

THE AVATAR PROJECTION PROTOCOL



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"In the desert, the souls of the dead gather deep below the surface. Only purification by water may lead to their rebirth."
Jean-Pierre Melville

A Tea Ceremony

Maria Xu Wei didn't have time to take the usual cycle route from the Archive. She had to be at the tearoom behind the spring gardens within the next 20 minutes. With the amount of cycle traffic at this time of the day in the early evening, she would be better off running. She slid on her holographic-lunettes and toggled to get an exact arrival time if she maintained a 5 minute/km pace. It was about 3kms following the river east and if she was lucky she'd make it just in time to confirm her reservation for her meeting with Whitaker Kilgore.

She pressed on the nano-string residing at the edge of her embroidered jacket and toggled through the selections of nano-materials she had available as options with her outfit. She stared at the crystalline holographic screen and blinked upon seeing the athletic spider-silk training outfit. Once it was selected and she released her thumb from the nano-string, her business casual attire adjusted its nano-fiber configuration into the ideal running suit for a slightly rainy mid-June day. Her shoes reformatted themselves to custom to align with the dulled yellow-orange and purple hues of her new running outfit and then she was off. She cut across the sculpture garden's sidewalks and onto the trail adjacent to the river. Hardly anyone dared to run through this part of the city anymore.

The amount of cycle traffic left this narrow old dirt trail following the river completely open to the joggers in the inner canal areas. Besides, most people in the inner canals didn't exercise any more anyway, why would they? They either had the fitness implant

upgrades or were waiting on cloned lungs or other vital organs made by Pulmena Technics, Ltd. for the wealthiest .05 percent of the population. Maria was lucky to have resided in a less polluted zone before moving to Bamboo City and her lung functioning was remarkably standard.

No, there'd not be too many other folks out jogging to interfere with Maria Wei's quick paced sprint to the tearoom. As she rounded a series of park benches she saw a young couple sitting down and she could see the joy on their faces as they toggled through their data-feeds and disconnected their oxygen mesh for maybe the first time. Bamboo City's air wasn't the cleanest in the world, but it was up there, somewhere in the top 1% of clean air still remaining on-planet. Most people who came here had never experienced breathing without the oxygen meshwork. For most, their survival relied on an immediate calibration of one of the greatest scientific advancements developed during the era of the Post-Carbon Collapse: the oxygen nano-mesh.

The oxygen nano-mesh had saved millions of lives as the CO2 levels rose at ever-greater speed and the forests continued to be decimated by viruses. Not to mention the myriad of other viral epidemics that could potentially take down entire populated areas prior to the invention of the oxygen mesh. Now, it was pretty much standard nano-tech for most citizens on and off-planet right along with the vaccine-modules set in place at birth to prevent any form of viral mutation to spread. Most inhabitable zones didn't have doctors any more and the simul-medic stations in some of the outer regions weren't to be relied on if the sat-com grid was disturbed by a violent storm in the upper atmosphere. The oxygen-mesh was something you pretty much relied on all the time to survive, but immediately forgot you needed. Like the process it helped to maintain: breathing itself.

But in certain zones, you were allowed to switch the oxygen-mesh off. Bamboo City and its environs being one of those rare milieus. It was in part why Maria Wei had moved there in the first place. She was lucky to be one of the .05% who even had the opportunity to work, but getting to work at the Archive in Bamboo

City, well, it meant she would not have to worry about the air quality and breath just like her ancestors were accustomed to.

Sometimes breathing itself was about as good as it could get.

Maria jumped onto the cobblestone walkway off the dirt path and pulled a thin clothe from out of her training jacket pocket. She wiped the small amount of perspiration and precipitation that had formed on her brow over the course of the 20-minute jog. She could tell by the reading in the upper corner of the lunettes that she had ten minutes to spare before her reservation in the tearoom. She walked slowly into the waiting area that took the form of a beautiful rock garden. Maria had just enough time to toggle through her nano-wear again and select another outfit among the four or five that seemed appropriate for such an occasion. She found one that she liked, blinked to select it and then pressed gently on the nano-string dangling slightly from the sleeve of her jacket. Within an instant, the nano-particles reconfigured and she was dressed in an elegantly casual outfit for the rendezvous in the tearoom.

In another age, meeting someone in a tearoom meant that Maria Xu Wei was about to get into a very serious relationship. In the today's culture in the 2070s it meant that she might get to do a halo-port session or maybe a feel session. They were basically the same. The halo-port allowed for about as intimate an experience one could have during the viral outbreaks of the 2050s, it was a huge success after the VR cubes began to lose traction on the Post-Carbon Collapse markets. Halo-porting was about as close as one could get to symbio-synching besides a neuro-tat, and both of those procedures were considered dépassé in the high end areas such as Bamboo City. A feel session meant that after they unplugged their oxygen meshes, and crossed through the precipice, a chemical shower would make sure to confirm they could actually touch each other without risk of viral outbreak.

They would actually get to exchange fluids, probably hold hands and kiss. But that was already implied in

their tea ceremony engagement. The data-feeds would register their arrivals and trigger the chemical sprinkler to secure a completely sterile environment. The tearoom reservation gave them about as much privacy as one could have on-grid. It was also, as Kilgore reminded himself, a way for the Archive and the Global Space Agency to ensure employees such as himself were guaranteed to have made their way through at least one sterile chem-shower sector to ensure no lingering viruses remained from his previous off-planet orbit jump.

The Archive never missed a chance to combine work with pleasure, and Kilgore and Maria Wei would get to share in an ancient tradition as well as get to know each other a bit better. Besides, according to the raw data-feeds being generated and filtered through both Maria's and Whit Kilgore's empath meters, there was a 77% probability that they loved each other. But Kilgore knew very well that the neuro-data outputs always indicated 77% for anyone with an attractive connection over the 50% median allowing for the neuro-marketing wetware to potentially get the individuals checking the data-feeds on the empath meters to spend some more of their Global Rupees. Or at least, that was the rumour going around about the relatively new empath raw data-feed readers.

Maria did kinda think Whit Kilgore was cute. She had no idea how much neuro-tech layered over his body, how old he really was, but it didn't really matter anymore. She had set her empath reader to 30 to 55 Earth years. At some point with all the advanced tech, you could kinda figure out in a couple of minutes whether you really liked the person or not. Maria Wei found herself in a peculiar situation. She hadn't had that many layers of neuro-tech done yet, and at an earth body age of 38, she had been tempted to start looking at some nano-upgrades. She knew that when she completed her 10th year working at the APCC Archive, she would be automatically offered the upgrades anyway. It was in her contract: Hired at 28 meant that after ten years, her neuro-tech status would include nano-implants configured by half the number of years she had worked there: so, that meant in a couple of months, Maria would have an Earth body age of 38

years-old but the upgrade of nano-implants would revert the age of her organs to 33. It was weird aging in the future.

Maria could hear the bells outside the tearoom signaling the arrival of the eight o'clock hour. No need for lunettes here. No data-feeds. The tea ceremony as well may have mutated in its ritual importance, but it meant above all disconnecting in order to connect in meditation with someone else. Was Whitaker Kilgore really going to show up? She glanced one last time at the holographic screen of her eyeglasses checking to see if any relevant data had emerged and flickered across the left or right lens. A neon green message scrolled across the lower corner of the left lens: look behind you silly.

Whit Kilgore tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to disconnect from our data-feeds and lunettes for this kinda thing. You know, isn't a tea ceremony about breathing in synch and staring at each other instead of our neuro-data?"

Kilgore tried to play it cool. He wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not.

"Can I, um, finish this cigarette? Sorry, I've been off-planet for around three months, and it's been nice to switch off the old oxygen mesh and have a smoke. You're not going to look at me like one of the eco-tourists or clone lungers are you? I can assure you that despite what the data-feeds might say or that fancy empathy-reader trying to sell you on my compatibility, that I'm... well, pretty annoying at times, a loner, too self-aware and self-loathing when not anxious about having all these nano-implants and upgrades. It's standard job protocol. I'm gonna get it right out of the way, because I don't know how you feel about this stuff, you seem like you could be a younger curator at the Archive, what are you 30? You probably haven't even made it to your employee required nano-tech upgrades, but given the fact that you invited me to do this here tea ritual, I'm guessing you're starting to think about your real Earth age a bit, well, I'll get it right out of the

way before we start. I'm a standard 35 years-old according to my GSA and Archive appointments, but somewhere beneath all this hardware and nano-wetware, there's a 55 or 65 year-old body, or brain, or something. Hell, I dunno know how any of this stuff works anymore!"

Maria Wei smiled subtly. She liked Whitaker. She already knew from his employee status that he was at the very least 50 or 55 Earth years-old, but she also knew that when you were one of the lucky few who were actually gainfully employed, that you were probably going to be in the standard 30-38 year-old nano-holographic mesh sensor avatar projection protocol. Which meant Kilgore was basically the same age as she was.

"Well, Whitaker, the first thing we need do is wash our hands in the tsukubai and then we're going to get down and crawl through the entry door to the tearoom." Maria smiled and took Kilgore's hands and plunged them into the cool water filling the stone basin residing in the middle of the garden.

"Ah, well, I guess, you're the professional here, Ms. Wei. I'll have you know however that it's not my first tea ceremony, but this water seems extremely cold compared to what I remember."

"Stop talking silly, and open your mouth so I can pour some of that cold water into it to purify the doubtless myriad of vulgarities that have spilled out of it since this morning. Or at least, the smell of Darjeelings. Someone that orbit-jumps like you off-planet and who works for both the GSA and the Archive, and you still smoke Darjeelings!?"

Maria Xu Wei was trying to lead the conversation a bit. Their data-feeds had been shut off per the protocol upon entering into the Tea Garden. This was probably one of the only places inside Bamboo City where one could actually have a decent conversation without the data-feeds and the sat-coms getting in the way. Besides perhaps, going outside of the inner canal areas toward the mountains where the monks, the poor, and the de-gridders lived. An area Maria often didn't

travel to. She liked the peacefulness of it, the outer regions, but her job at the Archive left her tied to the inner canal areas most of the time. She found a similar peace in tearooms such as this one.

Kilgore swished the water around in his mouth and spit it out. It had been a number of years since he had partaken in a tea ceremony. But, he had to admit, if Maria Xu Wei wanted his complete attention, she certainly had it. The material contact between them at such a simple level, was more than an orbit-jumper like Kilgore had experienced for a while. Moving between atmospheres, tracking down relics left much to be desired in the realm of intimacy. It wasn't part of the job description. One didn't have the time to build the trust or sentiments to engage in too many real relational exchanges. With his empathy reader temporarily disconnected, he had no real-time data at his disposal to entirely know whether Maria Wei was trying to exo-pathically get into his mind or not. So far he couldn't tell. Most folks who lived on-planet had no fluency in exo-pathic. The only way they could still intuit feeling and emotions was through literal material contact, which was regulated through a very strict cultural and techno-bureaucratic protocol in places like Bamboo City. That's why tea ceremonies were only allowed for the rare few who met a certain criteria in advance. Maria's and Kilgore's employment status already allowed for such a possibility. Who knows, maybe it was the Space Agency and the Archive who set up their whole engagement to drink tea in the first place. He might as well enjoy it and try to push aside his skepticism.

After both he and Maria had finished purifying their hands as well as their mouths, they slowly dropped down onto the slightly rain moist stones that led to the entryway.

Maria, gently grabbed Kilgore's hands as they stared into each other's eyes and slowly lowered themselves to the ground.

Maria removed her bamboo footpads and began to reach for Kilgore's shoes.

“Oh shit. Uh... that’s gonna be a problem. Uhm, yeah, you can’t um... have you ever... are you a runner by chance?” Kilgore had forgotten: The *gill-runners*.

He quickly glanced down at the slowly breathing shoes, inhaling and exhaling with every breath he took. Thanks to their guaranteed 100% orbit-proof skin cohesion and amphibial nervous system connection webbing, he wouldn’t be able to take them off for another two months. The pair he was wearing had been standard issue off-planet and he hadn’t expected to engage in such rituals requiring one to take one’s shoes off and lay one’s feet bare to the elements during his stay in Bamboo City.

Maria looked down at the standard lab-spec maroon and dull yellow colored running shoes that appeared to be breathing on the feet of Whit Kilgore. She was slightly frightened but also mesmerized. She had heard of gill-runners but never seen an actual pair before: bio-mimetically designed endurance footwear for the thin atmospheres of the off-planet colonies. Maria stared somewhat enchanted at the layers of spider-silk mesh wrapped around the lower ankles of Whit Kilgore culminating into a strange webbing around his feet sending a constant, bright electric pulse back and forth up and down the side of his legs all the way to his central nervous system in such a manner as to give the shoes the appearance of breathing in and out looking extra-ordinarily similar to fish gills. Hence their name: gill-runners.

“I love running, but those gill-runners are way more serendip than I would have expected.” Maria was still in awe by how the shoes seemed to breath in tune with Whit Kilgore’s own breath.

“Serendip?” Kilgore hadn’t been on-planet enough to know the new slang of the Mid-Global English spoken throughout most of Bamboo City.

“I will take that as being a good thing?”

“Yes.” Maria smiled and looked deeply into Kilgore’s eyes, “that’s slang for serendipitous. Now, we have to

be quiet silly, and crawl through the entryway so we can drink some tea.”

Maria grabbed Kilgore’s hands and they walked through the *roji* and into the tearoom.

They made there way into the ornate room and sat facing each other with a small wooden table between them. Maria had already requested for the purveyors of the tearoom to leave the proper materials of matcha green tea, along with the clay pot and cups required. She loved to perform the reminder and meditative beauty of the pouring of the hot tea repeatedly over her own specific teapot she had stored here for each time she visited. The tea residue on the outside of the pot, continuously changing the color of its hues over time, a teapot passed down for centuries from her ancestors to her grandmother, and finally to her, held much meaning: it provided an inner peace and connection with time and the natural elements of tea, the impermanence of the living and yet their persistence of spirit through such rituals. The teapot was in fact the last surviving artifact from her family after the tsunamis 50 years earlier. Her grandmother had given the teapot to Maria as a young girl as she embarked for her education off-island in the 2040s. Maria had no idea at that time, that she would never see her grandmother again, nor that she would never be able to return to the small island where she had been raised. Decimated by three tsunamis in three months. But her grandmother’s spirit was near every time Maria performed the tea ceremony. A reminder of a deeper rapport with place and why Maria had decided to work with the APCC Archive in the first place. Relics. Artefacts. They often had more meaning than merely the outer surface relation one might initially have had with them. In some cases, they unlocked vital rapports with memory, place, and life. Some even considered them as living beings.

Kilgore sat crossed legged with his breathing gill-runners trying to be as quiet as possible and not appear like a complete idiot with his obnoxious breathing running shoes. He could tell that Maria Xu Wei was in another place and another time. She poured the tea over the ceramic pot and then finally poured

both of them their own cups of bright green matcha tea. His exo-pathic understanding of her state of being was at the upper limits of pure life force. Kilgore hadn't experienced this connection with someone for a long time. She had his utmost attention. Maria, eyes closed, sipped from her teacup.

They slowly drank from their cups as Maria repeated the process of pouring hot tea over the ceramic pot filling their cups again and again for two hours. By the end, both Maria and Kilgore were completely in a meditative exo-pathic entanglement. Kilgore could feel all the pain, joy, sorrow, and hope that resided in Maria. And he realized that Maria Wei could feel his pain, joy, sorrow, and hope as well. They were entangled in the life force, simultaneously plunged into a deep inner connection while also being completely outside of themselves. Outside of objects and subjects, they were one with their environment.

And then it was over. Maria touched Kilgore's hand and pulled him along with her to the entryway of the tearoom and out under the brilliant night sky that now appeared overhead. Even in Bamboo City, beyond the mere light pollution of the inner canals, as one moved further along into the edges of the canal areas, one could still get a glimpse of the beauty of the outside. High above the canopy, the dead stars still furnished their brilliant luminescence, their light still traveling toward Earth. And for a brief moment, Kilgore was reminded of why he did the job that he did, the relics he sought out and helped to preserve, like Maria Wei's clay teapot that served them their tea for the ceremony, certain of them had a connection with life beyond the mere material realm.

Kilgore looked into Maria Wei's eyes as if awaking from a dream, Maria leaned in and pressed her two fingers against Kilgore's lips and then she kissed him ever so subtly and then pulled back. She hadn't felt this strong a sense of emotional presence in a long time. Kilgore kept his guard up. It was a reflex from his job. Don't let emotions dictate's one's perception of reality. He had given in briefly, but now, waking from the two-hour ritual, he slowly slipped Maria's bamboo footpads back onto her feet. The soft touch of

the smoothed bamboo soles awakened Maria from the oneness of the moment and made her once again aware of her presence within the stone garden entryway to the tearoom. She looked over to Kilgore who was actively trying to pretend like he wasn't at her beck and call. She could see-feel that he had enjoyed himself.

"That was, um. Pretty serendip. Did you know that if you look just at the right moment, you can actually see the off-colony sat-station *Selva_3324* blinking up in the night's sky?" Kilgore was trying to regain some control over his senses.

"I had fun too. Hey, can you give a girl one of those Darjeelings that someone wearing gill-runners probably shouldn't be smoking." Maria was glad to not have to turn back on her data-feeds or her oxygen mesh for the next three days. She had taken three days off in hopes of getting as much intel on Whit Kilgore as she could. And she still wasn't sure if it was merely because she was in love with him, because she was about to turn 38 and have the employee implant protocols or, because he represented someone who could orbit-jump, come and go from Bamboo City as he pleased, someone who wasn't tethered to this outpost of cine-relics and VR cubes. Maybe she just needed to get outside the inner canal area and spend more time with the Buddhist monks, the poor, and the de-gridders. Either way, she knew she was having a good time.

"A Darjeeling? A woman of your prestige and elegance would like to engage in such ancient relic-form of cine-vice?"

Kilgore pulled a silver plated container of Darjeelings from out of a pocket on the back of his woolen sweater. He handed Maria a tightly woven cigarette from the box that Taj Darpesh had given him as a gift only three days earlier. Its yellow-hued paper, imprinted with the word "Darjeeling" in brown cursive script indicated that they were of the high-end cine-relic variety, meant to mimic the yellow-hued- maize paper of the French Gitanes cigarettes often seen in the French New Wave films from over 100 years ago.

“You know, since you’re a curator at the APCC Archive, these high-end cine-relics are getting harder to come by, they mimic the Gitanes smokes one used to see in films by filmmakers like Jean-Pierre Melville. With the yellow-hued paper made out of corn husk, you should get the archive to store a room of them for special occasions, they’ve become popular with the eco-tourists, you might as well make sure the archive has secured a certain amount of the original cine-relics before they are completely gone!”

Kilgore was trying to impress her.

“Gypsy cigarettes. Believe or not, I’ve had a couple of Gitanes in my life, and I’ve even seen all of Melville’s films once. The Archive still has a couple of crystalline drives with his entire filmic oeuvre.”

Maria Wei was excited: she had finally found someone who also liked Melville’s films! Most of the employees at the Archive were only interested in the remaining early VR films from the 2020s rather than the collection of crystalline drives containing the last preserved filmic works from the mid-20th century. Why bother with the two dimensional narrative surfaces of early film.

Kilgore was the one who was impressed. She had done her homework; did Maria Wei know that he was a huge Melville fan? Or had Darpesh set the whole thing up? Kilgore was starting to awake from the tranquility of the evening. It was true, Whitaker Kilgore could take his job a bit too seriously at times. Even working in Relic Services, he had to remember that most of the top-end relics were pure commodity fetish. But not all. Not the teapot they had just drank from nor perhaps even the Darjeelings.

Maria pressed the nano-mesh wire dangling from her sleeve and toggled through her lunettes to a black tight fitting, water-repellant jacket and then, for the fun of it, she selected a bob cut like the one worn by Anna Karina, the famous French actress and Godard’s muse. And in an instant, her hairstyle immediately changed.

Kilgore hadn't been around this much nano-cosmetic tech for a while. He was slightly caught off guard. Yeah, Whit Kilgore was good at his job working in Relic Services, but in the Cine-District of Bamboo City, where the line between the virtual and the real, hovered around 1 and 0, there was a reason his spending limit was 3500 Global Rupees. The Bamboo City Currency Ledger, Ltd. knew better than Kilgore knew himself sometimes, at least on-planet in the Cine-District.

He could lose himself in indulgence like the rest of them. That's why he had the job he did. There was one highly pertinent difference: Whitaker Kilgore knowing that the difference between the 1 and the 0, between a pure commodity and relic, between a feeling and an emotion, was to know the difference. Kilgore knew that difference. For instance, he knew that Anna Karina's best role was when she stared into the camera and broke the fourth wall, obliterating her position between actress and the audience, between the human and the ghost in the machine, between playing a part, and being a person. And judging by the changes in the Cine-District since the last time he was here and the upgrades in cosmetic-tech, Maria Xu Wei knew the difference as well. It's probably why she was getting her first nano-tech and neuro-tech implant upgrade in a couple of months. She was post-Anna Karina, post-Godard. It was the 2070s and she was grabbing Whit Kilgore by the arm and running along with him in the light rain as the street lamps sprung to life, lighting the streets around them in a glowing mist of early evening.

Yeah, it had been quite a while since Whit Kilgore had been on vacation for a couple of days, and there no doubt was another reason why he had been assigned for his brief stint here in Bamboo City upon orbit-jumping back on-planet. To let the psychospheric atmosphere of the Cine-District run its course. He'd been neuro-generatively tested in the mountains with Lama Dorje, but something instinctively told Kilgore that his remaining week or so in Bamboo City would still be filled with a myriad of such tests, whether they were apparent or not. It was the culture shock adjustment time for someone in his line of business.

He grabbed what remained of the yellow-tinted Darjeeling cigarette from Maria and took a pull. He decided to play along with the festivities of the cine-district and pressed the tiny button on the side of his lunettes and toggled through the holographic lenses and quickly searched for possible cine-district available attire he could purchase and wear. He found a classic suit and thin black tie, along with a brimmed hat à la French New Wave and blinked twice to order it on the upper left side of his lenses. His nano-wear fabric immediately changed form and he felt like he was in the middle of his favorite film. A film which, he hadn't yet seen, but somehow knew was only beginning.

"Maria, shall we stop for a night cap? Je suis pas tellement beau, mais je suis un grand boxeur." Kilgore attempted his best Jean-Paul Belmondo impersonation.

Maria smiled, "Tu sais, Whit, je connais bien l'œuvre de Godard aussi. Et oui, je suis un peu fatiguée, mais je ne suis pas encore *à bout de souffle!*"

Yep. It was clear. Whitaker Samuel Kilgore was knee deep in the Cine-District of Bamboo City and at least for one night, he could enjoy an evening out with another employee of the Archive. Even if his data-feeds were already reminding him what his next day's protocols were. Meet up with Elda Welty, and prepare to work out the plans to transport and pay for thousands of cubic meters of water to be tunnel-ported from Alexandria_4538 into the newly fabricated de-grid reservoirs and figure out what the big deal was about another more important relic in the hands of some exo-shaman. Not all relics were pure commodity fetish. Whit took one last drag from the Darjeeling and put it out in the ashtray where he and Maria would have one last beverage before calling it a night.

"Garçon, oui, encore deux verres de vin rouge s'il vous plait".

"Oui, monsieur Kilgore."

Just another night in the Cine-District at Bamboo City.

And less than 24 hours later, Bamboo City matron, Elda Welty was shaking Whit Kilgore's hand and carefully sitting herself down into the ornate chair across from him.

"Mr. Kilgore, I thank you for agreeing to meet with me on such a short notice. I realize your brief visit here in Bamboo City is coming to a close."

While Elda Welty had become accustomed to passing into the Cine-District and seeing a myriad of young, attractive blurred image constructs of the myriad of cultural agents, art patrons and workers in various layers of neuro-tech and nano-implants, it had been quite some time since she had set foot back into the main thoroughfare of the inner canal zones. Whitaker Kilgore looked as fresh and youthful as so many others she had dealt with from the APCC Archive. However, as Elda reminded herself, beneath all the layers of nano-tech and neuro-implants, he was perhaps even older than Elda was herself.

"Ah, Ms. Welty, I hope you don't mind if I indulge in one of the rare cine-vices still available here in your fine city."

Kilgore opened the thin silver-plated case containing a handful of Darjeelings and flipped one coolly into his mouth carefully blew the smoke slowly from the side of his mouth so as not to direct it in the direction of one of the most respected matrons of the City. Smoking the Darjeeling was Kilgore's way of indicating his thorough awareness of the surroundings within which they found themselves. To have agreed to meet Kilgore in the middle of the Cine-District also meant trying to blend in as much as possible, and for someone of Elda Welty's renown as well as the fact that hardly anyone who set foot into the heart of the canal zones had preserved their outer-age appearance meant that Elda stood out much more so than Kilgore. But Kilgore was prepared for this. He pulled out an

extra pair of holographic lunettes from his jacket pocket and pushed them carefully over to Elda.

“I’m going to have to ask for you to put these on, Ms. Welty. You are familiar with these, are you not?”

Elda knew of the lunette tech glasses, she had a disdain for the commerce that seemed to be directed through them, from everything that surrounded her in the new zone of the canal areas. But she also knew that they were standard tech for most people these days. She calmly slid them on and pressed the tiny button on the left side of the lunettes. As the nano-crystal lenses materialized, Whit Kilgore synched his lunettes with Elda’s and immediately provided her with a temporary nano-mesh ID. He then provided her a temporary avatar-grade make-over, providing Elda with a 24-hour synthetic crystalline cloak-body that would project an image of a standard 30ish looking serveuse common to the Cine-District. For at least 24 hours, Elda Welty was going to have to embrace the image-constructs she had come to partially loathe. This was what was referred to as the Avatar Projection Protocol. And it was such a protocol that most of the denizens scurrying about around them had spent their lives residing in. Although in this case, the projection protocol would be temporary. Elda Welty would be provided with a taste of the quotidian existence of the throngs of people residing and working within the Cine-District.

“I’m sure you can understand why we need to place you within this temporary avatar-grade image construct. You might as well enjoy it. You’re going to look like a 30 year-old beauty for at least the next 24 hours. I believe this temporary avatar projection protocol actually has a life span of several months, so if you’d like to continue wearing it, feel free to do so. And you can keep the lunettes, they’re a gift from the Space Agency and the Archive. Who knows, you might even find out you like them, and take advantage of some of the free nano-wear selections offered up by the friendly merchants of the Cine-District and the Bamboo City Currency Ledger, Ltd.”

Kilgore called the waiter over to order them both a glass of red wine.

“I appreciate your courtesy and respect the rules of the Archive and Global Space Agency. Lama Dorje told me that you’d make sure to take good care of me and that I should simply listen and trust in the protocols you indicated. I do indeed like a nice glass of red wine every now and then, even at my age.”

“Châteauneuf-du-Pape 1955, if my data-cube file is correct.” Kilgore smiled and they both raised their glass in a celebratory manner so as to blend in.

“Ms. Welty, I’m aware of the situation regarding the water reservoir construction to be found on the outer grids and in the mountain areas. I can get the tunnel-ports to send the water from Alexandria_4538 if the intel is really correct. The last time I was on-planet, that outpost was barely surviving and was only good for salt acquisitions and the occasional wifi-cycle parts. But it would appear that things have changed rather quickly.”

Elda had more intel on Alexandria_4538 than Kilgore. No one ever knows what info one might have over one’s colleagues.

“The exo-forest install, as you know very well, Mr. Kilgore, has finally come online and on-planet. Alexandria_4538 is now one of the most powerful water and oxygen hubs anywhere on the entire planet.”

“Besides a nice Bamboo filled paradise for clone lungers, like the fine island where we are currently seated.” Kilgore added, smiling.

Kilgore wasn’t sure about any of the intel he’d been getting since he had arrived back on-planet at Bamboo City five days earlier. He trusted Lama Dorje, and he trusted Elda Welty, but what he didn’t trust was how information circulated within the vacuum created by the various competing interests of the APCC Archive, the BCCL, and the GSA, not to mention the fact that he had just completed a neuro-examination and was pretty

sure that Maria Xu Wei might have been trying to hack into his neuro-data at the tea ceremony.

“Mr. Kilgore, I’ve dedicated my entire life’s work to preserving and bettering the life of the people of Bamboo City and I can assure you that my aims are steadfast even amidst the eco-tourism and clone-lungers that have created a number of economic disparities throughout the island. I sense your hesitation regarding the recent events at the Alexandria_4538 outpost and I know you’ve spent a fair amount of time on the off-planet colonies so I know you have seen the exo-forest projects up-close with your own eyes and know the purity of the air quality as well as the unique environment created there. Elda pushed three tiny vials across the table in front of Whit Kilgore.

“Open them and see for yourself. These are the specimens from Alexandria_4538 which I received yesterday: the air quality, the rain water, and well, I believe you know for yourself what the last one is.”

Kilgore looked down at the bright glowing blue crystal of heliotite.

“Ah yes. The lunar connector. The “taste of the universe”.

Kilgore opened the vial of water and tasted a drink’s worth of liquid as he calibrated his lunettes to measure the purity of the nutrients he ingested. It was about the cleanest water he had imbibed in quite some time. He opened the vial of air and carefully breathed it in. A slight hint of piney freshness. It brought back memories from his time as a young training officer on *Selva_3342*. And the heliotite, well, that’s why he was the man for this job. Only a rare few had built up a tolerance to this extraterrestrial substance. His time at Cave City had led him to encounter the blue entity as they called it. The extraterrestrial communicator, the lunar connector, the “taste of the universe”. Kilgore had wrestled with this blue crystal and had conversed with the blue entity. He had traversed the outer-realms of the universe and skipped across time-space. It was

what had made him an orbit-jumper like the Shamans. And soon, he'd have to engage with the blue entity once again. Heliotite was a unifier between all beings of the universe and while Kilgore hadn't ingested it in a long time, he had already made his peace with the voices of the universe. He had to. It was how he had acquired fluency in exo-pathic. And it was why he was going to be heading down to Alexandria_4538.

"Well, Elda, if I may call you Elda. I see that you've been properly briefed by the Archive or the GSA, and so you know that our meeting this afternoon is much more of a formality than anything else. I've already been given orders to head to Alexandria_4538 and meet with the Shaman there. Let's just say, the Shaman and I have traveled some of the same milieus."

"Cave City. I know more about you than you might think, Whit. I may not have all the latest nano-tech and neuro-tech, but I'm well read. People still read the digi-books, you know. You know, there was even a time, when I was much younger, when I had even thought of applying for a stint at Cave City. Lama Dorje thought my services might be better suited there." Elda, took a drink from her glass of wine and caught a slight reflection of her nano-wear, temporary-avatar in the large horizontal mirror that covered the adjacent wall, sending a sublime chill through her. Her neuro-circuitry didn't have the proper neuro-implants to stare at the synthetic image projection and she wasn't prepared for the shock of such image residuals.

Kilgore could see she was reconciling the projection protocol of seeing her reflection as a younger, 30-year-old version of herself.

"You seem to be taking to the avatar projection protocol rather well. You would've been a good candidate at Cave City, Elda. Most people who look at their standard synthetic image reflection in a mirror for the first time without the proper neuro-tech implants tend to puke their guts out. Although, I recommend that over the next 24-36 hours, you refrain from looking at yourself too much in the mirror."

Elda finished off her glass of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and took a deep breath.

“Mr. Kilgore, you come highly regarded by Dorje and from what he has told me, you were one of his best students. Please help us continue to preserve the outer regions of Bamboo City. We will be ready for the tunnel-ports of water. We will have the reservoirs prepared to store the water off-grid. I know the elders rather well at Alexandria_4538, if there is any confusion about our list of resource purchases, simply hand them this.”

Elda pushed a small crystalline marble across the table.

“To retrieve a relic, sometimes, one must offer one in return.” Elda grabbed what was remaining of the slow burning Darjeeling cigarette in the ashtray in front of Kilgore and took a long drag.

“They will want something in return and this crystalline drive will provide them with the star-map they will need to re-calibrate their time-space location. Mr. Kilgore, I know you’ve orbit-jumped on a myriad of occasions, but are you aware of what year it is in Bamboo City?”

It was time for Elda Welty to blow Whitaker Kilgore’s mind.

Kilgore pulled out another Darjeeling from his coat pocket and sparked another match.

He took a deep pull and prepared himself for the news that Elda Welty was about to lay on him. He had felt that something had been a bit off since his arrival in Bamboo City five days earlier. There had been too many neuro-regenerative exams, too many repetitive comments from the likes of Darpesh and even the actions of the young curator, Maria Xu Wei. Kilgore realized now that perhaps his initial reason for traveling back to Bamboo City had had nothing to do with Darpesh and his fetish for Leonid Kastor VR cube films. No, this trip was more about Kilgore than anyone else.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that my data-feed in the left hand corner of my lunettes indicating it’s the Earth year 2075 is incorrect.”

Whit was being modest in his estimation. He realized that he hadn’t even checked the Earth-year time zone upon orbit-jumping back on-planet.

“Mr. Kilgore, the Earth year is 2145 in Bamboo City. Bamboo City switched over to exo-temporality 30 Earth years ago. We had to in agreement with the GSA in order to bring the city online with the exo-colonies. Your earth age, Mr. Kilgore is much older than you may realize. You haven’t done business here on-planet for quite some time, and your last orbit jump to Bamboo City may have been only three years-ago in earth years, but as with the temporal treaty signed with the Global Space Agency, the neuro-temporal age of your brain has been estimated at 145. Mr. Kilgore, you are now an elder of Bamboo City, the last orbit-jump hub to the off-planet colonies.”

Kilgore took another pull from the Darjeeling and held the sweet smoke in as long as possible. Holy shit. 145 years old. He hadn’t expected that one. He took out his laser comb from the inside pocket of his coat and folded his dark mop of hair back into its initial position.

“Well, Elda. I guess we’ve both learned something today about the relativity of time-space.

Kilgore awoke the next morning from his slumber and could still hear Lama Dorje’s voice in his head. “You must trust in your innate abilities.” His mind drifted back to his upcoming orbit-jump. The Shaman would be waiting for him. Whit Kilgore was pretty sure what sort of relic he’d be retrieving: a star-map engraved onto the outside of an ancient bowl. That was why the Shaman had been sent there: dispatched from the off-planet colony as a communicator between the Earth and the Sky. It was also why Whit Kilgore had opted out of his shaman

training and had been re-assigned to Relic Services for the Space Agency. He'd seen with his own eyes the ramifications of what could happen if a sacred bowl was placed in the hands of an individual with the wrong intentions who happened to also ingest too large a dose of heliotite. It was what one used to call a bad trip. However, in his line of work, it wasn't a mere psychedelic experience gone wrong, but more like a hurricane grade wrath of an extraterrestrial entity that one had no control over. And even a good Shaman could be outmatched for such an encounter. That's why they trained people like Whit Kilgore. He had no stakes in the matter. He'd spoken with the lunar connector on several occasions, he'd chatted a number of times with the "taste of the universe", and well, he had been trained to not hear the voice, or at least ignore it. Or, to put it another way: Kilgore had acquired a rather large tolerance for heliotite and a healthy ambivalence toward transcendence. These were both beneficial qualities if one wanted to work in Relic Services. That, and a rather hearty sense of humour.

Kilgore flipped on his lunettes and toggled through his messages on the crystalline lenses. He was shipping off to Alexandria_4538 in less than 96 hours. A message flashed up in the upper-right hand corner of his lenses from the BCCL reminding him that he still had 1400 Global Rupees remaining in his BCCL account. It would be plenty to get him through the next several days. He glanced to the upper-corner on the left lens and noticed a new message from Maria Wei: she wanted to meet up once last time before he tunnel-ported. She knew he was leaving? Ah. Nothing was a secret in Bamboo City.

The Toggle

The following morning, Maria Xu Wei ordered a reishi coffee and quietly toggled through her messages. Whit Kilgore would be arriving soon and she wanted to make sure she was prepared to unload the information she

had. She had gotten a hold of the coordinates to Darpesh's VR quantum-computer and had passed the info onto the GSA as requested. Somebody would be seeking out Darpesh and making sure that he kindly let the Global Space Agency use his quantum-computer to balance the temporal rift to bring the cloned, off-planet exo-forest online with galactic time. And Maria had already made up her mind. She was going with Kilgore to Alexandria_4538. Somebody had to keep an eye on the archival relics she would lend to him as he had asked her for. Besides, she knew how to work the quantum computer and if she wanted to ensure her position at the Archive and perhaps get offered a position with the GSA, it wouldn't hurt her chances if she could prove her mettle in single-handedly helping to temporally align the first exo-forest install on-planet. Exo-forests—thousands of acres of artificially cloned forests growing and cultivated for decades in the upper atmosphere circling the earth as satellite worlds comprised of luscious viral free vegetation and genetically modified to be grafted back on-planet to re-oxygenate entire regions that had once been thriving landscapes.

Maria Wei had studied about the exo-forests, everybody had heard of them as some sort of myth, but dealing with someone like Kilgore—an orbit-jumper who spent a large part of his time as a cultural mediator overseeing their eventual grafting back on-planet—meant that Maria might have a chance to actually witness the exo-forests up-close. They were said to possess the power to suck out large swaths of CO₂ and re-oxygenate thousands of kilometers of arid and toxic regions within minutes. If Kilgore was really traveling to check out the first exo-forest install at Alexandria_4538, he would just have to accept that she was coming along with him.

Whit Kilgore walked in to the cafe and noticed Maria toggling through her lunettes again.

"Do you ever take off your lunettes for a couple of days and get some time away from the toggle?" Kilgore's question caught Maria by surprise as he sank into the booth across from her.

The toggle. Slang for the tedium of the daily grind, toggling through the infinite amount of choices, messages, and enticements of the holographic lens world projected through the nano-particle screen of the lunettes. It was the meshwork through which most people conducted a majority of their daily interactions and it was also, for people like Whit Kilgore, his one way of staying connected with on-planet affairs as he orbit-jumped to the outer-regions where the connect signal faded continuously as he did his grunt work hands on in the field. Most days, the toggle was not part of Whit Kilgore's life, and he was appreciative of that. He was always reminded of that fact upon finding himself back in Bamboo City on-planet. The toggle reigned here in places like the Cine-District where the majority of the economy flowed through the holographic lunettes including one's day-to-day interactions.

"To toggle or not toggle...How else would I be able to provide you with such great intel?" Maria set her lunettes down next to her coffee cup and smiled at Whit Kilgore. She slid him a tiny crystalline drive across the table.

"Here's the 'crappy' relic you wanted. A whole series of avant-garde VR geo-taggers dating back from the early 2020s. It was weird what people thought was avant-garde back then. Surreptitiously geo-tagging VR artwork in random, hard to access geographical locations throughout the world. Why would anyone take the time and money to get to some hard to reach locale only to create a Virtual Reality tag of the area and then have others seek it out and have to use their intelligent phones to look at them? Completely ignoring the beauty of the geographical locations that were tagged." Maria was trying to display her knowledge of early 21st century art history. Kilgore didn't remember requesting yet another relic. Although he wasn't sure if Elda Welty hadn't sent this with Maria for Kilgore.

"Smartphones, Maria. They were called smartphones. And yes. You indeed hinted at one of the perplexities and contradictions of the early 21st century. The impending disruption of climate change, the loss of the beauty

and access to geographical locations. And the simultaneous ever-increasing drive toward virtualization. Without those “stupid” VR geo-taggers and their art, we wouldn’t perhaps have a good idea of the bizarre contradictory drive of humans 100 years-ago as they strived to make sense of their reflexive mourning response in the Age of Climate Change, the impending Post-Carbon era, and the early renaissance of the VR sphere. They had the crude connection network called the internet. And of course, today, we have the lunettes and the toggle. When I’m back in the Cine-District for a week or so, wearing the holographic lunettes, I often wonder if our age 100 years later is that much different than those early days of VR in the 21st century.”

“Smartphones, intelligent phones, whatever. I know the Archive has a whole room full of the earliest versions, encased in a photovoltaic chamber. I also know that one Taj Darpesh’s quantum computers has been located by the GSA and they’ll be borrowing it from him for a while.”

Maria took another sip from her coffee. She could tell Whit Kilgore was tired. She didn’t need her lunettes and their data-feeds to recognize that Kilgore was still adjusting to the temporal lag after orbit-jumping back on-planet less than two weeks earlier.

“Look, I had a good time the other night as well at the whole tea room deal. But I’m leaving this place in less than 48 hours and I don’t need to get attached to some cute young curator about to get her neuro-tech upgrades at the Archive. Whether the GSA got their paws on Darpesh’s quantum computer is not really my business right now considering that I’m getting ready to make sure that some piece of extraterrestrial pottery is carefully procured for your higher ups at the Archive. You’re a charmer, Maria. But I have some supplies to purchase before heading back out into this lovely planet of ours.”

Whit Kilgore was indeed tired. He was also admittedly a bit more annoyed by the fact that he’d have to endure another 48 hours in the Cine-District. He’d spent too much time in the de-grid zones, in the less

commodified areas, to continue to put on a nice face for the indulgences that were catered to here. He didn't mind some of the perks, but he'd had enough of the toggle for a while.

Before Kilgore could stand up to leave, Maria Xu Wei grabbed him by the arm and produced a small coin that immediately projected a holographic spiral of the Milky Way galaxy, emblematic of the Space Agency. It was her clearance code and travel visa in order to tag along with Kilgore to Alexandria_4538.

Kilgore looked down at the projection of the spiral of the local galaxy.

Maria looked over at Kilgore and smiled.

"Someone has to make sure you don't get stuck halfway out into the canyon lands in a tunnel-port station without any connect terminal back to Bamboo City."

Kilgore winced slightly.

"Well, I guess I don't really have a choice in this matter, do I? I hope you aren't expecting for me to perform miracles or something. Once we get out into the outer regions, there won't be any access to the toggle. No more Melville films to entertain you."

Maria enthusiastically placed her newly acquired sonic-disruptor on the table between them. It was one of the higher-level pacification weapons furnished by the Space Agency, meant to disrupt, partially stun, and disengage any individual, by vibrational frequency alone, without any harm being done to them. Kilgore quickly glanced down and back up to Maria and briefly caught a glimpse of his own sonic disruptor, slightly protruding from out of the inner holster of his jacket.

"Hopefully you won't be needing to use that. Although, I'm a certainly a big fan of non-lethal forms of distraction." He smiled at Maria, raised himself up from the cafe table and tossed his backpack over his shoulder.

“I guess you’ve been accepted by the Space Agency and you’re gonna get to see an exo-forest install up-close. Something tells me you won’t miss the toggle once we make our way into the outer-regions.”

As Kilgore turned and made his way toward the exit of the cafe, he could feel the sensation of cold metal across the left side of his cheek and the sound of Maria Wei spitting on the floor.

Kilgore turned around in an instant, stepped backward and flipped one last cigarette into his mouth and lit a match, blowing the smoke out the side of his mouth. He calmly looked down at the ancient weapon in front of him and then up at Maria.

“Yeah, I had heard that those actually still existed in small quantities as well, the bullets however, pretty hard to come by. I would suggest you leave that here. Some relics are meant to die and fade away.”