

INHUMAN



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAVID SIMPSON

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INHUMAN

BOOK-5

A PUBLICATION OF



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MESSAGE FOR YOU FROM THE AUTHOR



Hi! Thank you so much for reading my book! I hope you enjoy it. It is always an honor when someone takes the time to read one of my novels and I feel humbled and thankful. I owe you one! If you do enjoy the book, please remember to tell a friend or two (or two thousand) about it. And if you feel like being awesome, please take 1 minute to leave a positive review on Amazon.com. At this stage in my writing career, word of mouth is better than gold and is the best way for me to reach a large audience. It's because of the amazing support of readers that I've recently been able to achieve my dream of writing full time. There's no way to do it without the readers! You guys are everything.

I want to be available and interactive with my readers, so you can actually [friend me on Facebook](#) "LIKE" [the Facebook page for Post-Human](#), [follow me on Twitter](#), or check out my [website](#). I love to hear from readers and correspond with them about their experiences with my books.

So, thanks again, and hopefully, this will be "the beginning of a long, rewarding, and beautiful relationship between reader and author.

Yours,

David Simpson

“

...we know what we are, but know not
what we may be.

”

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

PART 1

“WAKE UP!”

Old-timer hadn't even opened his eyes before the visage of Aldous Gibson appeared before him in his mind's eye. “What the hell?” he whispered as he opened his eyes, the real world and his darkened bedroom suddenly appearing, with Gibson's face still overlaid on top.

“Craig, don't speak. You'll wake Daniella. I'm waiting for you on your roof. Get dressed and come out. I need to speak with you urgently.”

Old-timer's eyes were wide; nevertheless, he felt a grogginess that was unfamiliar to him. He'd been woken from the wrong sleep cycle, so his usual refreshed morning demeanor was elusive. He pulled his legs out of the bed, making sure not to wake his wife, then pulled a pair of loose-fitting pants on before heading out the front door of the old-style farmhouse he shared with her.

The night was almost perfectly still. The sky was clear and speckled with stars, and Old-timer had to shake his head to make sure he wasn't caught in a dream. He checked the time readout on his mind's eye; it read 3:15 a.m. “What the hell?” he repeated to himself. He looked overhead at the edge of his roof, then let the multitude of appendages unfurl from his torso, dozens of tiny fingers grabbing the tiles like suction cups. Once he had a good grip, he picked himself up, swung over the top, and sat himself down on the dark rooftop, just a few meters from the chief of the governing council.

Aldous's eyes narrowed as he watched Old-timer's unorthodox entrance. “Very interesting,” he commented. “Sticking with your new enhancements, I see,” he observed as Old-timer's suction-cup-like wire-like appendages released their hold on the roof. “No pun intended.”

The appendages furred back up into Old-timer's torso and melded perfectly with his skin, as if by magic, allowing the post-human to again take on his distinct, human appearance. “They're useful. It's a good upgrade. What's going on, Aldous?”

“You didn't wake Daniella, did you?”

“No. She's still sleeping, which is what I should be doing. What the heck is so—”

“I'm sorry, old friend,” Aldous replied, his smile returning as he apologized, holding his hands up as if to plead for forgiveness and understanding. “I wouldn't disturb you unless it was of the utmost importance. There are things happening that...” he trailed off, not sure how to word what needed to be said. “Well, they just can't happen, Craig. They *can't*.”

Old-timer blinked hard, then scratched the back of his head, nearly flummoxed. “Well, Aldous, you've certainly got my attention. Mind sharing what's going on?”

Aldous stepped away from Old-timer and began to pace slowly, almost nervously. He spoke again, folding his arms and bowing his head as he uttered, “Do you remember...do you remember the day we arranged for you to mentor James?”

“Mentor?” Old-timer held his hands up before smiling at the absurdity. “No one can *mentor* James—maybe the A.I., but certainly no human. I *do* remember the day you arranged for me to work with him though.”

“Semantics,” Aldous retorted, waving away Old-timer's point. “That day, I asked you to do something for me. Do you remember what it was?” Aldous asked, his eyes scrutinizing.

Old-timer took in a deep breath and searched his memory. “Yeah. You wanted me to try keep him focused on terraforming, to keep him away from getting too curious about Planck technology.”

“That's right,” Aldous said, his voice soaked with relief. “I'm glad you remember.”

“But, look, Aldous, don't you think we're a little beyond that now?” Old-timer asked. “James and

the A.I. are...well, they're way beyond us. They've transcended to a new level. If you're suggesting that I try to distract a mind like that—"

"No," Aldous interrupted, "of course not. That would be impossible. But, as for the Planck...well, that knowledge will be new to him. Enhanced or not, James has to know how dangerous it is."

"The A.I. already knows—"

"No, he really doesn't," Aldous interrupted again, waving away Old-timer's contention. "Besides, he's bound by a promise to me, just like you are. He *has*, however, related to me that he won't prevent James, or this new Trans-human intelligence, from uncovering the *true* nature of our universe."

"Because he obviously believes James can handle it," Old-timer observed.

Aldous's lips tightened into a grim line. "There's no room for belief here, Craig. Listen, I'm not asking you to deceive him. What I'm asking you, my friend, is to be the voice of reason he needs. He won't listen to me. The A.I. is obviously planning to carry out its mandate to transfer power to a more powerful A.I. and believes knowledge can only be good. And James is being carried away by his own enthusiasm and genius. I'm afraid there's nothing stopping them now, Craig...and that's something we should be *very* concerned with."

"Why? For goodness sakes, it's James. He and the A.I. have never failed us. They've always given us everything for—"

"No bed of roses is entirely devoid of thorns," Aldous said, cutting Old-timer off again. He looked up into the beautiful night sky, and his eyes latched onto the object that hung in the blackness like a white elephant, the giant armada of androids. They'd obeyed James's demand to leave the solar system, but they parked themselves on the boundary. The collective was so huge that it was visible as a tiny smudge in the night sky, appearing like a nearby galaxy. Aldous gestured to the spot with his hand. "Or do you need a reminder?"

Old-timer looked up at the luminescent smear in the cosmos and grimaced. It was true; things were not all roses. He and Aldous were standing on the flat-deck of his roof, on a beautiful, open plain that stretched to the horizon in all directions. He should've felt safe there, distanced from problems that were on a galactic scale—problems that seemed to be the domain of the new gods, James, and the A.I. and the impending, almost infinite intelligence of Trans-human. Yet there they were, standing with that night sky above them, as though all of space sat precariously atop their shoulders, weighing them down, threatening to crush them. "James and the A.I. can handle the androids," Old-timer finally answered.

"A fact the androids know well, Craig," Aldous agreed. "Still, they remain there, unwilling to leave...and I think I know why." He let his eyes drop from the celestial smudge to fall back on Old-timer. "I think they're afraid we could be on the verge of destroying our universe."

Old-timer couldn't help but let loose a long, low whistle. "Okay, now *that* is ludicrous."

"I only wish it were," Aldous replied after a short, frustrated sigh, "but when James and the A.I. insert the new matrix consciousness into Trans-human...well, there's no way a being like that will fail to uncover the nature of the multiverse and Planck technology. When that happens—and it will—the stability we've enjoyed for more than seventy-five years will be utterly obliterated."

"Aldous, with all due respect, you're starting to sound like a Pur—"

"Don't say it!" Aldous suddenly yelled out, his eyes wild as he held his hand up to stop Old-timer's words. Old-timer stopped, stunned. Aldous's desperate expression softened when he realized how loud he'd been. His eyes fell as he considered Daniella, who was still sleeping. "I hope I didn't wake..."

"What's gotten into you?" Old-timer asked in an admonishing whisper. "I haven't seen you like this in a long time."

“I *hate* them, Craig. I can’t help it. Comparing me to a Purist? I can’t bear the thought. They kill her, Craig.”

Old-timer closed his eyes. This was what he feared every time he was in Aldous’s proximity—th *she* would come up—and he’d have to experience the pain again. “I know, Aldous, but the people involved in that are dead and buried. It’s time to let—”

“Did I ever tell you I saw it happen?”

Old-timer’s breath caught in his throat. He couldn’t speak.

Aldous nodded, his eyes seeming to look back in time, deep into the memory. “Colonel Paine—*he* did it while I was watching—did it *because* I was watching, in fact.” He shut his eyes tight, and his jaw became clenched. “She wouldn’t give you up, Craig. She was willing to die to protect you and the A—she never said a word to him about the Planck platform. It was me that told him where you were, not that put your life in danger, all so that I could save Sam…” Aldous’s expression twisted into rage as the searing hot fire of the memory returned, still not dulled even after three-quarters of a century. “And then that bastard killed her anyway. Cut her head off, Craig.” He closed his eyes before he repeated in a mournful whisper, “Cut her head off.”

Old-timer’s hand went slowly up to his mouth. He was speechless.

“I know they’re all dead and buried—Colonel Paine is dead by my hand—I had my revenge. But it doesn’t matter. No matter how much I tell myself that the Purists are different now, I still can’t let go of the hate. I’m trying to, my friend but—”

“I understand,” Old-timer replied. “Now just a little bit more than before. And I have to admit to harboring some of the same feelings, but Aldous, you can’t let that memory control you. Memories can destroy you if you let them.”

“You’re a wise man,” Aldous replied, forcing a smile and nodding. He swallowed. “You know, not one living knows that story,” Aldous confided. “I don’t know why I told you. I guess because you loved her, too, so perhaps you could understand.”

Old-timer was left speechless once again.

“I haven’t even told…” Aldous didn’t finish his sentence, but Old-timer knew immediately who he was referring to.

“How…how is she?” he asked.

“How’s who?” Daniella asked as she appeared suddenly, flying over the edge of the roof before floating to a rest next to Old-timer, a look of deep concern on her face.

Aldous’s face paled, a look of embarrassed remorse quickly replaced by an equally embarrassed smile. “Daniella, I am so sorry that we woke you. It wasn’t my intention. Craig here was just discussing a favor I’ve asked of him.”

“In the middle of the night?” Daniella retorted. “It must be some kind of favor.”

“It is rather important,” Aldous confirmed. “And time is running short.” He turned to Old-timer. “Craig, you must promise me you’ll speak to him. Be the cautionary voice he needs—the one he’ll listen to.”

“Speak to whom?” Daniella asked Old-timer.

“James,” Old-timer answered her. “Aldous here is just asking me to give some advice to—”

“James?” Daniella replied, incredulously before turning to the chief. “Aldous, you’re here to ask my husband to tell a man who’s become a virtual *god* what he should do? In the middle of the night?”

“Again, I’m so sorry,” Aldous apologized, his embarrassed expression returning.

“It shouldn’t fall on Craig’s shoulders,” Daniella insisted, protecting her husband as had been her custom since they’d met more than seventy-five years earlier. “He’s done enough for the world, and

done enough for James. You can't keep asking for—"

"Daniella," Old-timer responded calmly, putting his hand on his wife's arm to soothe her frustration, "it's okay. We're just talking."

Aldous took this as an opportunity to change gears. "Daniella, it is so good to see you again," he began, the kindly politician returning to his charismatic demeanor. "It has been too long. I should have had more consideration for the woman who saved my life."

"Don't mention it," Daniella replied, biting her tongue before she said more, satisfied that she had made her point.

"Craig," Aldous continued, turning back to Old-timer, "she's right. I have no right to ask any more of you. I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep. Goodnight." He turned and lifted off the surface of the roof, his green magnetic field engaging almost immediately, facilitating his lightning-fast blast-off into the starry night. A second later, he was just a greenish twinkle in a sea of sparkling twinkles in the sky.

Daniella shook her head. "I don't like that, Craig. I don't like that one bit."

Old-timer sighed. "It was...unorthodox, wasn't it?"

"What makes him think he can just show up here like—"

"It's okay, honey," Old-timer replied, putting his arm around his wife, about to take her under his arm and back down to the ground before she stopped him.

"It's not okay," she insisted vehemently. "For him to come here, there must be something really wrong. Why does he need you to deal with it?"

"He's just..." Old-timer paused as he tried to find the words to describe Aldous's frame of mind. "He's just having trouble adjusting to the new world, that's all. We don't have anything to worry about. You were right, James and the A.I. have this handled."

"Exactly," Daniella said, folding her arms and allowing Old-timer to gently lift her off the roof and float with her back down to their front porch.

"Still," Old-timer began, "I should speak with James."

Daniella suddenly went rigid and pulled away. "What? Why?"

Old-timer shrugged. "Because he's my friend. Because I know something about the universe that he might not. I should give him a heads-up, don't you think?"

She shook her head, her lips pulled into a tight frown. "I don't want you getting involved in these things anymore, Craig. You were just supposed to be a terraformer, not a..." she stopped, her eyes darting back and forth as she, exasperated, tried to find the word.

"Not a what?" Old-timer asked, his eyes narrowed.

She looked up at him. "Not a superman. Not the world's hero. No one can ask that of you, Craig. You didn't sign up for that."

Old-timer smiled. "The world doesn't need me to be superman." He put his arm around her shoulder and they walked back into their home. "The world's already got that job covered."

James Keats walked out of the A.I.'s mainframe building, utilizing the senses of his chroma-colored, dramatically enhanced body, his glowing, azure eyes scanning the night sky, his lips pulled back into a grimace.

"This is troubling to say the least," the A.I. commented to James, both through James's mind's eye and also in the A.I.'s operator position, a position that James shared with him in cyberspace. As was now usual, James concomitantly controlled his superhuman body in the real world.

"Indeed," James replied, waiting as he narrowed his eyes as he examined the picture that was forming in his mind's eye, thanks to the millions of measurements his new body sent out into the space around him. "I can sense them. They think they're getting the drop on us, but they're disturbing space-time, and there are ripples in the gravitational field."

"It's an unexpected development," the A.I. observed.

"It is," James agreed, "which means we need to be careful. If we couldn't predict this beforehand then we're missing crucial information." James's eyes shifted slightly, and he held his arm up, facing his palm up toward the night sky. "Something major is playing out," he continued as he seemed to prepare for an arrival, "and we need to know what it is."

An instant later, a wormhole opened up in the atmosphere, just dozens of meters from where James stood and above the mainframe. In real time, the events occurred faster than a blink of an eye, but when James shared the operator's position in the mainframe, he could slow down his perception of time dramatically: his electric-fast thinking capacity allowing him to perceive the android ship remarkably similar to the one the androids had used when trying to destroy the sun with an anti-matter missile just weeks earlier. Like the previous ship, its skin was translucent, and James could see the androids who'd either been forced or manipulated into volunteering, bracing for impact as they performed their suicide mission, the plan obviously to crash into the A.I.'s mainframe and destroy it like kamikazes. James examined the contents of the ship and noted that it contained yet another anti-matter missile. Had he not detected it and intercepted it, this would've not only destroyed the mainframe—it would've destroyed the entire planet.

Fortunately, his early-warning system had allowed him to anticipate the exact moment the wormhole was about to open and to warp the gravitational field around the ship, creating a nearly impenetrable vice of space-time, catching the ship as though in a gigantic, invisible baseball glove. Unfortunately, he also knew he had to crush the ship and the device before it could detonate, and he closed the vice until all that was left was a tiny marble that appeared perfectly black. It floated gently into James's gleaming hand as he further manipulated the gravitational field around it, drawing it toward him. James examined it when it reached him, almost expressionlessly, but the A.I. could sense the pain in the post-human's eyes.

"You had no choice," the A.I. pointed out, his tone consoling. "If the anti-matter missile had detonated, not even your warp bubble could've contained it. You just saved every life in the solar system."

"I know," James replied, "but I just killed five people."

"You had no choice," the A.I. repeated softly. "And their patterns were no doubt recorded and uploaded to the collective before they set forth on this suicide run."

"The fact that there are copies of these people being rebuilt by the android collective makes the deaths of these individual entities no less tragic," James replied. "They're still dead...by my hand."

“My son, since we’ve yet to determine the mechanism they use to upload their patterns to the collective, we can’t be sure that these bodies they’re sending on suicide missions *are not the copies*, to speak. You may have just terminated *drones* and nothing more.”

“You’re grasping at straws.”

“Regardless, even if these androids *have* died, their deaths are on another’s hands, and we both know who that almost certainly is.”

James closed his eyes for a moment before he turned and walked back toward the mainframe, most of his attention returning to his pattern, next to the A.I. in the operator’s position. There, his appearance mirrored his biological human form, the form he still preferred to present himself in when in cyberspace. “Yes, we do. *I* clearly survived my destruction of her body, yet I haven’t been able to detect her pattern in the android armada.”

“Neither have I,” the A.I. replied. “However, we both know that it’s possible to hide a pattern if it is divided and kept in small enough portions.”

“That would explain how she avoided my detection,” James returned, “but it doesn’t explain how she’s still calling the shots. If her pattern is in pieces, then she’d be dormant. This was clearly a plan initiated by her, but we should’ve been able to detect her if she’s currently conscious and operating.”

“As I warned you before your last confrontation with her, she’s not to be underestimated. She’s a far more worthy foe than we previously realized.”

James nodded. “She is.”

“Still, attempting to destroy the mainframe and the Earth along with it, had no chance of success,” the A.I. began, his tone ponderous. “She would’ve known that we’d detect it and thwart it.”

“That’s not entirely true,” James countered. “She may have counted on me tagging along with our diplomatic mission. She may have gambled that my body is the only means we have of detecting space-time distortions, and with me too far away to protect Earth—”

“I think it is now you, who is grasping at straws. It’s highly unlikely that she wouldn’t have assumed that I also have the ability to detect space-time distortions. James, the fact that we’re both trying so hard to make sense out of these behaviors is extremely disconcerting. Her motivations for trying so desperately to destroy this solar system elude me.”

James nodded in agreement. “It doesn’t seem to make sense. With all of our vast ability to calculate probability, still, *1*’s bizarre strategy has us on the defensive. As I said, we’re missing crucial information. We have to be on guard until that information is uncovered.”

“This makes Richard’s and Djanet’s diplomatic mission all the more important. It may provide us with the clues we need to start piecing together this puzzle.”

“Yeah,” James replied. “Speaking of, they’re almost there. Time to refocus our attention. Keep your eyes peeled and your ear to the ground.”

The A.I. nodded. “Indeed.”

“Rich, how’s it looking over there, pal?” James asked via his mind’s eye connection to his longtime friend and fellow terraformer.

Rich Borges sat at the front of the ship he and Djanet were piloting toward an android armada of ships that was so gigantic, its collective mass generated gravity that drew them in like a tractor beam. The ship they were closing in on at that moment completely filled their front view screen, and Rich’s repulsed expression mirrored the revulsion he felt in his gut as he observed the monstrosity in front of them. The ships reminded Rich of pictures he’d seen of cancerous tumors in the days before nanotechnology when humans were subject to the whims of chance and their random personal genetic codes. Like cancer, the ships didn’t appear designed; there was no holistic vision. Rather, they were simply masses in space, malignant structures that spread out in every direction—long, ragged, jutting structures, sometimes extending like metallic rivers for dozens of kilometers in a myriad of directions. There was no symmetry or beauty; just a dreadful arbitrariness that increased the feeling of despair that neither Rich nor Djanet could shake off.

“It looks like...Hell,” Rich replied.

“I understand. It’s not pretty,” James answered. “I appreciate you guys volunteering for this.”

“Yeah,” Rich replied, “and that’s a decision I almost immediately regretted. The last time I saw these guys, even though it technically never happened, they turned me into a robot, so you know, that is...awkward.”

“The memory is real,” James answered, “so your concerns are understandable. That’s why we designed the craft you’re in to be a fortress. If they’ve scanned you, they know you can do severe damage to them if they behave hostilely. That should act as a deterrent.”

“Unless they squash us before we can use the weapons,” Rich countered.

“I’ve got control of the ship’s weapons. If they try to harm you, they won’t be around long enough to regret it.”

Rich considered the image of the ship’s weapons blasting a gaping hole into the side of the android ship in his mind and decided it was comforting enough to persuade him to continue with the mission.

“Thank you, Commander.”

“We’re docking now, James,” Djanet informed him as the ship entered through one of the openings in the android ship’s demented architecture. “We’ll check in when we’ve reached the landing platform.”

“Copy,” James replied.

Djanet turned to Rich and let loose a long sigh. “It feels weird, huh?”

Rich nodded. “*Really* weird.”

“You know, we don’t have to be a part of this. There’s enough going on in our personal lives—especially yours—to keep us busy enough.”

“I know, but that’s the kind of ‘busy’ I’d like to avoid,” Rich replied.

Djanet’s shoulders slumped, an overwhelming guilt weighing them down. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to put you through—”

Rich forced a smile and looked up at her. “Nobody twisted my arm to do anything. I made a major life decision, and there’s no going back. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but I’ve got no choice. I can’t turn back time. James can, I can’t. And I wouldn’t want to if I could anyway.”

Djanet’s expression brightened. “You’re sure?”

Rich sighed. "I'm sure I'd rather be surrounded by a trillion androids that are plotting to kill me than be at home with Linda, who is probably also plotting to kill me."

Djanet frowned. "It's that bad, huh?"

Rich shrugged. "What'd I expect? It's only natural."

Djanet looked out the front view screen at the awe-inspiring, yet repugnant image unfolding before her. The ship was being guided by its navigation system to the coordinates that had been agreed upon with the androids, a destination that it was becoming clear was too deep within the bowels of the structure for comfort. Androids were flying through the open space, groups of them stopping to hover and stare as the post-humans's ship flew past. In the distance, other androids stood on an endless series of walkways built to connect various structures in the interior. In totality, they appeared like webs of neurons connecting the innards of a madman's mind, and Rich and Djanet were being sucked farther and farther inside the madness. "I don't like the look of this."

"Me neither." Rich turned to her as he licked his lips nervously. "Maybe you're right."

Djanet turned to him with a quizzical expression.

"After this," Rich continued, "we're out. Someone else oughta handle this stuff from now on."

“We’ve touched down, Commander,” Djanet relayed to James as the spacecraft James had engineered for the mission landed.

“Good work,” James replied. “The A.I. and I are both monitoring through your mind’s eye feeds. I know it’s probably pretty scary for you two, but, trust me, you’re not alone.”

“That’s reassuring, Commander,” Djanet replied, “because I don’t know if I’ve ever felt so small.”

“It looks like they’ve provided an atmosphere,” Rich said as he checked the readouts on the screen in front of him. Suddenly, movement in the corner of his eyes caused his head to snap up; it was a welcoming party of nearly a dozen androids, floating down to a soft landing on the dull, metallic platform in front of the post-human ship. Rich’s eyes immediately zeroed in on a face he recognized.

“Of all the...Jesus. Why did they have to send *him*?”

“*Neirbo*,” Djanet whispered.

The stone-faced android stood at the center of the android contingent, his mouth in the same, thin-lipped, expressionless line that was emblazoned in both Rich’s and Djanet’s traumatic memories. He looked up at the front window of the ship and waited for Rich and Djanet to emerge.

“It’s possible that he’s the interim leader in the absence of 1,” the A.I. suggested.

“Either that, or they’re just trying to piss us off right off the hop,” Rich countered.

“They don’t know that you and *Neirbo* have ever met,” James reminded Rich. “*Neirbo* has a perfect memory of you. Try your best to keep your cool.”

Rich sucked his lips back into a tight ball against his teeth as he tried to bottle down his frustration. “Trying. No promises.”

The bridge of the craft suddenly lowered, becoming its own platform, setting Rich and Djanet down on the surface of the android landing platform. Rich and Djanet stood up from their chairs and walked the two dozen paces, to the waiting androids.

Neirbo’s lips suddenly twitched slightly, a look of disappointment flashing on his face before being replaced by his usual annoyed, stony countenance. His eyes moved from Rich and Djanet and up to the ship, which Rich noted most of the androids were exploring with their eyes with a certain fascination—Rich thought it mirrored lust.

“That’s an impressive ship,” one of the androids commented.

Rich looked over his shoulder at the exterior of the ship, a craft that, unlike its surroundings, appeared designed with meticulous care. It was a beacon of the beauty of human design and technological achievement. It shared the same chrome sheen that James’s enhanced body’s skin displayed, and the back end seemed to rest on its haunches, as though it were a metallic animal—a predator ready to pounce, its nose close to the ground. It seemed as though it were an extension of James, as though it were a part of him, watching over his friends while the man himself watched over them through Rich’s and Djanet’s mind’s eyes.

Rich shrugged, a faint expression of pride on his face. “I got a guy.” Then he turned to *Neirbo*. “You look annoyed, as usual,” he observed.

“As usual?” *Neirbo* reacted, his lips pulling back to reveal aggressively clenched teeth. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’ve never met you.” His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the post-human.

“Nothing,” Rich shrugged and smiled. “Just, you know, don’t look so glum.”

Neirbo sneered. “I was hoping someone else in particular might have chosen to be part of your smart contingent,” he said, icily.

“He’s talking about Old-timer,” James informed Rich through the mind’s eye. “He enacted a little retribution on Neirbo.”

“Oh,” Rich said in a low tone before commenting, “Good for Old-timer. I’m envious.”

Neirbo’s eyebrows knitted together as he scrutinized Rich’s unusual eye movements. “Is that your A.I. god speaking in your ear,” he asked, “or the superman abomination?”

Rich’s eyebrows arched. “No, no worries.” He tapped his temple, feigning that he was watching something. “The 49ers are playing. Fourth quarter, you know, and I never miss a game, but you’ve got like, 81 percent of my full attention, I promise.”

Neirbo’s expression remained unimpressed as he kept his eyes locked on Rich. “Your attempts at humor are woeful and you’re a distasteful little man,” he said.

Rich smiled. “And you can go—”

“Rich!” Djanet finally stepped in, putting her hand around his arm and taking over the responsibility of communicating with the androids. “We want to know why you’re still here. Commander Kea requested that you leave the solar system. Only individuals who plan on making a new life with us here are welcome to stay, and so far, that’s been a precious few. The rest of the android collective isn’t invited to.”

Neirbo’s eyes remained locked on Rich as Djanet spoke, but he finally glanced at Djanet when his lips moved to form his reply. “How do you know we’re not all planning to stay?”

“He’s being evasive,” the A.I. observed. “There’s zero chance they want to make peace. They just tried to destroy the mainframe.”

“Not to mention the Earth,” James added. “But I see no trace of 1’s pattern,” James informed. “That is pure Neirbo. Rich, do me a favor and turn your head. I want to scan all of the androids.”

Rich subtly did as he was asked as Djanet retorted to Neirbo.

“It’s highly unlikely that you’re planning to stay peacefully,” she said. “Why haven’t you left?”

Neirbo’s lips twitched again slightly. “We’ve never been without a leader for the collective before. We’re reevaluating our process for transferring leadership so that it can’t be... *corrupted* again. The reevaluation takes time. We’ve obeyed the request to move out of the solar system, but we’ll need a leader before the collective decides what to do next.”

“There’s a 99.9 percent chance he’s lying,” the A.I. calculated.

“But 1’s not here,” James said, a slight frustration in his voice. “I’m detecting nothing in the android communication link either. She isn’t even monitoring.”

“Djanet,” the A.I. began, “relay to the androids that they have twenty-four Earth hours, starting now, to begin moving away from our solar system.”

Djanet inhaled deeply before she spoke, cognizant that her next words might be construed as a threat. “I’m authorized to inform you that you have twenty-four hours to begin leaving the solar system.”

“Or else what?” Neirbo replied, disdain dripping from his voice.

“Or else our superman abomination is going to *make* you leave,” Rich said emphatically.

“A threat?” Neirbo reacted. “You follow your superhuman abomination so blindly. You think he has your best interest at heart, but what are you to him? He’s a god now. You’re a pet to him at most. We, on the other hand, are your true friends.”

Rich’s eyes flashed wide with surprise before he smiled. “Neirbo, *your* attempts at humor are woeful.” He winked. “Twenty-four hours, little man.”

And with that, the post-humans turned to retreat back to their ship and head home as quickly as possible.

“Do you have to taunt them?” Djanet whispered. “We still have to get out of here.”

Rich smiled as he shrugged. “You know, I gotta tell you, I feel good about it.”

In the mainframe, James turned to the A.I. “We know Neirbo’s stalling, but we’re no closer to uncovering the whereabouts of 1.”

The A.I. nodded, folding his arms and nestling his chin against his chest as he pondered a mystery that exasperated even the two massive intelligences. “I do not like this. If we’re missing information then it’s entirely possible we’re vulnerable. I suggest that we move ahead with our plan of putting the Trans-human candidate through the final phase of its testing as quickly as possible. If we’re going to be facing an unknown threat, it’s preferable that we have Trans-human on our side.”

“Agreed,” James replied. “I’ll speak with Thel. Let’s arrange for the final testing to begin tomorrow night.”

“Thel?” Old-timer said as Thel’s visage appeared, smiling and relaxed as she lounged on a Venus beach in his mind’s eye. “I’m having trouble locating James. He’s not appearing on my contact list. How is that even possible—”

“That’s because he doesn’t really have a location at the moment,” Thel said, understanding the problem immediately. “It’s a bit counterintuitive, I know, but, you know, James and quantum physics.”

Old-timer scratched the back of his head as he stood just a few paces in front of his porch, the dawn’s early light painting the horizon a soft pink, the morning dew forming large droplets on the long blades of grass in front of him. “Come again?”

“He’s terraforming,” Thel replied.

“Terraforming?” Old-timer reacted, astonished.

Thel nodded, her smile never faded. There appeared to be some sort of festive music in the background. It was night on the beach on which she was reclining in a comfortable beach chair. “Yes, but not in the old school way we’re used to. This is terraforming, James style. Check your real-time solar system map. You’ll see an anomaly that should be crossing near Mars as we speak.”

Old-timer tilted his head, perplexed but still following Thel’s instructions. A map of the solar system unfurled in front of him, a gigantic, nearly planet-sized, nebulous shape moving at an impossibly fast rate across it. “I see it.”

“That’s James,” Thel said, smiling. “He’s out of communication right now, but I can tell him you’re looking for him when I see him?”

“It’s pretty important. I should really speak with him right away.”

“Well, you could always go meet him. Just put yourself between him and Venus. That’s where he’s headed. Don’t worry, he’ll be able to sense you.”

“Venus? Isn’t the terraforming complete there?”

“He wanted to make a few tweaks,” Thel replied. “You know James.”

Old-timer smiled. “Yeah, yeah I sure do. Okay, I better head out if I’m going to reach him in time.”

“Okay, see you later!” She waved goodbye, and the communication ended.

“What are you doing?” Daniella suddenly asked, startling Old-timer and causing him to spin.

He held his hand to his chest. “Phew. You scared me! You can still get the old ticker ticking.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She stepped closer. “You were trying to sneak out before I woke up. Craig, please don’t go.”

“Daniella,” Old-timer replied, taking in a deep breath. He crossed to her and put his hands on her arms, which were folded across her chest. “I’m literally not going to do anything but have a chat with him.”

“You can’t let them keep sucking you in, Craig,” Daniella advised, the advice tinged with a pleading tone. “Things are getting too crazy. I just...” Her voice trailed off, and her eyes fell from his and dropped to the dirt on which she stood.

He tightened his grip on her when he saw that she was becoming overwhelmed. “Hey, Daniella, what is it?”

She swallowed and looked up at him. “Don’t you feel it, Craig? The world’s upside down. It doesn’t make sense anymore. We’re crossing a threshold here and I don’t know if we’re ever going to be able to come back. There’s no stability anymore—no life—just endless upheaval that threatens everyone.”

And then with Aldous showing up last night..."

He hugged her, holding her face to his broad chest and resting his own cheek on the top of her head.
"I feel it too, Daniella. It's not your imagination."

She looked up at him. "Then why are you going? Why don't you stay here? If something bad happens, then at least we're together! I'm afraid when you're gone. Every time you leave to go with James, I'm afraid it'll be the last time I see you."

His lips formed a slight pout. "I don't want you to feel that way. Look, Daniella, he needs to know about the Planck energy and about the Planck platform. He needs to know how dangerous it is. We shouldn't have hidden it from him for so long. But once I tell him, once I get this over with, what he does with that information will be up to him."

"Do you promise? You'll come right home?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes."

She hugged him hard.

He sighed. "After all, eternal youth or not, I'm getting too old for this crap."

Old-timer's forward momentum slowed as he flew through the vacuum of space, floating in the serene, silent blackness, his eyes forward as he watched for any sign of the impending arrival of the nebula that Thel had told him would signify James. He thought he could make out ripples of distortion in the blackness, but he couldn't be sure, and he blinked several times in an effort to refocus his eyes. Then, suddenly, he thought he glimpsed an object off in the distance that appeared like a golf ball racing toward him on the 9th hole, causing him to instinctively duck, but when he looked again, nothing was there except for the elusive black distortion. "What the heck am I getting myself into here?"

Just seconds later, the object reappeared, as though out of the nothingness, its trajectory dizzying, as it seemed to pop into existence from out of the murky cloud. It was massive, white, and almost planet-sized from Old-timer's perspective.

Again, in a panic, he held his hands over his head instinctively, but his other appendages—the dozens of thin tendrils that he controlled like fingers—flashed open in a reflex that caused Old-timer to temporarily appear like a jellyfish as he covered his face and braced for an impact that he was sure would be lethal if it were not for the fact he had also ignited his magnetic field at the same time. He expected to open his eyes after smashing an impact crater into the surface of the dazzling, mammoth object. Instead, after a few moments in which he tried to catch his breath from the fright, he opened his eyes to see James's smiling countenance in his mind's eye.

"Hey," James said, his chrome-colored lips forming the same friendly, instantly recognizable smile that Old-timer had known for almost twenty years.

Old-timer's hands lowered from their protective position over his face, as did the magnetic field, that his new skin didn't require him to use for protection in space, but that he'd kept nonetheless for its other advantages when he'd designed his new upgraded body with James. The tendrils also retracted and furlled onto his torso, but as he looked down, he noticed—much to his chagrin—that many of them had punctured his shirt, leaving it looking like Swiss cheese. "I thought I'd just bought the farm," Old-timer exhaled, relieved.

"Sorry," James replied. "I sensed you, but time and space were warped for me. Heh, uh, it's my first time dragging a moon through the solar system so, you'll have to forgive my bad driving."

Old-timer grinned and slapped his friend on the shoulder before laughing. "So, even with your godlike abilities, you still make mistakes?"

"Oh yeah," James replied, as friendly as ever. "I know it seems godlike—magical even—but as Clarke said, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,' and make no mistake, it's just technology."

Old-timer turned to the gleaming white surface of the moon James was dragging through space, the albedo of the white surface so bright that he had to squint as his eyes adjusted. The surface, though relatively smooth compared to the surface of a planet like Mercury, was crisscrossed with linear cracks and speckled with circular domes and pits. "Is that Europa?" he asked in astonished disbelief, even though he already knew the answer. He recognized it from the many times he and James had flown over it on scouting missions over the years, the familiar clay-colored streaks called *lineae*, on the otherwise white surface, were a dead giveaway. He asked the question anyway, his astonishment preventing him from accepting the reality before his eyes.

James looked over his shoulder proudly at the moon before turning back to Old-timer with a smile.

“It sure is.”

“I can’t believe it,” Old-timer said in barely more than a whisper. He shook his head, the awe still not abating. “I remember you talking about how you wished you could...but I can’t believe you’re actually doing it.”

“Amazing, isn’t it? Years ago, when I told you that Europa would be a perfect moon for Venus, I thought it would be something we might be able to do in a distant future, but—”

“You didn’t know you’d turn yourself into a god,” Old-timer observed, an impressed expression on his face.

“Ha! There’s that ‘god’ word again. Old-timer, I’m far from it,” James answered. “Listen, go ahead beside me, I have to make sure you’re inside the bubble.”

“Bubble?”

“I’ll explain it to you on the way to Venus. Once I explain it to you, the mystery will fade, and you’ll be far less impressed, I promise.”

Old-timer adjusted his position in space so that he was next to James and facing the same direction as a direction that pointed them toward Venus. “All right, it’s been a while since we’ve made a bet. The challenge is on. I dare you to try make this unimpressive to me.”

“A lot *less* impressive,” James corrected with a slight laugh. “Not entirely unimpressive.” He motioned with his right arm and faced his palm to the planet.

Old-timer watched as something seemed to happen to the stars in the background, their positions shifting noticeably as though their distant lights were refracting in water. Their positions continued to shift and Old-timer turned around, facing forward again when his mouth dropped in astonishment. The sun was noticeably growing in size in front of him, though it was flickering on and off as though it were on an old filmstrip. “What the—*is* that...gravitational lensing?” He turned to James. “Are you bending space-time?” he asked.

“I’m using the mass effect for propulsion,” James confirmed.

Old-timer was silent in his astonishment as his neck craned, following the outline of the lensing that was even larger in space than Europa.

James smiled. “Let’s admit it,” he replied, “it’s still pretty damn impressive.”

“Okay,” Old-timer said, “so explain to me how you’re not a god.”

“Gladly,” James replied. “Have I ever explained to you how I was able to calculate as accurately as a computer in my mind, even when I was a child?”

“No,” Old-timer replied. “I always assumed it was because you were the world’s foremost genius. He shrugged. “I guess I took it for granted and didn’t think about it any further.”

“Genius is relative,” James answered. “What is genius? We could debate a definition forever, just like we debate a definition for consciousness. What I can tell you for sure, though—what we learned from the brain scans I gave to the governing council—is that I have a unique and very fortunate form of synesthesia.”

“Synesthesia?” Old-timer reacted, his eyes narrowing slightly as his memory collected a definition. “Isn’t that when people’s senses get confused? When they see music for example in the form of colors?”

“That’s right,” James replied. “In my case, however, I can see numbers as colors and shapes.”

“Seriously?” Old-timer asked, surprised to learn this new information about a person he considered to be one of his closest friends.

“Yep. Here, look behind you,” James said as he and Old-timer shifted their positions so that they were partially facing the surface of Europa behind them. “One of the reasons I love this moon so much is because I can see a beauty in the topography that other people can’t see. It took me a while to figure out that other people couldn’t see it, mind you; I thought everyone saw the world the way I did when I was a kid, but then, when I asked them...” he shook his head as he remembered the silliness of the moment, “...they thought I was nuts.”

“What did you ask?”

“I was looking at a tree during a break at school, examining the bark, and asked one of my classmates, a little girl, if she thought the number sevens were as beautiful as I did.”

“Uh...what?”

“Yeah, that’s how she reacted too,” James replied. “That’s when I realized that the hallucinatory world I saw overlaid on top of what you and everyone else sees was something that I alone saw. You see,” he continued as he pointed at a cluster of lines and circles on the surface of the moon, “those lineae and lenticulae down there, when you see them, you see a series of random shapes, *whereas I see math.*”

“Math?”

“Yep. Math.”

Old-timer scratched his scalp near his brow. “And what does the math look like?”

“For me,” James replied, “it’s a gorgeous, awe-inspiring, synesthetic landscape.”

Old-timer exhaled, even though he wasn’t really breathing—his new body didn’t need to. “You’re losing the bet, James. You’re supposed to be smart enough to convince me that this isn’t supernatural and godlike.”

“I’m not even worried,” James replied, confidently. “I’ll win. You know what my favorite synesthetic landscape is?”

“No,” Old-timer shrugged. “I still don’t even know what the heck a synesthetic landscape is.”

“My favorite synesthetic landscape,” James pressed on, completely undeterred, “is pi.” He gestured to the curvature of Europa, moving his arm in a flourish to trace the shape with his finger to further

emphasize the point.

“Pi? I’m assuming you don’t mean cherry...”

“I mean 3.1415926535897932384264338327950—”

“Okay!” Old-timer exclaimed with a laugh, holding his hand up to stop James. “I get it. So what does this synesthetic landscape look like?”

James grinned, seemingly from ear to ear, and his head moved slightly to take in the beautiful symmetry of the solar system’s sixth-largest moon. “It’s like sailing on a ship along a shoreline, but instead of mountains around every bend, you see brilliant colors, flashes of light like the most incredible fireworks display you could ever imagine, eruptions of volcanoes, suns going supernova...” He trailed off as he took in the expanse of it all. “You see a circle, I see the face of God. Old-timer, pi is mathematical perfection—it’s eternity. When I see it, my body is flooded with sensations that inspire awe. Eternity is beautiful.” He turned back to Old-timer. “You can see why I picked terraforming as a career.”

Old-timer nodded. “Yep, lots of circles in this business.”

“Lots of 3.14,” James elaborated.

“Speaking of...” Old-timer trailed off as he pointed in front of them, causing James to turn to face Venus, which they were quickly approaching. “There’s a big, beautiful blue circle there.”

James nodded. “Math is the language of reality. It’s pure logic, and I’m convinced it’s the key to truly understanding the nature of the universe, to unlocking the greatest secrets there are. Those secrets still stymie me.” He gestured to the vortex of space, the nebulous cloud that seemed to engulf both of them, and the moon he had in tow. “This gravitational lensing you’re seeing isn’t magic. It’s a warp bubble and a warp drive.”

“Warp?” Old-timer tilted his head. “Seriously?” He looked up at the nearly invisible sphere that engulfed them and Europa. “Faster than light speed?”

“Superluminal,” James confirmed. “I didn’t invent it. It’s a modified version of an *Alcubierre-Wheeler* device. Just like the Tesla tower technology that I found and dusted off in the A.I.’s database, I found the plans for a warp drive in the historical record. Before the outbreak of WWII, the theoretical plans were already in place for warp drive, but no ship was ever built. The Purists came to power, and the plans were lost. The A.I. recovered them, but they were never made public.”

“Why?” Old-timer asked, suddenly turning suspicious. “That kind of technology has almost limitless applications.”

“Agreed, but I’ve learned a lot since I began sharing the operator’s position with the A.I. For instance, I learned that one of the A.I.’s chief purposes is to provide security for the human species so that we don’t go destroying ourselves. The governing council, and the chief in particular, had to approve any technological leaps. Even though I was part of the system, always fighting against the bureaucracy, I’ve since come to realize that the controls were even tighter than I’d imagined.”

Old-timer nodded, visions of his past flooding to his mind, pieces of puzzles three-quarters of a century old falling into place. “Because the A.I. monitored everything,” he said, suddenly understanding. He shook his head regretfully. “James, I—look, I’m really sorry but I’ve been complicit in this. I didn’t realize just how much until now—”

“Complicit?” James reacted, his head tilting. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve—I was asked to keep a secret from you, a long, long time ago. I said I would—I hadn’t even met you yet.” Old-timer nearly scoffed as he thought of the absurd amount of time that had passed. “I’d nearly forgotten about it until last night.”

“Last night?”

“I had a visitor,” Old-timer replied. “Look, what matters is that I won’t keep it a secret any longer and, if you’ve been digging through the historical record, I’m sure you know about it already.”—

“I might. What is it?”

“It’s—it’s Planck technology.”

“Planck technology? As in Max Planck? The theoretical physicist who originated quantum physics?”

“Uh...sounds right. I’m not sure. I never asked. But I’m specifically talking about something called the Planck platform.”

“Planck platform?” James’s face seemed to freeze for a moment as he searched the A.I.’s data base. At the same time, the warp bubble disengaged, the stars seemingly sinking back into their expected places, Venus becoming frozen in place, hanging in the limitlessness of space.

“Are you okay James?” Old-timer asked, once the disorientation of having space return to normal abated.

James’s glowing, azure eyes suddenly locked on to Old-timer, an expression of concern gripping them. “Oh my God. Old-timer, you should’ve told me.”

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