

HU 2.0

The future is not all automation and robots. As mankind advances he also falters...

The present belongs to us but the future is in our children's and their children's hands.
To AJ, Thomas and Noah. May your lives be full and your generation's stewardship wise.

1

NOTHINGNESS...

A sudden feeling of pain flashed forward like a melding of one's senses, each overloaded to their limit. A surge of fear and confusion whirled as the agony pushed beyond understanding. A shrill scream filled the air engulfing the room... then nothing.

The sound of an electrical discharge preceded ragged raspy breathing, fast at first and then in sync with the ticking of time, smooth, and constant.

Bright white changed to a monochrome blur that began to focus on an unknown world. There were shapes and borders, each unfamiliar. The sudden need to escape filled his soul building until it might burst but something held him back from executing. Movement to the right called to his burry attention, calming the growing emotional cyclone that was at its limit.

A mechanical arm, boney and rigid appeared and began wiping and sucking away the viscous material that clung to the newly born adult body. The shape and texture foreign. White pigment-less eyes tracked in time with the machine's orchestrated movements. There was a return sensation to his consciousness every time it made contact. It was soothing and non-threatening.

An adult male lay prone, naked on a birthing table, too weak and exhausted to move. His bald head and an almost skeletal form set against a bulging midsection with no belly button. Alabaster skin covered all six feet one inch of the ungainly creature. If you were to guess you would say he was mid-twenties and dying of something horrible. You would only be half right. A mirror slid out from a wall extending and reflecting back an unfamiliar face. It was gaunt and alien in nature. A calming female voice interrupted the newborn's self-scrutiny.

“Subject 25, welcome. My name is Azraelle. I will be your interface.”

The words had feeling but no meaning.

Day two. I am moving Subject 25 out of the birthing chamber and into his living space. The feeding tube has been a success and he is showing cognitive acceleration on par or better than with the past subjects. His physical advancement is ahead of schedule as he is able to wriggle on his own. I estimate erect movement within eight to ten days.

Subject 25 crawled across the cool floor in starts and stops, battling gravity and losing. Each time he fell, 25 obstinately tried again, the will to succeed strong. The composite floor was smooth with just a touch of texture to allow traction. The problem was that the texture had worn through his jumpsuit causing a scab on both knees and it hurt, forcing him to crawl knees up. It was something that he was mostly failing at. The feeding and water tubes were placed three feet off the floor, causing him to crane his neck to use them. 25's skeletal shape was slowly filling in while his ungainly potbelly was fading. The room contained several banks of indirect UV lighting that was proven to help the skin and eyes as they developed. At first he hid from the bright glow but now it was second nature.

Day fourteen. Subject 25 has shown sufficient progress to move past termination and initializing restart. I will commence with ALMA (Advanced Language Math and Arts) program and continue physical therapy until he is fully developed. He is quick-witted and eager to learn, even astute, having already developed a sense of self and a determination of will.

Subject 25 moved awkwardly, like a toddler learning to walk, teetering from side to side. The lone Trilacycle in the middle of the room rose from the floor. It was a machine designed to work every muscle group at the same time. He straddled the black seat and began his morning session. Music filled the room with band associated information to go with it, including the name, genre and decade. The written information was gobbledygook to him but the rhythm had an energizing feeling. Sweat began to pour off newly pigmented skin. It had a

slight olive color and the faintest of hairs were sprouting on his limbs. His muscles struggled to move, as form and function began their dance against resistance and gravity. He listened and watched a floating image in front of him as his body strained.

The multipurpose room was a twelve by twenty space that had padded walls and several different configurable apparatuses that could be deployed for physical training and therapy. The floating image in front of him was a technology known as Hollowvision. It used lasers capable of ionizing air molecules to create a three dimensional view that allowed the spectator to move or lean and see it from every perspective.

A calm voice matched the images and words as they appeared.

“Apple”

“Aple,” Subject 25 repeated poorly.

“Duck”

“Dook”

“Duck.”

He tried again only slightly better.

Day 28. Since initiating phase one, subject 25 has found comfort in routine and is progressing well. His brain is responding and functioning at capacity and he is nearly ready to begin training in earnest. Interfacing through the Azraelle sensors has met with total success. Based on previous subjects, 25 is most capable and progressing ahead of schedule.

The Chime for first meal sounded off. It was a single tone that repeated every few seconds.

Subject 25 gazed at an image in the mirror that was becoming familiar to him. He ignored the meal alert and focused on the details in front of him, ears, nose, pale green eyes, it was all his and based on the images he had seen of other humans on the Hollowvision, he would fit right in. His body had begun to fill-in, with muscle definition beginning to show. Hair has started to grow on his scalp and his grasp of his four room world was solidifying, along with images of something much grander. He opened his mouth and let his tongue move about

freely. Using his facial muscles he scrunched and stretched his face making various poses as he grew more comfortable in the skin he was in.

An urging from Azraelle pulled him from his actions and he stepped next to the Vaculet. An evacuation machine for when nature called. There were two foot prints etched on the floor next to the wall. Subject 25 turned his back to the machine and placed his feet on the prints. As he started to squat, two padded arms extended and cushioned the edge of his butt cheeks. A curved appendage with a pipe-like support moved up between them and sucked onto his undercarriage. The mechanism began to noisily suck out any waste products his body had created and was ready to release. The sensation was intense and a bit overwhelming. Once finished it rinsed everything with warm water and then an infrared light quickly dried him off.

Subject 25 pulled his white jumpsuit back up and padded in matching soft shoes towards the galley. As he sat alone at the small table spooning a beige protein gruel, a cycle of thoughts spun through his mind. It was as if an anxious feeling was sneaking up on him. The walls in his world were closing in. He shook the feeling from his mind and slurped another bite, as lifeless black sensors up on the wall watched his every move.

The eating area was made up of an all-white collection of cabineted walls and a few functioning FDM's - Food Delivery Machines. The feeding tubes had retracted back into the wall now that he was able to stand and he was given a limited selection of synthetic protein tastes that he could choose. He spied something shiny in the corner of the floor and moved to investigate. A small bearing ring from some previous repair or damage had been overlooked. He collected it up and turned it over in his fingers. It was cool to the touch and a perfect fit for his pinky.

"Subject 25, are you ready to begin?" Azraelle said.

25 pocketed the ring, deciding to hang on to it as a keepsake and stood. "Ready," he said without looking back.

An image of a book appeared in front of him. *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*, by Gabriel Marquez. The pages flipped open to a specific passage. Subject 25 read the section aloud. "It is enough for me to be sure that you and I exist at this moment." Subject 25 struggles with pronouncing the word exist.

“What do you make of that sentence,” Azraelle asks in a calm voice.

He looks up from his food as he answers. “That I am alive?”

“And what does that mean?”

Day forty two. 25 has taken to the training well and has excelled. He is starting to show signs of restlessness and dissatisfaction much like subjects 12 through 23. With an occasional outburst as he finds and learns to control his emotions. Further evaluation needed before proceeding to the next phase or termination and restart like many of the others. Will consider the later response based on the next two weeks progress.

Subject 25 entered the multipurpose room. The Trilacycle rose up from the floor. His eyes, now finally fully developed to a creamy brown, scanned across the white padded walls looking for something that was not there. He wore a frown that seemed to spread across his chiseled face.

“You are late Subject 25.”

He mumbled to himself, “took a left at the last hallway,” even though there was no left.

“Discipline and protocol are imperative for your success.”

“You keep talking about my success but I don’t have a clue what you mean. You show me images of a planet I’ve only seen in pictures and expect me to give 100% for something I have no interest in. This is my world...” He gestured to the twelve by twenty room. “...and I have a hard time believing in something I can’t touch or see with my own eyes.”

A moment of silence followed as Subject 25 held on to his frustration; eying the black orbs that watched without answering. Eventually he climbed onto the Trilacycle and began his session in silence.

“Please report to the galley, it is time for your debriefing.” The Azraelle suddenly reported.

“Would you make up your mind?” He climbed down and headed past his small berth with a bed and dresser, the head with its noisy Vaculet and into the galley with its mixture of stainless and the ever present white of his world. These four rooms are the only earth he has ever known, other than a brief memory from the birthing chamber. As he took his seat at the

small stainless table in the galley, six opaque glass panels in the room transitioned to a clear view to the outside world. 25 stood transfixed. At first glance it was nothing but darkness. Subject 25 moved to one of the windows. On the other side, a black void filled with tiny pinpricks of light filled his view. The closer he got the more spots of light filled his vision. It was beautiful and awe inspiring but at the same time his world just got a lot smaller.

25 had no words, as the ramifications set in.

“Subject 25, you are aboard the SS Hollanbach.”

“SS?” He asked.

“Space Station.”

Hidden behind the dark side of a moon was a gray cigar-shaped tube that had a cluster of seed-like pods on one end and a looped array on the other in the shape of a dish. Small porthole-style windows populated the cylinder giving it a tentacle look. It was exactly 90 meters long by twenty meters wide. The fully automated ship was the result of the latest technology of the time and its location was by design; keeping it hidden from warring factions. The dish on the far end was a Na-TECC converter which stood for sodium Thermo-Electro-Chemical Converter. It peaked out just past the shadow of the moon to get rays from the sun and used them to generate power by thermally driving a sodium redox reaction that pushed electrons through a solid electrolyte. Generating enough raw power to support two ships the size of the SS Hollanbach. There were no moving parts and simple table salt could be used as an activator. The power was stored in graphene-based supercapacitors giving the ship plenty of power and a long life expectancy.

The SS Hollanbach rotated to generate gravity, providing its occupant realistic freedom of movement. The ship was divided into several sections. The top end, close to the converter, was dedicated to the ship’s automation. Computers of every type ran redundant chores and maintenance operations including Azraelle’s AI. A bevy of robotic machines capable of cleaning, repairing and replacing anything on the ship via 3D printers and onboard tools were stored and recharged there. Azraelle, named after the Greek god of life, death and rebirth, was in charge of the incubating, birthing and raising of the ship’s humans. She (if you could call it that) was a

specialized computer with limited AI and a mandate to complete her task at all costs. Over the last 15 years she had sent five pods back to earth and been forced to destroy and recommence all the other candidates due to incompatibility issues to her directives.

The middle of the ship contained the living and birthing quarters where a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen filled the area giving the fragile human breathable air and just enough room to train and educate. It was not ideal but sufficient for his needs.

The very bottom of the station housed several pods capable of returning the subjects to the nearest planet, once their training and education was complete. There had been no contact with the five pods that had previously left and as per her programming, Azraelle would continue until there were no more viable samples in inventory.

Since first arriving on station, the ship was cut off to any incoming and outgoing communications as a safety measure. All information currently onboard was frozen in time with the current affairs of civilization relative to fifteen years ago. The downside being obvious and the upside was that they had not been discovered by any of the warring factions who might have survived the war and be looking for the ship. Secrecy was at the very core of their survival.

25 turned his face from the glass separating him from the cold vacuum of space, his mind reeling.

The soft friendly voice spoke up. "During a worldwide civil war a group of dedicated scientists and technicians launched and hid the SS Hollanbach behind the moon. This ship is equipped with onboard genetic samples and automated growing incubators capable of birthing adult specimens to be educated and trained for reinsertion to the planet earth. Since then it has been my mission to send these trained and educated humans back."

"And I'm what... the 25th subject you've tried this with?" he asked.

"The SS Hollanbach is a purpose built ship for the continuity of the human race."

"Terrific."

2

Day fifty six. Subject 25 has passed phase one and is ready to begin phase two. He has command of his first language and a physical presence sufficient for the requirements ahead. His short bouts of anger and frustration have been growing. There is concern over his behavior and emotional state but as long as he continues to progress and stays within my tangential parameters I will push for launch at 180 days.

A soft chime ended, waking 25 from his morning slumber. He leaned up on one elbow, letting the sleep depart and his head clear. His bed was just wide and long enough for his needs, with matching all white linen. He sat up and pulled the covers off, revealing a firm and muscular physic with a full head of curly sandy-brown hair and an expression of annoyance.

Judging eyes scanned the room with concern, as he sat up. He pulled the ring from his pocket and moved it mindlessly from finger to finger, staring at the shiny metal surface.

“Good morning Subject 25 it is day fifty-six of your existence.”

“Thanks for the update,” he countered with no small amount of sarcasm.

A song started to play and 25 glanced up to the screen to see its information.

Some singer named Elvis Presley and a song called *A Little Less Conversation*. It had a good beat and catchy lyrics with a gritty sound. 25 stood and danced a bit to the beat enjoying the feeling.

“Next,” he said and Azraelle’s playlist jumped forward several decades to something that sounded smoother and more electronic. He stopped dancing and went back to getting dressed and pulling on his shoes.

25 was being educated on a broad spectrum of topics. From basic survival techniques to more advanced subjects like metallurgy and chemistry. He was trained in self-defense and taught weapons use and handling. Things that would help him take what was left on earth and improve his environment.

“Today you will meet your counterpart,” Azraelle announced.

25 stopped and looked to Azraelle’s sensors with sudden interest. “Counterpart? You mean you created more of me?”

“Every cycle consists of three phases and two subjects, male and female. Past experience has shown the best results come from an insertion between fifty and sixty five days.”

“Best results? I take it you’ve had bad results?” he asked.

The question was followed by a moment of silence.

“Yes.”

25 left his cabin with a million different thoughts flowing through his mind, another human. He hurried down the hallway that connected his four-room world.

He had read and seen images of the great civil war on earth. It had been devastating to both Mother Earth and humanity. As a one-off and now perhaps one of two, he felt no connection to those humans or responsibility to fix what they had destroyed. He was created to

play the role of Adam and it made him feel like a lab rat. With every step his anger grew. He was no plug and play drone. If being human was what he thought it was, he would do things his way... Like Napoleon or Churchill.

Though... it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the female. Perhaps he could find some way to make...

A panel on the back wall of the galley slowly opened quelling his rantings mid-thought. Beyond it was a mirror image of his galley. On the other side sat a female on a small matching stainless table. She stood and gazed at 25 like he was some sort of aberration.

"Subject 25 meet Subject 24," Azraelle said.

No words were spoken.

The living quarters on the ship actually contained two identical spaces connected at their galleys by a removeable wall, allowing for simultaneous raising of a breeding pair. Each was individually raised until they were deemed ready to interact, then the couple would learn, train and work together just like they would have to on earth. Once their education and training was completed, they would be escorted to the bottom of the space station where one of the launch pods could be fired off for their journey to the planet earth. At that point, another set of specimens would be harvested thawed and grown. The whole process took just over six months.

The ship's gene pool contained a collection of DNA, frozen eggs and sperm samples. It was located between the computerized sections and the living quarters of the ship. At current, there were sixteen viable pairs left. When that was done, the mission of the SS Hollanbach would be complete and Azraelle would be free to take the ship off station and continue deeper into the universe, using her AI to glean and learn as she went.

24 allowed her eyes to follow up the man's narrow waist, across his flat stomach, broad shoulders and finally land on his handsome face. It was the face of a man with the look of a boy. A small smile grew, as she took a tentative step towards her new partner, not sure what to do next.

Everything 25 had been feeling and fostering vanished in a heartbeat as the female stepped forward and then paused. She had a smoothness in her movements that seemed effortless. Short blonde hair topped aqua blue eyes and her shape... It was very different from his. Of all the females he had learned and read about, she was different... Because she was real and standing right in front of him – it wasn't a Hollowvision. His heart raced as he tried to comprehend what to do next, as undisciplined eyes danced across her form not sure what to focus on. Full hips, thin waist and firm breasts. She had a strong chin, pink full lips and a button nose. There was a stray piece of hair that obscured her left eye but the intelligence within seemed to radiate out. She was intoxicating and intimidating all at once.

The female lifted a finger in his direction and he returned the gesture much like the Creation of Adam fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Touch. It was something new to feel another human and they quickly pulled their fingers back, feeling awkward and vulnerable.

After another few minutes, "25," she spoke.

"24," he countered.

They just stared at each other for a few minutes before the spell was broken by a unneeded voice. "I will let you two get to know each other."

24 stood about five foot seven with perfect creamy skin and a pair of matching dimples that expressed themselves without effort. She moved to the table and sat down. Her legs were suddenly feeling weak. A glance back at the tall man in front of her allowed a second opinion. He was very appealing with his olive skin and a youthful blank expression.

Eventually 25 joined her at the table and he found his voice again. Once the conversation started, it lasted an hour or so, before the two tone chime sounded for second meal.

Over the next few weeks 24 and 25 trained and studied together. As the only two human subjects on the ship a bond between them grew quickly. They found commonality in each other as well as many differences. 24 was a natural born follower eager to learn and

dedicated to her task. 25, not so much. He was given to the occasional outburst, mainly focused on Azraelle and the confined quarters that held them prisoner. Depending on the day or time, he often refused to follow the rules or did his own version of a drill.

Azraelle had sensors and image collectors throughout the ship. She used them to interface with the two humans and to watch their every move; constantly observing and judging. Even the slightest missteps were corrected as were their successes positively reinforced. This seemed to agitate 25, who was happy to express his individualism.

A single padded pole about six feet tall with two motion detecting eyes near the top pushed up through the floor in the utility room. 24 and 25 had just finished their morning studies and it was time to physically train.

“Level three.” Echoed through the room and 24 stepped forward.

Three soft tones that rose in pitch followed as she lowered her posture into a fighting stance. 24 was wearing a white textured leotard that allowed sweat to be wicked away and also provide muscle support. The tight fitting outfit showed off every curve and detail but flexed easily with motion.

25 leaned against the wall to watch his partner’s action but his eyes kept drifting and focusing on the differences in her body. It was mesmerizing to watch and he didn’t know what it was that compelled him to do so. A warm feeling coursed through his body and he let the feeling envelop him rather than fight it. A smile grew on his face that he couldn’t hide.

24 noticed his dopey look. “What?”

“Nothing,” 25 replied as the tips of his ears suddenly burned. “You got this.”

24 returned her attention to the coming fight.

The pole, called an E-Chung, spun and turned erratically using moving extendable side posts for feet and hands simulating hand-to-hand combat. 24 had mastered the E-Chung’s first two levels and was trying for the third. Today was going to be her day. Her mind switched between her task and the image of 25’s goofy face.

The sudden machinations of the E-Chung had 24 jumping, weaving and ducking just to keep from taking a hit. It forced her to the defensive side of the fight almost immediately, hardly giving her a chance to get a punch or kick off.

“Watch the backfist and leg sweep!” 25 called out from his place on the wall.

It was too late. A sudden reverse in direction caught 24 in the side of the head just as a lower arm on the E-Chung swept both feet. 24 went down in a “humph.” She rubbed the bump on her head and got back up to reengage. Three soft tones proceeded and the fight continued.

“Okay, keep your hands up,” 25 encouraged.

Again the speed of the E-Chung was too much for 24 and she ended up in a heap with the wind knocked out of her.

“Let’s take a break,” 25 said as he squatted next to her.

“Let’s?” 24 countered, as she rubbed the side of her head.

“It’s hard work seeing you get the crap beat out of you,” 25 said.

24 seemed confused as she twisted and looked at her butt. “There is no crap coming out of me.”

“It’s a figure of speech. Meaning beat-up. Something I picked up in one of my slang courses.”

“Yes, you’re learning slang, while I am learning French.”

“Hey, it’s one of the few options we had a choice on, right? Might come in handy if we find a city.”

“The chances of a city surviving on earth is twelve point five percent,” Azraelle interrupted.

25 rolled his eyes and put on some charm as he looked back at 24. “It’s still a chance,” he said with a raised eyebrow.

24 smiled at the effort.

“That means there is an eighty seven point five chance there will be no cities.”

They both glanced to the all-seeing orbs that governed every room. A black pair of lenses that articulated and followed their every move; always watching and listening.

25 gave it a sour expression.

“Subject 24 please return to your training.”

25 stood and stepped up to the visual receptors and challenged back. “She’s had enough for now Azraelle.”

“It is imperative that you master the E-Chung. Should there be any enhanced survivors on the planet they will surely have at minimum this speed and skillset.”

“This speed and skillset,” 25 mocked back. “If 24 dies of a concussion in training then your whole plan goes down the drain. How am I supposed to repopulate the earth by myself?” He mocked with a dose of sarcasm. “What are you going to do then?”

“There are measures and backups in place should one of you falter. Beginning with a full restart and a...

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“25.” 24 called out. “I’m okay. Let it go.”

There was a moment of deadly silence... “Please disregard. You are right; we will return to training later. It is time for a biological break.”

The chimes for second meal began to sound off.

“I’m tired of taking orders from you. I’m ready for some me time. That’s what I think.”

“25 please,” 24 pleaded.

“Take your little plan and shove it!” 25 yelled at the lifeless orbs staring back at him. The extreme emotion surprised 25 and he fed off it, ripping the arm off the E-Chung and swinging it at Azraelle’s sensors.

“This is not my plan. I have been purpose built to resupply the earth with viable breeding pairs by the Tenet Project team. It is of the upmost...” The voice emanating died abruptly.

The impact smashed and broke the orbs off the wall, as sparks flew and then died.

“25! What was that,” 24 yelled.

“That is what I like to call a bit of satisfaction...” He dropped the arm, then turned and left the room, a pleased look plastered across his face, as his anger faded.

A small mechanical robot entered and began cleaning up and repairing the damage.

24 stood and headed for the galley, tears filled her eyes. The unfamiliar emotion and response leaving her confused and a little scared.

Day seventy nine. Subject 24 is showing continued improvement in her language and aptitude learning. She has been behind on her physical training but ahead in every other category. Anticipate complete immersion and qualification by day 180. She will excel in the mission. Subject 25 continues to struggle to find his way. He is a quick learner but often chooses to procrastinate or just disregard the lesson. His individuality may prove valuable on earth but not here.

25 placed a set of ER viewers over his eyes and stepped onto the multidirectional mat. The goggles were used to give the wearer a fully immersive Enhanced Reality experience. The image on the screens came to life and 25 was transported to the earth's surface. There were destroyed buildings and burned-out cars. Wind blew an assortment of trash across his path. The ER viewer provided shooting practice within a variety of scenarios in the environment, from black-clad bad guys to rabid dogs attacking from behind and the side. The experience was connected to the subject neurologically. The curriculum worked the mind and reflexes giving the player vital fundamentals in handling, aiming a firearm and discerning hostiles in split second time.

24 watched from the side of the training room with amusement, as her partner moved and ducked firing off his ER pistol to an unheard and unseen battle. He looked dorky and vulnerable without the aid of seeing what he was reacting to. It was one of her favorite things, because the moment he took off the ER viewers, he would be back on his guard. His eyes always looking for a way out but for now he was just a boy in a man's body.

25 was often difficult to read. One second he was making eye contact with just a hint of a smile. Giving her a rush of emotion that she was still trying to understand. The next, he was angry and she couldn't get far enough away. Was it like that with all males? They seemed to carry their emotions on the outside - Easily corrupted and changed. She would need more time with him if she was to figure it all out.

25 finished his training and stepped off the mat. He looked up to 24 and released a breath. A smirk followed and his eyes twinkled, as he handed the ER viewers and gun to 24.

Fingers touched fingers as the exchange was made and both could feel the intensity that grew in their bodies from it. They let the moment linger, before it was broken by 25.

“1650. Let’s see you beat that.”

24 took the pistol. “Challenge accepted.” She stepped onto the mat and her mind filled with the requirements of their mission. If the world had truly destroyed itself, it would be up to 24 and 25 to not only repopulate it but to build a new modern version. Something that was compatible and user friendly for humans and the environment. The knowledge they carried would be the difference between living in a cave or rebuilding modern man. After all, knowledge was only a generation away from being lost and sending humankind back to the stone-age. It would be up to them to prevent this from happening and pass on their experience to future generations.

24 pulled from her thoughts realizing that she had been shot and killed. The game was standing by waiting for her to reset and start over. She glanced up at the score – zero.

25 closed his eyes and let his mind drift. It was a cleansing process he had adapted to help him reset after a particularly intense learning session. The speed and intensity they had been required to follow was intense. Every waking moment seemed to be filled with uploading information or skills into their brains and muscles. Sometimes at night his head would pound with the punishment it had taken throughout the day or his muscles twitch involuntarily.

He lay on his bed, sweat still glistening on his forehead, as he pondered the day’s events and slowly let it all go.

Today was the first time he had really felt like his world was so small and tight he could not go on. In the beginning, when he had no perspective of his outside world, the ship had been everything to him but once Azraelle opened all the windows, it made him feel like one of those twentieth century sardines that came all smashed together in a can, another thing he had learned in slang class.

24 had done a lot to change his perspective. She was dedicated to the mission and her diligence sometimes rubbed off. If they could just hold on a bit longer they could get out of this place and onto their brand new world.

He sat up and stepped to the small round porthole in his berth next to the storage dresser. The stars lit the backside of the moon giving it plenty of detail. He felt like he could just reach out and touch its rough textured gray surface. 25 imagined taking a stroll over its scalloped indentations and appealing open spaces and never coming back to the same place. It was hard to perceive. Without protective gear, he wouldn't last 15 seconds out there. A Hollowvision instructional had shown him that exact scenario.

Supposedly, the earth was just on the other side of the moon. Though he had never seen it, except in pictures and motion visuals, the colors he'd been shown seemed improbable. His life and everything he could touch or see around him was a limited palette. Growing up in a cylindrical white world, the kind of color the earth had was as extreme as fire to an infants fingers. Even the moon out his window was monochromatic. A planet filled with color seemed more like science fiction than fact.

The more he learned here on the SS Hollanbach, the more he was convinced he was not the right man for this job. The whole idea of supposedly travelling through space to this earth and landing there to start anew seemed beyond reach. Living in a constrained artificial tin can with nothing but a dictate of something better was unfathomable. It went against 25's instincts and he found himself more and more annoyed, to the point of battling just to stay the course.

Maybe that would change when they got to earth... if they got to earth.

24 had become his rock, his go to. She was special and marvelous in everything. The way she cocked her head when she wasn't sure of an answer or the sideways glance she'd give when 25 tried to be funny. 24 could mesmerize the soul just by the way she ate her food. She could even placate Azraelle, which was no small task but his favorite was her eyes especially when they made contact with his. It was like a charge of energy being released right to your gut.

It felt like a drill was boring into the back of the head while floating on a cloud. 25 pulled back from the port window and looked to the two orbs ominously staring at him.

“What’s on your mind Azraelle?”

“What’s on your mind Subject 25?” Her voice a combination of soothing and judgmental.

“I feel like I can’t... breathe.”

“Adjusting the oxygen level.”

“No.” He calmed slightly. “I can’t breathe in this cooped up world you have created. I need a change... Something different, I don’t know... maybe some context.” 25 picked at an imperfection along his cuticle as he spoke.

After a beat, Azraelle replied. “Please find Subject 24 and report to the galley.

25 looked up at the cold spheres pinning in his direction, never an emotion to go with her words. He gave a subtle nod and left his room, still unfulfilled.

24 was already sitting in the galley, drinking from a water tube and repeating various French phrases that matched a floating screen in front of her. As 25 entered, the small screen vanished and a large image of earth materialized in the space between them. 25 walked through the projection and sat next to 24.

The face of an older man with dark skin and white curly hair appeared. He had kind intelligent eyes and square-framed glasses.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Honeywell. I was the lead biologist on the Tenet Project. It included a secret build and launch of a space station with the sole mission of preserving mankind in its original form and if everything is going to plan, you are watching me now preparing yourselves to return to earth. Let me begin with some context.”

The Hollowvision of the doctor faded out and the 3d view of earth returned. 24 and 25 shared a glance before turning back to the projection.

“A series of global pandemics shook the human race to its core. This was not like any previous quarantinable contagions but four distinct viral outbreaks with world ending ramifications.”

The continents on the spinning globe were slowly covered in red.

“The first - A virus known as Marburg Virus G, spread across the globe instilling fear in every doorknob and stranger.”

An image of the virus and its name appeared. It looked like a u-shaped yellow caterpillar with green, red and blue dots all over it.

“The WHO and CDC worked diligently to combat this plague and help develop a vaccine that would save the world. People were encouraged to get the vaccine to help slow the spread. The encouragement led to government mandates that caused a rift between those that were vaccinated and those that were not. You see, many humans were opposed to the vaccines. They believed that the future of mankind was in those that survived the pandemics through natural immunity. Natural selection, after all, has been a part of all species throughout time. A vaccine so quickly produced held too many variables. While the other side believed that one death was too many and any way to save lives was worth it.”

A bold graphic showing the evolution of natural selection popped up on the Hollowvision.

“As all this was happening, the Metaverse was taking over the minds and imagination of most of the civilized world. Many people never left their homes. Everything they needed was within arm’s reach and the threat of a sickness just on the other side of their door didn’t help. The difference of opinion grew and polarized humanity. Those in power saw it as an opportunity and acted. It was easy to affect opinion in the metaverse. People who live in a false world are subject to the whims of it.”

A view of hundreds of computers being controlled to manipulate reality was projected.

“What the public didn’t know was that this vaccine held additional MRNA markers that were designed to modify the human genome. They used Cas9 to cut the DNA and alter the cells gene. Over the course of the next six years, four more pandemics swept the earth forcing additional vaccines to be developed using the same modified Cas9MRNA injections. This ultimately gave the three pharmaceutical companies that developed successful vaccines the power over life and death.”

Images that matched the narration appeared.

“By the time it was over there had been a shift in world dominance and humanity. The pharmaceutical companies who had patented and now owned the genetic modifications that were part of millions of humans, started flexing their muscles. These modifications not only

allowed them to do a host of things like monitor and modify your health and prevent sickness. This allowed these companies to charge a monthly fee to everyone with their modifications. Turning on a faucet of financial boon and placing the hand of control over a vast portion of the world.”

24 leaned back against the table.

“The gap in humanity grew and what became known as the Vaxxer age emerged. Humans effectively divided themselves into two groups the vaccinated and the non-vaccinated. Over time, cities polarized themselves and became one or the other. Detroit for example was a Non-Vaxxer city, where Tokyo was a Vaxxer. There were harsh travel restrictions as you can imagine. A Vaxxer city wanted nothing to do with a Non-Vaxxer and the marketing spin doctoring by those in power only added fuel to the growing fire.”

Images of extreme poverty with emaciated and dying humans hidden behind barriers and fences moved through the air.

“That riff continued as the big corporations began to fight against one another to oversee the planet. The key was in getting control of the Non-Vaxxers.”

Images of blocked highways and marching protesters appeared.

“Pro Vaxxer campaigns and pride marches soon gave way to a new moniker, Hu 2.0, for Human version 2.0.”

Hate filled groups were shown carrying anti Non-Vaxxer signs and marching through the streets chanting, *No 1.0's*.

“It gave the Vaxxer’s a superiority complex, partly because they truly believed they were better than the original version of man. This upgraded version of man, or Hu 2.0, was the next evolutionary step. Soon, other enhancements became available, like heart and eyesight improvements, lab grown organs and chip implants but these things are not always for the best. 2.0’s embraced a new version of man and as long as you made your payments everything went great. To be clear the 2.0’s were not bad. Many of my friends were 2.0’s.”

25 leaned forward and placed his arms on his knees.

“Eventually a global war broke out. Not country against country but corporations, fueled by a need to control all humanity. They pitted Hu 2.0’s against Hu 1.0’s. The result was a loss of

billions of lives and a consolidation of power and wealth such as the world has never seen. Many of our most advanced technologies were destroyed: the metaverse, our space program and even our most modern cities. As the Hu 1.0's started to lose the war, a dedicated group of scientists began the Tenant Project and began work on the SS Hollanbach. A plan to insure the continuance of us, our original species. A way to say goodbye to disease with a path for a better future for all without the strings of corporate power controlling everything. For surely by the time you are watching this, the world has destroyed itself. You are humanity's last hope."

The image disappeared and silence filled the room. It was heavy and thick. After a beat 25 spoke in a whisper. "It's not my responsibility to fix what others have broken."

Two black orbs followed, as 25 left the room. They seemed to linger after him before returning to their view of 24 still sitting at her table looking like her own world was breaking apart.

"24, I am detecting an unacceptable level of hostility growing in Subject 25. I will look to you to help curb that angst until you arrive on earth."

24 looked up at the sensor that connected them to Azraelle. "Of course," she said as tears flowed.

Day 86. Subject 25 seems to have only grown more agitated. Subject 24 has had little effect on redirecting his focus. I see no path forward that allows for success. Will begin termination sequence after four bells. It will be unsettling to have to eliminate Subject 24 as well but there is no place for a lone female on this ship waiting until the next male catches up.

25 placed his used food bowl in the evacuator, an automated cleaning system that sterilized cleaned and returned the bowl in seconds. The last two days had been sullen and quiet. 24 had been respectful and helpful but the constant closeness made it impossible to just turn it all off. Azraelle seemed to always be watching and pushing them forward. Just once he

wanted to go the other way. He laid back on the galley table and stretched his back on the hard cool surface.

24 watched as she finished her dinner. She had a strong sense of compass that led her forward in an efficient and effective path. Dedication was one of her strengths and she was determined to fulfill her mission. The problem was trying to get a read on her partner. He seemed way to preoccupied with himself and was constantly pushing back against the system. She had no idea what was to be gained by his actions and didn't understand how they were going to succeed on earth if he kept up like this.

Letting his mind wonder, 25 spoke without looking. "What do you think about taking a walk with me on the moon?"

24 looked over at her partner and allowed the fantasy to breathe. "Craters or mountains?"

"I'm thinking just the flat areas somewhere we could have a picnic. Preferably on the other side so we could see the earth. That is if it really exists." He stood and walked to the port hole window that had a perfect view of the dark side of the moon.

"The earth exists," 24 replied.

"Oh? You've seen it or are you just taking that on faith?"

"No... but I've read all about it and I can describe it in great detail," she said as she stood and approached 25.

"So faith... I could say the same thing about the Jabberwocky. Yet it doesn't exist," 25 said.

"That's ridiculous... you know, sometimes you seem like you don't want to go with me to save mankind."

25 turned from the window to look at 24. "Save Mankind... You say that like it's been programmed into your brain." He tapped the side of his head to punctuate his words.

"I guess it has but its why we exist. And being programmed doesn't mean you don't have control."

25 looked at 24 with a dour expression. He knew he would never convince her, so he decided to let it all go and just enjoy their moment. "Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all but luckily my feelings for you are not connected in any way to our mission or the programming."

24 stepped closer to 25. "Feelings?"

"Sure. You are the most amazing woman I have ever known."

"Jerk."

"What? That shouldn't change the impact of my statement, just because I have not met another real woman."

"No, you're right. It shouldn't," 24 conceded. "So what is it that makes you think I'm amazing?"

25 took her by the hand and led her over to the table and they sat down side by side. He turned and looked straight in her aqua blue eyes, smiling coyly. "You are intelligent, gentle and kind. You don't let circumstances get to you and I think I would have lost my mind completely by now if you hadn't been here."

24 just smiled back at 25's comments. "I think you might still be losing your mind."

"Undoubtedly... Oh, and I find you super attractive. Like I could kiss you right now."

24 had no words.

25 leaned in and touched lips with his partner. There was an awkwardness followed by a subtle pleasure that grew as they explored the texture and softness of each other's lips. A white hot burning filled their bodies as 25 placed his arm around 24 and pulled her closer. Eventually 24 pulled back and opened her eyes, trying to catch her breathe.

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow," 25 replied.

The ship's chime sounded four times indicating it was bedtime. 24, like a trained seal, pulled out of 25's arms and looked a mixture of ashamed and hungry for more. She reached back in and pecked 25 on the lips before turning for her berth. "Good night... partner."

25 couldn't help but let the corners of his mouth reach for the bulkhead. "Just when things were getting interesting," he said to himself as he watched her leave the room. The view suddenly seemed more magnificent than normal.

The moon was especially detailed tonight as he looked out his window after a visit to the head. 25 let his mind drift in imagination choosing a path that they could follow on their proposed picnic. He pulled the small bearing ring he had collected and moved it through his fingers, knowing now what to do with it, he placed it next to his bed. Reliving the feeling that had taken over his body as they had kissed. He couldn't wait to feel that again, so he let his imagination progress until he had 24 in a firm grasp and her lips pressed to his. The automated lighting in his room dimmed and he reluctantly tore himself from the fantasy.

Climbing into bed, he let the day's events melt away. He was looking forward to tomorrow for the first time in weeks.

24 sat in bed with her arms around her knees. She swayed slowly back and forth letting her mind also fill with warm fuzzy thoughts.

"24."

She looked up to the ever-present lenses of Azraelle. "Yes?"

"I am sorry to report that Subject 25 has not fulfilled his parameters."

"What do you mean?"

There was a pause. "He has been set for termination and rebirth."

"What. No... Please. I can make this work. It is working. Didn't you see us in the galley?"

"I see everything 24. My programming is very specific," Azraelle said.

"I am making progress... 25 is making progress. We can do this together. Just give us a few more days."

Silence filled her plea. "There is nothing left but to start over," Azraelle said.

"Start over? I can't go through all this again. Please, just give me a little more time, you'll see."

"I know." The voice replied as though it hadn't heard the last of her sentence.

A panel slid over the door sealing her into the small room. A small vent on the ceiling started releasing gas into the room.

24's pleading quickly turned to panic when she realized what was happening. She banged on the panel and tried to pry it open. "Please Azraelle, I can make this work. I can fix him. Don't do this!"

24 put her arm over her face and tried to breathe through her clothes. She pleaded for a few more minutes until she realized it was hopeless. She let gravity pull her to the floor and the tears started to flow. There was nothing more she could do but die.

Day 86, addendum. Termination proceedings have begun. Subjects 24 and 25 are no longer viable. Once the bodies are disposed of and the ship cleaned, I will resume birthing duties as the next pairing might prove more successful. This is another example of inherited traits versus learned behavior. Control of the human species is variable and unpredictable at best. Will attempt to raise the next subjects in total isolation until they depart.

25's eyes fluttered open. His room was dark and there was a hissing coming from a vent. He tried to stand but his legs failed him and he dropped to the floor unable to move. His mind fluttered with the possibilities of what might be happening, interspersed with flashing images of 24 and their time together.

Just before he closed his eyes for good the hissing stopped followed by a flashing red light and a strong male voice he had never heard before... "Proximity alert: impact eminent."

Then his world ended.