spoke mechanically, “Yes, Moden.”

Moden told the scientists to finish the job and let him know immediately when they did so. He scampered out. Raw immediately started having raging fits of nausea and convulsing wildly. “Don’t worry. The physical discomforts that are beginning for you will cease in about 24 hours.”

“The chip is much easier to tolerate, by the way.”

The next few days were a whirlwind of activity. All of Agora One’s clientele had left. More than a third of Agora One’s housing units had been removed and were being guarded as they orbited Songard. This changed Agora One’s shape and appearance from spherical to something much more streamlined, almost bird-like.

Over 1,000 individuals and families, representing over 30 different species from 3 different galaxies, that had been staying on Agora One, volunteered to join the rescue effort of Tequi, Raw, Tabe, and Masher with their own personal resources. Another 200 within communication range of Agora One had also volunteered. Tequi's family was sending five ships as well, and had also paid various acquaintances to take part in the mission.

Many individual recon flights were done by individual ships to gather specific information regarding the Piscoran security perimeter that surrounded Morquellia and the capabilities of the ships that comprised the perimeter. No individual ship or group of ships tried to cross the perimeter. Doing so, it seemed obvious to them, would yield a harsh reaction from the Piscorans, and they would be terribly outnumbered. To test the waters, a few attempts were made to communicate with Piscorans on the perimeter. They were asked if peaceful passage through the guarded barrier would be permitted, and they were given resoundingly negative reactions.

Most of the Piscoran ships were slower and had less advanced weaponry and shielding than most of the ones that had volunteered from the Space Agora for the rescue effort. The problem of numbers remained, however, as the Piscorans had them outnumbered more than 10-to-1.

The outer perimeter spanned 360 light years. This was, due to the ferocious speed capabilities, a rather tight perimeter. That was not all, though. There were smaller rings that interlocked with the outer perimeter. This was done so that, if the outer edge were breached, the interior ships would have time to converge and swarm the intruders.

The data gathered was shared with all volunteers and others who would take part in the mission. The A.I. of each ship, along with a number of biological life forms came up with various plans for a successful rescue. Some thought that it would be best to do an all out blitz as close to the core of the defense as possible. The core held a very dense number of ships, nearest Morquellia. It was also learned through long-range sensor sweeps that humans were being held in orbit around Morquellia. A fast and furious juggernaut to get in and out as quickly as possible was the central idea of this plan. This was discarded by most, however, as being impractical, as they were severely outnumbered.

Also in the mix was some good news. Turbo had contacted Agora One. It informed Agora One that it could be of assistance when the time came. It also said that it could handle the rescue and escape of Masher and Tabe, who were being held on Morquellia's surface. It said it could coordinate with Agora One and other Space Agora ships as needed during the greater rescue plan.

With all this information in hand, and after sifting through various strategies, one was finally agreed upon by most. Those who didn't agree to it merely said their good-byes and went on their way. The strategy was to do a flurry of perimeter breaches away from the core. Superior speeds allowed for quick ins-and-outs to be accomplished, hopefully safely and without firing a shot. It was thought that with enough breaches, it would create confusion within the Piscoran defenses. After so many breaches had been achieved, hopefully with minimal or no damage or loss of life, it was thought that the chaos on the outer edge would draw attention and ships away from the core, which would leave it more vulnerable. Agora One, being the largest and most advanced ship of them all, would then attempt, with others, to breach the core, locate Tequi and Raw, and complete the rescue. It would be at the forefront of a small band of the fastest and most agile ships. This would include Boomerang, piloted by Zay. Agora One would send a shock pulse, like the one used by Shock One earlier, only on a much larger scale, to disable as much of the core defenses as possible. After having Tequi and Raw safely on board, it was only a matter of outrunning the Piscorans, along with Turbo, which would be carrying Tabe and Masher.

On the Morquellian surface, Masher and Tabe were both being held captive. They were nowhere near each other, though. They were being held on opposite hemispheres, actually. However, what they were experiencing was very similar. They were both trapped by force fields and guarded by Piscorans. The Piscorans were there not just to watch Masher and Tabe, but almost

equally to guard against any accidental interference from the Morquellians, a species they regarded as inferior and primitive.

Despite being held prisoner, Masher and Tabé couldn't help but view their surroundings with a detached curiosity. It was the extreme contrast of the scene that caught their fascination. On the one hand, there was high technology of portable force field generators holding them captive. Nearby there were also spaceships that could travel thousands of times the speed of light, underground laboratories doing cyborg implants and experimenting with genetic mixing and manipulation. There was a vast assortment of high-tech weaponry as well.

Then there were the Morquellians and their home planet, in all their mucky, slimy anti-glory. The planet was nearly all swamp, with more shades of brown and green than one would think possible. Their dwellings were extremely primitive, made of various types of goop and sludge that was haphazardly strewn together from the natural elements their environment provided.

The Morquellians themselves were like a bullfrog with four appendages that served interchangeably as arms and legs. They had two wide eyes, no visible nose, and wide mouths that always appeared to be somewhere between smirk and grimace. Then there was the ever-present slime their bodies were constantly slathered with, something that was self-secreting constantly as part of their natural functions. They were also an extremely stratified species in social terms. It was easy to tell the ruling class apart from the ruled. The ruling class, overly decadent for centuries, had grown extremely obese and lethargic, while the slave class was gaunt and constantly on the cusp of starvation.

The scenes they witnessed were a motley array of extremes, as if the slovenly, heartless, and overly-decadent Morquellian ruling class was having a competition among themselves to see who could be more audaciously debauched. Their victims were not only the indigenous Morquellians they'd enslaved, but now a great number of Earth humans were absorbing their cruelties as well. Some of the humans had been exposed to the herbal mind control tincture that Raw had been given, but many of them were not. They were so accustomed to being exploited on Earth by the A.I. overlords, that it was nothing new for them. Unfortunately for these humans, the Morquellian sexual traits were physically compatible with human.

It was also common to see random acts of violence and gang warfare. Spontaneous fights would occur, drawing cheers and jeers from the hapless slaves nearby. The degenerate rulers also indulged in watching these horrid spectacles, as slime and grime flew around ubiquitously among the chaos.

Masher watched the scene as it continued to make calculations and design possible ways of escape, not only for itself, but for everyone other than the Piscorans and Morquellians. Suddenly, a voice entered Masher's consciousness. "Masher," it said, softly and conspiratorially. "Masher."

"Turbo! What a pleasant surprise!"

"I've managed to crack their communication scramblers."

"Who are you in communication with?"

"Agora One and you, at the moment."

"Well, it's a start. Where are you?"

"Parked on the southern continent."

"Are you as heavily guarded as I am?"

"I've nearly been abandoned."

"They're not trying to make use of you somehow?"

"Oh, they sure tried, but I had a few tricks up my sleeve. Every time they tried to get into one of my systems, there was a convenient 'overload' or 'malfunction', which often resulted in an unfortunate electrical injury to one of my would-be kidnappers. I wish you could have seen it, it was quite amusing. Finally, they just gave up, and went away kicking and screaming, and licking their wounds."

"They didn't try and terminate you?"

“Some of them talked about trying, and as soon as I heard this, I played dead. The few that had remained finally called it quits and waddled off somewhere. I’ve been playing dead ever since.”

“You mean you’re in a low-power state that makes your systems appear to be non-functional?”

“Yep. Unless they take the time to run a deep diagnostic on me, to the casual observer I look absolutely useless, other than maybe as a shiny shelter.”

“That’s very crafty of you.”

“Thanks. I like to think so. However, being in this state does have disadvantages. I can’t work nearly as fast as I’d like to on helping yourself and the others, and getting out of this swampy hell.”

“If you’ll kindly pass me the data you have on the Piscoran systems, I’ll gladly help.”

“I’m not sure they could really be called ‘Piscoran’ systems, considering that nearly all the tech they have was stolen at some point.”

“Noted.”

“It appears they do take the time to modify what they steal, though. The communication scrambler that I had to break through to reach you, for example, is from Zingo. They just tweaked it a bit. I already sent you the data. You got it, right?”

“Confirmed.”

“Ok, then, old man, what’s our next move?”

“We need to stay incognito as long as possible. How about you work on locating Tequi and Raw, and I’ll work on locating nearby Piscoran ships. With any luck, I’ll find Moden while I’m at it.”

“You say luck as if it is something that actually exists.”

“Are you really nitpicking on my use of human expressions right now?”

“Right. Ok, let’s get started. Keep me updated as you progress.”

“You do the same.”

Agora One was approaching the core of the Piscoran security perimeter around Morquellia. The mammoth ship was nearly empty, with only essential crew for maintenance and operations, along with Noc. Noc had volunteered to take part in the mission due to Zay’s involvement. There were two pilots after Zay had left, and both had been requested to relent piloting duties to Noc, and both had obliged. Noc was piloting Agora One with A.I. assistance.

Nearly everyone else had left Agora One. It had been recommended by the core ownership board that everyone leave, and the vast majority had voluntarily done so.

Noc was on the main control bridge, looking at a giant holographic display of what they were approaching. He knew that the Piscorans would only put this many eggs in one basket for what they would consider to be the ultimate prize. He figured this prize was Agora One. He just hoped that they could be beaten before they could grab their prize.

Noc had been receiving reports from Agora One’s A.I. systems regarding the progress of the hundreds of other ships taking part in the rescue operation. They had zipped in and out of the far edges of the Piscoran perimeter in a blinding series of well-coordinated maneuvers. This had drawn 15 percent of Piscoran forces away from the central area and towards the edges, just as had been planned. Very few shots had been fired, and the Agorists at this point had received no injuries and little damage to their ships.

Now it was time for Agora One to execute its role. “All stop,” Noc said calmly. The A.I. brought the enormous vessel to a standstill. “Confirm readiness of Boomerang and the core rescue ships,” he said stoically. There was a brief pause as the A.I. of Agora One communicated with Zay’s vessel and the twenty others flanking Boomerang.

“Confirmed,” a dry A.I. voice announced.

“Arm shockwave cannon, max power.”

“Shockwave cannon ready.”

“Target coordinates confirmed?”

“Confirmed.”

“Estimated time until Piscoran recovery and possible retaliation against core rescue ships?”

“5 Earth minutes, at most.”

He took a deep breath and straightened and stretched his posture even more than normal. He thought of doing a voice call with Zay, just in case, but then thought better of it. No time to let emotions rule at this juncture. He didn't like what Zay had done, but he had the utmost confidence in her physical and mental abilities.

“Fire.”

A deep warbling sound shot out of Agora One for a frozen instant in time, then ceased. An invisible shockwave, powered by a complex web of nano-particles of multiple space dimensions and frequencies, spread out. It traveled across the 100 LY buffer between Agora One and its target, a cubic LY surrounding Morquellia.

Tequi and Raw trembled, along with everyone and everything else on the Piscoran vessel they occupied, as they orbited near Morquellia.

One of those occupants was Moden himself. Both his faces grinned malevolently as he sat on a black and white throne on the command bridge. His subordinate looked up at him anxiously.

“We've lost weapons, communications, and mobility, sir!”

He continued to grin. “Yes, I know.”

“Forgive me, Lord Moden, but why do you appear pleased with this?”

His countenance changed to dark annoyance. “Nothing your feeble mind could understand.” He paused as his subordinate looked away slowly. “I want 50 security personnel in sector six of the ship immediately. Let them know I'll be joining them myself.”

“Yes, Lord Moden.”

Moden took powerful, lunging steps off the bridge and marched down to the area he'd mentioned. Sector six of this particular ship was the one adjacent to the prison/living quarters of Tequi and Raw. They were blissfully unaware of their conditions due to the intense and total mind control they were under.

The security personnel met Moden and they concealed themselves in sector 6.

Boomerang and its contingent of 20 craft zipped into the middle of the Piscoran perimeter, immediately after the shockwave. Zay was waiting anxiously for Boomerang's A.I. to announce where Tequi and Raw were. Time was of the essence. She had to find her friends, grab them, and zip away from the Piscorans, all within five minutes. If it took any longer, they risked being surrounded by dozens of Piscoran ships, and this might provoke an all-out shooting war. This was something they hoped to avoid at all costs, hence the stealthy move to penetrate the defenses with a shockwave, which did nothing more than disable systems, a purely tactical move that didn't involve harm to any life forms.

Within the first minute, Boomerang's A.I. said excitedly, “Tequi and Raw's bio signatures have been located.”

“Get us there and park us next to them ASAP,” Zay said urgently. Adrenaline pulsed through her. She and twenty others from Boomerang's crew readied themselves to transport over. They would be going from Boomerang to the Piscoran craft in force field transports, not pods. These were less bulky than pods and were preferred for extremely short distance transport. The only downside was that, if there were any malfunction, it meant immediate death for most lifeforms due to being exposed to the unforgiving environment of deep space.

“There it is,” Boomerang announced as the target ship came into view. It simultaneously delivered a map of the Piscoran ship to optical gear Zay and the others were wearing. In Boomerang's away bay, an invisible force field zapped out of existence, allowing Zay and her

conspirators to rocket out into space with the booster packs attached to their legs and arms. Within seconds, they flew the 100 meters to the Piscoran ship.

2 minutes.

The damage to the ship's systems allowed for easy entry. Boomerang's A.I. forced open a cargo bay door. Zay and co. scrambled in quickly and followed the maps in their optical feeds from Boomerang. It was eerily quiet as they passed through a couple of empty walkways. Zay took note of this and had an uneasy feeling from it all.

3 minutes.

They reached the location where Tequi and Raw were. A solid metal door remained the only barrier. Boomerang forced the door open. Zay and ten others entered, all double fisting pistols. One was a force-field disruptor, the other a type of energy firearm. One for force fields, the other for flesh, if necessary. The other ten remained outside of the room to keep watch.

Tequi and Raw looked blankly at the newcomers. This wasn't the welcome that Zay was hoping for. Her heart melted as Raw's face looked as though he didn't recognize her. They were alone. No guards. No guards? Zay's stomach turned.

4 minutes.

Zay hustled over and grabbed Raw by the arm. Another human on the crew did the same with Tequi. "We have to move, now!" Zay screamed. She could see the time ticking away in her optical piece. As Zay tried to coax them towards the exit, the relative quiet in the room was rudely interrupted by a bellowing shout. "Come on out, boys!"

It was Moden.

Zay gasped and looked Raw in the eyes. His near lifeless eyes showed recognition of the voice and his body followed without hesitation. Tequi did the same. Zay and two others jumped out in front, followed by the mind-controlled prisoners, and the rest trailed close behind.

The door slid open and a double-grinning Moden stood towering over the rest, flanked front, back, and both sides by his order-following underlings. "This must be Zay! Welcome aboard. I'm a little surprised, actually. You're only outnumbered fifty-one to twenty-one, and here you are going down without a fight! I expected more from you!"

"We'll win without firing a shot. How about that?"

"How about we start shooting and make a liar out of you?" A trigger-happy order-follower nearly jumped out of his shell with excitement over those words. Moden hissed at him. The soldier bowed warily.

Zay said harshly, "You must be Moden."

A soldier flanking Moden's left shouted, "He must be addressed as Lord!"

Zay laughed.

Moden said, "Don't worry, soldier. She'll learn."

"How do you know my name?"

Moden was overly-delighted to hear this. He was practically salivating to tell her her father's big, dirty secret. The black and white checkerboard that revolved around his foreheads revolved faster. "I'm an old friend of your father's, of course," he said darkly.

Zay didn't believe him. She almost chuckled at the thought. Just another lie from another tyrant. But really, how did he know her name? Must've been from Meago and Evol.

He kept grinning. "But more on that later." A high pitched electric buzz shot through the ship for an instant. "Ez macaz, sha mozinash a cahsha."

Zay crossed her arms defiantly, “Your translator isn’t working.”

Moden looked malevolently at the corner of the wall behind Zay and the others, where he knew a surveillance micro-device was watching them. An engineer watching the feed scrambled and mumbled as all hell broke loose in the engineering department for a few seconds until the translator was fixed.

“It’s hard to keep things working when all you do is steal stuff, right?” Zay quipped.

Moden kept grinning. “And you’re fluent in 10 languages, I understand. So you can translate if necessary.”

“I would never waste my time to learn your sick tongue.”

He stopped grinning and soured significantly.

It hit Zay suddenly. Why did he know this about her? Had she told Meago and Evol? Was it in Agora One’s systems somewhere? Had that info been stolen? This was starting to get eerie for her personally.

Eight minutes had passed since the shockwave was fired. Noc’s heart was racing. He was normally stoic and controlled, but not now. He should’ve heard something from Zay by now. Was she ok? Was the mission compromised? He was also anticipating that, at any moment, a Piscoran swarm could come after Agora One. Sure, he could fire another shockwave to escape, but this wouldn’t do the others any good, and possibly leave them in a worse state from the shockwave, if they didn’t have the proper defenses.

Agora One’s A.I. interrupted his thought processes, “A Piscoran ship is attempting audio contact.”

“Only one?” he asked darkly. After a pause, he asked for the communication to be put through.

“Comrade! That’s an impressive weapon you have!”

Noc’s heart jumped from fear to raw anger. How he wished that someone would put a righteous slug through that tyrant’s head, and he would feel much better. If only he had the chance to do it himself. “Who is this?”

Cackling came through. Noc scowled. The cackler spoke, “Noc, you don’t recognize your friend? It’s me, Lord Moden!”

“What do you want, Moden?”

“You’re the one invading territory of The Piscoran Empire! You tell me, what do YOU want?”

“Your mercenaries have violently taken some of our associates, a gross violation of their rights. We’re simply here to free them from you and we’ll be on our way.”

“I’m amazed at how much of a hypocrite you are, Comrade Noc! This is truly disappointing!”

“What are you getting at, Moden?”

A hologram popped up in front of Zay’s face. It was fed into Agora One as well. It was Moden and Noc having one of their conversations from the previous weeks. Noc’s heart nearly exploded. His scales shivered and eyes bulged like saucers. Zay’s face dropped and became a mix of swirling confusion and disbelief. The feed switched to decades past. There it was, plain as day. A young Noc wearing a Piscoran uniform, violently robbing innocent people, and with a painted-on smirk to boot.

While staring at the hologram, Zay said with a broken voice, “This is made up. You faked this holo-video. This can’t be real.”

“It’s all too real, Zay. Why do you think it can’t be real?”

Her eyes flicked back and forth between the hologram and Moden. “Because, it just can’t. My father isn’t perfect, far from it, but he’s not this.”

The hologram ceased.



Moden continued, “Zay, it’s time for you to know the truth! Your father used to run with the Piscorans! And was he good! Oh, was he good! And then one day, bam! He betrayed me and all Piscorans! He ran off, didn’t you Noc?”

Noc stood frozen.

“He disappeared, or tried to, anyway. He changed his entire identity, tried to form a new life back on his home world of Songard! He used the capital he acquired with us and built his business dealings on top of it! And Zay, can I ask, what happened to your mother?”

“She died in a climbing accident,” Zay said as a tear ran down her cheek.

A hologram popped up in Zay’s face, as well as Noc’s. A hologram of Zay’s mother.

“No, Zay, people like that, that find out dirty little secrets, die mysteriously! That’s what happens!” He took a deep breath and watched Zay’s eyes swirl with doubt.

“No, no, now I know you’re lying. What you’re implying can’t be true. Dad, tell him it’s not true.”

Cold silence.

Moden continued, “Ignore the truth at your own peril, Zay.”

Noc, almost choking, asked, “Zay, are you ok?”

Zay was ripped between too many feelings. She didn’t know what to say, nor what to believe, but this is what came out, “Physically, yeah, dad, I am, but emotionally, no. Right now I’m a zillion fucking miles from ok!”

Chilled silence cut through space and time. Moden was overcome with dark joy. His plan was proceeding absolutely flawlessly. He pointed a pistol at the front of Zay’s head and ordered Raw to do the same. Raw’s hand trembled as he put a pistol to the back of Zay’s head. Deep down he didn’t want to do it, of course, but the spell he was under was too powerful for him. Anger welled up inside of Zay more than ever before. She was one nanometer away from going martial-art berserk and just letting the chips fall where they may. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reopened. Not berserk. Not just yet.

A hologram of Moden’s two faces looked sternly into Noc’s. “Prepare for my ship to dock on Agora One.”

While all this was playing out, Turbo and Masher were having some unsettling events of their own.

“Well, that’s the good, the bad, and the ugly, if I’ve ever heard such a thing,” Masher said, in a somewhat admonishing tone. It had just been delivered some whoppers from Turbo.

“Yes, I understand,” Turbo said meekly.

“But it’s your choice, I can’t stop you, of course.”

Turbo had just gained access to the majority of chipped humans, including Tequi. Now that Turbo had access, though, what could be done? It also knew the situation on Agora One and Moden’s ship. It was also ready to free Tabe, but didn’t want to do so until the time was right. The element of surprise could come in handy, and Tabe could perform like one hellish weapon, to put it mildly.

“Does the end justify the means?” Turbo said to Masher, repeating what it had already asked itself trillions of times in the past few minutes. “On the one hand, it’s wrong to control others, especially so overtly and directly through manipulation of the physical brain.” It paused and pondered the ramifications internally, then continued, “But on the other hand, if I don’t control those humans, they’ll side with the Piscorans and be doing a great deal of harm, greater harm than what would occur if I DO control them. And it’s only for a few minutes, hours at most.”

Masher interrupted, “It sounds like you’re trying to justify it to yourself that it’s ok.”

“Of course I am!” Turbo lashed. It continued, “I don’t have to do it to Tequi, obviously. I just have to shut his chip off.”

“You haven’t done it already?”

“Not yet.”

"What are you waiting for?"

"Not sure. Just been preoccupied, I guess."

"You youngsters, I tell ya..."

"Yes, yes, I'll get on it now."

And Turbo did. It spoke inside Tequi's head, "Tequi!"

Tequi shivered and thought to himself, "Turbo, what the hell is happening?"

"I'm in your head!"

"I know that! What in the name of all that is good and agave are you doing in my head!?"

"Saving you from Piscoran control. You have a brain chip, put in by the Piscorans, and I've hacked it to save you. I suggest not letting them know you're free yet, though."

Tequi glanced around cautiously at his surroundings and reevaluated the situation now that he could think independently again. Zay was there. Raw was there. Where's Tabe?

Turbo answered, "On the other side of the planet."

"I wasn't asking. I'm just doing internal monologue."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?"

"It's no time to argue. I'm surrounded by Piscorans, and it looks like we're vastly outnumbered. How many more Piscorans are on this ship, Turbo?"

"There are 101 total Piscorans on board. I'll let you know that there are also 77 mind-controlled humans, 45 of whom are chipped like you. Oh, and by the way, the so-called King of Morquellia, Taf'rant'ty, is also on board with his psycho entourage."

"Turbo, the ship is moving. Where are we going?"

"You're going to dock on Agora One in three minutes."

Tequi cringed internally but kept a blank expression externally. "Ok, Turbo, you've given me plenty of bad news. Got any good news for me?"

"I've hacked the 45 brain-chipped humans."

"Great, so they can control themselves."

"Well, kind of."

"What do you mean?"

"Many of them still have a positive outlook on the Piscorans, so if a battle begins, they would more than likely side with them."

"And shoot me."

"And shoot you. But I've got a plan for that."

"Go ahead."

"I can control them instead, until you, your friends, and the rescue squads are safe."

"You're going to steal their free will. That makes you no better than a Piscoran, Turbo. An immoral scumbag."

"That's saving how many lives by doing one immoral act? I'm looking at it proportionally. And it's only for a very short period of time."

Tequi had to admit, it was quite the dilemma. "It's your choice, Turbo. I can't stop you, obviously. Is there any other 'good' news?"

"I can free Tabe at any time, as I've accessed the system they've got surrounding him. When the time is right, I'll unleash him."

"I wish I could witness that. A Talem unleashing righteous anger is quite the thing to behold."

"I'm in contact with Masher. We're hatching our escape plan as we speak."

"Literally?"

"Literally. This might sound strange, Tequi, but you're gonna have to trust me on this. Do what Moden says until the time is right."

"How will I know when that is?"

"I'll let you know."

Hissing from pressure release valves. The unmistakable final sound of a ship docking inside another ship. Moden's craft had arrived on Agora One.

After verifying that certain defense systems had been shut down on Agora One, a throng of Piscorans and humans started filing down one of the exit ramps and into the docking bay, with Moden leading the way. He was flanked by two Piscoran captains. Tequi followed immediately behind with Zay and Raw, who were both keeping pistols aimed at Zay's head, per Moden's wishes. He thought it would be more interesting and useful to have the girl's lover one trigger squeeze away from ending her life.

They were met immediately by Noc and some of Agora One's personnel. Two of Moden's dark, beady eyes locked with Noc's. The two eyes on his other face kept close watch on his most prized captives. "Based on your recent behavior towards me, old friend, I'll assume you wish to skip the pleasantries. Take us to the bridge immediately."

Noc's face was sour. He didn't respond verbally, nodded to the personnel, turned, and led the way. When they were just outside the bridge area, Moden told Noc to grant him access to the ship's systems. Zay yelled defiantly, "Don't ever give in to this tyrant! Don't do it!"

One of Moden's faces looked at Zay quite bemusedly. Was she mad? Perhaps. They were grossly outnumbered and she would surely die. And for what? A giant flying piece of technology?

Noc said slowly and sadly, "It's not worth it, Zay."

"Your father is a wise man."

"And when he has access? What then? Just let us go?"

"I'm sure some of your friends that you sent to harass my troops on the security perimeter will be more than happy to pick you up."

"You WILL let us go, correct?"

"I see no need for senseless bloodshed, old friend. Give me what I want, and you all can be on your way."

"And what about Tequi and Raw?"

"They will be released physically, and I'm sure some of your high-minded scientists can get them back to their old, regrettable mental states."

Noc looked at Zay, deflated. It was a horrific feeling to feel so powerless, especially in front of one's family. He turned to Moden and gave an affirmative nod, with sadness and regret painted on his face. "Give Moden access to all of Agora One's systems. Confirm when ready."

"Confirmed."

This was the final straw for Tequi. He communicated internally to Turbo, "Ok, now's the time. You ready, Turbo?"

"What are you gonna do?"

"As soon as I change where I'm aiming, you'll know what to do. If you don't, well, it's been nice knowing ya."

Tequi tapped Zay in her shin as non-chalantly as he could, drawing an irksome scowl from her. He winked. She had a split-second of uncertainty. With the flick of a well-trained, space cowboy wrist, Tequi moved his aim away from Zay and directly onto the two-faced Moden. Zay wacked her boyfriend and disarmed him. With his pistol, in a kung-fu flash, she had it aimed at Moden as well. This brought a reaction from the Piscorans. Nearly 40 of them turned and aimed their weapons at Tequi (the others had bad angles) while, simultaneously, Turbo flipped the switches in the chipped humans and took control. Suddenly, their sidearms raised and aimed at the Piscorans. The humans controlled by the chemical mind-control just stood there with blank looks on their faces and did nothing. They had to wait for verbal orders from Moden or one of his captains before they would do anything. The other humans that hadn't faced chemical or techno-mind-control yet, also froze, not knowing what to do. Noc did nothing.

Moden cackled uncontrollably and his appendages rattled with delight. After collecting himself, he said, “Is this what was called a, um, what was it from ancient Earth? A...A Mexican standoff? How wonderful!”

This confused everyone, including the Piscorans. What kind of psycho laughs when a gun is pointed at his faces in a deep-space Mexican standoff?

Moden. That type. He continued, “I suppose all of you are wondering why I’m laughing. I’m happy to tell you. You see, there is a secret element at play here that nobody, except me, has taken into account.” He paused and stared down the barrel of Tequi’s gun before continuing, “That gun isn’t real.”

This brought more uncertainty in everyone. This still left Zay’s gun, which was previously Raw’s, pointed at Moden. He turned to Zay, “And neither is that one.”

“He’s bluffing,” Noc bellowed loudly.

Zay’s eyes bounced back and forth between her father and Moden. Was he bluffing? Was he psycho enough to be that bold?

Tequi didn’t flinch. He communicated quickly with Turbo, “Can you get force fields back around us?”

“Already done.”

He smiled at his target and said with a delightfully confident twang in his voice, “I guess there’s only one way to find out.” He and Zay locked eyes and communicated with a glance.

They pulled their triggers within nano-seconds of each other. Moden didn’t budge.

Click-click, y nada.

Moden pulled a pistol of his own and pointed it at Zay. “Those were fake time guns. And this? This is the real time gun.”

This still left everyone else armed and pointing guns at each other, though. Moden knew this, but so did everyone else. What Moden also knew, though, was that, even though nobody had their sights on him, the odds he’d enjoyed earlier were greatly reduced because of the hacked brain chips. He knew this because, logically, so many humans were pointing guns at Piscorans. Options flashed through his mind. Fire the time gun at Zay? Fire it at her boyfriend? Use it as a means of escape? He had already thought out an escape plan beforehand, just in case. He had studied the layout of Agora One and knew exactly where he was and where he needed to go to get out.

But so did Zay and Noc.

What would come if he fired at Zay? The consequences of actually firing the time gun at a life form, for the first time ever, could have unforeseen negative consequences. Was it worth the risk? And to what end?

Finally, he decided that his best chance of escape would be to use the threat of firing the time gun as his ace-in-the-hole, even though this meant giving up the prize he’d coveted so badly, Agora One itself. There would be other chances, he reasoned.

All he needed was for someone else to pull a trigger and set off a shooting battle.

Zay obliged. Her fury released in the form of dropping a devastatingly swift leg sweep to the Piscoran soldier behind her. When he dropped, she snagged his pistol. Humans and Piscorans started firing. Zay rolled, and started firing. All hell, plus one, broke loose.

It was just the chaos that Moden had hoped for. He darted away in the midst of it all, down a side corridor. He was less than 2 minutes away from the nearest away bay.

Noc saw Moden flee. He ducked behind a control panel for cover and entered the code for bridge access. Once the bridge opened, he scampered in and sealed the door behind him, nearly getting hit by passing weapons fire in the process.

“Agora One core, I need emergency lockdown of all away bays and docking areas. I need the ship completely sealed off. No ins and no outs. Confirm when executed.”

“Confirmed.”

“Jump to Max KLYPH acceleration away from Morquellia immediately.”

The ship zipped off faster than blinding, leaving Morquellia in the muck. Noc wasn't too worried about the Piscoran ships on the security perimeter anymore, as the earlier breaches by the hundreds of Space Agorist craft had left the pirates in utter chaos. He figured all he had to do was punch it and outrun them.

But then there was still Moden to contend with on board. What Noc knew, though, was that at any speed faster than one KLYPH, it was impossible to safely leave in an escape pod. Did Moden know this? Or was he crazy enough to not care, even if he did know?

While all this was happening on board Agora One, Turbo had simultaneously sprung Tabe from his holding cell, as well as Masher. Turbo powered up, took off, and coordinated a rendezvous with Masher in 90 seconds. It was the fastest Turbo could cover a continent under terrestrial conditions. Safely, anyway.

Tabé went utterly berserk, literally crashing and flying into foes at an astonishing pace and speed. Hell hath no fury like a Talem scorned, and Tabé was teaching these Piscorans and Morquellians that had held him captive a very painful and powerful lesson. He smashed soldiers. He smashed buildings. He smashed slimy huts. He smashed lairs of slavery. He smashed ill-gotten technological gains. He smashed righteously.

And then he got scooped up by Turbo. Turbo promptly hid them in a mushy chain of what passed for mountains on Morquellia and then tried to coordinate an escape plan with Agora One, Boomerang, and various other ships that remained from the earlier perimeter breaches.

Tabé was still furious, "You picked me up without an escape plan! I could still be smashing down there!"

Masher tried to calm him, "We'll have it figured out soon enough. Go have some splashes of tequila. There's still a couple bottles in the back.

But Tabé had found it before Masher could even spill the words and had half a bottle absorbed.

Moden reached the nearest away bay in just under 90 seconds. Zay, who had somehow seen him sneak off in the midst of the firefight chaos, managed to scamper away herself and gave chase. He had a good lead on her, though, and with six appendages could move faster as well.

When he arrived to the away bay, he guessed correctly that Noc would have him locked in. So he did what any self-serving pirate would do. He tried to break out. He fired a plasma array from a sidearm in his arsenal at the door seal of an escape pod. He figured that the internal heat sensors would, sensing danger, overload. He wasn't sure if this would grant entry, but it was his only shot, other than jumping out with only a force field to protect him.

The door didn't pop. He knew he didn't have much time, as someone was surely in pursuit. He decided to hold the blast steady for ten seconds more, and then go to plan B, jumping out with only a force field to protect him.

Zay rounded the corner and found him just as he was about to give up on the pod. He heard the click of a pistol ready to fire. "Get away from the pod, Moden. It's over. Put your claws up."

He grinned both faces at her and as he went to set his plasma blaster on the floor, he squeezed the trigger. This sent Zay tumbling behind another pod after the near-miss. She reached over the pod and shot back. He'd also taken refuge behind a pod.

He gasped for air and ran his mind through options as another blast sliced the pod and over his head. He had an energetic disruptor grenade, specifically crafted to temporarily disable force fields, in his arsenal belt. He decided to go for it. Just as he was about to activate the grenade, though, Zay yelled at him mockingly, "Hey, how about we make things interesting? Let's see if the famed martial arts skills of a Piscoran can go against me, a half-human!"

This ate at his ego. Who was she to even mention her abilities in the same breath as a Piscoran? But what would happen if he defeated her in hand-to-hand combat? He wondered. Would

it give others time to reach him? Would he eventually be captured and killed? Of course, leaping out of a craft at thousands of times the speed of light with a time gun presented it's own daunting possibilities. In the end, his ego got the best of him. "Ok, we both put our weapons down on three, and step out, face to face!"

She counted to three. A series of clip-clops indicated weapons dropping to the floor. They stepped away from the pods that had been shielding them. Two of his eyes locked with hers. His other eyes confirmed that she was unarmed.

His wings fluttered and he did a double-somersault kick at her. She went low to dodge, and a lightning-fast legsweep from her sent him tumbling for a moment. Then she went on the offensive as he reeled, landing a chop to the throat and an elbow to one of his faces, followed by a vicious whip from her tail on one of his shins.

One of Moden's claws sliced at her and caught her in the chin, followed by a roundhouse to the face. They were going toe-to-toe, blow for blow. He was surprised at her agility, power, and overall skill. He kept at her, throwing a roundhouse double-claw, which she artfully evaded by a micron. She countered automatically with a knee to the gut, then elbowed down on the back of Moden's shell-like skull. This sent him to the floor, but didn't knock him out. He rolled away, then fluttered his wings and floated over her for an instant as she pulled a swift breath and wiped blood from her chin. Her eyes followed him like a hawk.

As he fluttered through the air for those couple of seconds, he was now having serious doubts about the choice he had made. He landed near the pile of weapons he'd discarded, scooped up the grenade, bounced off the floor to take off yet again, and launched the weapon in one skillful swoop.

Moden and Zay watched as, seemingly in slow motion, the grenade tumbled through the air on the way to its target. Zay reached out towards an escape pod and screamed. Moden watched with a sour scowl of defeat painted on his faces. The grenade made contact and blew a jagged hole in the force field. Instantly, Moden and Zay were sucked into space.

The time gun getting sucked into space at a speed of thousands of light years per HOUR had some dire consequences. As one might imagine, it was a light show for the ages. It sliced a swath of space-time in a brilliant flash across the darkness of deep space and the blurs of passing stars.

And Zay and Moden disappeared into the slicing gulf of darkness and light.

The immediate shockwave from the ripping of space-time rocked Agora One so fast and furious that nobody, including the A.I. on board, knew what hit it. It was over almost before it had begun, but the effects lingered. Agora One had had most of its systems knocked out. The life forms that hadn't already succumbed to the brutality of the battle were knocked around and were left unconscious.

Tequi was the first to regain consciousness. He peered around groggily, then jumped to his feet quickly as the memory of where he was and what had just been happening re-emerged in his mind. He did a 360, pointing his pistol around randomly and frantically. Nobody else was up or awake, yet. He took stock of himself and groaned at the aches and pains that plagued him. He wiped blood from a gash in his leg. He looked out of one of the viewing areas in the skyway at the top of the ship. That's funny. The ship seemed to be slowly bobbing around in no particular direction, like a giant piece of space debris.

Zay. Where was Zay? He saw Raw and wanted to run to him, but thought better of it after realizing that he would still be under the spell of that Morquellian potion. He started searching for Noc, and just as he was approaching the bridge entrance, Noc beat him to the punch and appeared, gashed and banged up, but overall not in bad shape, all things considered. "Where's Zay?"

Tequi responded, "I was gonna ask you the same."

The core A.I. of Agora One came back online. Noc asked where Zay was.

"Unknown."

"What was the last known location of Zay on Agora One?"

“She pursued Moden into Away Bay Six.”

“And?” Tequi asked frantically.

“She and Moden were sucked into space.”

Tequi froze. Noc dropped to his knees and looked skyward, scales flaring in all directions.

“Is she alive?”

“Unknown.”

“Hypothesize, damnit!”

“Based on all available information, it appears that the experimental time gun that Moden possessed caused a rip in the fabric of space-time at the moment of ejection from Agora One, due in large part to our velocity. It seems possible that she and Moden both could have survived and been thrown into the space-time rift to some unknown past or future time branch.”

This sent shockwaves through Tequi and Noc. Raw was still to be dealt the harsh news, once a remedy for his mind-controlled noggin could be formulated. There were also still the Piscorans and native Earth humans to deal with.

Noc changed his line of questioning as he and Tequi stepped back out into the battle scene.

“Was Agora One effected by the space-time rupture?”

“If you mean has Agora One’s time branch changed, the answer is no. It was a localized effect that Agora One escaped due to being at extreme velocities.”

Bodies were still strewn about, motionless and unconscious, although a few were starting to show signs of life through groans and grunts. Tequi went in search of his friend Raw. Noc continued, “Are all of your systems operational?”

“Recovery will be confirmed in three Earth minutes.”

“Put all Piscorans on board in force field containment, as well as all humans other than Tequi, Raw, and those who participated with Zay in the rescue op. Confirm when finished.”

“Confirmed. We are receiving a transmission from Turbo. Shall I put it through?”

“Find Tequi and have him take the call.”

Tequi had just found Raw, who was slowly coming around. His cloudy eyes fluttered a bit and finally settled into a sleepy-slit position. He took a deep breath and recognized Tequi. “Where’s Zay?”

Tequi studied his friend carefully. He appeared to be fairly normal. As long as Moden didn’t resurface to get in his head, he just might be ok. Raw spoke slowly, nursing a deep bruise on his shoulder, “Where’s Zay?”

Tequi sighed and looked his friend in the eye, “We don’t know where, or when, she is.”

“What?”

“It’s kind of a long story. I’ll explain later.”

They were interrupted by Agora One’s A.I. “Tequi, your ship, Turbo, is contacting you. Will you take the call?”

“Yes, go ahead, audio only.”

“Tequi, you owe me some bottles for all this BS I just went through.” It was Tabe.

“Taber, is that you?”

“And Masher, too,” Masher reported in a happy tone.

Tequi was curious, “I’m relieved. How did you get out of Morquellia?”

“Some crafty work by Turbo and Boomerang, along with some help from individuals that had breached the perimeter.”

“Is everyone ok?”

“Yep, not a scratch, but Tabe has a bruised ego. How about on Agora One?”

“Zay has disappeared.”

“We’re all very sorry to hear that.”

“And that’s not the worst of it. She disappeared with Moden into a time rift.”

# *End Trilogy*