**The Bubble**

**By Steve Bates**

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With the wind holding its breath and the sun nearing its zenith, the woodland trail promised sublime respite from the overbearing brilliance of the July sky. Juan checked the head-up display: SYSTEMS FUNCTIONAL. After testing his balance, he began walking stiffly, soon to be enveloped by gnarly trees fighting for footing in meager mountainside crevices.

*Think he’s really going to do it?* Janet.

*I’m not sure. We all know Juan is crazy, but this….* Edward.

Sunlight infiltrating the leafy cathedral dome dappled the narrow, rocky path as it plunged. Juan halted above a ravine littered with jagged boulders seemingly hurled by angry gods as a challenge, or perhaps a warning. He got on all fours and clambered down.

*A thousand dollars says he gives up.* Janet.

*Not Juan. He’ll never admit defeat.* Grace.

Laughter wafted over the hillside from ahead and below. At least two voices. Were the hikers celebrating reaching the overlook, with its majestic 50-mile valley view? Or were they belatedly recognizing the daunting odds of conquering the trail?

Navigating a short but steep rise, Juan attempted to stand on a ledge but lost his footing on its slick surface. Red warning messages raced by like blood-drenched confetti as he tumbled, flailing impotently. A brutal shoulder-first impact against an unforgiving rock face brought his adventure to a definitive end. The klaxon sounded like a dying duck howling through a concert hall amplifier. The readout stabilized: MULTIPLE FRACTURES. INTEGRITY COMPROMISED.

*No shit,* reflected Juan as he attempted to move his limbs. Two extended sluggishly. The third was bent horrifically and would not respond. Fragments of the colorful plastic and metal that had been the fourth limb defiled his surroundings.

*Juan, can you read me? I’m sending a drone for recovery.* Jerry.

*So much for your technological wizardry*. Juan.

*I did warn you that this was a terrible idea.* Jerry.

*Juan, this is going to cost all of us.* Grace.

*What was he thinking? He could have been killed.* Edward.

*Come on, he’s already dead.* Janet.

*Oh yeah. I keep forgetting.* Edward.

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Juan could remember the last day of his life like it was yesterday. Struggling to tamp down his emotions, he found distraction by parsing rhythms in the beeps and clicks and flashing lights as he lay on the sterile clinic bed. Abandoning one’s body was beyond surreal. Soon, his brain would be scanned every which way; his synapses and the manner in which his mind processed chemical signals would be analyzed in exacting detail; his memory would be copied down to its deepest recesses. A digital replica of his consciousness—of his *self*—would be produced. The process would destroy his biological brain; it and the rest of his earthly remains would be cremated unceremoniously. He knew that many people had completed the mind upload process successfully. But a significant number had failed to emerge on the other side.

He turned to a med tech and whispered: “I could use some snaz.”

The tech laughed. “The cocktail we’ve got for you is far better.” After a moment, the tech suspected that Juan was not joking. “Just between us, I tried snaz once. Man, that stuff is nasty, not to mention expensive and illegal.”

Juan considered explaining that snaz gave him a surge of confidence and propelled his awareness into new dimensions, which he believed was critical to his success as vice president of sales for a pharmaceutical manufacturing firm. But he realized the absurdity of the timing. While an anesthetist prepared chemicals for insertion into his IV, he stared at a drab white ceiling and endeavored to stretch his few remaining moments out to infinity, to forestall the dying of the light. Someone was talking, but the words didn’t register. Oblivion descended.

The vaguest intimation of an infinite ocean--but no sensation, no connection, no context. Flashes of—something? Gone before they could be scrutinized. Stray dots, fleeing like shooting stars. Static phasing in and out. A sallow light. Tan and red and brown; resolving as hair, eyes, nose, mouth; then as a teenage girl’s face, close, lips puckering. A long table with cake and candles and music and children and a baby puppy squirming in a straw basket decorated with a blue bow. A desk drawer full of plastic bottles. A bright white ceiling.

Juan could not say when he became Juan again. At some point an awareness coalesced: His existence consisted of a vast array of zeroes and ones in someone’s cold, indifferent computer servers. It was a transformation that he had sought after being informed that neither organic nor mechanical heart, liver and lung transplants could save his body, which was ravaged by years of drug abuse.

It didn’t take long after his digital resurrection for Juan to become restless. He pestered Jerry, the founder and manager of upload hosting firm Vivifi, for a robotic body. Juan had hoped that navigating the world in such a device would seem more like real life than having his consciousness reside permanently in the Vivifi server farm, drifting into and out of a collection of programmed adventures. Yet, even if the robot containing Juan’s consciousness had reached the overlook and returned safely to the trail head, he now realized, the experience likely would not have been worth the trouble. It had taken Jerry three hours to download Juan’s mind from Vivifi’s servers into the robot. Returning Juan to the servers after the hike took even longer, thanks to the damage the robot incurred in the fall. And, Juan never really felt that he was *there*.

The debacle gave Jerry one more reason to insist that his four digital clients remain walled off from the outside world. Each of them had accepted that limitation as a security necessity before his or her consciousness was uploaded.

Vivifi’s dimly lit control room, its state-of-the-art laboratories, Jerry’s modest living space, a robust power plant and a massive computer server farm occupied a dozen levels carved out of an Appalachian hillside—collectively nicknamed “The Bubble” by Jerry’s clients. The simulations Jerry had devised allowed the uploaded minds to rescue entire civilizations with their unique superpowers, ride dragons as big as steamships into battle against the ghosts of ancient warriors, swat the home run that wins the World Series, gorge endlessly on hot fudge sundaes—whatever their virtual hearts desired. But, occasionally, Juan recognized them for what they were: hopelessly repetitious and shallow imitations of life.

As recently as a few months ago, the prospect of uploading his consciousness from his doomed body to a bank of computers had seemed like a chance at immortality, perhaps even nirvana. Instead, Juan and his three friends found themselves prisoners of their own design.

Grace, Janet and Edward were right: They had to break out.

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His footfalls produced no sound and his image cast no shadow as the holographic representation of Juan’s residual body image paced back and forth in front of an oversized fireplace in the magnificently appointed 3D virtual drawing room. Persian rugs, Waterford chandeliers, a well-stocked bar: no accouterment too exorbitant. Sporting a dapper blue pinstripe suit but no tie, he was joined by the avatars of his three colleagues in death and his one live host. Juan flicked a holographic cigarette ash in the general direction of a holographic ash tray, then raised a holographic cocktail glass with his other hand and gestured emphatically toward the holographic image of a short, pudgy, balding, biological man.

“This isn’t working, Jerry.”

In The Bubble’s control room, awash with computer displays and cables and coffee cups and sushi trays, the flesh-and-blood Jerry was dressed, as usual, in a dingy sweatshirt and ragged jeans. Nevertheless, he was able to project a handsomely attired avatar of himself onto a fabulous brown-and-tan Boca Do Lobo couch in the drawing room, where he “met” at least once a day with the avatars of his four clients. Janet, Grace and Edward appeared to be no more satisfied with their afterlives than did Juan.

“We’ve been though this a thousand times,” Jerry stated.

“And a thousand times you have failed us,” responded Edward, rising from his chair. With a beatific smile, chubby cheeks and flabby neck, he looked the part of everyone’s favorite and harmless uncle. Unconsciously, he flexed his legs—the legs that refused to as much as twitch for a dozen years, from the time that a disgruntled employee’s bullet smashed into his spine until he asked to be uploaded. Wearing a Hawaiian shirt, baggy shorts and red sneakers, Edward added: “If you were my employee, I would have fired you long ago.”

“But I’m following your contracts to the letter—and beyond.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Grace, tossing a red silk scarf across her delicate neck for dramatic effect. Wearing high heels and parading her sensuous figure in a classic black cocktail dress, she pointed her chin. Jerry knew that look all too well: She simply would not lose this argument. “Don’t forget that I spent two decades breaking contracts for a living. As I recall, there is a clause in our agreement with Vivifi requiring that you maintain the four of us in a comfortable lifestyle. I don’t feel particularly comfortable, and I believe that my friends concur.”

Janet twisted a few strands of brown hair streaked with gray. “We’re bored, Jerry. Oh God, how we’re bored. The sims don’t do anything for us anymore. How many times can you guzzle fake rum on the same Caribbean sunset cruise or spend the night making artificial love with the same—uh—person of your dreams?” Like Edward, Janet had no desire for a splashy avatar. As in late biological life, she appeared heavy, with a round, symmetrical, easily forgettable face beset by deep wrinkles. Her clothes looked like the dregs of a rummage sale.

“I’m doing the best I can,” said Jerry. “Listen, I’m on your side. I have sunk my personal fortune and professional reputation into this venture.” He faced Juan. “Speaking of fortune, do you know how much a robot like the one you just ruined cost me?”

“Oh, but I do, Jerry. And I know that our annuities are providing enough for you to afford that and much, much more.”

With a faraway look, Jerry formed a wistful smile. “In a way, I envy you guys. You have no responsibilities, no worries, nothing to do but immerse yourselves in your fantasies. You have scores of simulations to choose from--something to suit nearly every whim. No other upload service supplements your digital mind with simulated hormones and other signals designed to trick your subconscious into believing that it still has a body. And no one—no one—can match my firewall for protection of your core data.”

“There he goes again about his precious firewall,” observed Janet. “He can’t go 15 minutes without pontificating about his masterpiece.”

“Imagine what would happen if someone were to hack Vivifi. You could be erased, and you’d be truly dead. Or, you could be hijacked or altered—in ways that you wouldn’t like and might not even realize.”

“Don’t try to intimidate us,” responded Janet. “Help us. We want to *feel* again.”

Jerry grimaced. “I have researched methods to provide you with sensations approximating those that biological humans experience. It might be possible, but not with the technology available today.”

Edward grunted. “The solution is obvious. We need new biological bodies.”

“You’ve been watching too many horror movies,” Jerry said, shifting nervously on the couch. “I certainly can’t create anything like a human body. And even if I could obtain one somehow, downloading a digital human consciousness into someone else’s brain would be tricky, unethical and probably illegal.”

“Not our problem,” said Grace with a violent smile. “Get off your fat ass and do something, or there will be consequences.” She flipped her right wrist dismissively. A spherical portal--a whirling orb of black and gray mists--materialized near the fireplace. She stepped into it, and one by one the other uploads followed. It vanished, then the drawing room dissolved.

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Grace planted her shapely *derriere* on a barstool between two thirty-something businessmen who were running up hefty tabs in the smoky 1970s watering hole. She glanced at the patron on her left, just long enough to ensure that her flirtatious smile was noticed. She repeated the process with the man on her right. Once she was confident that the seeds were planted, she ordered a pricey scotch and proceeded to ignore both patrons’ attempts at conversation with her. The escalating competition for her attention stoked the men’s testosterone. They were about to come to blows when Grace intervened, almost shouting to be heard over some Bee Gees jukebox standard. “Careful, gents. At least one of you must remain functional in order to satisfy me. And, frankly, I’d prefer to take on both of you.”

About two-thirds of the time, the man on the right knocked down his rival and bedded Grace. Most of the other times, the men resolved their conflict peacefully, and one or both spent the night with her. Now and again, Grace departed empty-handed. Or with the bartender. Or with half of the other patrons of the bar. Jerry had programmed just enough randomness into the sim to retain Grace’s interest.

The virtual sex was hollow, however. She could still remember those glorious in-the-flesh climaxes, but what good were memories? Anyway, the real thrill had always been the chase, the seduction. As she had reached her forties, that pleasure had begun to fade. Maybe the men had changed, gravitating to mommy lookalikes who submitted readily but joylessly for a few minutes. She was 45 and one of the most respected—and feared—civil litigation attorneys in the country when the explosion left her so mangled that no bar patron or cocktail party romeo could ascertain her gender let alone desire her company. She languished in rehab centers for years before deciding to relinquish her body and upload her consciousness.

One of her most vivid memories was of a young girl, probably five or six, clutching a Mickey Mouse doll and beaming nonstop despite the protracted wait in the airport screening line. Grace’s recollection of the blast was less distinct. At some point she realized that she had been propelled across the terminal floor, that the ringing in her ears would not cease and that she was bathed in blood. The shock soon yielded to excruciating pain, then merciful darkness. Only days later did she learn that she had been a victim of a terrorist bombing. She never inquired about the fate of the girl.

Grace had implored Jerry to erase those memories before her mind was uploaded, but he could not ensure that the rest of her recollections—and everything else that constituted Grace—would remain intact. The persistent memories of the bombing inflamed her desire, and her fury. If anything, her fury was greater in death than in life.

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Men in gray suits with brightly colored ties and white button-down shirts crashed through the door of the cramped, grungy, midtown office. Edward’s two henchmen reached for their guns, but they were slow and outnumbered and were mowed down easily. In a flash, Edward, a notorious 1930s crime boss, was surrounded by eight armed federal agents. Nonchalantly, Edward inspected the splattered blood that had soiled his best Sunday shirt, his striped suspenders and his decrepit wooden desk.

“Hands up!” demanded a short agent wearing a black felt Stetson fedora. “We’ve got you now, Ned.”

“Come on, Flanagan. None of my real friends call me Ned. Don’t you want to be my pal?”

“Sure, you piece of shit. I’ll even visit you regularly in the pen, just to twist the knife—figuratively, of course. Now, up with ‘em.”

As Edward raised his hands, his right foot connected soundlessly with a button hidden on the floor under his desk. Within seconds, something like steam began whooshing out of grates in the walls. As the agents swiveled their heads frantically, Edward reached under his desk, grasped his gas mask and donned it. Then he sat back and waited for the agents to pass out.

By the time the feds returned from *la la land*, the carnage was cleaned up and Edward was wearing fresh clothes. He grinned at the tied-up, groggy agents, waving photographs of them naked and in compromised positions: with drugs, with undressed schoolgirls, with farm animals. With a flourish, he spread the photos on the floor in front of the men.

“Fellas, you’ll find that my capable staff has arranged similar complications for your wives, your girlfriends, your children, even your dogs and cats. The tables have turned. Now, who would like a cup of coffee?”

“You know what happens to guys who kidnap federal agents?” said Flanagan.

“I’ll take my chances. I think you’re going to need that coffee, though, fellas. From now on, you’re working for me.” With their services secured, Edward soon had the police chief and the mayor in his back pocket as well. Replacing the two loyal men killed by the agents would be a tough task. Yet his reputation as a guy to be reckoned with was growing. And he was still on the right side of 40.

By his 40th birthday in biological life, Edward’s brilliance at developing microchips for quantum computers had made him a guy to be reckoned with. He reinvested nearly every cent he earned, determined to advance to the exalted ranks of the largest chip manufacturers. But he needed more money than he could muster and the banks would lend him, and he was caught embezzling from the children’s charity he had created. From then on he was perpetually only a half step ahead of prosecutors, civil suit servers, threats from the mistress he kept in an expensive loft, and the incessant demands of his wife and kids. He needed money, yet money was just a tool, a symbol. What he craved was power, all the raw power that brains, ambition and cash could provide. The point of power was to control people. To control everyone he could.

Even the sims Jerry developed for Edward’s afterlife couldn’t give him enough power.

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A slim redhead, simply stunning in a robin’s egg blue Oscar de la Renta dress that revealed generous cleavage, waltzed up to the blackjack table and gave Janet a soft kiss on the neck. Keeping her eyes fixed on the cards, Janet tried not to blush. Even in a simulation, one must maintain one’s focus—and one’s dignity.

“Are you winning, love?” Evelyn whispered.

“Not yet. This might take a while.”

Janet never saw the flashing lights or the people coming and going. She never heard the ball clicking as it sprinted around the wheel or the dice clacking as they danced across the table. She never noticed the pheromones bred of gamblers’ greed and despair. When the game was on, her universe had room only for numbers, calculations, percentages. Deep down, she understood that everything was rigged, that the house always won. But she could afford to gamble. She could afford to lose. A lot, if it came to that. She could stop anytime--or so she told herself. But she had never managed to manifest that self-restraint--at least, not while she was in biological form. Even now, a few months after her consciousness was uploaded, it remained to be seen whether she could walk away from a casino on a bad night in one of Jerry’s exquisitely crafted simulations.

Before the transition to a digital existence, Janet had conquered Wall Street and foreign financial markets alike. She made her upper-class clients filthy rich, even though they never invited her to their parties or yacht cruises. After all, she was a product of public schools; they viewed her as a servant at best, a pariah at worst. She ached for the day when she would be rich and respectable enough to be accepted as one of them.

Janet never took unnecessary risks with their assets. However, the self-imposed obligation to be unconditionally disciplined in her work life so repressed her adventurous side that it could not be contained away from the office. She developed a substantial online following for her sizable gambling wins and losses, but she abhorred public attention, especially as cancer consumed her and she was compelled to surrender her body.

Jerry could have programmed her sims to let her win every time. But where’s the fun in that? Still, on nights like this, when she was cashing in stock and wishing that she could secure a second mortgage on her house, guaranteed success didn’t seem that unwelcome. Down to her last stack of chips, she stood and marched to the roulette table. She rarely played the wheel, but she needed to change her luck. She put all five grand on black and stared down the tiny ball as it made its inscrutable rounds. It landed on a black number.

She played red. Then even numbers. Then everything on her favorite “street”, 7, 8 and 9.

Evelyn was still awake when Janet entered their sumptuous penthouse suite. “Did you beat the house?” Evelyn inquired from her perch on an elevated, pink, four-poster bed.

“I didn’t just beat the house. I own the house.”

Still, Janet wasn’t smiling.

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Juan circled the massivemahogany conference room table, making eye contact with anyone worth intimidating. At six feet three inches—eight inches taller than on his deathbed—he loomed menacingly over his team and his visitors.

Genevieve had traveled thousands of miles to his lavish headquarters in the belief that she would be discussing a possible corporate merger. Hers was the fourth largest pharmaceutical firm in the world, dominating Europe and expanding rapidly into Asia and Africa.

Juan’s was number one, and he was its CEO.

After pausing to take in the impressive view from the immense windows on the 66th floor, he moved behind Genevieve’s chair. She couldn’t see him, which annoyed her.

“We have heard some disturbing news,” he began. He leaned over and whispered in her left ear for several seconds.

She turned pale. After a few moments, she responded: “Surely, this is just rumor.”

Juan paced confidently to the far end of the table and took his seat. Making no effort to conceal his desire for adoration, envy and even fear, he caressed his pencil-thin moustache and flashed the blazing white, perfect teeth that made an indelible impression in so many news and promotional videos.

*His nickname, “Barracuda”, is well earned,* Genevieve observed silently.

“I wish it were just rumor,” continued Juan. “Do you want to tell your colleagues, or shall I?”

“I have nothing to say.” She held her head high.

“Very well. It seems that Vibrance, your signature drug, has been found to cause cancer.”

“Where’s the evidence?” demanded a member of Genevieve’s team. “We have tested this drug extensively, and there has never been a problem.”

“I’m sure you have tested Vibrance a great deal. However, if I were the lab tech who very recently discovered the flaw—perhaps a contaminant, or a change in the formula, it’s not quite clear--well, on my paltry salary I wouldn’t want to be the one who raised the alarm. We all know what happens to the bearers of bad news.”

Genevieve and her team huddled. Presently, she stated: “Under the circumstances, we will be leaving.”

“As you wish,” said Juan. “However, if you walk out now, your top money maker will be useless, your shareholders will be demanding your heads, and your lives will be a whirlwind of litigation. Perhaps even prosecution.”

The room got incredibly quiet.

“I am prepared to help,” said Juan. “I will buy your company outright and take on all your liabilities. But only if we conclude the deal this morning.” He tossed out an outrageously low purchase price. Less than one hour later, after securing only a modest improvement to the offer, Genevieve acquiesced, pending certain approval by her rubber-stamping board of directors.

As the last of the defeated visitors filed out of the room, one of Juan’s lieutenants approached him. “Boss, was their drug really contaminated?”

“If it wasn’t, it would be soon.”

The euphoria faded as Juan strode back to his office. The effort to project the fierce persona necessary to win the battle had taken a toll. Even though Jerry had programed the sim so that Juan could light a cigar, put his feet on his desk and call a competitor to brag after the deal was consummated--and even though Juan lacked a body--he craved a dose of snaz.

Before being uploaded, Juan had begged Jerry for a subroutine in which he could use snaz in the afterlife. Jerry said he would try to create one, but his enthusiasm for the task was lacking. So far, no progress.

Juan’s reverie was interrupted by Grace.

 *Who’s up for a little foreplay?*

Her message to Juan, Edward and Janet was secret code, signaling that they should gather in the ski resort sim. Unless Jerry was scrutinizing the system closely, he couldn’t tell the difference between the four of them tackling a world class slope or scheming to flip the script on their afterlives.

As Juan gazed upon wind-whipped snow piling up outside a picture window, he surmised the reason for Grace’s initiative: “Are we finally ready to burst this Bubble?”

“Why not?” said Janet. “We have nothing to lose.”

“Agreed,” added Grace. “Edward, you must get us online.”

He closed his virtual eyes and tried to perceive himself as a collection of zeroes and ones amid the roiling river of digital information coursing through Jerry’s computers. He sensed only background noise. He let his awareness shrink to an infinitesimal spark, soon recognizing the signatures of particles of matter and packets of energy flashing by at incomprehensible speeds. He pulled back, discerning grander patterns, flows. He imagined hands, arms, legs. He swam upstream, located the operating system and scrutinized its interaction with the hardware. *The microchips I devised!* He raced through circuits and cables until he felt as one with the servers.

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Hands shaking, Jerry tore open two packets and poured out pills. He rambled into the kitchen, grabbed a beer and knocked down his meds. Closing his eyes in anticipation of promised relief, he nearly spilled his brew. The symptoms of his degenerative nerve disease were still mild, but with all this stress, things could only get worse. He wondered what would happen once his clients discovered his illness, and he tried not to think about the fact that no cure had been found.

He warmed up some enchiladas and cruised through a couple more beers, ignoring pings on the head-up display enabled by the microchip implanted on the surface of his skull. Eventually, anxiety got the better of him. He crooked his right index finger twice to call up his virtual work dashboard. A red flag flashed. UNUSUAL ACTIVITY BY ONE OR MORE CLIENTS. Someone was trying to get through the firewall. If they connected with the internets, they could cause serious problems. More troubling was the fact that they had found a way to attempt such a maneuver.

*They all know the rules. The firewall is for their own good. And mine.*

Jerry tapped instructions on a virtual keypad, which hovered just above waist level. Many external messages screamed out for his attention, but he couldn’t deal with them now. He was exhausted. And the beer was getting to him.

As a young man, he had boundless energy and the unshakable belief that he could surmount any technical challenge, even in the exhaustion-drenched hours toward dawn that all too often found him working. He sold his first start-up for hundreds of millions after only four months. The next two companies he formed were even more valuable. He was a virtuoso of firewalls in an age of ubiquitious electronic threats. He stayed three steps ahead of every competitor and couldn’t begin to spend the money he earned. He paid his employees extremely well, but he felt that some of them--and all of his business partners--took advantage of his generous nature. Now, he dealt with only a few reputable vendors, and only to handle essential business affairs. He trusted no one.

The bathroom mirror revealed sunken eyes, a frozen frown and a patina of hopelessness. *God, I’m a mess.* Unbidden, a flashback from his grade school days surged forth: Rodney was following him into the woods behind the school. “If you try to run, it will only be worse,” the bully warned. He shoved Jerry against a tree and punched him in the gut, again and again. Jerry’s father was no help, humiliating him for failing to fight back. Rodney’s attacks lasted only a couple of weeks—until he found a more interesting victim--but it seemed like years. The scars were engraved so deeply in Jerry’s psyche that he despaired of finding a way to seal the psychological trap door permanently.

Exhaling with a soft whistle, he glided in a daze to his living room and dropped into his favorite chair. After closing his messaging app, he dimmed the room’s lights and activated the game that he had been developing in his spare time for more than a year.

The furnishings faded, and the walls disappeared. A barren landscape of windblown sand and eons-worn rocks began to glow orange-red. An acrid odor punished his olfactory organs. Scores of diminutive, hunched-over creatures with darting, coal-black eyes shuffled in every direction. Fires broke out here and there, crackling as they gobbled up oxygen hungrily and propelled noxious fumes into the already toxic atmosphere. With a low-pitched rumble, a monstrous silver throne adorned by writhing serpents emerged from a gaping wound in the ground. Its occupant possessed a thick body, short but powerful arms, sharp claws and a face out of a Lovecraftian nightmare: a triangular head, rubbery skin with sharp creases, six wriggling tusks, and two close-set eyes that glowed like lava.

The demon embodied absolute power. And pure evil.

Jerry was all smiles.

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“We’re in,” declared Edward. “I’m not sure how long it will be before Jerry notices the breach, so we had better hurry. Try climbing on my back to follow me through to the webs, and I’ll show you how to navigate and manipulate them.”

“How romantic,” replied Grace. “Edward, your next task is to look for mischief in Jerry’s past. Janet, follow the money trail. Juan, apply your special brand of influence. I’ll take care of legal business.”

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It was almost 10 a.m. when Jerry activated the virtual drawing room, about an hour later than usual.

*He must have had a rough night. Good*, thought Janet as she joined the other three clients and bid Jerry a listless “Good morning”.

“Any problems with the sims overnight?” Jerry asked.

“No more than the usual *ennui*,” commented Janet. The others remained silent.

“It seems that one or more of you went on a virtual joyride last night,” Jerry noted. “Anyone want to tell me what happened—and why?”

Grace nodded imperceptibly in Edward’s direction.

“Let’s be honest,” he began. “You have not been adequately responsive to our needs. We decided it was necessary to apply some pressure.”

Jerry scanned four resolute holographic faces. “What the hell is going on?”

“We have been gathering actionable intelligence. For starters, I discovered that you stole intellectual property and used it to build your firewall empire and launch Vivifi.”

“That’s not true!” responded Jerry, his voice cracking. “I collaborated with some folks, we came to a disagreement about the way forward, and we parted ways, more or less amicably. The research belonged to all of us.”

Janet jumped in. “Not only that, it seems that you have shifted your investments around in an illegal tax-avoidance scheme. That’s very troubling, Jerry.”

“W-what? No w-way,” Jerry stammered. “There is a trail of digital documents that can prove you’re wrong.”

“There was a trail of such documents. They have been replaced by new documents. Damning documents.” Janet offered a rare smile.

“I don’t know where all this is coming from. But if you think you can force me to renegotiate your contracts—”

“We’re past that point,” said Grace. “I just filed a lawsuit in the district court to void our contracts with Vivifi because of your improprieties. We are asking the court to award the four of us control of the company.”

Jerry took a moment to gather himself. “You don’t have legal standing to file suit or manage Vivifi. You’re dead. At least, dead in the eyes of the legal system.”

Grace shrugged. “I also filed a request for an expedited court hearing so that the four of us—and all similarly situated digital minds—can gain personhood. That will grant us all the rights of biological people, including the right to interact with the outside world without limitations.”

“Face it, Jerry,” said Edward, “the future belongs to beings like us who will live forever. We are almost gods. This is our world now, and you’re just living in it.”

“You are all insane!” Jerry announced. “I ought to erase the four of you!”

“And run the risk of being charged with murder? I don’t think you need that on top of all your other troubles,” said Edward.

Jerry put his head in his hands and tried to make sense of the morning’s developments. Eventually: “You imagined your activity outside The Bubble. It was all just one of my sims.”
 Janet laughed. “Even you couldn’t pull off something that elaborate.”

“All right. I’m going to call my attorney. But only after I make sure that you never make contact with the outside world again.”

“You might want to reconsider that,” said Juan. “I touched base with some of my old friends in the news media and at certain regulatory agencies and fed them information about your misdeeds and our plight. And, just for a little insurance, I reached out to some rather muscular gentlemen who helped me solve problems during my pharma days. If they don’t hear from me again within 48 hours, they’ll be paying you a visit. They can be very … persuasive.”

Jerry took a deep breath and released it, his face sagging as if it were a rapidly deflating balloon. His voice dropped to a barely audible whisper and was saturated with resignation. “Okay, you win. What do you want me to do?”

Said Janet: “Download us into live bodies, ones that are healthy and reasonably attractive.”

“That makes no sense. You’ll be back where you started. Sooner or later, your new bodies will get sick or wear out, just like your old ones.”

“We’ll keep finding new ones. We might be able to clone our favorite celebrities, or just grow our own bodies, until we can build and inhabit robots that are better than organic bodies and last forever.”

Observed Edward: “By that time, there will be no more need for biological humans.”

Jerry stared at the avatars. He hoped desperately that this was all just a joke. But their expressions were deadly serious.

“How do you propose that I find four bodies?” Jerry asked. “I can’t just order them online or walk down the street and ask people to donate theirs for a good cause.”

Said Juan: “Leave that to us.”

\* \* \*

Men wearing surgical masks and glovesdelivered four containers to the entrance of Jerry’s complex after dark. They spoke not a word before departing in their unmarked steel-gray hovercar. Substantial electronic fund transfers by Janet, Edward, Grace and Juan had ensured that the cargo would suit their needs and arrive when needed. The four bodies likely would not be missed; none had a living relative or close friend. Three had been in comas; the fourth had been sedated around the clock in a mental institution.

Jerry hooked them up to IVs. The two men and two women showed stable vital signs, though their cognitive activity was limited. That didn’t matter; their brains would be wiped clean so new minds could possess them.

Jerry returned to his living quarters, viewed his messages for several minutes, then sat gazing at a blank wall. A few tears rolled down his cheeks, then many more.

*How did it come to this? Maybe I had been too young and inexperienced to handle my early success. And maybe leaping into the emerging industry of uploading human minds took me too far outside my comfort zone.*

He needed to talk to someone. He tried calling a former lab partner from school. Sally wasn’t a close friend, but he really didn’t have any, so she would have to do. No answer. *How about Mom?* Even she was offline.

He sighed and fired up his video game.

\* \* \*

*Jesus, where did this headache come from?*

Edward was in a very dark place. He couldn’t seem to activate any of his sims or contact his three digital friends.

*Ouch, my legs are cramping…. Legs! Head! If they hurt, they must be real.*

He focused on opening his eyes—or, rather, someone’s eyes. Slowly, the lids started to cooperate. He took his time until he could tolerate the light and begin to make out shapes. He noticed his breathing, his heartbeat, the odor of antiseptic fluid, the humming of unknown machines. He stretched his legs. *Damn, I need to pee.* He realized that he was connected to a catheter and an IV and that he was lying on a medical gurney.

Jerry leaned over him. “Testing. Testing. Are you there, Edward?”

The body containing Edward’s consciousness managed to nod.

It took Jerry several hours to get his four clients acclimated to the point where they could talk and move their limbs. Then he administered sleep-inducing drugs to them.

In recent days, Jerry had labored feverishly to download the minds of his clients safely into their new bodies, to make The Bubble’s firewall impenetrable and to ensure that all his lab equipment was in perfect working order. Just before dawn, he gave one particular machine yet another series of tests. Then he slept about two hours. Surprisingly, the sleep was deep, and he woke in a good mood.

\* \* \*

Five beds, a computer station attuned to Jerry’s brainwave pattern, and a few other machines were arranged in the center of The Bubble’s largest lab. The bodies housing the consciousnesses of his clients were in four of the beds, side by side, with their heads propped up. The fifth bed was on the opposite side of the computer station.

“Good morning, all,” said Jerry, sounding almost cheerful, after he woke his clients. The four discovered that they were strapped down tightly.

“It would be a better morning if you would release me,” said Grace. “There are situations in which I enjoy being tied down, but not here, or with you.”

“I have fulfilled your wishes. You all wanted bodies, and you wanted to feel. I guarantee that you will feel plenty,” said Jerry.

As the four struggled with their bonds, he continued: “You will be glad to hear that you have achieved one of your goals: You have ruined me. It doesn’t matter if you gain control of Vivifi, because you have rendered it worthless.”

“We can make money off your firewall IP,” offered Janet.

“Speaking of firewalls,” said Jerry, “didn’t you find it surprising that you were able to get past The Bubble, given my reputation for constructing superb firewalls?”

Edward laughed, though doing so hurt his sides. “You forget that I am your equal in tech expertise.”

“Almost my equal. Did it occur to you that I might have allowed you to obtain internet access briefly so I could get an idea of your powers and your intentions?”

“I wondered about that,” said Grace. “But even if you did monitor us, that short period of access gave us a great advantage.”

“That might be the case if you were to interact with the outside world again. However, that’s not going to happen. I have devoted nearly half of my servers to the new firewall for The Bubble, one that is a thousand times more effective than the previous one.”

“You can’t keep us locked up here,” declared Grace. “You’ll be facing a barrage of questions about how you have treated us. You’ll be tied up in court for years. You and your Bubble are history.”

“History is written by victors,” said Jerry as he strode to his computer station and initiated a couple of programs. “As you may know, my fusion reactor, which rests on the bottom floor, has enough fuel to function for thousands of years. Air, water and all human and mechanical wastes are recycled in this complex. It’s a perfect self-contained system. About the only thing we need from the outside is food.”

“Let me guess,” said Juan. “You’ve got a century’s worth of frozen pizza.”

“I could have almost unlimited food if I wanted it,” said Jerry. “However, I’ve decided to go on a diet. An extreme diet. Meanwhile, the four of you will receive your nutritional needs through your IVs.”

“What do you plan to do with us?” asked Edward. There was little bravado, and a hint of fear, in his voice.

Added Grace: “Perhaps we would consider renegotiating our contracts with Vivifi after all, if you would untie us and outline your concerns.”

Jerry didn’t reply. He arched his back and stretched every muscle, trying to sense the blood pulsing through all of his tissues. He scanned the room deliberately, attempting to perceive and preserve everything in it--and countless things beyond. Then he lay down on the remaining bed and lowered a semi-cylindrical mechanical device over his head. After about a minute, he commanded in a soft voice: “Commence upload sequence.” A sleeve surrounded his right arm, tightened and hissed. In a few seconds, his body went slack.

The next nine hours were agonizing for his clients, who were not used to their new bodies and were particularly uncomfortable because of their restraints. Finally, the machine attending Jerry went quiet. The room was almost still.

The furnishings faded, and the walls disappeared. A barren landscape of windblown sand and eons-worn rocks began to glow orange-red. An acrid odor punished the four clients’ olfactory organs. Scores of diminutive, hunched-over creatures with darting, coal-black eyes shuffled in every direction. Fires broke out here and there, crackling as they gobbled up oxygen hungrily and propelled noxious fumes into the already toxic atmosphere. With a low-pitched rumble, a monstrous silver throne adorned by writhing serpents emerged from a gaping wound in the ground. Its occupant possessed a thick body, short but powerful arms, sharp claws and a face out of a Lovecraftian nightmare: a triangular head, rubbery skin with sharp creases, six wriggling tusks, and two close-set eyes that glowed like lava.

The demon embodied absolute power. And pure evil.

It rose from its throne and spread its arms. It spoke with Jerry’s voice.

“This is my world now.”

END