

# DYSTANT



A COLLECTION OF SCIENCE FICTION STORIES BY

**DREW D. LENHART**

# **SNOWY**WORKS

(DIGITAL EDITION)

# DYSTANT

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Drew D. Lenhart

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*I float.*

*The tether broke with a muzzled snap, the sound gulped by the vastness of space.*

*No destination in sight, no bearing made. Any slight movement would steer me in the wrong direction. Slow movements now. Slow.*

*I move my arm left. Which way will I go?*

*The movement stirs my body's trajectory into the path of the abyss as it surrounds me. Not left, not left! Which way?*

*Goddamn it.*

*I twisted my torso, aiming to push myself backwards. A monumental effort, as if I'm trying to shift the weight of the Earth. The more I twist, the worse it becomes. Shit.*

*I screamed, a shrieking sound only I could hear.*

*I bent my legs, pushing outward, stirring like a man drowning in the ocean. The void showed no mercy. I was spiraling into ruin with every move I made.*

*I opened my arms as if to embrace the universe, movements now slow and deliberate. The ship was but a distant dot now, mixing into the stars.*

*A surprising sense of peace settled in during my final moments. Despite its enormity and apathy, space had granted me clarity. I drifted further into eternity. I closed my eyes and whispered a single word.*

*“Home.”*

-DDL



*For Laney and Lana.*



# THE ICE CUBES ARE MELTING

*E*ventually, everything gets covered in dust - red dust. A rusty, dusty layer of fine Martian soil, untouched by humans for billions and billions of years. Dust gets on everything, literally everything.

I feel horrific, almost ready to call a truce between myself and God. Ever since I stepped onto this planet, I have been sick, and the worst bit is that it's never the same thing. Sometimes, it's a headache, sometimes it's a blocked nose, coughing, sneezing. I can't catch a break.

I sure hope it's not from the Martian dust. We were told that breathing too much of it could set you up for complete organ failure. What if this is it?

It's silly, how do they consider us to combat this? The dust clings onto our boots like insects and taints our suits red. No matter how many layers we wear, it gets everywhere.

Every time a small gust of wind hits the Colony, it spreads throughout the air like a disease. Once it gets into your lungs, consider yourself done. It ignites a burn more painful than giving birth (I should know).

Today, I found myself for the sixth week in a row, inside the Doctor's waiting room.

I rushed to put my hand over my mouth as a cough slipped out. The only seconds of peace I get is when I force myself to swallow, bringing tears to the corners of my eyes as the gooey saliva goes down my throat, the only immediate relief.

I bob my knees up and down nervously. My jet-black hair bounces as it moves in sync with my nervous legs. I press my hands on my knees. Can't seem to stop fidgeting, "Come on, Doc, I'm waiting. You are late.... again. Why can't you hurry?"

The assistant behind the counter stares at me as if I were some psychopath. She doesn't understand the pain I am in. Hopefully, she never has too.

Slowly, my mind twists and turns to a violent degree. Drowning in dark thoughts - burying itself within a self-dug grave.

To avoid a panic attack, I focus - scanning the room around me. Turning my head like a robot, left to right like a malfunctioning machine, white, why must everything be white? White walls, white desk, and white furniture. By the end of the day, everything becomes tainted. So dirty and painful to look at. Why- why do they do this? How on Mars do they keep it so clean?

At last, the door swung open and out came, dressed

in white with a pair of red-framed glasses, the doctor.

She carried, in her right hand, a Martian issued metal water bottle: stainless steel and complete with a sliding lever to allow proper water flow to the mouth within Mars' thin atmosphere.

The ice cubes pinged off the edge with each movement. I imagined with each step; she shattered the perfectly formed cube faster than the water could melt. My heart rate rose and a slight ringing formed in my right ear.

She gestured for me to follow her towards her room, closing the door firmly behind her with a hard click and a second push for good measure. Her white overcoat flurried around like a cape as her eyes locked onto mine.

She sat on her swivel stool, pivoting from side to side. "So, what is it today? More symptoms, I assume?" asked the Doctor with her eyes glaring over her glasses.

"I mean, yeah," I said, barking out another cough. "Can't you hear it?"

"Weren't you here last week or was it the week before that?" she asked dripping with sarcasm, "Oh, wait, I know, you were here for an earache, right?"

The ice cubes in her cup clanged on the side once more as she took another sip, waiting for an answer. I guessed around six ice cubes, maybe more. "Do you mind putting that down?"

"What, my cup?"

"Yes, it's so distracting," I stated, diverting all the questions.

"Absolutely," she said while setting the cup on the

desk next to her. "Can't upset my number one patient!"

Doc pulled out her stethoscope from around her neck and let out several long breaths to warm the end.

'She always knows what to do.' I thought in my head.

She first listened to my heart. I could feel it beating through my Adam's apple. She said nothing.

She used her otoscope and shined its light into each of my ears. Her glasses clinked on the device as she tried to get a better look. She said nothing.

She grabbed a large wooden stick, jammed it into my mouth and held my tongue down while pointing a flashlight in the back of my throat. She said nothing.

She glared. "You're fine. Nothing wrong whatsoever."

"So, not a Martian dust infection?" I asked, feeling stupidly disappointed.

"No, it's probably just a lazy procrastinator wasting my time with their nonsense!"

I looked at her with shock. "What?"

"We've already had this conversation - this check-up, ten times! How long till you realize that you are not bloody sick?"

"I just thought..."

Her anger cut me off. "You thought what, if I tell everyone you're sick, you won't have to work anymore?" She pointed her finger directly in my face. "We're not on vacation here."

I began tearing up, "I know!... I know."

Slamming her hand on the table, "Let me tell you something. All the members on this mission came to create a better future for those back home and none of us

want some wannabe freeloader in our midst, chugging up the medicine supply.”

“You’re faking.”

“I’m not.”

The coughing got worse, “I... am.. not...” I could no longer speak.

“Please leave. I’m reporting you to home base. You’re going back on the next supply ship.”

Left with no control over my neck and no respect in her eyes, I got up and limped away.

“Wait?” She came running towards me. “What the hell is that?” She put the light up to my right ear. “What the?”

A large splash sound came from my right ear and the pain that accompanied brought me to my knees. Not a moment later, both my ears and eyes went blank, and I collapsed to the floor, curled up in tormenting pain. I screamed at the top of my lungs.

The first feeling returned to my feet, which felt wet. I don’t know if it was from sweat or if my bladder failed to survive the pain.

My sight returned but in front was something I should’ve never seen; The Doctor looked lifeless, her glasses shattered beside her and her white robe now a shade of red, but the real horror was above; her head! A hole cut deep as if a giant cookie cutter had been pressed through. All the insides were now resting on the floor behind her and through the very crater where her face once was.

I wanted to move, I wanted to run but could do no

such thing- my body was jammed. In fear of what could occur, I closed my eyes.

Not soon after, I heard the sound, “Tssss... Tssss” I tightened my grip. “Tsss.... Tssss.” It became louder, and my head began spinning till I could no longer tell where I was. It came again, “Tssss... Tssss.” This time I opened my eyes.

The doctor was no longer in view but instead, a small, never-ending spiral of teeth and a red eye with a cold stare.

See, I wasn't faking it.



# HOW THE MIGHTY (SCREW UP)

Captain Jonathan Crizen gritted his teeth as the ship's alarms blared. He briefly glared to the left through the cockpit window, trying to admire the starry backdrop, but he knew what lay ahead.

The enemy vessel slipped into the asteroid belt with an evasive turn. The Vanguard-1's controls vibrated under his grip, shaking his hand while he glared ahead. Jonathan forced the ship deeper into the hazardous field.

Hours of pursuit had led to this moment—a high-stakes game of cat and mouse that would determine the fate of the United Federation's most sensitive data.

The enemy ship—a sleek United Federation, latest generation combat fighter, a few models newer than the Vanguard-1 darted between massive asteroids with practiced precision. Jonathan's eyes narrowed as he tracked its movement, his fingers dancing across the

control panel to adjust shields and thrusters. The stolen Federation data in that ship could tip the balance of the war if it reached enemy hands.

“Come on, come on,” Jonathan muttered, pushing the throttle forward.

The Vanguard-1 surged ahead, diving further into the heart of the asteroid belt. City-sized rocks loomed around him, their gravitational fields tugging at his flight path like invisible hands. Radar was useless here—the belt’s magnetic interference turned every reading into a solid green mass on the screen.

A sudden movement caught his eye. An asteroid, easily the size of a small moon, broke free from its orbit and hurtled toward the Vanguard-1. Jonathan jerked the controls hard right. He could feel his heartbeat hammering through his Adam’s apple as the massive rock scraped past the shields. The enemy ship seized the opportunity, banking hard left and gaining precious distance.

“Goddamn it,” Jonathan mumbled. This wasn’t some random pilot he was chasing. Their movements were too precise, too calculated. The mystery pilot knew the belt’s dangers intimately—possibly even better than he did. The thought sent a chill down his spine.

“Gamma Base, this is Captain Crizen. I have the enemy dead in my sights, requesting orders.”

His earpiece crackled with static before a control operator from Gamma Base cut through: “This is Gamma Base. Captain, your orders are to destroy the enemy craft. Over.”

“Destroy?”

“Under no circumstances are you to let that craft get beyond the belt. Take her out at all costs, Captain. This is a direct order, straight from the top.”

Her? Jonathan’s jaw tightened at the revelation. “Roger that, Command. Don’t worry, I’ll destroy the ship.”

The enemy pilot’s gender didn’t matter—what mattered was stopping the ship before it could deliver its cargo. Jonathan leaned forward in his seat, focusing entirely on the chase. The Vanguard-1’s state-of-the-art navigation system struggled to keep up with the chaos of the belt. He’d have to rely on his many years of instinct and experience alone.

A massive asteroid shower suddenly filled the surrounding space. Rocks of all sizes—from fist-sized chunks to building-sized boulders—tumbled through the void at terrifying speeds. Jonathan weaved through the rain of deadly rock, but the enemy ship seemed to anticipate every obstacle, slipping through with grace.

The Vanguard-1 shuddered violently as a chunk of debris hammered its hull. Warning lights flashed across Jonathan’s dashboard, and sparks erupted from a damaged panel. “Not now,” he growled, fighting the controls as his ship veered dangerously close to a massive asteroid. The collision had compromised his outer hull and lower gun. One of his engines was sputtering ominously and had no way to shoot down the enemy!

Jonathan steered toward a narrow gap between two enormous asteroids, pushing his damaged ship to its

limits. The thrusters roared in protest as he threaded the needle, barely avoiding a catastrophic crash. He fought to keep Vanguard-1 steady, sweat streaming down his face.

Something about the enemy ship's movement caught his attention. It was slowing down, positioning itself differently. This wasn't a simple escape anymore—was it a trap? Jonathan's gut tightened.

His sensors finally locked onto the enemy vessel, but he was closing too fast. The asteroid field ahead was too dense, leaving no room for evasive maneuvers. Impact was inevitable. Jonathan's eyes darted across his instruments, his mind racing through options.

Jonathan made his choice. He pushed the throttle of the Vanguard-1 to full power.

He gripped the ejection lever in a split-second before the collision and slammed it down just as the Vanguard-1's nose smashed into the enemy ship. The world spun violently as his cockpit shot clear of the wreckage. Jonathan activated his jet pack thrusters, guiding himself away from the destruction.

He watched in grim satisfaction as both ships plummeted toward a nearby asteroid, crashing into a spectacular display of sparks, twisted metal, and landing with an ungraceful thud.

The enemy ship lay broken but not destroyed, its pilot somehow still alive. Jonathan's scanners confirmed it—she had survived the crash.

Jonathan floated in the vacuum of space, staring at the wreckage of his beloved Vanguard-1. Reduced to a heap of metal, his favorite fighter lay close to the enemy.

“Damn it, there goes another one,” he muttered, tapping his gloved hand against his helmet’s visor in frustration.

He activated his jetpack, only to be surprised by the sudden thrust. Jonathan spiraled wildly through space, cursing his own arrogance. “Of course, I skipped the damn jetpack training!” Biting his tongue, he struggled to regain control, losing valuable fuel before stabilizing his trajectory as a floating boulder threatened him.

With several more careful adjustments, Jonathan finally closed the distance to the enemy ship’s wreckage. He landed clumsily on the asteroid’s surface, sliding before his magnetic boots engaged with a heavy clunk.

His hand moved instinctively to the Phaser gun at his hip. Jonathan drew the weapon and flicked off the safety, crouching as he approached the enemy ship. The silence of space pressed in around him, broken only by his own rapid breathing inside the helmet.

Movement caught his eye—a figure in the enemy ship’s cockpit. A woman, wearing a space suit identical to his own. Jonathan’s heart skipped a beat as he felt something wrong about this whole situation.

The cockpit hissed open, and the woman sat glaring at Jonathan. Her movements betrayed fear, but there was something else in her posture that Jonathan couldn’t quite read.

“Get out. Now!” he ordered, keeping his gun trained on her.

“Don’t shoot! We’re on the same side.” The woman’s voice carried a desperate plea. “Listen, I’m a special agent. My mission from the Federation is to smuggle secret

information...” She pushed back her helmet visor, revealing intense eyes and a face lined with urgency. “You must believe me!”

Jonathan’s brow furrowed as she continued spilling out words in a rush. “The data I carry is false information, meant for the enemy, where I’ll gain influence and infiltrate their ranks from within... See, enemy ships are on their way, and they are expecting me.” She gestured helplessly at the wreckage. “Captain, everything has been orchestrated by the USF. In order to make it believable, we had to design a scenario that looked real, as if I were trying to make an escape from Gamma Base.”

“I’m not buying this lady. I was ordered to kill you. Direct orders!” Jonathan’s hand trembled slightly as he lowered his weapon. “You expect me to believe that the whole chase was pre-planned?”

The quiet of space shattered as distant engines roared to life. Jonathan’s eyes snapped to the horizon, where three enemy fighters emerged from the asteroid belt. They were approaching fast—she was right!

“Captain, please!” The woman’s voice carried genuine fear now. “I know this seems off. But that’s why you were dispatched after me. After all, you are the fleet’s best pilot and this makes the situation more believable.”

She gestured frantically at the approaching ships. “The enemy would have great respect for me. This is the perfect plan! Look, we have to hurry! The enemy is expecting to rendezvous with me. Earlier, I had sent them a message that I had crashed. You’ll need to give me your

gun. If they see you pointing that thing at me, they'll know something is off and they'll kill us both!"

Jonathan's heart hammered in his chest as he assessed the situation. The enemy fighters were almost upon them, their weapons likely powering up. But the thought echoed in his mind: If they see me armed....

"Hurry! They will be here any second! Now goddammit!" she screamed.

"Fine," he muttered under his breath. "Don't make me regret this." Slowly, he handed it to the woman.

She took the weapon with practiced ease, her grip suggesting familiarity with its weight and balance. "Thank you, you just saved my life," she said, holding it to her side. "Now, just play along. I need you to pretend you've been captured."

The enemy ships were now within striking distance, their weapons trained on the asteroid's surface. The lead fighter veered closer, its pilot visible through the cockpit glass.

Time stretched like elastic as the lead fighter assessed the situation, its weapons still powered up. Jonathan held his breath, watching the woman from the corner of his eye. Everything hinged on this moment.

Jonathan watched, as the woman adjusted her grip on his Phaser gun. Her movements were quick and efficient. The three enemy fighters drew closer, their engines screaming through the void.

Without warning, the woman spun and fired. The shot struck Jonathan's jetpack with devastating accuracy, sending him tumbling backward as the pack erupted in

sparks. He crashed hard against the rocky ground.

Panic gripped him for a moment as he realized his jetpack was dead—his only means of mobility in zero gravity, destroyed. He scrambled to push himself up, but the heavy gravity boots only dragged him down again.

The woman moved with purpose toward the nearest enemy fighter, her magnetic boots clanking against the asteroid's surface. She didn't look back, though Jonathan's struggles were clearly audible behind her.

Then came the laughter—cold, cruel, and taunting. It echoed through the emptiness of space, slicing through Jonathan's remaining hope like a cleaver. His heart sank as the sound washed over him, the weight of betrayal nearly as crushing as losing his favorite ship.

He watched helplessly as the woman reached the enemy vessel, disappearing into its shadowy interior. The ships' engines roared to life, and within moments, all three fighters darted past him in perfect formation, heading further into the asteroid belt. Brief streaks of light marked their engines' passing before the massive rocks consumed them entirely.

Jonathan struggled to his feet, using a nearby boulder to raise himself. His body protested every movement.

His comm device crackled suddenly to life. "Sensors detected your collision with the other craft. Great work, Crizen, you just prevented a major leak of classified information. Hang tight, Captain, rescue is on its way. Over."

The words hit him like a physical blow. A major leak of classified information? His face hardened as the bitter



realization washed over him.

“Goddamnit,” he hissed between clenched teeth, standing alone with his thoughts.

## RBX-009

Alex's brain tickled within the inch thick polycarbonate protective helmet.

He wasn't supposed to feel anything physical, but he did. At least, he wasn't supposed to. He had no organic body for the signals to travel through!

An itch never to be scratched, he thought. It did, however, keep his mind from obsessing over the long voyage through space, peering into a black abyss.



In the distant future, humanity dared to reach beyond the moon, where the solar system beckoned with its mysteries, wonders and enlightenments. NASA handpicked a mission of unprecedented scope for nine brave individuals.

A select few of these astronauts were more than just astronauts; they were the pioneers of a new era, destined

to traverse the system.

Alex was one of them, a man of unyielding determination and boundless curiosity. He had trained tirelessly, preparing his mind for the monumental journey ahead.

This was no ordinary mission.

Robotic Space eXploration, or RbX, revealed itself to them as an advanced technological feat that merged the human brain with robotic entities.

Humanity's frail form was ill-suited to the rigors of space travel, its flesh vulnerable to the ceaseless onslaught of cosmic radiation. Thus, the super space suits were born—a fusion of man and machine, where the human brain, removed from its host, resided within a robotic encased shell. These suits served as an all in one traveling vessel. Thrusters and navigation components, all controlled by the mind of the inhabitant.

One after the other, each pilot stood up and followed the scientists to the bionic transformation chamber. Not soon after, it was Alex's turn.

A large tub filled with nitrogen-chilled water awaited. Stripped of his clothes, Alex stood inside. A cold burn ran through his body as he submerged his body, but Alex remained silent and determined.

A doctor in a white jumpsuit with protective goggles entered the room. "Mr. Steely, glad you joined the program. My name is Doctor Neely," he said, looking down at Alex. "Before we begin, let me brief you on your mission, sir." He pulled out a file and leafed through the papers.

“The procedure is not without its risks. We haven’t exactly had the chance to fully understand the extraction and re-insertion process.”

“I understand the risks, doctor, but what happens to my body?” Alex questioned.

“Not to worry, we’ll keep your body in cryo freeze. When the mission is complete, we’ll re-insert your brain back into your body, just as if nothing happened.”

“Eleven years is a long trip, doctor...”

“Don’t fear, your body will be preserved. The mind, however, is another story. We don’t have the data to understand the long-term effects of this magnitude. Since your mission is the longest, it means we can gather adequate data from the candidates with shorter missions. We’ll be able to make adjustments for you as we go.”

“Understood. What is my mission?”

“Your mission on this program is to journey to Pluto, a frigid and desolate dwarf planet, to explore its extreme frigid atmosphere for resources. The goal is to map the terrain in the greatest of detail, and start the construction process for a colony. Your mission will be the farthest and longest. The hopes of humanity rest on your shoulders, Mr. Steely! I wish you the best of luck on your journey. Godspeed.”



When Alex underwent the intricate procedure to transplant his brain into the space suit, he felt a surge of anticipation mixed with apprehension. The boundaries

between man and machine blurred, and he emerged from the process not as he once was, but as something altogether new—a machine.

When his eyes opened, he no longer had his body. Instead, the sound of gears and mechanical joints accompanied his every move.



“God damnit,” thought Alex, the itch.

While soaring through the void of space, the itch remained. At first it was just an annoyance, a slight distraction from the wonders of space outside his view port.

As days turned into months, months into years, the itch became a constant torment. It was as if a thousand ants were crawling under his robotic skin, swarming and gnawing away at his brain. His messages back to Earth became increasingly frantic, his calm professionalism giving way to extreme desperation.

“I can’t take it anymore. Why didn’t they tell me I’d never sleep?” he groaned. The void of space seemed to close in around him, mirroring the void within. Sleep was impossible; thoughts of self-destruction crept into his mind.

He considered shutting himself down permanently, ending the agony.

“Computer, status report,” Alex said, while trying to keep his voice steady.

“All systems functioning nominally.”

“Impossible,” he whimpered, his brain feeling like fire. “Lies.”

His movements became erratic, his thoughts tortured. He raised his mechanical hands to his head, trying to shake the itch away. A slight reprieve quickly reversed. The itch returned, as always, consuming him in an all-encompassing torment that left him with no rational thoughts.

“It won’t stop, it won’t stop, it won’t stop!!” Alex screamed.

On the brink of madness, Alex made preparations to end his agony once and for all. But the proximity alarm suddenly buzzed with an oncoming obstruction, a meteor, roughly the size of a bus.

“Slowing engines one percent to bypass the meteor,” said the computer.

“Cancel that.” Alex said, holding his head in agony. He had thought of every sinister way he could end his life up to this point, but the mere idea of failing the mission weighed heavily.

“I have an idea. At this speed, if I divert more energy to the forward shields, I’ll slice right through it. Just like a bullet through an apple!” he explained, for once seeing clarity.

“Yes! This will work!”

“But, sir, this is not a rational solution to your issue.”

“Just enough of a bonk to make this itch go away. Yes! Yes! Computer, divert all available energy to the forward shields, maintain current speed and trajectory.”

“But, sir.”

“That’s an order!”

Alex easily guided himself towards the moving meteor, like a dart in the wind, until colliding with a mere thud.



Doctor Neely rushed to his terminal as an alarm blasted through the control room. A young control room technician frowned at his monitor as the doctor sat down.

“Damn, mission failure. He was the last one.”

“Humm, perhaps what we’re missing is that the mind must have its true host? Or maybe...”

“I’d say this program was a giant failure, Doctor.”  
Whispered the technician.

“Compile all the internal communications, thoughts, and actions. Get me a detailed analysis.” Doctor Neely slumped in his chair. “Bloody hell, I guess we’ll just have to start all over.”

# THE TEACHER TELLS IT SO WELL

**T**he old woman opened her eyes, releasing a single tear down her cheek. We all held our breath thinking it would be her last.

We gasped as she closed her eyes quickly. This could be it. This could be it!

It was mean, I know, but we made bets daily thinking she would die on the spot.

Her face was battle torn with wrinkles, extreme old age, but she insisted on teaching to her last dying breath.

She called my name. No clue what she asked. I was so focused on death.

As she launched into a familiar speech about why we were here and how I should pay attention. I feel a sharp pinch on my elbow. It's an ant; the biting kind.

Henry laughed until I pointed to the anthill he was sitting next to. With a yelp, he jumped up and looked for



another seat. The teacher told everyone to settle down, but she was too old and frail to stand.

A thunderous rumble in the distance made everyone silent. Was it a bomb or a building falling? Sometimes, the huge piles of rubble teetered and came crashing down. I guess that's why we were not supposed to play on them, but that's what made it so much fun.

She closed her eyes again and we all waited, staring at her. I counted one...two...and then she opened them. I wonder if she knew we're waiting for her to die.

Her lecture continued right where it left off, right in the middle of her sentence. The world didn't use to be this way, she told us as her eyes scanned the classroom and the dilapidated buildings around us.

We need to listen to the past so we don't ruin the future. I've heard this before, from Mom, Dad, and the other teachers.

I raised my hand. Henry looked at me like I was crazy.

"Yes, Jonathan?"

"How do you know any of this stuff actually happened," I asked.

"Because I was there."

"Gosh, how old are you, anyway?"

The class went quiet. I didn't mean to say it out loud. It just slipped out.

Her eyes slowly closed and I hoped for a second that she didn't pick this moment to die.

"I've been around longer than you can imagine."

I think I see the echo of a smile on her withered lips before it disappears. We were waiting, wondering if that was her final answer.

“But,” she continued, “I’m not the topic of today’s lesson.”

Everyone lets out their breath at the same time. I expected her to go on with what she was saying about *the before times*, but she’s stopped again. Her eyes are still closed and Henry looked at me like he’s trying to say, “dead or sleeping?”

Opening her lids just halfway, she took a deep breath and sighed. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The button. It wasn’t a real button, though many people thought of it that way. The activator was a series of keys and switches all locked with special top-secret codes. Only four people in the world knew those codes; two generals and two politicians.”

Henry raised his hand but didn’t wait for her to call on him.

“Did you know them?”

“Know, who, Henry?”

“Did you know the generals and the other guys? The ones who pushed the button that killed everybody?”

“If you had been paying attention in class yesterday, you could tell me their names. To answer your question, yes. I knew one of them. Actually, I taught his son.”

A shadow passed over us and I looked up to see a vulture circling. Two more follow. Was there something dead nearby or are they waiting for *her*?

“Was he mean?” asked one of the girls.

"I only met him once, he was a kind man."

"Then why did he blow everyone up?"

The teacher looked at her for a moment without speaking. Then, she says, "he was doing his job."

Henry asked, "it was his job to kill people?"

"Please raise your hand if you want to talk, students. No, Henry. It was his job to save people; his own people."

"But," I said, "he didn't save them, did he?"

She looked at me and blinked very slowly. "Well...that depends on..."

And then that's it. The sound of cicadas swells to fill the silence.

We all sit, expecting her to finish, looking back at her opened eyes. Her mouth slowly started to open and then it stopped. It closed again and so did her eyes.

I start the count again. One...two...three...still not open. It looked like that could be it. The whispering girls whispered again.

"Teacher?" one of them asked.

There was no response. The Teacher was finally silent. Her head slowly sank to her chest. Her hands went limp and dropped beside her.

Henry jumped up so fast he made me flinch. "Ha! She's dead! Pay up, sucker!"

"Wait just a little longer. I think I saw her twitch." I know I've lost the bet, but I'm stalling.

"Nuh-uh. The old bat's gone. Pay." He held his hand out, waiting.

I told him I don't have it here, that I had to go home to get it. Henry asked why don't we just leave now? Class

is over, right? There's no class if the teacher's dead.

As we stood up to go, we heard the sound of a truck pulling up. Two men got out, each holding the handle of a big case. It looked heavy.

“Hold on now. Don't nobody go nowhere,” one said.

They sat the case down next to the Teacher. Together, they tipped her over and inserted a tool in her back. Then, they pulled a battery with a blinking green light out of the case, took her old battery out, and replaced it. The man who spoke to us leaned her back and pressed a button on the back of her head.

The Teacher opened her eyes.

# WHEN THE CLOCK MOVES BACKWARDS

*T*he desolate streets of the ancient world were obscured by thick, tainted-yellow smoke. Even behind the protective breathing apparatus with filtered air tanks, the stench lingered, a constant reminder of the toxic smog. Only Lexi was around to guide me.

“In twenty feet, turn right,” advised Lexi. Lexi was a cutting-edge marvel of technology, a motion-sensitive, A.I. driven GPS assistant, all contained in a small earpiece.

I couldn’t see much beyond the swirling clouds, just hazy shadows moving behind the protective plastic of my mask.

“Make sure you’re right about this,” I muttered. “The smog is so thick today, I can barely find my way in this mess.”

“My sensors track registered locations only, sir,” Lexi

replied.

I couldn't fathom how people endured this smog-infested landscape. Just looking at the air made me feel sick. I prefer to stick to the high-rise buildings, cleaner air, better views.

"In five feet, turn left." Lexi directed, projecting red markers onto my goggles. Yet, the system often struggled, revealing obstacles just before I collided with them.

Occasionally, dim lights of moving vehicles zipped by my left leaving streaks of light in the smog and seemed to slowly dissipate. Short blasts of thick, smoggy air would hit my ruffled brown overcoat causing me to misstep, almost as if it were a wave of water crashing into me.

"In forty-two paces, you will have arrived at your destination," Lexi declared, outlining a small shop in red.

Looking through the mask of the breathing apparatus, before me in bended neon tubes, I squinted to barely make out the glow of *Calzer's Clockworks* sign hanging in the front window. The store seemed frozen in time, likely a remnant from the 21st century.

"You have reached your destination," Lexi announced, marking the shop's door.

I twisted the handle opening to a small foyer. The door creaked open, revealing tile and woodwork, real woodwork, a stark contrast to the modern world of recycled plastic.

A sign hung on the wall with instructions for visitors. *Please wait until decontamination is fully complete before entering!*

A solid blast of cold air hit me from all sides, startling me. This is decontaminant doing its job, destroying any living microbe that may have latched onto me. I couldn't shake the fear of it missing something, poisoning me slowly.

Calzer's Clockworks is a sanctuary of time. In every conceivable place is a clock of some sort. If there ever was a place for old clocks to end up, this is the place. The left wall upon entering was lined with tall and beautifully constructed grandfather clocks crafted out of wood, which all seemed to be ticking in sequence. Clocks of all shapes and sizes hung on every wall: circular, square, oval, and triangle. Clocks with visible moving gears, cuckoo clocks and their busy components were like a symphonic orchestra playing in tune. Inside illuminated display cases sat hundreds of wrist watches and pocket watches decked in gold and silver.

Behind the counter sat an old man with thick, black-rimmed glasses, which magnified the size of his eyes. He was a round, pudgy man with a black sweater vest looking intently into a large magnifying glass repairing a small pocket watch. He took no notice of me. I took off the breathing apparatus and stood in front of him tapping my foot a few times to catch his attention.

"Excuse me?" I said, annoyed. "Can you help me?"

Suddenly interested. "Hello sir, my name is Calzer, what can I help you with today?" he said, with his eyes looking above his thick glasses.

"I'm looking for a clock for my wife, can you help me

find one?" I asked.

He nodded silently while putting down a small screwdriver and moved aside the pocket watch carefully.

"Can you be more specific?" asked Calzer as he propped his head up with his hand. "There are all kinds of clocks. Wall clocks, pedestal clocks, digital clocks, alarm clocks, and atomic clocks, just to name a few."

"How about a clock to sit above our fireplace?" I suggested.

Calzer stood slowly. "Ah, yes. I do have the perfect clock you can take off my hands."

Calzer pulled a skeleton key out of his vest pocket and unlocked the door of a large wooden chest. Inside, Calzer removed a clock about a foot long with a light wooden stain. The clock face was a light aging yellow.

"This clock is very old. I cannot seem to get rid of it. It is very beautiful and well maintained," said Calzer as he admired the intricate wood carved detail on the clock.

Judging by the age, this would be the perfect gift for Therese. The clock was thoroughly cared for as the wood looked brand new. The craftsmanship of the intricate leaf border around the edges magnified its beauty.

"It does look very nice. I think my wife would truly enjoy this."

"Perfect! However..." his voice trailed off. He hesitated before continuing, "This clock..." Calzer said as he put a hand on the clock and the other on his hip. "Holds power beyond your comprehension."

"Power?" I scoffed. "You're speaking nonsense. It is nothing more than a relic of times gone past."



“You’re blind to the truth!” Calzer’s voice grew sharp.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “It’s just a clock”.

“Well, yes, it is, however this clock is truly important and special. As the new owner of this clock, you must agree to maintain and protect this clock at all costs. And never, ever turn the clock hands backwards or counterclockwise.”

Calzer paused and looked down as if he were embarrassed. “Time always moves forwards, not backwards. Remember that. Moving the hands backwards will cause you to go back in time.”

“I really thought this was some cheap tactic to jack the price, but you are actually insane,” I said.

After a short pause, I burst out laughing. I put my hand on the display case to hold myself up. I glanced over at Calzer, who was unamused. This was no joke to him. I could see the crinkles on his forehead as if he were holding back the anger.

“Ok, I’m sorry, this is not a joke?” I said, trying to hold back the laughter.

“I am telling you the truth, the mere act of turning the dials back could catapult the bearer to a place beyond their wildest imagination.”

It must have been the child in me, always having to push that button, or touch wet paint when a sign clearly says *Wet Paint*. I don’t know why. I put my index finger on the hour hand and moved it counter clockwise around the dial several times.

Calzer yelled. “You are... making... a grave mistake!”

Calzer’s voice and the noise of the entire store began

to slowly get quieter as if someone turned the volume down on a remote. I began to squint a little more as everything began to look fuzzy and lose its color. I looked down at my hands. The color was fading, and I could slightly see through them.

Nausea set in and I closed my eyes. My skin began to tingle as if my whole body were asleep. Absolutely no sound at all. What was happening?

Suddenly, sound began to slowly fade in. I could make out the chirping of birds and crickets. No clocks ticking. No sounds of the big city, nothing but the sounds of nature. A gentle breeze blew at my back. The air smelled clean and fresh, no pollution.

“Unable to contact servers, trying again in five minutes,” said Lexi.

I stood there, taking in the lush, untouched wilderness, feeling an unexpected sense of belonging. This ancient world seemed to beckon me, inviting me to shed the chaos of my life and embrace its beauty.

The wonder quickly dissipated with the sense of terror. Just as I started to imagine spending the rest of my days here, a ground-shaking sound began to approach, heaving, trampling with hollow thumps, growing louder with each passing second.

Something big was moving in the woods as I heard loud puffs of breath. Off to my left, a massive beast of ancient myth, towering over me like a mountain, crashed through the thick brush. Its scales gleamed with an ancient, weathered majesty and its eyes locked onto mine.

My heart raced, I couldn't move. Every instinct

screamed at me to run, but I froze in awe and terror. The ground trembled beneath its massive weight, sending shockwaves through my feet as it let out a thunderous growl. Time seemed to stand still.

Suddenly its long neck ducked to match my height and before I could scream for help, its mouth engulfed my head. I began to see black as its teeth sank into my throat.



Calzer stood up angrily in his empty store. He picked up the mantle clock with both hands and placed it back into the wooden cabinet, “I tell everyone every single time, do not move the clock hands backwards!”

# PLEASE REFER TO THE MANUAL

**S**tay-at-home Dads have routines. Especially Jeremy, the father of two beautiful daughters. This morning is no different. First things first: a cup of coffee, admire the view from their four-hundredth-floor apartment, sit, and read the morning headlines.

Jeremy could not remember when he last held a job. In fact, he couldn't remember much of his earlier life, only bits and pieces of memories he could never stitch together. It was his wife, Amber, who found him twelve years ago after a tragic fall, which caused him to lose all his memories. Amber explained everything to him after the fall. They grew closer shortly after and eventually moved in together.

It frustrated him when he couldn't remember the past, so he simply gave up trying to remember. His frustration grew to the point he had the constant feeling

of implosion. In his state of lost memory, giving up the past was the best path forward, as he felt content with everything he and Amber had built together.

When Amber gave birth to their first daughter, Jeremy offered to stay home with her since Amber had recently received a substantial promotion. He didn't mind staying home with her. His loss of memory made him feel like he couldn't contribute much to society anyway.

Jeremy sat in his favorite reclining chair facing a large dome window. He could see his reflection in the window, all six feet, blonde hair, bifocal glasses, and even some visible grays. The chair was brown and worn around the edges of the arm from frequent sitting, with the fibers of cloth fraying in every direction and stained from oily skin. It was worn down but comfortable. He sat with his leg crossed over the other, where his tablet computer rested. In his left hand, he held his coffee.

The apartment was on the highest floor of the building. It is a dome apartment with fantastic views of the city. Jeremy loved living in the glass dome and the city. He refers to the family as 'domers,' often using the phrase to irritate Amber, a sad attempt at making a joke. The glass on the dome allows the family to embrace all the angles of the vibrant and busy city. From their vantage point, they see shiny metal buildings, old architectural buildings, flying cars, planes, and birds. It was also a technological marvel. The glass can apply a foggy tint to the entire dome to allow privacy with the push of a button or voice activation.

Inside the dome, the apartment has three bedrooms, a

kitchen, and a family room. It didn't have much square footage, but the dome's height made the apartment feel large and spacious. Amber has always been a technology guru. As a hobby, she buys the latest and greatest gadgets and technology to better their life. Their apartment was proof of this as it was littered with old technology, computers, smart mirrors, security systems, tablets, automated sweeping robots, and personal A.I. assistants. Jeremy gave in and quickly succumbed to his wife's obsession with technology.

Jeremy took a sip of his coffee, its warmth lost as he swirled it around his mouth before he swallowed. Behind him, a slam of a door caused him to jump and shake his cup, leaving a brown coffee drip on the side of the mug and onto the already tattered chair.

"Oh my God!" screamed the voice of a teenage girl.

Jeremy rolled his eyes and moved his attention back to his tablet computer. His teenage daughter was awake and launching into her typical behavior.

Ella, Jeremy's eleven-year-old younger daughter, stomped her feet and stopped just behind Jeremy.

"Jessica did it to me again! She locked me out of the bathroom!" screamed Ella as her long blonde hair shook with her facial expressions. Her teddy bear pajamas were wrinkled, and her hair was half matted to one side; she had clearly just woken up.

Jeremy grumbled as he felt a sense of *deja vu*. This same situation happened yesterday or earlier in the week. He couldn't remember exactly.

"Jessica! Let your sister into the bathroom! We need

to leave for school soon!” shouted Jeremy in a slightly exasperated and monotone voice.

“Dad! Will you just get up and do something? I won’t have time to get ready for school, and Mom will be here any minute with breakfast!” pleaded Ella in a whiny voice.

Jeremy grumbled, taking the last sip of coffee as he rose out of the chair. “Fine.”

Jeremy walked through the hallway towards the bathroom. The door was shut, and the glow of the bathroom light gleamed through the bottom crack. He lightly tapped on the door three times. “Jessica, please let your sister into the bathroom.”

Jeremy paused for what felt like ten minutes without getting a response. Growing more frustrated, he pounded louder on the door, causing pain on the edge of his fist. “Jessica! We need to leave soon! Open the door!”

Frustrated, he rested his forehead on the door. “Why, why, why, must this always happen?”

“See, this is why you should remove all the locks in this house!” declared Ella as she walked by her father and into her bedroom two doors down.

Jeremy pounded three more times on the door, causing more pain to his fist. He lowered his head and whispered, “1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1.”

The door cracked open roughly an inch. Jeremy raised his head to see Jessica’s dark blue eyes peering up at him. “Oh my God, why can I never get my own space around here?” screamed Jessica.

Jeremy stepped back. “Why can’t the two of you just get along? Please let your sister...” Jeremy paused mid-

sentence, and his eyes widened. “1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1.”

Jessica swung the door wide open, her hand holding the door revealing identical blonde hair as her sister’s and her middle school baseball shirt used as a nightgown.

“What are you doing? Are you counting down on me?”

“What? Of course not!” exclaimed Jeremy.

“Then why are you counting?” Jessica asked accusingly.

Jeremy cocked his head to one side and his eyes grew wider. Jessica was sure her father was playing a joke on her. Her grip on the door intensified.

“1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1,” Jeremy repeated.

“Please stop!” Pleaded Jessica, before her father’s facial expressions returned to normal.

“Stop what?” questioned Jeremy. “Are you going to let your sister in here or...”

His head instantly cocked to the right with one eye open, and a vein popped out on the side of his neck as if he were shouting. “1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1.”

She stepped backward and began to close the door but left it open slightly. Her father had played some jokes on her before, but nothing like this.

“1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1,” he repeated.

Jeremy walked closer to the opened bathroom door. Jessica put both hands on the door and began to shut it in his face, but Jeremy’s fist pounded the door open, causing Jessica’s hands to slip free and stumble backward. “Dad, stop!” shouted Jessica in terror. “What are you doing?”

“1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1,” Jeremy said again, talking louder.



His eyes rapidly blinked as if a speck of dirt were caught in them. He had an abnormally brilliant, bright smile, which caused the hairs on Jessica's neck to stand straight up. She dashed past him so she wouldn't feel trapped in the bathroom. Her left arm brushed up against Jeremy, and he didn't take notice or move an inch.

"1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1," he said again, which crept Jessica out.

Jessica ran down the hallway, almost tripping over the automated vacuum. She burst into Ella's room, barging in as she usually did. The door flew open and slammed against the wall, which bounced back, almost smacking Jessica as she ran inside.

"We HAVE to leave; Dad has lost it. He keeps repeating numbers over and over!" Jessica screamed desperately at Ella.

"I don't understand," stated a confused Ella, who was brushing her hair. "Besides, why should I believe you?"

"Just listen to him!" shouted Jessica.

A distant thump could be heard, a few seconds pause in between, followed by Jeremy speaking, "1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1."

Both sisters moved to the bedroom doorway, trying not to make any noise. Jessica peered around the corner to see her father in the hallway, pounding his head on the wall, repeating the phrase. "See, look at him! He's gone crazy!" she said.

"1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1," repeated Jeremy, pounding his head on the wall.

Ella peered around the doorway and confirmed what

her sister proclaimed. She saw what her sister had described.

“1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1.”

As the sisters watched their father’s perplexing condition, the sound of the deadbolt keypad beeped several times before the electric deadbolt finally turned, ending with a final click. The front door creaked open, and their mother’s voice echoed in the hallway. “Hey, everyone, breakfast is here!!”

Amber, dressed in her casual blue jeans and gray sports jacket, walked through the doorway, juggling her keys, coffee cups, and a sack of muffins she picked up in the lobby coffee shop. She threw the keys on an antique end table next to the door, trying not to drop the food and coffee in her hands.

Jessica and Ella ran to their mother with fear and worry in their eyes.

“What’s wrong with you two?” questioned Amber.

“It’s Dad!! Something is not right! He keeps repeating numbers over and over!”

Looking down the hallway, she instantly noticed her husband facing the wall and thought she might have an explanation.

“1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1,” Jeremy repeated.

“Oh, I think I know what it is,” said Amber, looking up and thinking out loud.

“What is it?” both girls asked hysterically. They both looked at their Mother and waited desperately for an answer.

“Oh, goodness, I don’t know exactly. I’ll need to refer

to the manual,” said Amber. She turned towards the antique end table. She pulled open the top drawer, removed several loose papers, and revealed a thick book.

Ella and Jessica looked at each other in confusion.

The manual was several hundred pages long. It looked brand new, as if it had never been opened. The manual looked pristine: not a crease, a faded page, or a wrinkled page was observable. In fact, its pages were perfectly white, obviously never seeing the light of day. Jessica let out a small gasp as Amber pulled out the book. On the cover, she saw a portrait picture of her father, who was smiling and looking like he was having a good time. The title jumped out at her in its thick, bold letters consuming half the cover, ***Maintaining Your Robot Father.***

Amber leafed through several pages of the book, looking intently for the numbers Jeremy repeated. She licked her index finger several times to grip the lightweight pages before finally settling on a page halfway through the book, “Aha! 1, 2, 3...3, 2, 1, it’s a code for *faulty power supply - replace soon!*” she said.

The girls stared at her in horror.

Amber slapped the book closed and tucked it back into the end table, “I guess it was only a matter of time before you two figured it out.”

“Does this mean Dad has been a freakin’ robot this whole time?” questioned Jessica.

“Yeah.” She paused and looked down at both girls. “He’s much cheaper to maintain than a real one!!!”

# THEY AREN'T HURTING YOU

**T**he blades on the blender broke the silence, but the room desperately needed life.

Red coffee dripped off Tenny's gray beard as he sat in the kitchen. He stared at his wife, Sherry, pondering where the years had gone.

Their love had forever been the only thing keeping them sane in the dark times, but recently, it was no secret they were feeling distant.

Life as a farmer was never easy; with fourteen billion people on the planet, Tenny was mandated that his three-acre plot of land contribute to feeding the world. Giant cylinder stacks lined his backyard in a nine-by-nine grid pattern. Each cylinder grew corn, green beans, and potatoes, rotating in the sun to maximize light. Vertical farming at its best.

Tenny swiped away the coffee drips from his beard, and his eyes left his wife for the first time as she scurried around the kitchen making breakfast.

Red coffee didn't taste like coffee, and he longed for coffee beans grown on Earth. Red beans get their color from Martian soil, and growing on Mars is cheaper than growing on vertical farms. This is all according to the rules and guidelines of the Farmer's Guild. Growing anything that isn't edible food is also strictly forbidden on Earth.

At his last sip of red, Tenny paused mid-gulp, hearing screech after screech.

***“SCREEEEECCHHH!”***

“God, damn it,” said Tenny looking up at the ceiling in annoyance.

“What's wrong?” asked Sherry.

Tenny turned to her, feeling lost in the brief moment she looked like she cared. “Those damn Crizens are back,” he said, looking disgusted. “I am getting real sick...”

The look on Sherry's face said everything. The rodents were the reason behind the strife of their marriage.

“Oh, lay off it, Tenny,” grumbled Sherry. “They ain't hurting anyone.”

Tenny stood up and headed towards the other end of the kitchen, where his 20th-century modified rifle hung on the wall. Only Crizens make screeching noises this early in the morning, and it is the perfect time to pick a

few off.

Only ten years ago, the creatures began to plague the Earth. They are small rodent rat-like creatures with large protruding spines and razor-sharp teeth.

The beasts came from the fourth planet in the Trappist system. A return mission from Trappist 4, led by famed astronaut John Crizen, brought them here as specimens for study. They quickly escaped shortly after landing on Earth and didn't take long to acclimate to Earth's climate. In fact, the climate here is so lovely that they multiply rather quickly.

Tenny always saw Crizens as nightmarish beings wreaking havoc on their farm supplies. Sherry, however, viewed them through a softer lens, finding a particular charm in these seemingly harmless creatures. This spawned an unspoken tension between Tenny's practicality and Sherry's plea for mercy.

"Oh, please, Tenny, they ain't hurtin' no one. Can't you just leave them alone?" Sherry said, unwilling to face the harsh reality, pleading with Tenny to reconsider.

Tenny inspected the rifle in his hands. "With the right aim, they won't feel a thing," he said, looking to see if the chamber was reloaded.

***"SCREEEEECCHHH!"***

Sherry went from concerned to petrified and stood by the door to the backyard. "You have to reconsider," she said, trying to look intimidating (Something her old frail

body could never manage). “They are only innocent little children.”

Her words flare up emotions for Tenny. He remembered the relentless invasion of Crizens. Those troublesome creatures that snuck into the water, into the silo, and even the vertical farm. He remembered the echoes of Crizens' screeches resounding through the fields, a haunting melody expanding over the horizon as he could do nothing but watch the destruction of his crops- the food to feed thousands, destroyed on the night of the harvest moon.

“It is them or us!” he said, his frustration growing.

The screeching halted as if out of fear, but so did his anger. For he saw the look on the face of the woman he had spent the last 40 years loving.

He knew her lingering affection for the creatures, a poignant contrast to his feelings.

Just like them, the farm recalls memories of tough times. The Crizens had become a symbol of the deeper issues that troubled their relationship.

Tenny turned away and went to the back door.

“Wait!” She halted him just as he placed a hand on the door. Sherry pulled a box from a drawer and brought it to Tenny. “At least use these. These are stronger and will make sure they die in one hit.”

Tenny grabbed the box and glared at Sherry while stuffing it into the front pocket of his faded blue coveralls. “Just stay inside while I take out a few Crizens,” he said.

***“SCREEEEECCHHH!”***

As Tenny entered the house's backyard, morning light showed through the cylinder stacks. He could hear the sounds of many Crizens as their screeching noises echoed off the cylinders, making it sound like several thousand screeched at once.

***“SCREEEEECCHHH!”***

Tenny cocked the rifle and put the end of his precision scope up to his eye. He moved and pointed the gun at the base of a cylinder station where a Crizen stood. Its long protruding spines reflected in the sunlight, almost blinding Tenny.

Boom! Tenny fired off a shot. The Crizen jumped and scurried around the silo. “Damn, missed.”

Two more Crizens caught Tenny's eye off to his right. He fired three shots in their direction, missing them both. “Unbelievable, I am off today.”

Taking his time, Tenny carefully lined the scope's crosshairs to an unsuspecting Crizen at the top of one cylinder stations. “This time, I won't miss it.”

Another miss, and Tenny was getting visibly agitated. He walked through the grid of cylinders while dozens of Crizens scurried into the growing areas of the stations. As usual, the cylinder motors kicked in every hour and began rotating with a light hum.



***“SCREEEEECCHH!”***

Tenny aimed one more time at another Crizen hunched over eating a fallen potato. BOOM!

Tenny had missed once more, and the Crizen looked back over its spiky spine at Tenny as if nothing were wrong. He pulled the trigger of the rifle once more and click, out of bullets.

“I can’t believe this. What the hell is going on here?” yelled Tenny.

He grabbed the box of ammunition out of the pocket of his coveralls and looked closely at the description on the box.

Twenty cartridge blanks - Dangerous within 20 feet.

“What the hell, BLANKS?” yelled Tenny.

Behind Tenny, Sherry stepped out of the house with a cooking pan in each hand. She began banging them together in rapid movement. Crizens started poking their heads out of nooks and crannies.

She had discovered days earlier that Crizens became agitated and aggressive with certain noises while trying to scare several away from the house.

“Sherry, what the hell are you doing?” cried Tenny, looking around and noticing a staggering number of Crizens appear.

As she walked closer to Tenny, she began pounding louder, throwing the pans at Tenny’s feet and walking slowly backward.

“I don’t understand!!! What you are...” Tenny’s voice trailed off in fear.

Hordes of Crizens began moving towards Tenny, snarling and shrieking. Dozens of Crizens were popping out of the cylinders. The most Tenny has ever seen. He staggered in fear, looking back at Sherry.

“Why did you...?” he screamed.

Several snarling Crizens pounced on Tenny all at once, biting anywhere they could. Hundreds of Crizens swarmed the body of Tenny, feasting on his skin viciously. The blood-curdling screams reached Sherry’s ears, and she was unfazed by the sight. She just stood there watching the Crizens with a half-crooked smile.

Her face was serene. She was pleased with herself, knowing Tenny had it coming after all these years.

“I told you to leave ‘em alone, Tenny!”

***“SCREEEEECCHHH!”***

# HELLO COMPUTER

*I* stared at our first electrical bill and couldn't move.

Down at the bottom, the last number listed by the word TOTAL. The number was high. Sky high. It was almost as much as our house payment.

Mom is going to lose it. We barely have any money left over after moving into the new house. This will probably mean extra shifts at the diner for Mom. In fact, it might mean extra shifts for me too. I was coming up on fifteen and working as a busboy at the local diner is not fun work at all.

I could not believe it, and I stared longer at the bill. Appreciating the power company's blue logo, I quickly went from liking it to wanting to curse out loud.

With trembling hands, I folded the bill, my eyes widening in disbelief at the staggering amount. I fought the urge to scream.

We've only lived in the house for a month and a half. There was no logical reason it could be this high. It has to

be a fluke. Calling the power company did no good, as the lady on the phone insisted the bill was correct, looking up on her computer several times to verify. I even asked her to triple check for good measure.

She loudly tapped away on her keyboard. The punching sound of each keystroke echoed through the phone's speaker, agitating my ears. Somehow, we had churned through enough energy to power our home, plus two more!

How? We still have everything we own meticulously packed away in boxes and stacked in our living room. We have nothing plugged in yet except for the essentials.

Mom and I moved into this house with much eagerness. She saved every single penny she could for years, working double and sometimes triple shifts just to scrape enough money together for this house!

Apartment living had slowly eroded our faith in humanity. Home ownership was our only escape from the craziness that ensued at the apartment building: guns, violence and loud parties, just to name a few. It took us several years of saving. Close to eight years, but we made it to homeownership. We were finally free.

Finding our new house couldn't have come at a better time, as Mom finally snapped. It was the constant noise abuse from the neighbor above us. I had always known it was only a matter of time.



The new house had been our home for two and a half

months now. We had unpacked every single box, making the house livable to some sort of standard.

I stood on the porch in the 110° heat and chuckled.

After growing up in southern Texas, I was used to the heat. This was nothing. Totally normal. Living in the great state of Texas had conditioned me, prepared me. It also contributed to my year-round tanned skin and dirty blonde hair. I'm not sure if the Texas heat gave me my height, but I was becoming super tall for my age, nearing six feet.

I opened the metal flap to our black stainless-steel mailbox mounted to the house, admiring my somewhat limited do-it-yourself skills. A new mailbox was my first project. I was proud of the effort.

I grabbed the day's mail and noticed the blue logo of the power company in the top left corner. My heart sank a little, instantly remembering how painful it was for Mom to pay off the last one. I opened it immediately, letting the envelope float slowly to the ground.

Once again, the bill was exorbitant, too high. I wadded the bill into a ball and threw it against the wall in anger. I walked inside and let the screen door slam against the doorjamb.



Three and a half months now at the new house, I'm again staring down at the latest electricity bill. I managed to grab the bill before Mom had the chance to stress over it.

Somehow, it's higher than the previous month! Mom stepped out onto the porch while I stared down at the bill. She stood next to me in her blue tank top and shorts, almost afraid to come outside, afraid that the sun would burn her fair skin.

"Darren, why don't we call the power company or an electrician? They can come out with their little tester things and find out what the problem is," suggested Mom, acting like the know-it-all of electricity.

"Tester things?" I questioned. "I suppose they could come out and at least do something or give some kind of advice."

I wouldn't know. I wasn't anywhere near an expert of any kind.

"Perfect, I'll see if we can get someone out here as soon as possible!" said Mom.

The electrician packed up his testing equipment and carefully wrapped the wiring of the testing prongs around his tinged yellow voltmeter.

"I don't know what to tell you," said the electrician. "I've checked every outlet. Checked each of the big appliances with a watt usage monitor. I've even ensured that the electrical box is up to date. Everything looks perfect!"

"How about the electrical work? Come on, there has to be something," I complained, all the while leaning against a wall with both of my hands in my pockets.

"All the wiring in the house is up to code. All the wiring in the house meets the latest code requirements.

Heck, almost everything is brand new! There is nothing in this house that is drawing that much power to cause your bill to skyrocket,” he said.

I looked down at my feet. “There has to be something, some direction to take.”

“I have a theory and an idea of what I think you should try next.”

I looked up at the electrician with one last glimmer of hope, thinking of the last dreadful option: we may have to move out or, worse yet, go back to apartment living. I dreaded the thought.

“You should have the utility company come out and mark where underground electrical lines. Have them check all over your property. Sometimes people steal!!” he said.

“Steal what? Electricity?” I asked.

“Yep, I’ve seen this before. For instance, I’ve seen people run electrical lines over to a neighbor’s outbuilding and siphon off their power. It’s pretty rare, but it happens from time-to-time. How long have you lived here?” he asked.

“Almost four months,” I answered.

“It’s possible. The previous owners might have had deals with neighbors that you’re unaware of. If I were you, I’d start there next!”



The utility company finally came around after three more weeks and receiving another devastating electric bill.

The representative was a tall, overweight man with large a handlebar mustache and greasy, long hair. He wore his bright neon yellow utility jacket while he held his utility device with both hands.

I met him on the front lawn and he barely acknowledged my existence. Apparently, I was a ghost. I don't mind as long as he finds something. I stood by, watching as he swayed his device back and forth. It was a device the size of a baseball bat, a computer screen at the top handle, and a sensor at the other end. As it beeped along, he pressed a button on his device and it sprayed red paint out of the bottom. The indication of the red color meant that there was an electrical line hidden below. He continued to sway the device back and forth, all the while spraying red paint up to the house.

He looked over at me as he approached the side of the house. "Must be your main feed. Ain't nothing else coming in here in the front. I'll do the back really quick and be on my way," he muttered.

I followed along, as he continued swaying the device, until we reached the backyard—our disgusting backyard. Our property butts up to the woods at the back. The home to the left is a vacant home, long ago abandoned by its owners. To the right of us, an old woman lives there whom we've barely seen. Luckily, both properties have a privacy fence. Combined with the woods and the fences, the backyard provides great privacy for us. Mom has dreamt of the possibilities from the first moment we saw the backyard.

The yard was burnt to a crisp from the summer heat.



With drought and water restrictions placed on watering lawns occurring so frequently and pretty much all summer, the lawn suffered.

As I was looking at the burnt grass in disgust, the device beeped. The utility man had found something in the middle of the backyard and began marking the location. He sprayed four lines in the direction of the woods before the beeping stopped. “Stops here in the middle of your yard. Let’s check and see if this line leads to your house.”

He guessed correctly and marked a straight red dotted line leading to the outside electrical meter. A thought screamed at me in the back of my mind. Builders constructed the house in the mid-twentieth century during an era of much fear. I was about to blurt out what the mystery could be, but the utility man yelled, “I bet you there is an old bomb shelter buried in your yard!”

“That sure does make sense, but not why there is power down there. Why did the problem just start now? We received an average electric bill from the previous owner and nothing too crazy high,” I responded.

“Who knows? Did you flip on any breakers when you moved in?” asked the utility man, standing with his meter thrown over his right shoulder.

The thought of *move in* day popped into my head. That day was a day hotter than normal with blistering weather, a super hot day even to my standards. It was so hot it looked like the house could melt away while we moved our belongings out of the moving truck.

He was right!

The house was vacant for several months, and the realtor explained the house was without power before handing over the keys to us. On the first day when we moved in, I flipped on every single breaker I saw in the basement!

“I think you need to get someone in here and dig this up, find out what’s running in there,” the utility man said, stating the obvious.



Robert, my neighbor, lives across the street and owns a lawn service with all kinds of equipment he’s purchased over the years. He is a chipper old man with balding, grey hair, in his mid fifties perhaps.

He’s a friendly guy, always willing to help. He even tried helping us move in that fateful hot move-in day.

While patiently waiting for Robert to get his mail one afternoon, I waited until he limped to his mailbox, knowing I’d have enough time to catch his attention. I always wondered if he had an interesting story behind his limp, perhaps an old interesting war story. I was too afraid to ask.

I ran outside, pretending as if I were doing something in the yard, and struck up a conversation. I tried to explain the situation.

Robert listened quietly while he held his mail. Looking as if he were eager to open them like an impatient child. I rambled on every detail I could think of while he listened. I explained I would like to uncover or at least find the

entrance to the shelter.

Robert agreed and looked immensely intrigued by himself. He relayed he could help over the weekend so as not to interfere with his business work and would be happy to come over with his excavator, all for a free dinner at Mom's diner.

I agreed on her behalf, thinking she wouldn't mind.

Mom and I enjoyed the bright Saturday morning. Well, Mom did anyway.

It was almost too bright as we ate our breakfast in the sunroom off the back of the house. The sun did everything it could do to bounce off every bright and reflective surface in sight, including my plate. I had to close my eyes as I shoveled scrambled eggs into my mouth.

Our peaceful morning soon turned into a loud rumbling noise. I looked up at Mom and saw just past her in the distance, Robert driving his small excavator into our backyard. The diesel engine's exhaust roared loudly and swirled around the side of the house. It filtered into the sunroom's screen windows, unsettling our peaceful morning with the smell of diesel and noise.

Mom turned up her nose as she ate her breakfast and breathed in the engine exhaust.

The little boy in me rushed to finish what I was doing and ran inside to put on some clothes. I could feel Mom's disapproving stare drilling into the back of my head.

By the time I reached the backyard, Robert had already excavated most of it without me. I was so disappointed. Robert had large mounds of dirt already piled up at the

edges. Inside the hole, the shelter looked like a concrete box! Dirt still lay on the box as Robert did the best he could with the bucket of the excavator.

He was able to find all the edges, which went down about five feet. The side closest to the house had a cylinder shaft higher than the concrete container with a door hatch on top of it.

I felt a little stupid, as the hatch would only have been a few inches under the soil. A simple metal detector and shovel probably could have discovered the door.

The rumble of the diesel engine quit, and Robert looked down at the shelter. "There she is. It's a bomb shelter alright."

"The hatch door. How in the heck am I going to get that open?" I said, inspecting the rusty edges of the door. Looking at it made me feel like I could contract tetanus.

"Easy! Use a hammer to move the handle in the open position, and then hook up a chain to the excavator and pull it open!" explained Robert.

He was right. It was easy, or Robert made it look easy. In no time at all, he pounded the rusted hatch handle into the open position and was pulling the door open with the excavator. The hatch screeched open, possibly waking the neighborhood.

As I peered into the entrance, Robert hobbled over to join me. We looked into the uncovered shelter together. A metal ladder, covered with rust, dust, and dirt, led all the way to the bottom from the inside.

"Robert, you've lived across the street from here for years, correct? None of the previous owners mentioned

something like this?" I questioned, looking over at Robert.

"I briefly met the man and his wife. He was some sort of college professor. They both kept to themselves. Friendly, though, he always waved to me but never said much more than hello," replied Robert.

I focused on the entrance shaft, trying to count the number of steps on the ladder.

"Sorry I can't stay longer, Darren, but I have an appointment I need to get ready for. Tell me what you and your mom find down there? Also, tell your mother, don't forget about my free dinner!" said Robert, smiling as he returned to the excavator.

I nodded as I continued peering into the entrance. The possibility of this becoming an obsession concerned me, given my eagerness to uncover the truth behind the mystery.

What was down there? Would I simply find a room with old degrading survival supplies? It could be empty, or maybe there is something more. Thoughts of previous owners storing their valuables and finding those treasures intrigued me. Every time I thought about the bunker, I couldn't stop thinking about the possibilities.

It was time to get dirty and find the reality.



My foot disturbed about a half inch of dust, which had been resting peacefully on the rusty metal ladder. I felt like I was disturbing sacred ground.

I used my foot to kick off the layer of dust before placing the middle of my foot firmly onto the step. I repeated the process on the next step and continued on until I reached the bottom of the floor.

At the base of the ladder, the years of dirt falling through the hatch crack became compressed underneath my footsteps. I clicked the flashlight on and looked around. The room was small and square-shaped, about 4 feet by 4 feet. I noticed a mounted rusty cylinder-shaped unit on the wall, about the size of a garbage can, with a pipe leading into the room and the other end leading up towards the hatch entrance. As I looked closer, on a fading manufacturer label, I could barely make out the text 'Carbon Dioxide Scrubber'.

My eye caught a second pipe leading out of the bunker, next to the CO2 scrubber pipe. I followed it with the flashlight as it twisted around each corner of the room down to the bottom corner of the small entryway. I didn't notice it at first, as it was rather small. A gas generator sat perfectly tucked into the corner with the pipe connected to its exhaust output. Smart! It looked brand new, preserved by the sealed environment of the bunker.

I inspected the generator, noticing it looked like nothing more than an old style internal combustion lawnmower engine, mounted on a piped reinforced cage for easy transportation. I noticed the engine had a rather large gasoline tank, which was probably intended so the owner wouldn't have to refuel as often.

Behind me, there was a small opening in a gray metal

door. I found myself in the bomb shelter's entryway! My mind seemed to accept this was normal for bomb shelters, even though I had no working knowledge of them.

I used the flashlight to inspect the door. It was as normal as any other metal door. Untouched by weather and age, it looked brand new with a shiny silver handle. Shifting the flashlight to my right hand, I grabbed the handle and pulled it open. The door screeched as its metal rubbed against the doorjamb, causing my head to sink in agony. Almost instantly, hot air rushed out of the room as if a heater had just kicked on. Immediately, my eyes started to dry out, and I blinked several times to regain clarity.

The room brimmed with darkness, except for several small red and green blinking lights, all flashing this way and that in different and seemingly random patterns. The hot air dissipated from the room and normalized to the outside temperature.

I stepped inside, shining the flashlight in front of me. I bounced the light back and forth to get the lay of the room. It was quite large, roughly 12' by 12'. The sound of several large machines hummed on both sides of the small space. The reflection of the flashlight shone off of what looked like a computer monitor sitting at the far end of the room. Two lights hung from the ceiling, with the beam of the flashlight bouncing off their rims. I looked around for the switch.

As with any typical room, the switch was located by the door. I pulled the switch up, and it resisted, much like

everything else here. It didn't give into change but I forced it into the up position. With a mix of fresh energy, the switch snapped loudly and popped, illuminating the room.

The room was incredible. I was expecting a shelter: food, beds, and endless supplies. But none of the things you would typically find in a bomb shelter were present. What I was standing in seemed like a data center. An old data center from the past, complete with raised flooring and a room so loud with computer equipment, you couldn't think.

To my left and right, the large black mainframes hummed. Beside me, two units stood taller than me. The branding showed ST/400 on each unit in the upper left-hand corner. The logo was red and indented and each unit had four rows of its own, which looked like rows and rows of logic boards with their blinking lights shining through the plastic protective door cover.

I've seen pictures of these mainframes in images on the internet, but I've never seen one up close. I even remember using the pictures of these exact machines in an old middle school report about vintage computers!

Being a bit of a computer nerd myself, I've never really seen the inside of a room like this. Modern data centers these days are much more efficient than the time era this equipment is from. We no longer needed giant buildings housing endless rows of computer servers to serve the world's internet and computing needs; instead, modular data centers orbit the Earth.

My eyes locked onto the terminal at the end of the



room. A beige computer monitor. I walked past the mainframes closer to the terminal, leaving footprints on the dirty floor. I guessed that nobody had occupied this room in thirty or more years. Further, just past the mainframes, there stood smaller half size mainframe units with large spinning circles. Tape drives perhaps, spinning to the exact location that the computer is seeking.

There were four units total, lined up nicely against the concrete wall. I assumed it was a storage array. The spinning wheels were spinning extremely fast for several seconds in a random pattern. They stopped and paused before picking back up again. Perhaps there was some program running on the mainframe needing data?

I sat down on the stool before the terminal, wiping away excess dust before sitting. I clapped my hands together, letting the dust float to the ground.

A green line blinked on the lower left hand of the monitor. I supposed it was waiting for a command. I pounded the space bar several times. The cylinder tape drives to my left immediately spun and buzzed from the interaction.

The mainframes came alive behind me with what sounded like a rush of a thousand fans synchronously starting and stopping at the same time.

The screen began to show green text, appearing slowly and one letter at a time. "Hello, would you like voice interaction? (YES/NO)"

I looked at the keyboard for the keys and typed 'YES' with my index finger. The keys looked dingy from use and the plastic looked like a murky yellow, showing its

age.

The cylinder drives buzzed again, and a synthesized voice cracked over loudspeakers. I jumped up, startled by the crackling noise, and noticed large speakers in the upper corners of the room. The noise sounded as if the computer were trying to adjust the sound volume as the speakers cracked and popped for several more seconds.

The synthesized voice began speaking as text slowly appeared on the screen. "Hello, system diagnostics indicate that battery supply is no longer sufficient. Please enter the current date, followed by current time, into the system."

Looking down, I looked for the number row and punched in *08-20-2029 11:00AM* and pressed enter.

The computer buzzed for a few seconds before returning the blinking green line. "Would you like to replay the last calculated scenario?" asked the mainframe.

Curiously, I typed 'YES' followed by the enter key. Nothing happened. I waited a few seconds before re-typing the command.

New text appeared on the screen as the mainframe instructed, "Press the talk button on the microphone or exit the program and answer NO on the voice prompt."

Next to the monitor stood a microphone. It was old and showing its rust. Below the microphone at the base, a faded green button. On the dingy button was a label and what looked like "TALK" written with a ballpoint pen.

"Would you like to replay the last calculated scenario?" questioned the mainframe.

I pushed the green talk button, unsure if the

command would work. “Yes,” I said.

The cylinder tape drives to my left instantaneously spun trying to retrieve records. It seemed as if this would be a normal occurrence. I noted all the sounds of the moving pieces of the system and it was quite incredible.

Trying to get past all the noises, I reminded myself that the technology was old and unlike the computers of today.

“What is your name? Your speech patterns do not match the data stored in my database,” questioned the computer.

“Darren,” I said, holding the button.

“Thank you. Based on the latest trending data, unless all human pollution activity ceases to end by 2060, the atmosphere will no longer be able to harbor life.”

“I would be able to provide a more accurate scenario by entering the latest data. Are you able to update data for the last 30 years?”

“No, I don’t understand,” I said, while holding the talk button. “What is this system used for? What is your purpose?”

“I was created by Professor Javier Holden of the University of Southern Technology to store and model climate data at various designated areas around the world. These areas fed data into my system to model changes across the planet accurately and continually. My function is to create practical suggestions to resolve humanity’s negative impact on the planet.” Stated the mainframe.

“I still don’t understand. When were you created? You are responding remarkably well to my speech.” I asked,

not believing the situation.

“As I stated, Javier Holden created me. My development was primarily conducted in the later 1980s with additional research teams contributing programming and hardware. Professor Holden developed my cognitive and speech engine. I officially came online in 1992.”

“So, you are some form of artificial intelligence?” I asked.

“Yes, that is the best explanation.”

I couldn’t get over the idea of some kind of advanced artificial intelligence being created in that era of computing history. The responsiveness of the mainframe was superb and precise. I jokingly blurted out a joke to test the computer’s abilities, “Can you tell me why the chicken crossed the road?”

I chuckled a little and waited for the computer’s reply. The mainframes fan kicked on momentarily before the loudspeaker cracked on, “To get to the other side, of course. However, there are other logical reasons for the chicken to cross the road. Would you like to hear the top ten?”

“No, thanks.” I said, disappointed, feeling outwitted by the computer.

This machine was incredible and was ahead of its time. Each time I pressed the button on the microphone, it translated my speech to text and I could hear the mainframe kick online, trying to process and understand the text. Incredible for technology nearing 40 years old. I asked the computer several more jokes out of curiosity if it could comprehend, as a test. If it did not know the

answer, it asked me and stored the answer in its data bank.

“I appreciate all of your questions, but would you like me to finish replaying the last calculated scenario?” questioned the computer again.

“Yes, please do,” I said, more convinced of the computer’s validity. I was becoming more curious about the conclusions of the computer, and even more about the mysterious work of this Professor Holden.

“Considering the last dataset is from September 1999, we must assume that human activity and pollution have increased as the population increases, correct?” questioned the computer.

“Yes, yes, I would assume so.” I stated, not giving the full extent of the last thirty years.

The computer was correct to assume so, as pollution has indeed increased. Air pollution is a dangerous problem for many cities and human health, massive deforestation, and reckless waste piling up in the oceans. The list goes on.

“I recommend we follow and execute the last plan.”

“And what is that plan?” I asked, perking up.

“Professor Holden was able to tap into several nuclear power facilities across the world. After using all my system resources to gain access to these systems, we discovered massive security issues with these facilities. If those facilities are still online, I could initiate a system meltdown, causing multiple simultaneous nuclear explosions.”

“Why would you do that? The damage would be far

greater and millions of people would die!!” I said, practically yelling at the computer.

“Yes, precisely. Removing the human element out of the equation essentially stops the damage to the planet. The multiple explosions of the nuclear reactors would release enough dense smoke into the atmosphere to cool down the Earth for many, many years. This would give the planet ample time to repair itself.”

I couldn’t help but think perhaps there was a good reason this computer equipment was sitting in this bomb shelter. Professor Holden was planning to end the world in this very room.

“It is the best scenario with the best chances for Earth’s survival. However, my communications device cannot communicate with the facilities. Do telephone lines still exist in 2029?” asked the computer.

A bad feeling hovered over me as every hair on my neck stood straight up and my hands turned ice cold. I felt I had stumbled into a dangerous area of a city, and I had the feeling of knowing something bad might happen to me if I stayed.

It felt wrong, almost treasonous having this conversation with the computer. Hacking nuclear power facilities? Professor Holden was smart enough to build this technology in a time where it was almost impossible. He built something incredible and was using it to destroy society. Is that what he really wanted?

“Darren, will you be able to help me with hooking up a telephone line?” asked the computer again.

“Yes, I think they still exist but,” I paused, not

knowing what to say. “I need to leave. It’s getting late.” I said, getting up to leave. Having heard all the information from the computer, that was the only response I could offer.

“Darren.”

I climbed out of the room faster than I came down.



Mom grilled me over dinner, asking me what was in the room. Recognizing her inevitable exploration, I made the decision to be truthful.

Well, almost all the truth. Describing all the equipment functioning and the old 1980s mainframe computer lining the sides of the room, I pointed out a single monitor sitting on a table at the end. I informed her that it might be broken because of its age and attempted to make it function, but couldn’t get any display on the screen. Regrettably, I omitted the part about the plan to destroy the world. I told her when we moved in; we flipped on several of the unlabeled electrical breakers, and it caused our astronomical electric bills.

“So, are you going to power down the equipment?” asked Mom while she scooped a fork full of mashed potatoes.

“Yep. I’ll power everything down. I’ll find the breakers we originally turned on and make sure they stay off!”

“What are we going to do with it?” Mom asked.

“Not sure. I’ll ask Robert if maybe he can help me take it apart, recycle it or something. Maybe we can

repurpose the room for its original function?" I suggested.

Mom laughed, "Yes, because this day and age we need to worry about nuclear war!"

I laughed, too. It was a silly notion, but after speaking to the computer, it didn't seem so silly.

Later, I relaxed on the couch and flipped the TV channel to the news. Sometimes, it bored me enough to put me to sleep. Perhaps it was a coincidence or fate was trying to tell me something. News cycle after news cycle reported issues around the world.

Half of the remaining Amazon rainforest is burning. The great plastic garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean is now the size of the United States. The President of the United States is considering a two-mile evacuation on the entire east coast of the United States in order to prepare for hurricane season. Last year's hurricane season was brutal and killed thousands. Pollution in China and India is so bad, they must stop their manufacturing several days a week to help with air quality.

I sat and thought about the computer in the bomb shelter. Could it be right about everything it said? If Professor Holden were alive today, what would he say, a giant 'I TOLD YOU SO'?

Much like the computer predicted, these issues happening in the world are because of humans!

I couldn't believe it. I was starting to justify the computer's outcomes. Destroy society so the Earth can have time to heal itself. Would it really be so sinister to try to save the planet? Maybe Professor Holden thought this



way as well. What is the point of living if there is no planet to live on?

What would Earth look like in another twenty years? How bad will the natural disasters be over time? Are we as a society even making a dent in using renewable resources to offset the fossil fuels? What happens when we cut down all the trees?

My mind was spiraling with questions about humanity's future.

I didn't sleep at all, tossing and turning all night with questions I could not answer. I was trying to make peace with the computer's predetermined outcome as I battled through a sleep-deprived haze.

Could I really do this?

I spent most of Sunday morning in a zombified state as I ate my breakfast. I couldn't shake the thoughts out of my head as I stared into my bowl of cereal, stirring the milk in a circular motion.

Mom banged away in the kitchen cleaning her morning mess, obviously trying to get my attention while humming a song playing on the radio. Our kitchen is quite small but with newly updated cupboards, counters, floors and appliances. It was the only room in the house that looked new, which in itself would probably make a prominent feature in a magazine or something. The rest of the house looked like it creaped right out of the 1980s. Mom jokes that I have a lot of renovating to do and asks when I will be starting. I ignore it, of course.

"What's wrong with you this morning?" she asked.

“Oh nothing, couldn’t sleep last night, that’s all.” I could never be truthful to her with what was really on my mind.

“You would tell me if something were really bothering you, wouldn’t you?” she asked as she threw a dish towel over her shoulder.

“Yep, I would,” I said, forcing a smile. I hated lying to my mother.

She stared at me for what seemed like ten minutes. Mothers always seem to know when something is wrong.

“OK. Well, I am here when you are ready to talk,” she said, trying to be chipper.

As my mind was beginning to free itself from the depressing thoughts, a news brief broadcast over the radio.

*“Scientists are now predicting the polar ice caps are melting thirty times faster than previously thought. It is now believed they will be fully melted by 2080, twenty years earlier than previous assessments. Coastal cities are now faced with a heightened timeline for preparation!”*

All the thoughts came rushing back with a heavy burden. I could do two things: speak into that microphone and use my voice to fix the world, or flip an electrical breaker and forget everything about this computer.

It wasn’t a simple decision, given the heavy consequences.



Mom left for work right on time, as usual for a Monday morning. I decided to skip work and call in sick. I made sure to steer clear of Mom in the morning, aware that she wouldn't buy my excuse if she saw me acting fine.

I acted as if I wasn't feeling well when speaking to my manager. He bought into the ruse and he himself suggested I stay home for a few days if I needed to. I couldn't help thinking this could be the last time I spoke to him.

The computer had explained it needed a landline phone. I wasn't even quite sure if they were still around. Everything is wireless these days.

Although this was extremely uncommon in today's world, I was able to have the phone company install a new line at the house.

This would be a special order, the phone company said, which probably meant they would try to talk me out of it. My persistence was worth it and I won the battle; they even came out *THAT* day to install the line, what service! I guess the technician already being in the neighborhood was to my advantage.

It was a simple procedure, really. He ran a phone cable from the cracking sun-beaten telephone pole to a gray weathered phone box located outside the house in record time.

The telephone man asked several times, "What do you need one of these for? I couldn't tell you the last time I

installed one of these!”

“It may be old, but they are reliable?” I relayed a half answer, half question. It was the only answer I could muster without sounding like a complete goof.

Before he left, he helped to locate what the phone company called a termination block in my basement. I suspected that this wiring might lead straight into the bomb shelter; I hoped anyway, so I lied and told the telephone man it went to Mom’s attic office.



I slipped down into the bomb shelter for the second time after the telephone man drove off. The room was still eerie and loud as before, hot too.

The machine had the last question still printed on the screen with the lower blinking green line waiting for input.

I pressed the talk button on the microphone, thinking it would wake the machine from its slumber. “Hello.”

“Hello Darren, would you like to replay the last calculated scenario?” asked the computer while its fans buzzed away.

“No.” I said.

“Computer, what is the likelihood I will survive if we,” I paused, “execute this plan?”

“If we gather an ample amount of supplies, the survival rate will be 100%. The recommended amount of food supplies is one to two years’ worth.”

A sudden realization hit me while I was at the

terminal. I'm not prepared for anything, no supplies, no nothing!



I abandoned the bunker and made the choice to follow the computer's suggestion. I grabbed Mom's credit card from the thick brown books, which she kept on her nightstand for emergencies.

Under normal circumstances, she would kill me for stealing this. There would not be any normal punishment or repercussions for using her credit card without permission, only a solid prison sentence. She would forbid me from leaving the house until my 18th birthday, for sure. I would be a prisoner for years, paying off my debt.

She'll thank me later. I tried to brush off the thought.

The grocery store was just a short bus ride down the road. I knew I could walk everything I needed back and forth to home. So, I was prepared to rack up thousands of dollars, buying food and supplies to store in the bomb shelter.

I was dead set on going through with this now, no turning back. I was determined to make sure that Mom and I would be set for several years, especially if we needed to spend a long amount of time in the bomb shelter.

I purchased as much non-perishable food as I could. Anything I saw that was dry food, I grabbed: canned vegetables, pasta, soup, fruit and meats all made it into my

cart. I included bags of rice, beans, dried instant potatoes, salt and pepper, dried herbs, and a lot of bottled water. By the second trip of painstakingly carrying grocery bags back to the house, I was praying for my own car.

I also found myself at an outdoor recreational store further down the road, purchasing everything I could think of; batteries, camping gear, spare gas cans and a water purification system. This caused quite a few more back-and-forth trips to the house.

The checkout attendant gave me the weirdest look and asked what I was planning. I responded with the first thought on my mind, “Hey,” I said chuckling, “haven’t you ever met a doomsday prepper?”

I maxed out Mom’s credit card, completely maxed it out. Each time I used it, I held my breath, hoping the checkout attendants wouldn’t ask for identification, otherwise it would have been game over.

My mind stayed busy with thousands of ‘what if’ thoughts cycling through a sequence in my brain. I decided I would wait until Mom came home from work before I executed the computer’s motive. Then, I knew she would be safe and we could rush into the shelter if any disaster struck close.

Throughout the afternoon, I brought down all the food and supplies into the shelter, placing them in any free space available. There was no room, so I began stacking the supplies on top of the mainframe and cramming what I could next to the desk. Living conditions might be cramped, but we would manage.

I filled the dozen gas cans I had purchased earlier at

the filling station and filled each one to the brim, managing to do so on three trips alone. Down in the bunker, I filled the generator's gas tank, and I investigated how to start the thing, splashing the smelly gas on my hands.

I found the starter cord and pulled back on it three times. On the fourth pull, the engine seemed to slurp the gasoline into its cavity and rumble to life.

I let the engine run for a while and replaced the filter on the shelter's clunky carbon dioxide purification system by cutting out a piece of foam the exact size needed. It wasn't perfect, but I figured it should work. I flipped the switch to the system. It choked and barked until it maintained a steady hum.

Preparation is complete!



I waited.

It was almost game time. I couldn't keep a single straight thought in line. I was bouncing between thoughts of the computer, what would happen around the city, the house, work, and everything else. I paced back and forth, practically making tread marks on the carpet.

Mom arrived home right on time, ready for her afternoon workout, as she usually does right after work.

I gave her a peck on the cheek and mentioned that I'll be occupied in the bomb shelter until dinner. "Go to your hole," she said. "Boys will be boys," she muttered.

Down in the bunker, I pressed the spacebar to free up

the screen and waited patiently for the green blinking line.

“Welcome back Darren.”

My voice quivered as I held down the green talk button. “Hello computer.”

“Have you been able to obtain a landline telephone connection?” asked the computer.

“Yes.” I said while holding the talk button.

Suddenly, a weird ringing noise in several pitches could be heard behind me. Something I wasn’t quite used to hearing before, the dial-up modem.

“A dial-up connection test has been established. Thank you for restoring communications. Darren, would you like to replay the last calculated scenario?” asked the computer.

I looked behind me, half expecting Mom standing there, “Yes, yes, please run through the last scenario.”

All fans on the mainframe instantaneously turned on at the same moment, the circle tape drives all spun at once. The screen displayed names and addresses of nuclear power plants stored in its database and scrolled through the list faster than I could effectively read.

“Cycling through the list of 200 stored nuclear facilities. I will attempt to establish a connection with last known data and report facilities for final approval,” said the computer.

The list of facilities started in the United States, and the computer slowly worked through the list. For each facility, the computer activated its dial-up modem and tested its connection, before disconnecting and moving onto the next list. The computer continued to facilities



outside of the United States; France, Germany, and Japan.

The computer took close to a half an hour of testing and gathering data. I sat and watched its list scroll down on the screen. If the computer established a connection, it marked the last line with CONNECTED.

In the last thirty years, a lot has changed, and it astonishes me that some of these facilities are still connected to this outdated dial-up communication.

The room suddenly got quiet as the last facility on the list was marked as CONNECTED. "I have completed the list," said the computer as the screen cleared all the text and a new list was presented on the screen. "I have discovered 29 facilities whom I am able to communicate with and still have the ability to initiate the plan. These facilities are also the oldest, with most residing in the United States and France. Based on my calculations, a meltdown at these facilities would be enough to trigger adequate chaos in society to effectively achieve the desired results. Would you like to execute?" asked the computer.

I paused and stared at the screen. Would I like to execute this plan? Would I? I could feel my heartbeat pounding in my throat.

"Please provide voice verification or type YES into the terminal."

I looked behind me, stalling my decision.

"Please provide voice verification or type YES into the terminal," the computer repeated.

I pressed the green talk button on the microphone, hopefully for the last time.

“Yes.”



I was shaking uncontrollably, climbing up the ladder. In order to save the planet, I had just become the world's biggest mass murderer. And no one would know my name, thank god.

My knee sank into the dirt as I advanced to the top and into the yard. I looked up in all directions, expecting something, anything.

But, I reached the top to find no change. Not even a tremble from an explosion that I was expecting. With the sun beginning to set, its fading red-orange light illuminated the back of our house.

I circled around in all directions up towards the sky, no change, nothing.

I could see Mom through the window, running on her treadmill, looking fatigued. A flock of sparrows fluttered overhead. I didn't understand.

Out of the corner of my eye, Robert rounded the corner to my backyard, smiling. He was still wearing his sweaty, dirt stained clothing from a hard day's work.

“Did anything happen?” I questioned frantically.

“What do you mean, did anything happen?” asked Robert, walking closer. “What are you talking about? What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied, feeling less tense. Perhaps the incidents haven't happened yet.

“I got a little information about the previous owner.

Apparently, my wife is a friend of a friend of the professor's late wife and she talked quite a bit about their life."

"Oh really? Do you mind telling me a bit later? I'll stop by and get the details," I said, trying to divert a long conversation.

"Just a second Darren. The professor, named Javier, was a Psychology and Computer Science Professor at the university in town. The guy was a genius apparently and a real wizard with computers. That is how my wife put it: a wizard! He used technology to study the human response to intense situations and was working on some 10-year research study."

"Thanks for letting me know, Robert, but I need to get back to work here." I said, trying to get rid of Robert.

"Real quick, just one more thing. According to my wife, this guy became too intense with his research and the university fired him. He brought his research home with him to keep it going. Instead, he ended up being paralyzed when he was in a car accident and he spent the last several years of his life bedridden," explained Robert.

"Wait, you said he brought his research home with him?"

Something didn't feel quite right.

"Yea, I was thinking maybe he did some of that research down there in that shelter?"

It had been almost twenty minutes since the computer executed its plan and something wasn't right. I pulled out my cell phone and checked the news. There was nothing new beyond the normal news cycles. A large catastrophe

would certainly hit the news airwaves instantly.

“Everything alright Darren? What did you find down there?”

Without responding to Robert, I turned and climbed down the bomb shelter shaft. Robert’s voice trailed in the distance as I descended down the latter.

My foot slipped close to the bottom, and I ended up sliding to the base of the ladder, landing on my left foot. I grumbled as I turned towards the metal entrance, fighting through the pain of my newly twisted ankle.

I limped to the terminal to find nothing but a black screen. I pounded on the keyboard to wake the machine. Nothing.

The mainframe suddenly roared behind me with a momentary fan burst. For what felt like several minutes, the tape drives spun. Simultaneously, the mainframe’s indicator lights, green and red, all turned on. The green line on the terminal started listing letters at an excruciatingly slow rate.

I stood still as each letter printed on the screen and the glow of green text flashed on my face. It finally stopped, with a question filling the screen.

***WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY AGAIN? (YES/NO).***

# JUST PUSH THE BUTTON

*H*agen found himself, not for the first time, lost in his surroundings as the old man explained the systematics of the systems control panel.

It never felt natural to him how the world had changed dramatically since he was twelve. The concept of micro-worlds still baffled him; how humans are transformed into mere inch versions of themselves and led to these manufactured worlds of dreams and wonder still felt unreal.

It was never meant to be a classy lifestyle choice for most but a necessity for a world nearing eighteen billion souls. What a world this has become. It was an easy way to assist the population and overcrowding.

Short of beginning a purge, scientists were forced to break through the barriers of science fiction and create what no man or woman of the twenty-fourth century

could have imagined. Miniature habitats, cheap living, vacation destinations, fantasy excursions, anything was available for the right price.

“Hagen? Hagen!” The old man snapped his fingers several times before Hagen’s face, returning him from the world of dreams. “Hagen, did you hear anything I said?”

“Press the blue button to open the door. Press it a second time when the customers have gone through. Push that red to my right to shrink them and the green to send them through,” he said with a forged smile.

The man backed away so Hagen could look at the console one last time before leaving. His eyes, however, fell to a different sight. Only twenty-one, he found herself standing at the precipice of a hidden world, his heart pounding with excitement and trepidation. With its gleaming machinery and blinking lights, the sterile control room stood in stark contrast to the enigmatic Micro-world concealed behind the glass window, its secrets beckoning yet instilling a sense of foreboding.

“Now, can you please look at the panel and tell me exactly what your job is?” The old man said, his patience tested by Hagen’s fidgeting eyes.

Hagen’s eyes darted to the control panel, a labyrinth of buttons and levers. Calmly and carefully, he once more explained to him his job.

The man nodded and turned to leave but was halted by Hagen.

“What are all these other buttons for?” Hagen asked.

“Don’t pay any attention to those,” he said. “They are

not for you to worry about.”

He turned to leave but was halted again, this time by a sound from the control panel.

An alert flashed on the control panel, signaling the return of visitors from the Micro-world. The trainer’s calm demeanor vanished, replaced by a look of grim determination. He sprang into action, his hands moving efficiently over the controls.

The glass window slid open, revealing a sight that sent a shiver down Hagen’s spine. A group of soldiers emerged, their uniforms torn and stained with blood, their faces etched with the weariness of battle. One soldier held a bloodied stump where his arm once was, a stark reminder of the fierce struggle they had endured.

Hagen’s initial excitement turned to horror as he gazed upon the wounded soldiers. “What in the hell kind of Micro-world is this?” said Hagen, wondering why he wasn’t assigned to some fancy vacation destination world.

“Remember, Hagen, don’t ask any questions. They don’t like that. Just keep your mouth shut, push the buttons like I told you, and you’ll get your paycheck.” He said, his words laced with an underlying seriousness that belied his gentle tone.

“Who are they?” he said.

“I said just keep your mouth shut!” he said before storming out of the room.

Despite his warning, Hagen’s curiosity burned like an untamed flame. It also stirred a sense of unease within him. Unlike the others he had observed, this control room had an entrance directly into the Micro-world,

which only deepened the enigma surrounding it.

The trainer's silence fueled Hagen's burning desire to unravel the secrets it held. What wonders or perils lay hidden within that miniature realm?

The entrance to the room opened, and another group of people dressed in camouflage ran in and stood before the glass door, awaiting Hagen to open it. A new unit.

Hagen hesitated, his eyes fixed on the soldiers. Their faces, hardened by battle, held a mix of anticipation and resignation as they looked up at the control room.

The old man's voice, growing stern and lacking patience, came down from the P.A. system, "New guy, push the damn button!"

With trembling hands, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, Hagen reached for the blue button once before and after they had entered, just as instructed.

As he pressed the red button, activating the shrinking process, a wave of guilt washed over Hagen. Was he complicit in some kind of covert operation, sending unsuspecting soldiers into a dangerous and unknown world? The trainer's words, "Don't ask any questions," echoed in his mind, but Hagen couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this job than just pushing buttons. He had stepped into a world of secrets and danger that would test his courage and challenge his understanding of reality.

Finally, he pushed the green button, and the shrunk soldiers disappeared into the tiny globe.

Hagen left his shift, his mind buzzing with questions



and his heart pounding with fear and excitement. He had stumbled upon something big that could change everything he thought he knew about the world.

He would discover what was happening in that Micro-world, no matter what it took.

The next day, Hagen started his research with renewed vigor. He spent hours scouring the internet, reading every article and blog post about the Micro-world. But the information was sparse and contradictory. There were rumors of government conspiracies, alien abductions, and even time travel, the normal gibberish one may find on the internet.

While nothing seemed credible, each post after another of paranoia started to scare him. He found a whole website claiming to be memoirs of former employees. It was a forum regarding the Micro-world Incorporated facility. Hagen read through the posts, his heart pounding faster with each sentence.

The stories were harrowing. One person described being sent to a world where humans were hunted by monstrous creatures. Another wrote of being forced to participate in deadly experiments, while another described dinosaur recreations. Hagen's stomach churned as he read the accounts, but he couldn't stop himself from continuing.

As he reached the end of the forum, he encountered a post that made his blood run cold. It was from a former employee who had resigned in protest of the unethical practices at the Micro-world facility. The employee

claimed that they saw soldiers being sent on these missions, but instead of some harmless training, they would end up being used as cannon fodder in some secret war against an unknown enemy.

Hagen's mind reeled as he absorbed the information. He had to do something. He needed to know more.

The following day, Hagen returned to the Micro-world facility. It felt like he was risking his life, but he couldn't stand by not knowing.

He slipped through a back door and went to the control room. He found the old man sitting at the console, his eyes fixed on the monitor. Hagen crept up behind him and cleared his throat.

The old man jumped in his seat and turned to face him. His expression was a mix of shock and anger. "Don't sneak up on an old man, new guy!"

"Sorry," He said, taking off his coat and throwing it onto a coat rack. "Usually, supervisors don't show up this early."

"This is not some rations warehouse or a theme park booth," the old man said, looking offended. "This is a top-notch Micro-world facility."

Hagen placed his hand on the back of the chair the old man was sitting on. "So, am I good to get to work?" he said.

He rose and stepped aside. "Fine with me, get to work. Not like we have much going on today, other than a few scheduled departures," he said as if Hagen had been protesting otherwise.

Hagen stared at the console and felt overwhelmed with the fear and confusion that took hold of him the other day. “You know, I...”

The old man had gone, snuck off in the noise of Hagen’s own thoughts. He did not mind. In fact, his absence helped him plan.

When the next platoon of soldiers arrived, Hagen looked to see if the old man was near. Assured of his absence, he stepped away from his station and into the entryway room. He approached the man in green camouflage who looked to be in charge.

“Excuse me?” Hagen called, placing his hand on the arm of the soldier. “Can you tell me what is going on here? What’s going on in there? Are you fighting some kind of war?”

The soldier halted, his comrades running off without him, and turned to face Hagen. His face showed no pigment, only a zombie-esque white complimented by purple baggy circles under his eyes and a purple vein throbbing from his forehead.

His haunting face gave quite a stir to Hagen, but he kept pushing. “What are you guys doing in there?”

The soldier made a sound that can only be described as a squeal, prompting Hagen to let go. He then rushed to the rest of the soldiers, and they stood waiting for the shrinking process.

Hagen went after, determined to find an answer. The closer he got, the more he could feel and hear the presence of something he could not explain. An unease that felt otherworldly and dark.

Just before he could enter, the glass door closed in front of his face. He turned to look at the console, only to find the old man standing there and staring at him, fuming.

“No!” Hagen shouted, banging his hands at the glass as the soldiers both shrunk and went on. “I must know... I have to know!”

When he looked back up, the old man stood beside him. He grabbed him by the arms and lifted him. The strength in his pull felt inhuman. “Can’t you just do your bloody job?” he said.

Hagen tried pulling his arm away but failed to loosen his iron grip. “What are you doing here? What is inside that world?”

The old man opened his mouth to answer but was halted as the flashing light and alert sound started blaring from the control panel. He sighed and ran to the panel while still holding, now dragging Hagen.

“Take your hands off me!” yelled Hagen.

A large flash of light came from the Micro-world as the old man’s hand went to work on the panel, his eyes fixed on the flashing screen.

Hagen held his breath, his heart pounding in his chest, as the flashing halted, revealing a sight that would forever haunt his nightmares.

Fully grown soldiers materialized behind the glass, their forms emerging from the swirling mist like phantoms from a realm of war and terror. They were not the whole yet scared soldiers nor the ones with minor bruises. These men were battered and bloodied, their

bodies bearing the unmistakable marks of a brutal battle.

Hagen's eyes widened, and his stomach churned in horror as he took in the gruesome details. Their uniforms were torn and bloodstained, their faces streaked with grime and sweat. Some were limping, their legs mangled by unseen forces. Others bore deep gashes and lacerations, their flesh raw and exposed. And then there were the bite marks. Blood poured down their legs, leaving a stained trail as they limped along.

He stared at the deep, jagged wounds that dotted the soldiers' bodies. They were not the clean surgical incisions but the ragged, jagged marks of something more sinister. The sight of fresh blood dripping from one soldier's severed arm, like a grotesque open tap, sent a shiver down his spine.

A wave of nausea washed over him as he found himself unable to understand what could be the possible truth behind this heinous sight. What world of the unknown had these soldiers been sent to, and what horror befell them.

The old man's face was pale and drawn, his eyes filled with relief and dread. Hagen could tell this was not the first he had seen this sight.

He also knew that this sight would remain burned in his mind forever. He wanted to turn away, to erase the images from his mind, but he couldn't. He had to see. He had to understand the cost of this secret war.

"Just tell me what is going on here?" Hagen yelled.

The old man passed him an envelope. "Here," he said. "What is this?"

“A pink slip,” he said, looking grim. “You are fired.”  
“Huh?”

Before Hagen could enquire, uniformed men burst into the control room. His mouth was gagged, followed by a black bag shoved over the top of his head. A slight stinging followed on the side of his neck as if he were stung by a bee. He felt a pair of arms hold him back and dragged him away.

In his state of shock and struggle, he heard one last thing before going into a silent sleep. “All you had to do was push the damn button without asking questions.”

# CRIZEN'S SHIP

The docking bay in Daedalus was surrounded by flora and fauna that had never grown back home. The symphony of shrieking and clawing beasts made even the strongest of hearts watch their backs. Nothing was different when Starship Daedalus was at bay, awaiting orders from high command.

Once the final piece of cargo was loaded onto the ship's dock, the loading bay door closed, a siren blaring to warn all to stay away from the moving parts of the contraption.

"All supplies are accounted for, specimens are sealed for hyper freeze, and all the dangerous and fragile cargo is double-layered in protective sheets. We are good to go for the seven-light-year journey back to Earth, Captain Crizen," Lieutenant Aaron said, reading from a checklist in his hand.

The Captain's focus seemed to be diverted, his hands fidgeting with something in the pockets of his space suit.

“Captain? Captain?” Failing to garner any response from his superior, Aaron took a step forward, and with the checklist, he swatted the Captain’s face. “Jonathan, focus!”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you. Everything is in order. Let’s give the order and get to it then,” Jonathan said, halting his fidgeting, his hands still in his pockets. Jonathan and Aaron had known each other since they were young. It always bothered him when he was called Captain by him, mainly because it always came with a tinge of sarcasm.

“Not quite, Jonathan,” Aaron said, looking into his checklist. “There is one anomaly.”

Jonathan gave him a look.

Aaron continued, “There seems to be an extra item on the ship, one not in the notes.” Jonathan gulped, one Aaron captured right away. “Did you bring something aboard?”

“No...well, maybe,” Jonathan said.

“What did you bring, captain?” Aaron said, concern riddled in his voice.

Jonathan moved away, bringing his arm up to his eyes. “Oh, would you look at that,” he said, staring at his silver and gold digital watch. “We should leave to reach our destination on time.”

Aaron wanted to follow and push for more, but a buzzing sound diverted him.

The two men separated, with Jonathan heading towards the ship’s cargo gate, looking through the windows for one last glimpse of the alien world. He didn’t want to leave this barren, grassy world. Its lands



reminded him of the treeless fields of the Great Plains.

To him, this world had been completely untouched, and was crying out for exploration. Its dark blue sky and green grassy fields were strikingly similar to Earth's. However, its vast oceans looked light purple from space, yet from the ground, they were blue. The planets were identical, yet so different that Jonathan nicknamed the planet "Earth's distant cousin."

Jonathan Crizen had been chosen to captain the new cruiser due to his experience and longevity in space. He needed no introduction, as he had a considerable celebrity following on Earth for space exploration. He was in his early forties, with blond hair, and was as physically fit as someone half his age. He had always been able to nab any new, exciting space exploration mission. Jonathan's devotion to space made him the go-to man to command the science mission to Trappist 4.

As for his ship, the Daedalus had been the latest in star cruiser tech and had been commissioned for Trappist 4 specifically. It boasted the latest in star engine technology, crew cabins for three, and a front-loading cargo bay door for easy entry. The interior had been intentionally bright, with white walls and equipment to brighten the ship and its passengers' moods on long journeys. It had been the first of Earth's new line of vessels, which had traveled the stars and could land on the planets without a separate landing vehicle.

The ship's intercom let out a blast of static white noise before relaying the words, "Just two more minutes and we will be ready to take off. Captain Crizen and

Lieutenant Aaron, best take your seats,” said the booming voice of Chuck Espy, the ship’s pilot.

Lieutenant Aaron walked up behind Jonathan, breathing heavily after moving the final items into the cargo. “Come on, Captain. Let’s go,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, I know,” Jonathan said with a sigh.

The two astronauts walked up the cargo dock as the docking bay door automatically shut behind them. They walked past various crates packed with as many plant species as possible. Green grasses, red grasses, purple flowers, small weeds, anything that could be grabbed to be studied. Now attached to the haul, the cargo crates entered their freeze mode to safely store the contents for the seven-month journey to Earth.

As they walked to the end of the crates, a sound of growling could be heard, and it did not miss Aaron’s ears. “Wait,” he said, stretching his arm to stop the Captain. “You hear that?”

“I did not hear anything,” Johnathan replied.

Aaron walked to two crates to his right, carefully treading forward.

“I am sure it’s nothing. Let’s go,” said Jonathan.

Aaron reached forth and pulled off the cloth over the crate.

Inside were two rat-like creatures. They were small, about the size of a man’s fist, and covered in soft charcoal fur. Their backs were lined with large, pointed spines, and their mouths looked so vicious that they could easily rip the flesh off of their prey. They have three-pronged pointy toes on each leg and a tail as long as their

midsection. They look vicious, but they are very gentle.

“What the hell, Johnathan?”

“Do you think these alien creatures can survive the cargo freeze?” Jonathan said, playing dumb, the sound of the creatures getting louder under the direct light.

“I don’t know Jon. We aren’t even authorized to bring back actual moving, living creatures on this trip. It’s foolish to do this,” Aaron snapped angrily.

“Yeah, yeah. But there’s something about these creatures. They can benefit us somehow; I can feel it.”

“You’re going to get fired is what’s going to happen. This totally breaks protocol. You know you shouldn’t be bringing unknown, living species back to Earth,” said Aaron as he shook a crate to check its sturdiness.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take the heat for this one,” said Jonathan without any worries.

“T-minus forty-five seconds until lift off. Captain, are we all strapped in and ready to go?” blared the intercom, a sense of agitation in Chuck Espy’s voice.

Aaron took one last look at the cage, furrowing his brow. “Do not mess this up, Jonathan,” he said, shaking his head. “You are playing with fire.”

Jonathan and Aaron buckled themselves into nearby seats inside the docking bay. Jonathan noticed Aaron’s hands trembling as he tried to click the silver buckles together. Despite a (decade) of traveling back and forth to the known galaxy, Lieutenant Aaron still felt an unease during the blastoff.

Before sitting down, Jonathan pushed the talk button on the ship’s loudspeaker. “Strapping in now, Espy, we are

a go for launch,” he relayed.

The Daedalus launched quickly and punched through the Trappist 4 sky without much turbulence. Jonathan observed the ship’s progress through the porthole to his right. He watched as the sky went from blue to a light translucent purple, eventually fading to black. Stars began to sprinkle their white light into the porthole.

Aaron had his eyes tightly shut, hoping all would be over soon. He didn’t notice when the ship broke into the darkness of space.

“Successfully broke orbit, punching in the coordinates now. Chill out, guys, we have a long journey ahead of us,” Espy said calmly over the ship’s loudspeaker.

Jonathan un-clicked the buckles to his seat and leaned over to Aaron, gripping the armchair as if his life depended upon them. Aaron opened his eyes to see his grinning companion.

“Relax, we made it,” Jonathan said, smiling.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said before returning to his usual hard-boiled self, “Those creatures! Why can I still hear it?”

Before Jonathan could answer, Aaron jumped and ran to the caged beasts.

Jonathan came running after. “I did not think it would be necessary. They are harmless, and they might be of use alive. Don’t worry,” he said, placing his arm onto his arm. “Do not worry, I will handle everything, my friend.”

“Freeze those things, Jonathan. The scientists can

study those things just as effectively if they are dead,” Aaron said, a sense of coldness in his voice.



Later, once the lights had dimmed, the cockpit had been left on autopilot, and the crew members had retired to their dorms, Jonathan brought some snacks to the loading dock, not for him but for his little friends. He observed that the creatures seemed more assertive since leaving the planet. He thought a little meal might calm them down.

Despite their newfound aggression, he couldn't help but find them utterly adorable. Something he never really considered for anything else.

As he approached the crates, the creatures were moving in circles, their sharp spines rubbing against the sides of the metal cage. The resulting noise resembled dozens of nails on a chalkboard, creating a peculiar symphony of metal-on-metal sounds that, while occasionally excruciating, somehow added to their charm.

Undeterred, Jonathan crumbled the snacks and gently dropped them through the breathing holes, brushing away the crumbs from his pant leg. Surprisingly, the creatures paid no attention to the food and continued their unhinged movements, beginning to scrap parts of the cage.

Jonathan considered that his presence might be the cause of behavior, yet he couldn't deny the strange allure of these creatures. It almost felt like offering them

fatherly love as he provided them with the crackers.



As Jonathan tried sleeping that night, the ship grew quiet. Most non-critical systems entered into hibernation mode. The distant sound of the creature's spines scraping along the inside of the metal crate could be distantly heard in the sleeping quarters. He lay in his bunk, counting each time one of the creatures rubbed its spine on the sides of the crate. He pictured how many laps around the inside of the container they were making. The noises stopped, and Jonathan fell asleep.



A burst of white crackly noise jolted Johnathan from his sleep. The voice that followed belonged to Aaron. "Captain! Captain!" he said, sounding petrified. "Come to the docking bay immediately!"

Jumping off his bead as quickly as possible, Jonathan ran down the corridor and burst into the cargo hold. He found Aaron ducked down, pacing around frantically. He was dressed in his white mechanic's jumpsuit, looking under crates and boxes.

"What's wrong?" Jonathan said.

"Those damn creatures of yours, they got out!! Look at the crates!" Aaron replied, his eyes red.

Both cages housing those creatures appeared to have been roughly cut in half, their tops discarded on the floor.

Inside, the markings from the creatures' spines were evident, slashing the metal crate in numerous places. These little beings seemed determined to escape, eventually managing to cut their way out.

Jonathan examined the cuts with concern and fascination, running his fingers along the edges. A sudden prick on his index finger made him jump, "Unbelievable!! That's why they were scraping the sides! I can't believe it! Smart, little things!" he said in admiration and shock as he held his wounded finger.

"Admire them later. We need to find those critters before they break something important," Aaron said.

"Let's lock down the docking bay until they are all found," Jonathan said, walking towards the entrance hatch and locking it inside.

Jonathan grabbed a nearby mechanics jumpsuit, similar to Aaron's, and hurriedly threw it on, practically jumping into it. He quickly pulled the zipper up, getting his shirt stuck in the process, snagging his already cut finger.

He looked over to see Aaron moving aside the cut-up crates. He unclicked them from the magnetic lock and let the hover feature move them aside.

A loud screech stopped both astronauts in their tracks. It was a blood-curdling screech and sounded like a high-pitched vulture. The sound raised the hair on their necks.

Aaron was jittering and breathing heavily. "I do not see them, Jonathan!"

Jonathan, however, felt more reassured hearing the

loud screeches. The creatures were still in the cargo bay, not the rest of the ship. The echo of the screeching noises multiplied, and it was impossible to pinpoint their exact location. The creatures appeared to feed off one another with the screeching as if it were a form of communication.

Aaron grabbed the emergency ax, secured to the cargo bay's wall with a high-powered magnet. He pried as hard as he could until his strength overpowered the security magnet.

"Found one by the bay door!" Aaron said, pointing with one hand and rushing over to it.

From the corner of Johnathan's eye, he spotted the other creature suddenly lingering by the hatch door he had locked earlier. It appeared to be looking up and sniffing at the handle. The beast was no longer the size of a fist; it was now about the size of a small rabbit. Its spines had grown longer, roughly six inches, and appeared razor-sharp. Its fur was much more bushy and thick. The creature didn't show any aggression, only curiosity.

"Found the other one. This one looks larger than before!" Johnathan said, perplexed.

"Jonathan, how many of these did you bring aboard?" Aaron said.

"Yes, only two. You saw them yourself," Johnathan said.

"Then why do I see more small creatures under the workbench?" Aaron said.

Jonathan turned to Aaron and focused on six small creatures underneath the work table. They were smaller



than the original creatures that were captured. Their spines were smaller, a few inches, and their fur was not fully grown. They were pacing and sniffing the dock floor, appearing as if they were unsure what to do.

Johnathan's concern escalated as he pondered the possibility of inadvertently capturing a creature carrying offspring. When he first caught them, only two creatures were in his custody, both markedly diminutive. Overnight, however, they seemed to have undergone an inexplicable growth spurt that baffled Johnathan entirely. As he gazed at the now more giant creatures, a deluge of unanswered questions inundated his thoughts. Could the unfamiliar environment have triggered this rapid development? Was the scarcity of life on Trappist 4 linked to such accelerated growth? And the pivotal query lingered: had one or both of these creatures been pregnant before their capture?

"I can't believe this; there are more!" Aaron said. "Look around closely. They are on top of the specimen crates and everywhere!"

Aaron was correct. In all locations around the bay were random small creatures poking and prodding their new environment. On top of crates, below crates, and in front of the hatch door, one even came out beneath a crate up to Jonathan's boot to explore.

"There has to be about forty of them now. What will we do, Jonathan?" asked Aaron in a frenzy. "We can't open the hatch until this is contained! We need to kill them, kill them all! This mission is in jeopardy!"

Aaron headed towards the largest creature by the bay

door with an ax. He walked as silently as he could to not deter the beast. He raised the ax over his head and gripped it as hard as he could, ready to strike.

The creature looked up at Aaron and instantly let out a large screech. Soon after, all the creatures in the room joined in screeching. The sound penetrated his very soul. Aaron dropped the ax by his feet to cover his ears, kneeling in agony. Jonathan hunched over and crammed his fingers into his ears to muffle as much noise as possible.

The screeching continued for what seemed like ten minutes before stopping. Aaron uncovered his ears and yelled to Johnathan, "Let's blow the hatch and suck these things into space. It's the only way to be sure we got rid of them all!"

"No, I won't authorize it. We will lose everything: the plant specimens, everything we worked so hard for. It will all be gone!" Jonathan yelled.

"You should have thought of that before you brought those things in here," Aaron said before calming himself down. "Look, if we do not do this, we could risk a catastrophe on Earth!"

Johnathan looked down, shaking his head, the tiny creatures scurrying across the bay floor. "Ok, let's do it. If those things multiplied on this ship, I can't imagine what they would do on Earth."

Both astronauts, in agreement, silently walked to a compartment where their spacesuits were located.

The suits are cream-colored with black gloves and boots, all attached to a one-piece suit. A brightly colored

patch on the right shoulder of each suit showed the mission logo. Each astronaut climbed into their spacesuit carefully, taking great care not to agitate one of the nearby creatures one leg at a time. Johnathan slowly pulled the suit around his arms and slowly zipped up the suit, trying not to make noise.

As both astronauts began to put on their helmets, Johnathan noticed the creatures coming out of their hiding spots and becoming more familiar with the environment. Soon, the cargo bay was covered with sixty or more small-sized creatures, all looking about the same height and weight. He moved the lever on his helmet until it clicked into place, and he could feel the oxygen pour into the suit.

Jonathan grabbed two security straps, handing one of them to Aaron. He secured one end of the strap to the belt of his space suit and the other end to the interior hatch door.

Jonathan pushed the speaker button on the loudspeaker communication panel, "Espy, can you hear me?"

The loudspeaker clicked back, "Yes, Captain."

"I need you to follow my orders, no questions. In thirty seconds, I need you to open the cargo bay door. We have a situation with the creatures, and we need to terminate them," Jonathan said.

"Uh, what the iss— Yes sir, thirty seconds, no problem," Espy said.

While Aaron was securing his strap to the door hatch, Johnathan knelt down and picked up three smaller

creatures gathering around his feet. They were roughly the size of a tiny mouse. The thickness of his glove protected his hand from the creature's sharp spines. He looked in Aaron's direction to be sure he wasn't looking his way. He knew if Aaron saw what he would do, he would never hear the end of it.

Johnathan stuffed the three creatures in the pouch of his spacesuit and zipped it shut. He could feel the creatures squirming through his suit. He grew concerned the creature's spines would puncture a hole through his suit, but he thought he might have enough time to get them out after all the oxygen and contents of the cargo bay were jettisoned into space.

"Five seconds!" Espy said over the intercom.

"Copy that," said Jonathan, realizing he wasn't at the communication panel.

Aaron glanced at Johnathan through the helmet as both men grabbed any available handle on the hatch. The alert system began buzzing, indicating that the cargo bay door was about to open.

The cargo bay door began to inch open, and instantly, the oxygen was being sucked out with a powerful and intense force. Jonathan and Aaron could feel the force pulling them backward as the gravity in the room began to dwindle. They hung onto the handles as hard as their strength could hold. The cargo bay door continued opening. All loose objects in the room instantly rose up and sucked out of the opening. The cargo crates securely attached to the walls were instantly ripped off. Jonathan looked up inside his helmet to see all the creatures being

sucked out of the room and into the abyss of space. The door opened a few feet more, and the force grew and was so intense it caused Aaron and Jonathan to lose their hold on the hatch.

Aaron and Jonathan began to get sucked back to the cargo door before their security harness caught them, causing their backs to arch backward. Jonathan screamed through his space suit as he felt the belt squeeze his ribs.

Jonathan looked out through his helmet and noticed Aaron's security harness beginning to give way at the hatch. He yelled as loud as he could, but his voice was drowned out by the loud noise of all the oxygen being ejected from the room. Aaron's back arched backward toward the bay door, and Jonathan couldn't tell if Aaron was unconscious. He felt hopeless, watching and knowing he could not help his friend.

The security harness broke free of its hold on the hatch, and Aaron's body flew towards the bay door. His helmet hit the door, and the glass spiderwebbed. Jonathan was looking up and saw the oxygen was instantly sucked out of his helmet. He felt utterly helpless, knowing he could not help his companion, and watched his body disappear into space.



The ceaseless hum of oxygen abruptly halted, and the cargo ejection ceased as the room succumbed to the vast emptiness of space. Jonathan was adrift in the room's center, tethered by his harness.

The cargo bay door gradually initiated its closure, accompanied by a relentless buzz from the alert system. Minutes later, a rush of oxygen flooded the room, ushering in a surreal sense of normalcy. Jonathan plummeted to the floor as if a celestial force suddenly reclaimed gravity, intensifying the ache of his already bruised ribs.

Falling to his knees, Jonathan released the latch, securing his helmet and letting it fall to the side. Behind him, the hatch creaked open, revealing Espy as he wrestled with the heavy door.

“Is everything fine here, Cap?” inquired Espy, peeking through the doorway.

“Fine? No, nothing’s fine!” Jonathan erupted, his voice trembling, tears brimming in his eyes. “We’ve lost Aaron!”

“Dear God,” whimpered Espy.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on Jonathan as he slouched forward, only to detect faint movements near the pouch where he had stowed the creatures. They were still alive!

Bolting upright, a rush of excitement and disbelief surged through Jonathan. A glimmer of hope emerged, dispelling the specter of total failure. Hastily unzipping the pouch, he found all three creatures gazing up at him, seemingly unscathed, defying the odds of survival following the cataclysmic incident.

“What on earth are those creatures?” Espy’s disbelief resonated as he loomed over Jonathan’s shoulder.

Jonathan’s brow furrowed. “The only remnants of

our entire venture on Trappist 4.”



Jonathan settled into the co-pilot's seat, his gaze fixed on the controls alongside Espy, who monitored the ship's systems. He adjusted a security camera to focus on the new crates housing the mysterious creatures, his nerves on edge. This time, he wasn't taking any risks and had initiated a strict seven-month freeze cycle for the containment.

“This will ruin us, Jonathan. Our careers, done,” Espy's voice resonated amidst the glow of control panels and computer screens, casting eerie shadows on his face. “They might as well name those creatures after you!”

“I beg to differ,” Jonathan said, his tone steeped in defiance. He refused to concede defeat.

As he spoke, Jonathan's frustration simmered beneath the surface. It wasn't just about the creatures but about Aaron's tragic loss. The fact that Espy seemed more concerned about the potential career fallout than the devastating death of their friend fueled Jonathan's ire.

“Maybe you're content with worrying about your job, Espy,” Jonathan snapped, his voice tinged with bitterness. “But some of us are more troubled by the fact that Aaron got sucked out into fucking space!”

He didn't want to acknowledge the haunting image of Aaron's absence during the chaos in the cargo bay. The memory of his friend being taken by the merciless pull of the vacuum, the sudden emptiness where Aaron had

stood moments before, fueled Jonathan's inner fury.

"I am sorry, I..." Espy recoiled at the unexpected outburst, momentarily taken aback by Jonathan's response. The silence that followed was thick with unspoken tension, the weight of Aaron's absence hanging heavily between them.

Jonathan's frustration, born out of grief and anger, lingered like an unspoken accusation against Espy's seemingly misplaced concerns.

Despite the shared loss, the two men sat in a silent standoff, each grappling with their own emotions, entwined with the heavy reality of their doomed mission and the harrowing loss of their friend. The words hung in the air, an unspoken divide between two perspectives—career and friendship, each carrying its weighty significance in the wake of tragedy.

Amid their tense exchange, Espy's eyes widened with a sudden realization. "You brought those creatures aboard, didn't you? Despite the protocols, despite the risks!" His accusatory tone pierced the air, fueling the brewing tension between them.

Jonathan's jaw tightened, a steely resolve in his gaze. "I did what I thought was right," he retorted, his voice firm with conviction.

Their conversation escalated into a heated argument, voices rising in discordant crescendo. Each word exchanged was a jagged blade slicing through the already fraught atmosphere.

Fueled by frustration and conflicting emotions, their disagreement rapidly escalated into a physical



confrontation. The once-muted grief now transformed into a volatile expression of rage and despair. Their struggle echoed through the chamber, reverberating against the cold, metallic walls.

Amidst the chaotic scuffle, the containment of the creatures was breached. As the creatures darted frantically, the tension in the room intensified. In his frantic attempt to control the situation, Espy found himself ambushed by the unpredictable creatures, their aggression unleashed, and the fear in Espy's eyes.

Espy grappled with the creatures, caught off guard, attempting to fend them off. But their ferocity overwhelmed him, their spines proving to be lethal weapons. In the heat of the moment, Jonathan witnessed the chaos, torn between intervening and allowing the inevitable course of events.

The conflict escalated into a violent struggle for survival as Espy succumbed to the creatures' assault. Jonathan hesitated for a fleeting moment, torn by conflicting impulses. Yet, in a surreal act of resignation, he chose not to intervene, a chilling acceptance etched on his face.

The room fell into a haunting silence, punctuated only by the muted echoes of the recent altercation. Jonathan stood, a mixture of remorse and resignation etched into his features, the weight of his choice burdening his soul. The loss of his friend and the dire consequences of his decisions hung heavy in the air, shrouding the room in a suffocating veil of regret and sorrow.

Johnathan did not move to help, only stared as the beast continued to bite chunk after chunk out of his friend's neck. Blood fountained over the floor, the control panel, and even John's jumpsuit, but he did not flinch.

Espy screamed at the top of his lungs. He scratched the pain in his body, buzzing and twitching, his eyes slowly losing life, turned to his Captain, and with one last bit of strength in his body, he reached out to Johnathan... he only stared in silence.



Only Johnathan remained within the confines of the ship, accompanied solely by the creatures. The vessel's corridors echoed with an eerie solitude as he observed the creatures moving about, their movements oddly synchronized.

Jonathan became increasingly attuned to the creatures' peculiar behaviors without external distractions. They seemed to display an unusual level of activity, traversing the ship's interior with uncanny coordination. The remnants of Espy's body on the floor garnered their attention, and their numbers multiplied as if influenced by some mysterious force.

As the creatures meandered around him, a bizarre semblance of a routine unfolded. They appeared to be drawn to him, their motions resembling a peculiar dance. Despite his internal turmoil, Jonathan assumed an unintentional role in their midst. The ship's once sterile environment now hosted an unusual communion between

man and otherworldly entities.

The creatures' curiosity extended to the remnants on the floor, and they engaged in a peculiar form of feasting. Their actions, reminiscent of an odd familial dynamic, evoked a surreal image as they hopped about almost synchronized. It was as if a bond had formed between Johnathan and these extraterrestrial entities, an unspoken connection that defied conventional understanding.

The ship's interior transformed into an otherworldly stage in this strange interplay between the lone human and the creatures. Jonathan found himself drawn to their movements.

As the ship sailed through the uncharted expanses of space, Jonathan and his curious companions had a silent understanding. The creatures, multiplying and exhibiting their newfound environment, moved in an odd harmony. The vessel became a vessel not only for a lone human but also for what he deemed a key to the future of mankind.

Johnathan took the seat at the ship's helm, his face devoid of emotion, and the little creatures, gaining in numbers, running around him. He wiped the blood of Espy off of his side, and with hands ever so bloody, he resumed his quest to Planet Earth.

# MY WAY OR THE SPACE WAY

*I* grew up watching an idol of millions in the prime of his life. Born amongst the second generation of the space age, when Earth threaded ever closer to its demise, this man pushed to a new dawn. He was a hero to the people across the whole solar system.

Never was there a moment that his adventures were not the talk of the town. The news would talk of this man, and not far from my teens, we would see the emergence of television shows, books, and action figures of the fearless Johnathan Crizen. I collected them all, by the way.

So years later, the hype from my youth gone dim if not completely silent, I applied to be the next space-trotting adventurer...

Or so I thought.



I was about to sit next to the most experienced astronaut in the solar system. My stomach was more of a nest of butterflies, and I could just manage to keep my upper lip from shaking.

As I buckled into my chair, I saw Johnathan Crizen in the flesh, taking hold of the pilot's chair before me.

"Hello, Captain Crizen. It is a pleasure to..."

He snorted, his brows bent. "Not now, kid. I need to concentrate," he said, his voice not as demanding as his TV show counterpart but more like an aged old man.

Like a child in trouble, I quickly sat in my seat and pulled the tattered seat buckles over my shoulders, tightening hard until they dug into my brand-new spacesuit. I noticed my reflection in the cockpit window, ensuring my slicked black hair looked perfect. Still, in my heart, excited about the journey before us.

Seeing him at work and how his hands fell over the control panel was mesmerizing. With just one hand, without ever looking at the keys, he set in Earth's coordinates, calculating the best route and checking flight systems.

I leaned forward to get the best view. I hoped the captain might share some of his secrets if he saw my eagerness to learn, but he took no notice or acknowledgment of my existence.

I started to feel like a substitute co-pilot, and clearly, "I am nothing to him," I thought. Who was I to imagine being a partner to someone of this high status? He had worked with many other co-pilots and traveled to every corner of the known universe without ever needing their

help. Why would he need someone like me?

Feeling a little distraught, I sat back and took in my surroundings. Jonathan's ship was very old, first-generation old, and it showed its age. It was once painted white but has mostly faded to a charred black, probably from the years of atmospheric re-entry. He received the first long-distance star cruiser long ago, taking it on its maiden voyage to Pluto and back to Earth in record time. At the time, his maiden voyage made headlines across the galaxy. I even remember watching the initial launch when I was a young boy.

The ship can transport up to three passengers and was built for speed and maneuverability. The craft was perfect for the scientific missions Jonathan was well known for in his prime. It holds a bit of nostalgia since it resembles a 20th-century space shuttle, with the cargo bay door in the front.

I hung my space helmet on the hook to the right of me. It wobbled back and forth until it rested against the hull.

I took another look at Jonathan, still hoping he would notice me when I saw something peculiar. He wore a simple, blue jumpsuit that did not look regulation. It was a suit made for space travel, but its faded color and stains from years of use reminded me of some roadside mechanic back on Earth.

The Academy student in me wanted to point that out, but I refrained, settling for a simple "Sir," with the cadence of a shy high school student, my hand reaching out to meet his. "It is an honor to ride with you back to

Earth.”

Jonathan's eyes peered over at my hand, appearing disgusted at shaking it. "Save the small talk, kid. The trip is only a few hours. If I'm lucky, I'll never get to see the likes of you again," he muttered.

I was left speechless. This man who I grew up watching, matching my whole to his, was an asshole.

The reality was that Jonathan was an aging, cocky, self-centered man. You would think a man in his late fifties, with his vast experience, would have abundant wisdom to share. But no, he's a grey old man, a washed-up astronaut still thinking he is the best, unable to let go of his glory days.

No wonder he had halted his adventure for simple cargo hauls between colonies.

Could it be just yesterday when I checked into the busy spaceport of Europa, Jupiter's moon and the newest colony in the system?

I remember how excited I was to see Jonathan's name on the flight roster, followed by my name--pilot: Jonathan C. and co-pilot: Doug L., destination: Earth. I was giddy. How lucky was I? It is my second official flight straight out of the Academy, and I was paired up with one of the most incredible astronauts of all time!

Unfortunately, I didn't expect the excitement of meeting the great Jonathan to wear off within the first few minutes of meeting the man. I was nothing to him, just a rookie. Fresh meat along for the ride.

He shook his head, put on his communications headset, and muttered a few words I couldn't quite hear. I

assumed it was something like, “Why did they stick me with this guy?” or, “Why can’t they give me someone with more experience?”

I stayed silent, observing him, still expecting to learn something from this old git.

The ship started to rock, and the get-strapped symbol lit up overhead. We were getting ready to blast off.

Sighing, I leaned back into my chair and put on my headphones. Not a moment later, I heard the captain’s aged voice again. “I just want to reiterate: do not touch anything on my ship, got it?”

I nodded in agreement. I couldn’t help much anyway because the ship was old, and the control labels were mostly worn off. The control panel had finger smudges built up over the years.

The ship had clearly never been cleaned. The seats were torn at the edges, and the floors hadn’t been mopped in years. I would have no problem keeping my hands to myself. It was disgusting.

“There is only one good pilot on this ship, and it’s me! So sit back, relax, and watch the professional work,” he said, getting more unbearable every second.

Jonathan gave the all-go to the spaceport command, and we launched through Europa’s thin atmosphere like a bullet out of a gun. It was a smooth launch, and I was surprised, given the condition of the rickety old ship.

We left Jupiter and its moon quickly behind us. Some people think traveling through the asteroid belt would be the next challenge. It is, in fact, my second journey through it. Most pilots let the ship’s computer navigate



through the asteroid belt, but not Jonathan. The chances of colliding with an asteroid are like one in a million, though the occasional collision isn't unheard of. Jonathan preferred to pilot using manual controls.

"Sir, wouldn't it be smarter to let the computer navigate through the asteroid belt?" I asked cautiously.

Jonathan finally looked at me. The spark and hint of hope I still held that I could pick up some helpful knowledge from the great Jonathan was quickly diminished with one line. "I know what I am doing here. Been through here close to a hundred times. Just sit there, look forward, and don't touch anything!" he repeated.

"But sir..."

"Just stop! I don't want to hear about all that junk that comes out of the Academy these days! You are flying with the best astronaut in the whole system!" he said irritably.

"We had only been traveling for about ten minutes when we entered the asteroid belt. The ship's radar display flashed a red alert that grabbed my attention. On the screen, large splotchy objects appeared. Asteroids! We were heading right towards a large cluster of them.

There is a one-in-a-billion chance we could run into asteroids, and here it was about to happen! I swear the next thing I will do when we get back is buy a lottery ticket with this kind of luck. "Sir, asteroids are approaching; perhaps we should activate the autopilot?" I asked while trying to remain calm.

I hovered my index finger over the autopilot button beside the radar screen. It was the only button on the

control panel that looked brand new.

“Permission NOT granted. I can navigate through this manually,” he barked. “You kids are too hung up on your bloody autopilot. There was no such bloody thing back in the day. Just watch and learn, kid!”

A giant asteroid was quickly approaching. It was moving fast towards us, or perhaps Jonathan was intentionally moving towards it. So much detail could be seen through the cockpit window. The asteroid was about ten times larger than the ship, with large indentations and crevices with boulders and loose rocks orbiting around it as we flew. Obviously, this celestial object has had many collisions over its billion-year lifespan.

“Captain, I don’t think this is such a good—”

“Stop, just stop!” demanded Jonathan.

I looked over at Jonathan’s eager grin. I couldn’t tell if he was showing off or having fun. Perhaps both.

I hovered my finger over the autopilot button again, trying to determine if I should break rank and save both our lives but halted.

I had been on this ship to learn, and so far, I only learned that Jonathan Crizen was a horrible person to be around. However, this was my only chance to learn something valuable from the man.

“Watch this!!” exclaimed Jonathan

Jonathan threw the throttle lever into full speed, which caused the ship’s engines to explode with thrust. My head slammed against the headrest of my seat while the G-force took its toll on my body. I managed to look over at Jonathan, looking intently through the window. I

grabbed both armrests and squeezed until the tops of my knuckles turned white.

I closed my eyes, fearing collision, that dreadful feeling of impending death overwhelming my thoughts with fear. Jonathan suddenly jerked the ship to the left at the last possible moment.

He was showing off. The ship gracefully maneuvered around the asteroid, missing all the loose debris. He managed to pilot the ship around the object, showing mastery and finesse from his years of experience. He moved the ship left and right several times, easily missing any objects within sight.

“Wake up!” he yelled.

“Wake up, you!” yelled Jonathan.

I peeked open one eye. No asteroid. Phew.

“First time through the asteroid belt?” asked Jonathan, sporting a significant smile.

I managed to sputter out a response. “No.”

“You sure act like it,” chuckled Jonathan. “There's nothing more thrilling than flying through all that. It really gets the blood flowing!”

“I've gone through there hundreds of times. Takes real skill to pilot through that mess,” gloated Jonathan. “Real skill!”

I wanted to get angry at him and forcefully push the autopilot button, but I hesitated. Ever since I stepped foot on this ship, I was treated like I was in the wrong place, but now, Crizen was talking to me. Although it came from arrogance and recklessness, he was actually conversing with me.

“That is great and all, Captain, but maybe next time we should use the autopilot,” I suggested.

His grin left, and his eyes narrowed. “What? Are you serious? Didn’t you just witness the precision of that maneuver?” he said, looking like he would slap me if his arms reached. “You really want to trust a computer after seeing what I just did?”

“It was great, sir, but the risk was not worth it,” I said.

“You clearly missed it, didn’t you?” he said sarcastically. “You clearly had your eyes closed out of fear or something. Did you wet yourself as well, Doug?”

Jonathan’s cocky nature was beginning to annoy me. Was it too much to...

“Wait a minute, he said my name? He knew my name! Johnathan Crizen actually took the time to learn by name!” I thought to myself.

As I found myself lost in the amazement of what had occurred before me, Jonathan rambled on for several minutes, mostly describing his greatness as a pilot. He failed to notice the next batch of debris. The radar must not detect small patches, or maybe Jonathan’s equipment is so old it doesn’t detect small debris like the newer models.

It seems as if we slammed through a field of floating pebbles. I could hear and feel the thousands of tiny meteoroids ricocheting off the glass of the cockpit window, battering the ship. It sounded like hundreds of pop cans with their tabs rattling on the inside.

Jonathan’s face went from smiling to severe in a split

second. Even though a six-inch glass window was in front of me, I closed my eyes, fearing the worst. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up as if it received a bad premonition. My hands performed what must have been the tenth armchair death grip sequence of this trip and dug into the already torn and tattered armrest.

I peered over at Jonathan. I hoped his years of skill would react and pilot us quickly from the debris field. He couldn't do it. With the force, intensity, and constant attack on the cockpit window, one of the smaller asteroids eventually broke through.

A single rock, the size of a dime, pierced through the window, hitting Jonathan square in the forehead. I watched, horrified, as the rock exited from Jonathan's head.

Amazingly, a single, small asteroid just killed the greatest pilot in the entire solar system.

The ship's oxygen began to suck out of the tiny hole made by the asteroid. The high-pitched sound, as if someone had released the air of one thousand balloons, grew louder. Within a split second, the cockpit window began to crack up, spider webs appearing all over it until they consumed the entire window. I quickly grabbed my helmet off the hull and put it on. I slammed the compression lever under my chin into the locking position, and the oxygen burst through the inside of the helmet. I gasped, gulping the fresh oxygen into my lungs.

The tiny hole in the cockpit window quickly eroded the remaining glass and sucked the remaining bits and fragments of glass into space. In the blink of an eye, my

pilot's chair was ripped away from the secured attachment of the ship's floor. All items not secured to the vessel were being exported into the cold vacuum of space, including Jonathan's lifeless body. I was being sucked into space!

I drifted hopelessly, further away from the ship. I was slowly circling around, as chance would have it, so my view took in the ship. There was nothing I could do. No way to stop the inevitable: I would die out here when the oxygen runs out. Dying of asphyxiation is an astronaut's worst nightmare, my worst nightmare. I watched as the ship continued moving further away from me.

"Dammit, Jonathan!" I screamed before the brightness of the billions of stars stopped shining around me. My vision went completely black, and a buzzing noise rang through my ears.

The program had ended. Oh, how easy it is to forget about reality when using these things.



The program had ended. A blaring red siren played overhead, telling of the disaster we had just gone through.

I took off my virtual reality headset. Jonathan sat to my left, looking shocked.

He had already taken off his headset. In fact, it was thrown across the room in front of us. His arms were slumped down, dangling beside the chair. He looked around the training room, hoping no one had witnessed his poor performance.

We sat in a large open room with no windows and tall ceilings, surrounded by other pilots training just like us. Everyone wore the same blue training jumpsuit. Pilots and co-pilots were paired and spaced throughout the room, sitting on nothing but a simple metal chair. Each pilot had on their virtual reality headset and held their hands up, flying an imaginary spaceship. It looked silly on the outside but was authentic to the pilot.

Hung on the walls all around the room were large televisions, one after another. Each television represented the view of a specific pilot. It was a direct feed into the pilot's virtual reality program. The trainers stood at the end of the room on an elevated platform. They wore special glasses that projected a tiny screen on the inside. It was a view into the virtual world of their assigned pilot, watching and grading all the performances.

"Jonathan, seriously? You can't even pass your own VR program?" I exclaimed exasperatedly.

What irony. Jonathan had received special permission to alter the certification virtual reality training program. For weeks, he had hounded the certification board to replace the standard ship program with a particularly unique program he wrote that allowed him to fly a virtual replica of his own personal spaceship. He had complained it was the only ship he would ever fly and could not train on anything else, period.

The flight instructor, a former drill sergeant, stormed up to Jonathan. Jonathan cowered slightly, expecting to be attacked.

The instructor was an elderly woman with short curly

hair wearing a white blouse, skirt, and heels. She still looked incredibly fit and intimidating for her age, and her physique still showed it. I'm sure, even at her age, she could outperform any person in this room without a problem.

"Jonathan," she angrily said, pointing her index finger at Jonathan's face as she bent over to look him straight in the eyes. "You are insane! How do you expect rectification stamps when you can't even finish a simulation without this nonsense!"

He raised his hand like he was about to say something but thought better of it and remained silent.

"You will never fly again, and that piece of junk you call a ship will never see the darkness of space again," she said.

Jonathan slumped over. Every astronaut must be re-certified! Even the biggest idiots in the solar system.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drew D. Lenhart is a technology nut who works in Information Technology writing software for web applications, testing, and automation. He has written numerous flash fiction, short stories, and comic books. His short stories have appeared in *Mystic Mind Magazine*, *Galaxy Anthology*, and *The World of Myth Magazine*. He founded the comic publishing company, *SnowyWorks*. Drew currently lives in Indiana, the U.S. with his wife and two daughters.



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