MEGALOMANIA

Episode II – Sentient Exposition

Alpha Sequence

By Wynn Mathis Franken

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Introduction

This is the second episode of the MEGALOMANIA Alpha Sequence, and because it picks up right where Episode 1 ended—down to the chapter numbering no less—I imagined a synopsis of the 650 pages long prior episode would be pretty damn convenient. With that in mind, a repeat of the personal introduction was scrapped in favour of the following expanded blurb, which will presumably jog your memory well enough for a smooth transition. Plus, I daresay it's even been injected with some alluring mystery to build a little excitement for what's to come. So without further delay here's what happened previously, in the world of MegaLoMania.

Synopsis for MEGALOMANIA Episode 1 – Deviant Voyager

Would you fit in with a truly flawless society of de facto immortals, or would its alienating perfection leave you feeling fundamentally out of place—and perhaps even drive you to madness?

Awakening in an ideal world after centuries of cryogenic suspension, Mathew Magellan is confronted with true perfection in every way imaginable. Enveloped in the lap of Utopian comfort, he discovers a society boasting breathtaking technological wonders and socioeconomic miracles—a far cry from the cyberpunk dystopia in disguise he had secretly expected. Jumping in with honest conviction, Mathew initially enjoys navigating the genuine, logical brilliance of this new reality, motivated largely by his extremely dedicated supervisor, Jasper Perry.

Alas, the alluring shine of societal harmony fades faster than anticipated, the positive effect on him diminishing day by day. Considering himself a displaced relic of bygone times, Mathew increasingly wrestles with future shock, survivor's guilt, and fractured perceptions—the messy fallout of a stressful body shell transfer. His broken mind seems warped by past trauma, prone to becoming a sickness if left to fester. In order to heal the psychological wounds as well as the physical, Mathew unshackles himself from Jasper's cold, sharply focussed rationality. Instead, he chooses to seek out the warm, emotional side of a promised life, chasing the memory of a brief, but striking chance encounter with a woman, Lisa Connelly.

He subconsciously expects falling in love will flush out his buried sorrows and regrets. Yet deep down, a quiet suspicion grows that despite the outright perfection, something here is not quite right, and that something might well be him. Being the only human relic to survive the great reset proves more challenging than anticipated, particularly when the new

order—so deftly shaped in the empty wake of its aftermath—was only ever intended for the replacement of baseline humanity.

Mathew has no choice but to adapt to live amongst elites, because unless this single deviant can reinvent himself and discard the burdens weighing him down, he is condemned to fall, potentially shattering another world that conforms so eerily well to his personal ideals—almost as if it were bespoke.

To (Anne) Caithlin,

My future wife, loving partner, and the mother of my two awesome sons.

21 – Chapter
The Ringworld is just a bonus

As the door opened Mathew stood face to face with the girl he had kept actively visualised in his memory for weeks on end. She looked both exactly the same, and very different, mostly due to the nearly opposite conditions of the two occasions on which they had met—outside in the nightly cold then, at the front door of her brightly lit home now. During the brief moment where the surprise visitor had yet to be acknowledged and identified, Mathew took in her most unprepared look, soaking her features as if making up for lost time. With his eyes he traced her lean sharp chin, her somewhat pronounced cheekbones and the full eyebrows that were slowly rising into a frown. Her nose was even prettier than he had remembered; beautifully prominent with a lovely sculptured presence, turned down slightly, with a narrow and attractively straight tip. Her sun-kissed face was equally bronzed as her bare arms, revealing she might be evenly tanned almost up to Mediterranean levels of summertime holidays. Her dark blond hair was loosely bound, and the top layer revealed streaks of a brighter shade of gold. Mathew wondered whether those nearly all but gleaming bands had been the result of intense solar exposure, perhaps picked up during some kind of outdoor activity like hiking or running. Due to wearing flat sneakers this time as opposed to pumps before, her height now topped just below his one eighty, while her sporty get-up afforded her a late teenage to early tweens look. She was dressed in a plain yellow skin-hugging stretchy T-shirt and light grey straight-piped velvet cargo trousers, indicating to Mathew's conservatively keen eye she had been otherwise preoccupied and not quite expecting him.

'Hello there' Mathew managed to say, frowning awkwardly, lamely hoping for even the slightest hint of a click to take place. Alas her beautifully beckoning lips, neither voluptuous nor thin, yet treading just the right middle ground, had yet to form even the tiniest of inviting smiles to grace him. And so it took an uncomfortable few seconds more than Mathew had anticipated for his presence to ignite in her the anticipated spark of recognition. But then—and much to his relief—those same bright purple-blue eyes he had admired only once before in person, grew ever larger and more vividly alive, signalling before any further words were spoken she knew who he was. And that she was happy to see him.

'Mathew! My, you've changed!'

‘No worse for wear I hope’ he said.
She bit her lip appraising him in more detail, and finally shook her head ‘Quite the opposite— handsome is what you are.’
‘Well, it seems we’ve found our first generally accepted truth to agree on’ Mathew noted, attempting to break whatever ice there might rest beneath the surface of her increasingly warm reception.
‘Uh huh—and clearly there’s also a hint of lessened modesty about you than I recall. You told me you were coming to see me, but I had no idea it was going to be so soon—well, it’s not soon after we first met, but soon after the message. I hardly dressed up…no, scratch that altogether; this is my most super casual and comfy outfit, exclusively worn when I mean to enjoy lazy creative days at home—all by myself, alone.
‘Oh, eh…well I hope this is a good time’ Mathew said uneasily.
‘Of course it is you silly man’ she said laughing, tapping his chest with her hands in all the surprise excitement, and then she noticed the potential gifts he was carrying along.
‘What’s all this, is that for me?’
Mathew looked down at his hands. ‘Yes, it’s your Scariff—you said you wanted it back, so I’m returning it now. And these are flowers, for you’ Mathew managed, handing her the Persona Hap first, which she hung over her shoulders, and pressing the flowers in her hand thereafter. She smelled the bouquet and smiled as the fragrant red and white roses made her both happy and—by the looks of her sudden blush—also a little shy.
‘I see you’re still wearing my jacket?’ Lisa appraised with hesitation.
‘Uhm yes, it’s very comfortable, but I’ve been told the cut probably suits you better’ Mathew admitted, demonstrating his willingness to return the garment by clumsily taking it off right then and there.
‘I’ve been thinking about you often since our serendipitous encounter on Endymion’ Lisa said softly, taking him by the arm to nudge him across the doorstep and into the apartment.
‘I would have made you a mixtape’ Mathew explained apologetically, ‘but seeing as they don’t exist anymore, and honestly haven’t for a while now, I had to make do with a Playlist—I’ll have my Persona transfer it to yours shortly.’
Lisa halted him. ‘You made me a playlist too?’ she gasped, ‘that’s so sweet! I can’t wait to play it to hear what you picked.’
They stood there in the hallway, looking at each other and she smiled again realising Mathew’s intervening update had for some reason been cause for a more than average rejuvenation effect. Her joyful expression and suddenly glittering eyes told him coming to see her again had been a wise move. He could hardly take his eyes off Lisa, stealing looks in plain sight, roaming across the slender build that all-round perfectly curved figure. With quiet amusement she watched him ogle her while hopelessly struggling not to show it, making her wondering in how many more ways this man was unlike other men she’d met and had especially taken a liking to her. Meanwhile, a

palpable sense of relief overcame Mathew when Lisa slowly took him by the hand and without speaking gently pulled him along to the living room. The Scariff—having resynchronised from the nearest active Hap—now uncoiled itself from her neck and fluttered towards a resting place similar to an elaborate coatrack. Gliding across the large room it swung itself along the upper steel beam and neatly came to a halt, after which it adopted a pose visually indicating it was still ready to be summoned if needed. Mathew hung Lisa's coat on a coatrack underneath the Scariff and from there on out considered it returned to its true owner.

After some minor chitchat about how his trip had been and how lovely the weather was, Mathew wanted to begin explaining her why he hadn't called or visited sooner. Effectively telling him to hold that thought, she offered him coffee instead and left him to his own devices for moment to make some cryptic adjustments. Admiring the freely accessible part of the house, Mathew simply bided his time on when to bring up the uniqueness of his situation. The interior was luxurious but not over the top and as he walked around Mathew imagined this planet would be a great place to start a show like Cribs on, seeing that being original was somewhat of a difficulty without budget and lack of space. The walls were decorated with large artist impressions of outlandish planetary landscapes, both beautiful and impressive, that managed to put a smile on his face. The living room, or at least this living room, was expansively large and offered various sub-locations to meander between, not dissimilar to the way the contemporary cities were built. Furniture seemed modern, but didn't noticeably push their presence, as if the ensemble managed to convey calmness in its overall look and feel. Much to his surprise, Lisa owned a large collection of physical books and games. Going by the titles and cover art both types of media appeared to predominantly have the topic of adventure in common. He concluded that immersion in escapism was still going strong, even though it might still bely a particular romantic predisposition. The stories and experiences on display probably only constituted the tip of the iceberg. Most data was probably safely locked away somewhere in a mainframe and therefore not visibly present in a room. Sipping his coffee he wondered where they would lead its passengers; off-world expeditions, fairy tales, discovery in outer space, role playing maybe, experiencing recent and ancient history—the possibilities were endless, and far from reserved to entertainment. Mathew imagined Memento EBs would also grant access to more conceptual insights, of technological possibilities and improbabilities, predictions and revelations, retrospect views and opinions, relationships between eras, repetition of patterns. Eclipse offered a treasure of ingredients that—if added to a creative mind to be recombined—could be shaped into the best stories ever to be crafted. Mathew felt something then that put a stop to his pondering, a vague sense

he was being watched had triggered. Turning around slowly he saw Lisa standing there, leaning against the door opening.
'Sorry I was gone for a while' she apologised, possibly also pertaining her slightly sneaky observation of him.
'Busy day?' he managed, 'I can come back later, if you prefer.'
'No, no—not at all' she hastily said, 'I just had to switch off some sensitive equipment. All done now.'
'Okay then. So, I was just looking at your muses here' Mathew said and felt a little flash of excited exhilaration creep up inside him at seeing her.
'You've changed' she said again, her smile betraying she was perhaps feeling something similar about him, although for the moment at least she kept her cards close to the heart.
'So have you' he playfully parried, referring to how Lisa had switched clothes. Perhaps she had been slightly embarrassed by her prior casual attire. He'd liked that careless "girl next door" getup, but looking this pretty with only minimal effort basically took the words right out of his mouth. Lisa was dressed smartly and casually at the same time, snugly fitting khaki pants and a pink blouse adorning her body making for a functionally neat yet clearly comfortable outfit.
'Oh—you mean this' she laughed, pulling at her blouse after a second of confusion. Self-conscious her hair was still a mess—even more so following the quick change—Lisa kept unknowingly trying to arrange it, routinely folding locks over her ear that slid off again, combing it back with her hands only to have the majority fall before her face like a lovely cascade. Suddenly realising what she'd been doing, and that he had noticed, she immediately quit fooling around. Her blond hair was curved around her face a little, while some stray hairs covered her face as she looked at the floor momentarily, still holding the plate.
'I wouldn't mind brushing your hair' Mathew helpfully offered, feeling immediately awkward about the weirdness of that statement, but to his delight and relief she chuckled.
'I thought you might' Lisa said, cocking her head, still keeping her distance. Across the room they looked each other in the eyes, and the familiar radiance associated with a little crush was beginning to emerge. At some point during their mutual staring competition Lisa smiled brightly, as if she had deciding to pursue an interest. She walked over to him like a woman on a mission, and with a pounding heart Mathew shyly allowed whatever came next to simply happen.
'You look like you need a hug' Lisa said, and without waiting for his reply she embraced him. Just being held by her signified a moment he enjoyed more than anything life had brought for the longest time. She felt instantly comfortable to be with and already strangely familiar, a kindred spirit he would be able to confide in. There was so much to say, he thought sensing the warmth of her body pass over into his. It was an act of unspoken young love that felt natural, like it was meant be.

‘I thought about you a lot’ Lisa said, still not breaking off their tenacious cuddle as if ready and waiting to turn it into a slow dance.
‘You did?’
‘Yeah, is that so surprising?’ she replied, her voice belying simmering amusement.
‘Eh, no—it’s just that I also thought about you, almost constantly in fact. That’s—a nice turn of events for me, if I’m honest. But listen’ he said, gently pulling away to hold her shoulders and look her in the eyes, ‘there’s a lot we need to talk about’
‘Do we now?’
‘Eh, well if you want; if you’re curious at all.’
‘Well lucky for you I can be all ears, and I am curious.’
‘Some of what I have to say will be weird and—possibly unbelievable too’ Mathew said, hesitating on how to traverse this initial minefield of turn-off. ‘It’ll take some effort to understand, that’s what I’m trying to get across in this uncharacteristically flustered manner.’
‘And here I was already assuming this was your best attempt to be lovably cute’ Lisa sharply replied, and softly patted his check. ‘Go on and tell your story, without reservation. I make Hypergames remember, meant to be shocking and original—shockingly original even, so I do weird and unbelievable like nothing else.’
‘Make believe, suspension of disbelief—that sort of thing?’
‘Yeah, and speaking of unbelievable, I did wonder why you didn’t contact me right after we first met’ she subtly teased, ‘I mean the connection I felt seemed real, or was I mistaken?’
‘Absolutely not mistaken’ Mathew said resolutely, ‘but it’s—complicated.
‘Hmm, ‘best start at the beginning then’ Lisa suggested, inviting him to sit down beside her on the lavishly comfortable sofa.

Without wasting any more time he began to recount the particulars of both the narrative describing his life, which allowed her to deduce the nature of his person. She seemed to follow better than he had expected, after all it wasn’t exactly commonplace to meet a man plucked from history. The implications of being a Standard even after receiving his new shell started to sink in and he could see a flicker of doubt cross her face when it did. Mathew thought it best to just keep on talking, to show how similar he was to Novae, at least on the surface. Being unprepared made his second impression more difficult to nail than it had been with Iris, but he felt confident it could be done given her positive reaction to him. Little by little he could see her getting fascinated by the revelations, hanging on his lips to tell her more.

The general confusion of this new world had been overwhelming often, despite the simplicity it inspired, despite the help of Jasper and Iris. His Standard nature in a perfect setting had made a normal life with accepted

or taken for granted liberties impossible, until now. He warned her that regardless of the update procedure, baseline human thought process; both feeding rationale and agency, still reigned inside his mind, but as he'd hoped she didn't seem to care very much, or perhaps considered even a potentially risky individual harmless enough to deal with. As he talked she gazed at him with the sort of look that made people forget what they were talking about, rendering them spacey, indecisive and distracted. Still he carried on, and almost nothing was left untouched, but remembering Jasper's warning about keeping a low profile, Mathew decided to leave out the strange dreams and some. Concentrating on other things instead, he elaborated on what it was like awakening in a whole new world populated by next level humans, but she seemed especially interested in his time on Earth. She turned out to be a very good listener, never interrupting much except when she felt it was what he wanted, never hysterical or overenthusiastic. Even upon hearing something that managed to visibly affect her state of mind, judging by her occasionally widening eyes and opening mouth, she remained outwardly balanced and composed. He felt completely at ease with her because of that restraint of inner passion, but equally excited at being with her, filled with a sense of driven relief to be able to tear down the wall of silence around his thoughts and memories. She asked him whether the new environment felt like a good new start and he could only agree, going as far as calling it ideal. He admitted it would take time and effort to make Mars his real new home, but as things were going now he had nothing to complain, even though there was still so much to acclimate to and learn about. Sometimes Lisa hardly spoke, content to listen and provide an incidental push for Mathew to keep on telling her more. He couldn't remember talking so much about himself for this long, touching base on pretty much everything he had been through. At first he expressed optimism about his impressions of the functioning society, and the positive impact of novel technology. Gradually though, he was coaxed by her unfaltering interest into admitting some of the sorrow about what had befallen his past brethren, and the doubts about what he could offer Novae in light of his kind's legacy. He told her honestly he wasn't sure how he was meant to find his meaning within the context of it all, knowing he was basically all alone; the lone survivor of an extinct species, or at least an obsolete variant.

And so the day passed ever so quickly as their conversation intensified, and a more light-hearted closeness seeped into their interactions. Filled with moments of sympathetic sadness and other subtle marks of empathy, the first few hours came and went. Followed or interspersed by countless delicate smiles, joyful laughs and little touches—physical signs of attraction, body language talking instead of words—time appeared to either quicken, or stand still. When the evening set in she served a wonderful dinner with seasoned chopped Mito lamb, cream spinach and farfalle

pasta, accompanied with a delicious bottle of white wine. The whole stage was set for a peaceful dinner and he enjoyed the taste of liberation to the full as they each talked and listened to what the other had to tell, and they did it all while drowning in what he hoped were each other's increasingly infatuated eyes. From the way she showed affection, and how she responded to his invited equivalents, he was soon confident to learn her way of expressing love, albeit of a fledgling kind, naturally began with touch. The first little taps on his hand became the odd squeeze of his arm and culminated in a tentative hand resting on his leg. When the look in her eyes reached a certain questioning quality that hinted she was looking for just the tiniest sign he felt something for her more than mere friendship, he responded with a tentative finger brush across her face. Truthfully he was smitten with Lisa, and being with her felt as if they had known each other for ages already. The trust was implicit, the connection intense and their wavelength seemed completely in synch, and yet despite being green-lit in every way imaginable, Mathew sensed he should take it a little slow, rather jump in all too eagerly. He desired to be with her more than anything, but likewise also wanted that match to last beyond the casualness of a spontaneous fling.

Listening to some music reminiscent of early Heather Nova, they sat on the couch having a glass of bittersweet dessert wine. Lisa looked at him in a way he couldn't place exactly, partially absent as if she was processing all the information he had supplied her with. Maybe she was trying to make sense of it all, or trying first and foremost to even imagine what it must have been like to experience what it he had been through.
'I knew it in Riyath' Lisa said suddenly, 'knew there was something going on—something strange, but also enticing, pulling me in, and pushing me away in waves.'
Her lips formed a little smile as looked at him—as if studying the new him—and her scrutiny made him shyly look down at first. 'Like the tides' she added, without following his averted eyes. It only took a split second for Mathew to decide Lisa's beauty wasn't something to be scared of, and met her gaze without revealing just how tempestuous an effect she had on his emotional composure. He said nothing for a while, only waiting for her to follow-up, until it was Lisa who coyly cast her line of sight downwards, as if embarrassed by so obviously wanting him to expose his full story. Enjoying the silence in the moment that followed Mathew glanced at the window next to them into the nondescript expanse of darkness beyond. In his peripheral vision meanwhile the edge of the giant spinning wheel teased its presence, like the first brief sighting of a Chekov's gun. He redirected more of his attention to its overall shape, taking in the swathes of vagueness broken up by starkly luminous rifts. The ring was sparsely lit, but what point-based light sources had been dotted across the surface were optically elongated by the spin. The resulting squiggly line of illumination traced the pathways

crisscrossing the greenery, stretching as if time moved slowly, shining brightly like luminescent veins, but without bleeding into the pitch black sky.
'I looked a mess—wrecked beyond repair' Mathew said finally, shifting focus to admire her reflection in the large window. Time had flown by and the stars were emerging in the clear sky, dutifully painting the sources of the infinitely unknown yet comfortably familiar cosmos. She didn't speak, but instead also turned her face towards the window so the two of them could stare at the stellar bodies together, unaware of taking turns to secretly focus on each other instead. In that moment the wheels of time stopped turning, past and future forgotten or made timelessly irrelevant, allowing him a glimpse of what it could be like to live in the foreign land of the present. That pivotal moment made him feel truly alive again—made him feel strongly grounded, anchored emotionally. It went past mere physical and mental revival, which had been limited by reason and science—in spite of being awakened, reanimated, updated or integrated, actually feeling emotionally extant filled him with an indescribable feeling of happiness and of place. He touched her face with the palm of his hand, and she quietly rubbed her cheek against it like a cat. In her presence a long feeling of joy returned to him, one that since his final years on Earth and the passing of Elíse he had only been able to experience while hiding in music or the escapism of a powerful narrative. Watching a film that left you feeling abandoned afterwards, but also enchanted, and inspired—hopeful there was still much left worth experiencing. He hadn't been living on true love though; instead riding on the ersatz stimulus of its fictional varieties, indulging in the facsimile of life by delving deeply into the songs of countless others. He had learned to consume time spend alone, bridging the feelings of being empty of direction, lost on his way following the sequence of tragedies. To think this moment would never have occurred failing a decision to cheat the impetus of his half-life. He could see Lisa felt doubt simmering beneath the surface, but it was equally drowned out by the mounting happiness and a peculiar sense of closeness that should be logically reserved for long-time friends and lovers alike. Lisa smiled when Mathew opened his arms, the gesture offering an increasingly intimate closeness, and in accepting she felt the last barriers of tentative inhibition dissolve into flimsy wisps of near nothingness.
'Looking back, I already kind of fell for you from the first moment we met' Lisa murmured, leaning against him and feeling very comfortable in his arms.
'You did?'
'U-huh, I think so. When we sat on the Skydeck and talked it just clicked, even if you did look overly smug' Lisa admitted, thinking back on the particulars of his demeanour.
'I looked smug?' Mathew asked, knowing it had probably been true—a known fall-back employed to mask insecurity. He held her close.

‘Yeah, it was an act—a façade in retrospect, I know. Never mind about that. I had such a nice time with you, even though I knew something was just not right.’
‘Were you afraid of me?’
‘Not at all, just—I felt cautious, but curious to know more. Maybe I liked the gamble of taking a chance, that’s what it felt like. Afterwards I wanted to see you again and had to wait. Then you didn’t call and I was actually really sad and disappointed. You had all my data and it made me feel like such a fool for getting my hopes up.
‘I had no idea how to even share my contact information, or how to check whether I was even in the system’ Mathew admitted, and stroked her hair as she rested her head on his shoulder.
‘That’s what I figured, and how I concluded there was something odd about how the whole encounter played out.’
‘You mean, about me—the Standard factor’
‘Uhm, yes, but I figured you would explain away the oddities later, content with mostly listening to me talk for some reason. I imagined you must have liked the sound of my voice, was perhaps even taking you for a tentative introvert.’
‘You know better now don’t you?’
‘Yes, I do—very much so actually’ Lisa said, sniffing with amusement, and raised her head. Putting her nose against his she nudged the tip, wiggling it like an “Inuit hello”. Mathew noticed Lisa’s face blushed, and thought it made her look both disarmingly cute, and vulnerably open.
‘I wanted to visit far sooner, but the choice wasn’t mine.’
‘Trapped by an invisible cage, I figured as much, but your freedom—is it guaranteed now?’
‘I secured as much liberty to roam and interact as was required to visit you, the uncomfortable delay notwithstanding.’
‘Well, late or not, I am just happy you came to see me in the end’ Lisa admitted and pressed her warm soft cheek against his. She moved to sit between his legs then, fully secured in his embrace, and for a while they just held each without speaking. Mathew listened to her steady breathing, resting chin on the back of her head. Her long hair carried a lightly perfumed scent, making her smell like nothing else. Fleeting associations passed by, a crisp morning in a blooming rose garden, a holiday at the beach, a pine forest in summer time—but none of them matched her unique natural fragrance. She was sublime even in that regard, Mathew thought. After a little while longer she entangled from his arms and extended a hand to pull him up and away from the intense comfort of the sofa.
‘Come, the view is lovely tonight. Let’s have a look outside.’
They stood side by side, and she allowed him to wrap his arm around her waist.
‘You’re a little more daring than I remember you’ Lisa mentioned, tapping the hand that rested on her belly areas. Mathew chuckled in response, and

retracted his hand and stood behind her then. She looked up when he began to rub her flat tummy in circles, widening his probing scope like a blind man learning the lay of the land.
'Make that a lot more daring' she amended, without asking him to stop.
They watched the near infinite pinpricks of light shimmer across the sky, and for the first time since his conscious arrival on Mars, Mathew saw the stars were different here—more incandescent in a way, a view unspoiled by obstructions. Mathew shivered as he realised they might finally be within his reach for the first time.
'I felt a little quiver, are you cold?'
'No, not at all—just wondering how many I can visit some day is all.'
She gently squeezed his hands resting on her waist.
'Quite a dreamer you are' Lisa whispered.
She could feel Mathew simply nodded.
'Better yet, a *Stargazer*' she added, smiling as she looked at his mirror image in the window.
Upon hearing that that word a broad smile appeared on his face, showing surprise and elation.
'You are really one of a kind aren't you?' Mathew said, kissing her hair.
'True—there's only one Lisa quite like me.'
'I've always dreamed' Mathew mumbled, 'about how it happened, where it all came from. I used to be motivated by trying to figure out the grand scheme of things, and by seeing that bigger picture I often realised the insignificance of our problems and the meaning of our existence. Science and the stars both served to contextualise my perspective in a way, showing me that regardless of our faults we appeared to be unique in the visible Universe at least' Mathew explained.
'So you worked for your equivalent of SECA?'
'Yes, NASA—I wanted to create a means to pursue my dream, even though I never reached that ambition. My time and world were a poor fit, there was no place for idealism in its future, and by then the political drive was done. My plans and ideas were too much like shooting for the stars, which ironically prevent them from ever seeing the light of day even on Earth.'
'You would have made a good Leap02 member I think.'
'Yeah, part of the Exodini group, it's a shame they never called me—as far as I know. Maybe I worked on a shadow contract at some point, but I can safely say I made the leap of faith in a wholly different way.'
Lisa hesitated about what to say, but when Mathew sighed with satisfaction and looked at her with a reassuringly grand smile she knew words were very unnecessary, because he clearly felt far more in his place.
'It's getting late' he suddenly said.
It was a harmless remark that seemed to puzzle her to no end. By reputation she had likely expected a Standard man's urges to get the better of him sooner or later. Instead this one showed some restraint when clearly he was completely into her and all too ready to take it to the limit.

‘And what of it?’ she said, almost stunned to discover she might have misinterpreted his many indications of attraction. After all, most of them had been loud and clear signposts, each akin to a series of foghorns and lighthouses all working together to inundate her with magnetic allure.
‘I tend to sleep at night; call me old fashioned, but I need my eight hours, preferably in a comfortable bed rather than the floor.’
She looked at him; head cocked trying to figure out his play, wondering if the timid attitude was supposed to show he was in control of a more primal nature, perhaps to reassure her he wasn’t forcing himself upon her, that it was safe to be with him. Or—maybe he wasn’t sure whether a man should take the initiative. Could it be he was waiting for her to make a move first to avoid acting inappropriately? She would have to make him understand she wasn’t easily offended, or sensitive to social taboos for that matter, so she decided to lend him a hand by extending an invitation.
‘I have a big bed, more than one in fact.’
‘Oh, well…that’s—good.’
‘Will you stay?’
‘Yes I will, unless it’s too soon—I mean, only if you’re sure.’
She was certain now he wasn’t rejecting her, far from it, but wanted to let her dictate the pace, and the forking road to whatever base he assumed came next.
‘I’ve never been surer about anything. I feel like I've known you for months already. Maybe the time we've been apart since meeting strengthened the connection?’
‘Like a rubber band bouncing back to ease tension.’
He still hadn’t taken the bait. Lisa decided to open the door for him point blank, take it or leave it—all bets were on.
‘Are you playing hard to get, or do you really not want to spend the night together?’
‘Are you crazy?’
‘Nope, you'd be though if you leave me now. Who knows, I might slip through your fingers if you let me out of your sight again.’
‘I'd have to hold you first.’
‘Look at you, such as smart Alec.’
He felt as if he'd bet everything and lost by having said something stupid, killing the momentum of where this exchange could lead to, filled as it was with the tension of anticipated intimacy and maybe more. She in turn was beginning to know when to let him off the hook, and when to reel him back in. She let him cook for a bit, enjoying the masquerade of an imposing ego poised for courtship crumble to reveal the real man beneath. The one she had decided she liked since meeting, and liked even a lot more from the moment he’d offered her a playlist.
‘Well I tend to be overconfident close to a catch' he said, coasting on his wit to keep the dance going in lieu of both practice and talent. Her laugh sounded like something between a scoff and a snort, which he hoped was a

good omen. He knew soon enough, because she knew then he was waiting for her to make the first real move. Maybe out of respect than out of fear, or lack of self-assurance—Lisa would have to lead this dance after he had started it off. Looking at him with those deep purple eyes, the windows into her heart and soul pulled him in like a lagoon in paradise. He stood as if paralysed, frozen in the moment.
‘I think you'll stay' she said, and quickly kissed him on his lips to seal the deal.
‘That was nice’ he managed, surprised by what he could've seen coming from miles away.
‘Well, well, well—high praise for little effort.’
‘I also tally up the thoughts and emotions behind the gesture.’
She shook his head, the palms of her hands covering her forehead. ‘You are truly different breed, I'll give you that. Want another one?’
‘Yes please.’
‘Then shut up and kiss me back this time.’
He obliged on both accounts—smartly foregoing his vain attempts at being charming—and so the first real kiss they shared was both lovely, and almost everlasting.

After a while Mathew did his McConaughey “alright, alright, alright” before telling her that, in truth, there was nothing he wanted more than to stick around a while longer.’
‘Like you had to tell me that, using words’ Lisa gingerly teased.
‘Am I that obvious?’
‘Yes, or actually no—maybe, but to be fair I’ve also been a libertine by not exactly concealing my usual tells.’
‘True, though you could just have been a player acting by routine.’
‘What’s the matter, having second thoughts about trusting me?’
‘Never, but you just make it look so easy.’
‘The marque of fatal attraction, lull your prey into a false sense of security.’
‘I don’t mind being hunted by the likes of you.’
‘Don’t worry’ Lisa said, ‘I’ll be gentle.’
‘And as for me’ Mathew promised, ‘well—I’ll bite softly.’

*

Stripping down to his stretchy blue boxer shorts Mathew watched Lisa coolly undress down to her own undies; a loose fitting silken white string top that kept her riff exposed, and a velvet red Brazilian slip. They were in bed together soon after, cuddling, gently kissing, but both equally distracted by an unexpected turbulence of thoughts and feelings.
‘Mathew, I—’ she said and stopped.
‘What is it Lisa?’

‘It’s nothing, or maybe everything. You told me so much about yourself already, but I realise you were barely scratching the surface. You don’t seem like the kind of man who needs someone to take care of you, but I want you to know that I‘ll be here for you.’
A few silent seconds passed.
‘You’ll watch my back?’
‘Something like that yes’ Lisa said, unsure of what he had surmised actually conveyed.
‘Will you stay with me after today too?’ she asked out of the blue then, and slowly put her hand on his face. Not completely happy with how that question had come out Lisa decided it best to stop asking them for a bit. She didn’t want to imply he needed anyone to thrive, but on the other hand she wanted to tell him he didn’t have to be alone while learning how to do so. With a little start Lisa then realised meeting Mathew had suddenly made her feel so very young again, as if she’d reverted to being an adolescent in love for the first time. She thought about the many things Mathew had told her about today, and having taken it all in she was processing much of it belatedly. To be confronted with so much new information quite so quickly had made Lisa a little less confident in her ability to properly express intentions. By consequence she felt uncharacteristically nervous, like an uneasy element of risk was involved. The risk of loss, or gain—their moments together constituting a gamble that could either pay off in spades of happiness, or cause disappointment and suffering in the long run—as relationships did even today. Mathew noticed the hesitation on her face and was oddly glad that the sensation of being a little nervous and anxious was mutual. He also hoped those doubts were offset by a similarly turbulent cloud of butterflies as was creating havoc in his own stomach. Mathew understood how she felt, and seeing that he did relieved Lisa, making the anxiety slip away to make room for unadulterated bliss. Mathew gently cupped her cheeks and kissed her before any further words could be spoken, and time stood still as they responded to each other—like lovers do.
They tenderly explored each other’s body then, Mathew stroking her belly, moving up to her breasts underneath the silky top all the while still kissing her. Lisa was a little more specifically curious, and tiptoeing down with her fingers like a hand on a mission, she nonchalantly slipped into his underpants to touch the whole package underneath.
‘You’re not one to waste time are you?’ he said.
‘Just checking if you’re fully equipped is all.’
‘And what is the result of this unannounced inspection?’
‘All parts present and accounted for, but rest assured you can hang on to it for the time being.’
‘Decreased libido?’
‘More like I had my fill of playing with myself this week in particular—you know, to satisfy those womanly needs, but without the hassle of a partner.’

‘Oh sure I know.’
‘Do you think you also know me?’
‘I know you’re both sweet and caring, but—’
‘But what, tell me?’
‘Unabashedly sizzling I guess covers it.’
‘Sure I can be hot—if I’m with the right person. Maybe you trigger me, push my buttons the right way.’
‘Do I turn you on?’
‘Maybe you do, a little.’
‘Let’s see if I can finds some more buttons down there to dial it up a notch.’
‘Oh yes, *let’s*!’ she yelped when he tickled her sides.
Finally showing he was playing to win he edged on top of her expertly and started to kiss her.
‘That's nice’ she mumbled.
‘High praise, for—’ he began, but she shushed him with a finger to the mouth.
‘Don't stop, more action, less talk.’
‘Conversation like television set on honeymoon—unnecessary!’ Mathew stated.
‘What now?’ She laughed. ‘Gosh you're weird, thank goodness for that touch’ Lisa added, wondering what she'd gotten herself into with this oddball. Those stray thoughts quickly drifted off as she felt his tongue and lips explore more of her body. Unperturbed by her ticklish giggles Mathew kissed her neck first, then lifted up her top to work her breasts, softly kissing his way down to her waistline, and ending on her knickers. She was warm and responded with a sigh as he lingered, nudging her pubic zone through the fabric with the tip of his nose. He traced the contours of her bellybutton with his tongue. Then she pulled up his head making him look at her gleeful but earnest face.
‘I like your innie’ he said stupidly as she held his face close to his.
‘Thank you, I’d like you to know that I'm also fully equipped.’
‘I figured I’d find out—bikini line included, I’m very curious.’
There pause, the silence before a storm.
‘I peg you for a Brazilian wax, or maybe a strip, although—’ Mathew jabbered before hushed again. She asked him then, her voice hoarse, laden with the pull of anticipation
‘You want me?’
In hushed tones he replied, eagerly, and with futilely attempted restraint.
‘Yeah, I do.’
The smile on her face was dreamy, drunk with wanting; her perfect eyes intoxicated by the anticipation of another first time with someone new—someone she felt was special
‘Okay—then take me.’
He came up to kiss her parted lips and with eyes closed she slid down his shorts ever so smoothly, tracing his buttocks with her nails and fingertips as

she did, and even brazenly squeezing both cheeks. She opened her eyes and knew from his expression he would gladly allow her naughty streak to further emerge at some point. Lisa helpfully lifted her riff then—arching her back to allow him to easily slide off her velvet slip—and raised her legs, only settling back after the flimsy bit cloth had cleared her ankles. He threw it away with such scallywag casualness it made her chuckle.
‘Let's see if this is still as good as I remember it can be’ Mathew announced.
‘It's always good if you're with someone you like, or might just be falling in love with’ Lisa whispered in reply, and languidly wrapped her legs around him.
‘Then I'm sure.’
‘About what?’ she gasped breathlessly, already feeling him move inside her; indulging in the act, embracing him with both arms.
‘That with you—Lisa Mantell Connolly—it'll be absolutely fabulous.’
She bit her lips, feeling drunk on puppy love.
He softly bit her nipples, already mad about her.
Yes it was fabulous darling, and absolutely so.

*

Mathew lay in bed, arms softly wrapped around Lisa. She was already asleep, but thoughts kept him from leaving the realm of consciousness. Just as real as she was here with him, the whole evening had appeared like a memory to him. Past events with Lisa stood between the existent world and his fantasy, a fantasy that made him break out, one that set him free. An unnerving feeling crept up on him, a feeling that all this was just too good to be true. If you’ve never tasted the bitter, you’ll never really appreciate the sweet, but what if you’ve tasted bitter for so long, it’s become something of a granted way of life. Years of swimming against the accepted current without much in the way of success had made him cynical and jaded. His way of doing things were based on strong principles and rooted in idealism, but all he had to show for it had been a few admittedly good friends, but sadly a legion of enemies as well. During his last minute on Earth the wide-eyed innocence of Childhood had seemed further away than he had ever imaged possible, but this day might be the one that would help turn him around and rediscover that spark of wonder and enjoyment. Time was already on his side, as now was Lisa. With that last thought in mind he softly kissed her cheek and closed his eyes. Trust didn’t come easy for him, but henceforth he would certainly try his best to overcome the need to verify.

Silent running

In the morning he woke up with Lisa's head lying snugly on his chest. Somewhere close by a window had automatically opened to bring a breath of fresh air into the house. All things considered it felt like a typical Saturday morning at first, rather like the ones he used to enjoy in his New York City penthouse apartment, although with one improvement to that scenario. Her presence was flowing from his senses back into his acute awareness, and only then did the realisation dawn upon him where he was, and more importantly—with whom. To his amusement Lisa was still asleep, making for a nice change of pace in getting a head start to the day ahead. Elíse would always be up about way before he'd even reluctantly open his eyes, which had always made him feel a bit abandoned when waking up. She'd be hanging around the house, or outside and would have usually made him a light breakfast and most importantly some coffee. Without coffee there was no starting the day, and the ritual of indulging in its necessity still constituted the sole spiritual moment he had ever acknowledged. Lisa's head was bobbing up and down in the rhythm of his breath as his thoughts flashed back to a few random quirks regarding his late wife. Elíse had been a night and morning person in equal measure, requiring almost no sleep—contrary to himself, who had always needed an awful lot of shuteye to be able to do anything during his effectively shorter days—and in hindsight her much increased daily credit of waking hours almost felt as if she had been precognitively compensating for her early notoriously passing. The disorganised wisps of reminiscence made him rueful and as he felt himself slipping away into a snooze, Mathew blinked twice to shake off the mental ramblings before they got the chance to turn into a potent dream. Well and truly awake then Mathew decided to see if he could fix up something to eat.

Carefully untangling himself from Lisa's arms, he gently put her head on the pillow and started to make his way to the kitchen while she seemed to be content with just murmuring a little. Miraculously, there was a recognisable coffee machine, or at least something that looked like it and after a few of Data's handy instructions, no machine conceivable could pose a problem anymore in terms of getting it to work. There were quite a few things to figure out to do what he had in mind, but no worries, he said to himself. Feeling rather proud of his achievement and relieved the thing hadn't made him spaghetti instead, he had managed to fix up freshly arrived bread, croissants, cheese and ham, together with coffee and orange juice. He put the tray on a small table near the floor bed and crouched down to wake Lisa up. Without realising it, she had been following him around, still a bit sleepy but very much awake to appreciate the ludicrous effort he'd gone through, as assumed by his own standards. When Mathew saw Lisa had awakened he came forward to slightly tap her nose.

‘Look at you—awake already, the pretty sleepyhead’ Mathew noted.
‘I’m awake at exactly the right time. Don’t you know the earliest bird does all the work?’
‘Oh you mean this?’ Mathew said, pointing at the tray, ‘that’s not free; I want payment.’
‘And what would you have me pay with?’
‘A little jump is all I ask for, just the tiniest start’ he said, and unexpectedly poked her side, which made her jump and cry out. Fully upright in bed now a slightly indignant expression formed on her face.
‘So you’re the poking kind are you? This is turning out to be a very informative morning.’
‘This is actually a morning where you’ll find out how good room service is likely to stay if you behave’ Mathew countered solemnly, having unexpected fun issuing words of wisdom.
‘Do we need breakfast at all?’ she asked quizzically in a way that made him unsure of she was pulling his leg.
‘Um, you do actually have breakfast?’ Mathew asked, logically unsure what her eating rhythm was owing to a lack of observational precedent. She peered alongside him, saw the croissants and broadly smiled, like a mouse having successfully dug its way into to a cheese store.
‘Never mind, I see you’ve outdone yourself’ Lisa stated appreciatively. Then she stretched elaborately and yawned loudly, but after she’d finished her routine—which had often demanded at least some attention from past lovers—Lisa noticed Mathew looked a little absentminded.
‘Hey what’s wrong here—deep thoughts again so soon? Don’t tell me you’re having “morning after” regrets—because you shouldn’t’ Lisa told him, spreading her arms wide to invite him back to bed with her. He shook his head and hopped back in bed with her. They cuddled for a bit, half snoozing together for another precious few minutes. Mathew was combing his fingers through her ruffled hair as he distractedly thought about the coffee getting cold, and feeling conflicted about his momentary priorities. Sensing he wasn’t really there with her Lisa she poked his sides and appreciatively watched him both yelp and jump even more intensely as she had.
‘Well this is ironically interesting; you can’t stand tickling either can you?’ Lisa said, her face displaying such a childishly naughty expression it made Mathew laugh and pick up a pillow.
‘Choose your bedroom weapon and prepare to lose because I am the master of such battles’ Mathew warned, striking an impressive pose crouched on the bed. Lisa accepted the challenge and soon they had forgotten about breakfast to instead playfully fool around. After only a short fight Mathew yielded, unable to withstand the fearsome tickling techniques Lisa was employing like a weapon of great precision.
‘No more, please’ Mathew pleaded, tears of laughter running down his reddened face.

‘I remain champion of the bedroom Battle Royale’ Lisa announced, promptly collecting her victory prize by sitting on top of his belly. It offered him no way of escape or retreat and the sight would have been pretty hilarious for an uninvolved outsider. Lisa’s hair was such a dishevelled mess now, strands hanging in front of her face which she tried and failed to blow aside. Looking at each they both light-heartedly laughed. She wildly shook her head as if that would untangle the mess, which obviously didn’t help one iota, but managed to make it even worse. Resigned she would have to shower to undo the bird’s nest look they gazed at each other eye to eye for a moment, her own cheeks only slightly blushing from all the frolicking. Before he could say anything, charming or not, Lisa bent over to meet Mathew’s face. He used his free hands to clear a way through the tousle of bond locks and received a passionate closing kiss shutting him up. She rolled to his side, allowing him to get a good look at her naked body. Lisa was more ideally flawless than Mathew believed he could have even imagined—her long smooth athletic legs, her healthily slim figure, and her perky breasts all conspiring to prove her perfection by staring him in the face, almost begging him to take the bait. Yet before Mathew was allowed to be swept away by another potential magic hour of lovemaking, Lisa abandoned the bed with tremendous fervour to attack the pastry he’d brought her at last. Only after Mathew suggestively coughed did Lisa reluctantly share the second one.
‘I think I found a potential weakness, your Achilles’ heel so to speak’ Mathew joked.
‘I can be bribed with croissants—it’s all true’ Lisa mumbled, her mouth still full of chomped croissant. He laughed and drank his coffee, setting next to her on the side of the bed.
‘We could share a shower to make up for your greed’ Mathew hopefully suggested a little later.
‘Excellent, that’ll also give me a chance to fix my hair. How about we do that quickly, and then go for a walk?’ she offered, shattering his aforementioned hopes. Finishing her orange juice Lisa assuredly placed the glass on the table and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Following her earlier unreserved stretching and yawning Mathew subconsciously took this latest gesture to be another tell-tale that Lisa’s interior attractively mismatched with her exterior. Despite boasting archetypical feminine looks, Lisa appeared to actually be more boyish type of girl in spirit than she’d previously let on. He rather liked the low key attitude, and the unforced lifestyle it could well represent.
‘That’s a good plan, I’d like that’ Mathew said, adjusting his mental plans, ‘but I’d like to go somewhere quiet if it’s all the same to you.’
‘I know just the kind of place you seek, and it’s closer than you might think.
‘You do—what is it, and where?’
She pointed to the spinning massive wheel outside.

‘We’re going *there—on it?*’ Mathew asked, half smiling with excited keenness, yet equally concerned about the hazards, dangers, and resulting accidents that could befall him.
‘Yes, it’s a park—the Ring Garden.’
‘Wow, okay—and somehow we’ll go…on it?’
‘That about sums it up yes’ Lisa said chuckling, ‘did you ever go into a centrifuge at your space job—to train for G-forces?’
He shook his head with resound conviction. ‘Oh no, that’s for astronauts only! Some of those systems subjected them to upwards of six G’s I believe. I never got into the program, so was never tortured in the Aerotrim.
‘Is that what they called the Spinner?’
‘No that’s the three axis gimbal used in tandem with the Spinner, but thankfully I never ended up in one of those either. Incidentally, why do you ask?’ he said, becoming worried what her line of enquiry portended. She dismissively waved his question away.
‘I’m sure you’re the kind of man that plans every adventure ahead, someone who wants to know things in advance—I am right?’
‘Well…’
‘Precisely, but today you’ll just have to allow yourself to be surprised’ she said and already pulled him along to the shower to get that business out of the way first.
‘You assume a lot about me, you know that’ he said, having no choice but to follow her lead.
‘But am I right?’ she asked again, turning.
‘Uhm, sure—to a certain degree I guess’ Mathew reluctantly conceded, ‘but I did risk coming here’ he hastily added, after what amounted to his quickest pause for reflection ever.
‘You feel as if you risked everything just to arrive right here and now, with me?’
‘What else could it be?’
Lisa folded her arms. ‘Maybe I lured you in across time and space—all Siren like, eluding your free will’ she said, bending forward to taunt him, but thankfully refraining from making a duckface.
‘You set a trap—is that what you’re saying?’
‘Yeah, kinda—with a little help’ Lisa hinted, ‘of the wheels of fate turning by my command.’
‘Okay, again sure, so then what happened?’ Mathew dutifully asked.
She tutted in a way that felt tantalising to him rather than annoying. ‘Well dear boy, I’d say you sprung it gloriously.’
‘Fantastic then, you did a great job with those wheels. Meanwhile though, I just really hope I make it through the day’ Mathew said.
‘Stay close to me and you might’ Lisa told him, pushing him into the shower. Watching her body glisten under the stream of hot water, Mathew happily considered that he would at least carry the first memory of soaping up Lisa’s naked body for a little while longer.

AI NARRATOR MARKER [DROIDS]

And that's my cue to rewind a little to get you up to speed on this remarkable place that Lisa called her home. I represent the triad of drones from Silent Running; we are Dewey, Huey, and Louie. Yes, all together in harmony, and still very much in synch with all things floral.

Now then, as previewed upon Mathew's arrival, the overall structure inside of which they now resided held suspended in the sky one momentous wheel; the Ring. As luck would have it the view on said Ring from Lisa's apartment was absolutely breathtaking (or so we're told). The Ring structure offered an inner surface area roughly the size of NY Manhattan, complete with fields of grass, modestly sized areas of cultured forest and even a permeating body of water. In fact, the small lake sprouted an equivalently miniature delta system, as one end connected to the other via multiple streams looping the ring circumference. The design was not dissimilar to Central Park, albeit more refined and larger in scope. This tiny Ring worldlet was held aloft by the aforementioned mighty dual Pylons, which also provided the motive power to the spin axis. During its construction the meandering lake bed had been filled with water, the Ring having already been spun up to provide the artificial gravity of centrifugal force. It had been a remarkable feat of engineering which had necessitated the connection of a giant external reservoir that could pump water in and detach after fulfilling its sole function, rather like a primary rocket stage, or a mid-air refuelling nozzle. Building materials had been slingshot into spin alongside the inner lining, while all floras had simply been grown from planted seeds after final gyration had engaged. Within the inner mesh structure of the Pylons myriad apartments had been nested afterwards, their collective name dubbed *Overlook Halo*. Every apartment, each occupying an entire floor, offered spectacular views on the Ring, but Lisa's domicile was a little special in its own right by being situated at the top of one Pylon, and closest to the axis rod supporting the Ring. The elongated windowpanes of every apartment spun all around the Pylon like rounded bands of Hyperglass, providing a spectacular view of the sector on one side, and even more breathtaking ones on the Ring and of course the adjacent Pylon.

Alright, so we usually make do with such qualitative descriptions, but in this case we'll make an exception by adding some numbers just for the heck of it. You know, for Earthly context and all.

The dual Pylon skyscrapers each stood eight hundred and twenty-five meters tall, and bridging the space between them a single one hundred and twenty metre long axis—interconnected by millions of barely visible Hyperglass spokes—served to hold the giant Ring aloft.

To actually enter the Ring garden entailed the use of a very special kind of elevator, which departed from the Pylon bridging axis. From the access station visitors could board one of four transparent elevators, which connected to the inner Ring through a dedicated Hyperglass tube, one for each cross-divided corner of the garden. Of course it meant passengers had to be cocooned tightly into an acceleration couch, as the lifts themselves tumbled and pivoted to match orientation for departures and arrivals. The g-forces endured during such manoeuvres and while moving up and down the tubes were considered part of the fun, and provided a little taste of what was to be experienced on the Ring proper. Demonstrating the pinnacle of FibreSteel forge manufacturing, only the most jaded of souls could likely take their eyes off the herculean efforts its presence represented, while all the rest would bask in the splendour of its otherworldly dimensions. The Ring itself for instance boasted a diameter measuring just shy of sixteen hundred meters, resulting in a circumference ranging a smidgen over five kilometres, which meant one could walk the long way round—from its spinning inner start, back to the very same finish point—in nary an hour, provided of course one didn't take the meandering scenic route along the one hundred and ten metre width.

Got all that? You don't? Well then, I do find your lack of imagination disturbing. Let's see, how about this: picture an upside down unicycle with the saddle and steps both removed. Okay, the Pylons are the fork, the Ring is the wheel. You're welcome (but know you've ruined this for me).

Returning to the here and now Mathew walks the perimeter of Hyperglass. He appreciates the awe inspiring views, his sights first resting on the majority of the Ring's planescape, then shifting to the surrounding lands, stretching as far as the naked eye can see. Lisa enthusiastically shows him around the rest of place on this maiden visit, boasting somewhat about her home-based Cimar development lab. Unbeknownst to Mathew, bespoke sections of the apartment have fully transparent vista walls that partially extend into the floor. As these segments overarch the exterior building's edge they effectively form a closed-off terrace space. Confronted for the first time with this protrusion, Mathew nears with no small amount of trepidation. It mystifyingly appears to him as if a giant hole has been punched into the living space's anteroom. After tapping the tip of his shoe into the open space, merely to investigate the nature of this local enigma he assures himself, Mathew senses the reassuring solidity of seamless Hyperglass. As reason trumps fear he takes a small leap of faith into what the mind perceives as thin air, yielding a moment of sheer panic and glee. He lands on the invisible surface, smiling in discovery, but as quickly distracted his thoughts turn mesmerised. The spinning Halo dominates the outlook, commanding all attention as it now majestically asserts itself even closer before him, striking with awe.

End of optional transmission
[Signal origin: Silent Running]

Once inside the hollow axis on the way to the Ring entry vehicle, Lisa tried to convince Mathew the access routine was perfectly safe.
'I honestly don't have the desire to be updated quite as soon as this.'
'Don't be a baby, you'll be happy you took the chance in but a moment—you'll see' Lisa said patting his head.
'I can't believe I'm being patted on the head' Mathew said and rolled his eyes.
'You deserve it.'
'What's going to happen to us in here?' he said, studying the tumbling drum above them.
'We have to shoot up the access tube to get on the ring.'
'And what if I change my mind?'
'Well once on the way there's no turning back until our arrival capsule switches orientation for a return trip' Lisa said, squeezing Mathew's hand in encouragement. He was shown to a body shielding contraption reminiscent of an exoskeleton control seat. Carefully climbing in he felt like an old test pilot being pushed to fly a prototype jet plane one more time just before his retirement.
'This will be—a little intense' Lisa told him, as the mechanised crash couch closed up flexing, its many parts flexibly shaping itself around him until it hugged his body like a suit.
'This is insane. I have a very bad feeling about this' Mathew said, looking up at the massive revolving FibreSteel drum again, the colossus that dwarfed their presence from above like a super star destroyer hoovering right above its target. It was daunting to see through its Hyperglass roof, the continuously refreshed top area of the spinning Ring cast in shadow with the sun at its current apex position.
'It'll be very beautiful once we're there, don't worry about it—and try to be a big boy' Lisa said. Mathew swallowed as the capsule tumbled forward a little and then moved into one of the tubes after it had matched both rotation speed and orientation. The impact on his body was immense.
'First I can't be a baby, now even being a little boy is off the table?' Mathew sputtered.
'Hold your breath' Lisa said, 'it probably helps.'
'Probably—is that the best you can do?' Mathew
'Very likely then' Lisa inattentively revised, focussing on working the launch controls instead.
'We will not survive this' Mathew quietly moaned.
'A little faith in the cannonball run please' Lisa said, sounding giddy by contrast, like a child looking forward to her favourite fairground ride.

‘It’s not the structural integrity of the insertion process I’m worried about, but being subjected to the whims of its triple forces’ Mathew droned as if the sky was to fall on his head.
‘You figured that out did you?’ Lisa said, grinning like a scoundrel would.
‘Oh yeah, acceleration, centrifugal, and gravity—it’s a lot to be flung into.’
‘But surely my man can deal with some extreme Gs?’ Lisa pouted, but before he could answer she winked and hit the release button. In the split second of last remaining motionlessness that followed Mathew realised he liked the sound of hearing her say “my man” even if it was in a mocking context. Immediately thereafter he was violently pushed against the backrest making him forget about everything except surviving. The capsule had suddenly accelerated to cross the gap as fast as possible, lowering the time during which passengers would simultaneously experience wildly shifting gravitational and centrifugal forces. They crossed the eight hundred metres in mere seconds, and so long before Mathew could grow even more concerned about dying all over again they already arrived, the strongly breaking capsule coming to a halt with nary a small bump downplaying their erstwhile terminal velocity. Much to his relief Mathew presumed the journey was over only to be surprised once again by the capsule revolving one-eighty degrees to align with the inner surface of the Ring. Only upon hearing the pressure valves doing their jobs of releasing his personal containment couch did Mathew realise this was well and truly the end of the access ride. After taking a deep breath, he took Lisa’s extended hand and carefully stepped out, a little nauseous in the stomach and wobbly due to the unnatural blend of forces he’d been subjected to so abruptly. He stood waiting for the dizziness to pass, and hardly took note of the surroundings.
‘You okay?’ Lisa asked quizzically as the hatch of the capsule closed behind them. Four people, perhaps other tenants or external visitors, were on already board for the return trip and in greeting she gave them a little wave. It had apparently taken some time for Mathew to collect himself
‘Yes, I think I am, or will be’ Mathew said, knowing he would only have to adjust to gravity and centrifugal forces from this moment on, instead of the fluctuating and spiking combination including the acceleration he had just endured in the capsule. Holding back the onset of a hurl as their part of the ring was now moving downward towards the planetary surface, Mathew felt his confidence markedly decrease. The added body weight and shifting momentum wreaked havoc on all the organs in his torso. Despite the mild gravity on Mars, it was enough to cause bouts of intense nausea. Like a seasick person on a boat he tried to breathe carefully and regarded the interior surface as a reference point, while ignoring the spin dizzy world outside. It didn’t take as long as he thought, but his efforts hadn’t gone unnoticed.
‘Are you feeling alright?’ Lisa asked, frowning as Mathew swallowed carefully.

‘The forces and shifting perspective are taking their toll, and I’m still working through our arrival routine’ Mathew explained, puffing and heaving.
‘Was it really that bad?’
‘It was, and the gyrating isn’t doing me any favours. It’s not bothering you?’
‘Not so much no. I usually have fun’ she softly replied, feeling bad for him now.
‘The benefits of being upgraded no doubt’ he panted, steadying himself by holding her shoulder.
‘Goodness, I thought they would have enhanced your physical tolerance capacity with the update. I’m sorry, I should have asked instead of teasing you. Will you be okay?’
‘Yeah so was a direct copy effort, otherwise, I’m still mostly vanilla.’
Lisa smacked her forehead. ‘What was I thinking, I feel so silly! Here—hold on to my arm and just take in the air; trust me It’ll do you good.’
‘If you say so’ Mathew said, inhaling deeply.
‘If it doesn’t get better fast promise me you’ll say so and we’ll leave right away’ Lisa said and walked with him into the reception area separating the entrance proper from the intra-transport system.
‘I promise, but after going through that ordeal you can’t blame me for wanting to see what all the fuss is about. Plus, it’s getting better all the time.
‘And you’d like to postpone the return process for a bit isn’t that so’ Lisa deduced knowingly.
‘You got me there’ Mathew admitted, his voice trailing off as he witnessed the sights before him, the splendour of it all washing away most of inconveniencing troubles. Taking it all in Mathew swiftly concluded the landmark was more than worth the discomfort to witness in person. From the outside perspective he hadn’t been able to properly make out the details before on account of its rapid spin. Now that they stood on the inside however—travelling along just as fast as the internal scenery was rotating—it represented as a place of extraordinary beauty, one that felt completely natural on one hand, yet unbelievable unreal on the other.
‘Tada—a Spark’ Lisa said playfully, but Mathew remained speechless as his eyes traced the entire curving surface around them.
‘Well? Lisa lamely asked after some time passed.
‘It’s astonishing’ Mathew managed to utter, his head tracking all-around, his eyes tracing the many landscape details strewn across the surface, some verging on the inconceivable. In payment for his trying efforts then, Mathew was treated to a mesmerising view encompassing such gems as elaborate green fields, flowering cherry blossom trees, dwarf oaks and an encircling delta system of streams interspersed by modestly sized lakes. Between the lavish settings of nature, a multitude of pathways was spread out over hills and flatlands, bridging the water streams and coasting besides it on boardwalks. Benches and tables adorned the scenery as well, while picnic spots likewise offered places of tranquillity next to the glittering water underneath the tentative shade of young trees, or on sloped lawns

surrounded by shrubberies and bushes. Raising his head to admire the sky—or rather the other end of the Ring Garden—Mathew admired the defining characteristic making this dream oasis so spectacular. The fact that one could behold the inner biosphere running for three-sixty degrees all around was impressive to the point it left him breathless. The outside world could be seen madly spinning through the transparent sides and roof, which had been logically installed to prevent being literally blown away by the crosswinds that would have otherwise razed the entire surface. Walking around the insides of a giant centrifuge wasn't something Mathew had ever imagined doing, and now that the discomfort was wearing off, on no small part owing to the distraction of such magnificence, he was enjoying it to no end. The air inside the Ring, the local atmosphere entrapped within the Hyperglass cover, felt somehow out of the ordinary. Unusually refreshing and relaxing, there was an ever so slight breeze that carried a hint of warmth, as well as the pervasive scent of blossom and freshly chopped wood. The sensation of Mathew's perfect holiday sentiment was conveyed by the zephyr, associations coming alive of spring days where everything seemed wonderfully perfect. He reminisced of going for a walk in Central Park, sitting down to read a book, occasionally looking up to watch people play ball. Then later, when the sun would start to set he'd enjoy a lovely dinner looking out over the cityscape. Mathew took a deep breath and felt more relaxed already—comfortably numb even. Seeing Mathew excitedly looking up and around the impossible made real, Lisa had smiled before joining him in taking a few deep breaths.

'This puts all the combined parks and roller coaster rides of old Earth to shame' Mathew finally said, and pulling up their held hands he kissed Lisa fingers. She put her arm around him.

'Is the air making you feel better?' Lisa asked, rubbing his back. It was a rhetorical question that prompted a rhetorical reply.

'I don't know—is it?'

The answer made her laugh. 'Yes, because it's laced with trace amounts of relaxants. They normally also reduce what residual nausea even some true Novae might have to deal with when arriving here, especially the first time 'round. But part of the idea of this Spark is to train mental control over the body, stimulating it to find tranquillity and balance even under a moderate degree of physical duress.'

'Aha, so that's the secret of this little magical kingdom under the wings of Utopia.'

'Yup, the wonders of biochemistry at work to spoil the mystery.'

'Even without the benefit of hallucinogens, this place is nothing short of a miracle.'

'Thank you, I found that a little seclusion always goes a long way' Lisa whispered.

'Wait a minute' Mathew abruptly asked, pulling her sideways to look at her head-on, 'did you design this?' He realised then he had sounded sceptical,

as if this mega project having once been her brainchild embodied an incredulous notion.
‘Well, don’t be so surprised’ Lisa said, rightfully delivered with the most subtle of scornful intonations. ‘I submitted the concept over forty years ago to Cloud Atlas and Tyrell. Not the technical design mind you, I’ve always preferred generating ideas and coding rather than managing construction.’
‘Well I’m hugely impressed with your imagination and the details of its execution. If your games are even half as good as this I’ll be in for a treat when I get to play one’ Mathew said, hoping the compliment would offset his slightly condescending earlier remark.
‘Trust me they’re out of this world, and I hereby insist you’ll beta play my newest crowning achievement. When you do, it’ll feel like being transported to the Land of Oz’ Lisa boasted, taking his arm as they confidently began their walk along the yellow brick road.

After meandering around the long and winding roads strewn across the surface of the Ring for close to forty minutes they reached the midpoint. Mathew looked straight up at Lisa's behest and squinting he could just about make out the arrival point. Mathew had grown somewhat accustomed to the forces badgering his body, but if he shifted his gaze to the view outside of the Ring's interior he was overcome with nausea almost instantly. The Pillar of autumn and its spring both rotated rapidly—relatively speaking from their perspective—and so did the landscape alongside; the ground, and the sky tumbling over and over around the division line of the horizon. He imagined the experience was like being subjected to gyration in space while being prone to extreme sea sickness, due to the added effects of gravitational forces compounding the centrifugal effect. As the onset sickness came rushing back in like rolling thunder Mathew quickly looked down at his feet again, and at the fixed and steady motionless ground they were standing on, again relatively speaking. Fighting to regain his inner sense of homeostasis he cursed himself for making the rookie mistake of proverbially looking down when prior evidence showed how that would turn out. Taking deep breaths he gestured Lisa to take a break with him on a nearby bench positioned at right angles to spinward direction. Sitting down carefully they overlooked almost two-seventy degrees of the ring when craning their necks behind as far as possible while looking completely up. He slowly panned down his viewpoint as if filming the scene as a vertical panorama as framed by the Ring's left and right perimeter in glorious Panavision. Exhaling slowly through his mouth Mathew considered it as good a time as any to call upon a distraction. And what better way to kill some time, not to mention his nausea, than to ask Lisa about her biggest passion; the Existenz-Rekall Hypergame. Perhaps the deed would be tantamount to opening Pandora's Box of Hypergaming—cursing him forevermore plagued by incomprehensible swarms of technicalities—but at

the moment he'd rather feel like an inundated n00b than feel quite so acutely aware of his stomach simply itching to relieve itself of breakfast.

‘Being the best game maker in the world’ he began to tickle her sense of pride, ‘I bet you can tell me all about what’s involved in your recipe for success.’
‘Are you stalling for time spent sitting down by masquerading as someone with a vested interest in my pastime, or are you genuinely asking out of curiosity?’ Lisa asked, eying him sideways.
Mathew blinked, but wasn’t going to let her outstanding ability to see right through him get in the way of prolonging their recuperative break.
‘Yes—a bit of both.’
‘Fair enough, I’ll tell you about the basics and if you want to know more we can take it from there. I’ve made Sims in past, including tutorials for F-Zero SSR, but I soon transitioned to the full immersion type of game. The experience I’m working on now, and hope to finish the coming months in fact, is a Hypergame.’
‘And what’s a Hypergame?’
‘It’s immersion based, with the entry levels encompassing more of the sensorium in every additional tier, the pinnacle of which also includes directing cognition to stimulate mental scenario’s to subsist with the appropriate senses being triggered to synchronise with the projected world.’
‘Okay so the system controls an increasing partition of the player’s perception and awareness with every tier?’ Mathew asked, finding the prospect both fascinating and more than a little frightening given how it manipulated the very foundation of one’s link to reality.
‘That’s right’ Lisa replied, evidently pleased Mathew got on fast, ‘the apex tier creates reminiscence of being and interacting, hence the moniker “Existenz-Rekall” to convey remembrance of simulated interactive experiences. The ER-Hypergames are completely immersive in its fictional scenario to all the internal wiring of the senses while bypassing the actual organs normally involved in triggering such neural responses’ Lisa said,
‘As in, the sense of smell won’t actually be triggered through those?’
‘Yes exactly, and neither will be the ears and eyes be involved in projecting sound and vision. The mind directly perceives the entire palette of being consciously extant, and receives stimuli on top of that to present options that query for choices to be made in parallel.’
‘And all of this happens while being completely severed from the stimuli and awareness of actual reality during those sessions? Mathew asked, sensing the implications taking shape.
‘Indeed, so you can imagine it involves a great deal of trust to be subjected to such a deep dive into another world. For those who feel the full works are a bit too much to handle or prefer to get used to idea of surrendering increasing amounts of control there are also diluted experiences. Reduced

levels of severance can even be issued at the apex tier of ER, allowing for the optional omission of external awareness blockers or addition of mitigating assists to anchor participants to the truth of the leisure activity they take part in' Lisa explained, her facial expression betraying she did not much care for such compromised alterations, as if anything less than the fully whammy equalled the effect being tainted.
'In its purest form though' she continued happily, 'Existenz-Rekall Hypergames allow players to realistically smell, see, feel, hear, touch and interact with the populated scenario directly from the mind. The player's emotional state and thoughts influence the progress of the story, which adds a further randomised aspect depending on who plays along' Lisa said, and waited for Mathew to surmise, who had by now clearly shown recaps to be his usual modus operandi in letting new information sink in. His predictability didn't disappoint.
'So it's a sensation inducing game with storyline events based on memories and experiences of the players?' Mathew concluded. He noticed his stomach was settling down as the concept of the Hypergame preoccupied his thoughts. 'I wonder—if I was to lend my imagination and memories to a game experience; what would happen?' Mathew asked. Lisa quietly paused for a moment to think about that.
'Game of the century material likely' she finally whispered in a sigh. Mathew smiled, thinking she was probably right. For a minute they just watched other people walk by, snuggling up to each other while taking in the magnificence of their impossibly curved surroundings.

'Do you have a specific mission when making these games, or a signature style maybe?' Mathew asked after a while. Lisa nondescriptly hummed a little while she considered her words.
'Whatever I produce I want people to be touched in an unexpected way. The mark of a great Hypergame is the ability to induce a renewed sense of being that lingers after the experience ends to drive fresh thoughts and open up avenues to new realisations. The potential permutations are endless with each new combination of players. Every session allows participants the unique and unprecedented opportunity to see a partial representation of the inner self manifest within a random instance of time, place and governing rulesets. The momentary paradigm of every initiated scenario greatly influences the expression of player desires and ambitions, and often serves to expose otherwise concealed layers of personality. After ending an ER session each player may have lived through a vertical slice portion of a life they never knew they wanted, motivating them to explore the taste of such possibility in the real.
'You find the experience promotes living differently in the real rather than cause a habitual dependency to being immersed in the virtual?' Mathew said.

‘Absolutely, on account of our minds being largely immune to any kind of neural addiction, whether it be substance or technology based’ Lisa said confidently, but the remark had elicited her to wonder if the same could be said for the uncommon man sitting beside her.
‘I should be so lucky’ Mathew mumbled, having apparently come to much the same tentative conclusion. Not wanting to grant the precarious subject any more attention than was strictly necessary for the moment Lisa simply put her hand on his and smiled encouragingly. With a laugh and shrug he shook off the potential issue as something to deal with when pressing.
‘So the stored pile of random information in a person’s mind is used somehow to create coherent images accessible to all players, while also making a story’ Mathew said, getting back on track. Lisa nodded enthusiastically.
‘Yes, the game system basically mimics the brain’s capacity to induce lucid dreams, the key difference being that the narrative is neither as chaotic nor and illogical, offering far more coherence due to being subjected to external control. The experience is also more rounded out as opposed to the natural limitations concerning the idiosyncrasies of reverie as it also incorporates those parts of the brain involved with logic skills and language.’
‘Meaning you’d be able to read?’
‘Yes all faculties bound to logic and interpretation of meaning—including the ability to sense when an experience is real or fictional—that are usually walled off partially or completely during dreams, are completely accessible in game.’
‘Ergo, a player knows it’s a game when they’re playing it.’
‘Yes, when the appropriate immersion mitigating options are toggled. At full immersive ER settings the brain is fooled into being convinced the hallucinatory experience is real.’
‘How then is it actually fooled into believing the feed instead of siding with its intuition?’
‘By projecting a richly detailed holistic canvas animated into life by disparate objects, actions and perceptions. We essentially compensate for the additional capacity to scrutinise by maintaining a predefined baseline for logic drivers.’
‘Then, you’re saying it can get a little crazy, but not absurd enough so as to suspend disbelief altogether.’
‘True, it’s a side-effect of introducing elements of reason into the mix, but without it no rational processes could take place, which would severely hinder the meaningful impact of the experience during play, not to mention making the lingering rational and emotional effects almost non-existent. Dreams are often difficult to remember and are nonsensical to the point of being quickly dismissed as irrelevant. Hypergames by contrast strive to generate a lasting impression.

‘You’re basically generating alternate realities on demand’ Mathew thought out loud, ‘to which—both player consciousness and agency are existentially synchronised.’
‘Right, and believe me, some truly remarkable things happen during the runtime, which is why we monitor beta trials. This tends to reveal just how much potential for imagination certain people have locked away inside them, never to be fully tapped yet itching to be expressed. Trends show the ability to strategize is underutilised in modern times, so the uptake is that Eclipse can devise ways to actually have such talents be tapped into together with the other entaskment institutes.’
‘It sounds incredible—but how is all this managed in practise, I mean how does the game know what to generate and according to what restriction?’ Mathew said.
‘Every session begins by attuning both the complexity and intensity of the experience to a level corresponding with the matched players. The intrinsic algorithm organically validates the participants’ skill level and even probes for latent wishes. The Gamesmaster decides how to process the players’ input and builds the environment based on the resulting data pool. Scenarios are designed to have the players reach the state that balances between being challengingly frustrated due to the placed barriers that exist between a status quo and perceptible progress, with the eventual satisfying sense of achievement upon reaching a certain goal, although it’s the journey that ultimately matters most of all.’
‘Besides finding evidence of strategic talent being underutilised, what other discoveries did you make that really put a stamp on your memories?’
Lisa smiled with nostalgia as she retraced and evaluated the recollections that best fit the bill. Vividly speaking she told him of the overall recurring highlights.
‘I saw players find true romance, living through the most beautifully constructed fantasies, to experience wide spectrum of fear and exhilaration like never before. But the most amazing facet I witness time and again is any Hypergame’s ability to create immediate understanding between very different kinds of people in terms of character, personality and preferences. The opportunity to exchange core values and wishes during game instances takes away communication barriers of the spoken word. It anonymously shows what motivates individuals within the player stack, and whatever they think and feel is allowed to transgress within that group indiscriminately, thereby freely providing cross-pollinating insights, ideas and wishes.’
‘Isn’t that what mind links are for?’
Lisa shook her head. ‘Not exactly, or rather not exclusively’ she clarified, ‘you see the difference between a Link and a Game is that the latter allows more than two minds to participate, adds the narrative driver to weave a narrative from player feed, while obscuring and scrambling the origin of said feed.’

‘Whereas the mind link is about sharing direct thoughts and feelings with a significant other sans the distraction of a story—ok, gotcha’ Mathew said, understanding how to distinguish between the two option and why each had their merits.
‘How long does one of those sessions typically last?’ Mathew asked next.
‘That depends on the agreed upon pre-set for real world time investment, but in-game that can be translated in players losing themselves within a narrative scenario for days on end, with some marathon sessions even lasting upwards of virtual weeks and months. Of course in real-time the sessions only take a few hours at most, simply because the brain and body both need sustenance and rest, but technically any fictive scenario can be constructed to simulate near endless passage of time. Logically the most common question after concluding a Hypergame session is “how long have I been out?” regardless of being presented with that information as part of SOP. It goes to show it’s hard to believe the discrepancy between baseline awareness and perception of the virtual kind, which is usually greatly accelerated.’
‘To jam in more content without wasting true time, makes sense but I find it creepy to say the least. I assume there are many safeties at work to prevent people from being stuck for a semblance all eternity during an afternoon of leisure?’
‘Absolutely, the monitoring of player neural activity is constant, and the GM itself is subject to MAC oversight. In all every diagnostic system and control apparatus is met with triple redundancy, as is all technology these days’ Lisa replied. She paused for a second before adding: ‘Really Mathew, there’s nothing to worry about. I assure you.’
He turned his head to look at her, and when she looked back at him her bright eyes showed a sense of puzzlement. ‘Something wrong?’ she asked, tilting her head.
‘No—nothing’s wrong. What you said, I—well, knowing about triple redundancy is a relief I suppose’ Mathew conceded and shortly reflected on what Lisa had explained so far. From what he could gather that “GM” was paramount in running a Hypergame, so he elected to pursue that topic next, feeling quite content to stay seated for a while longer.
‘So what is the Gamesmaster part of the Hypergame—it’s function so to speak?’
‘That's the fundament of it all, but how it weaves a narrative differs for each game and every session. The Gamesmaster is the construct that stimulates the designed neural topology in the minds of every connected participant.’
‘Like a Dungeon Master in a D&D game, providing the narrative framework, facilitating the flow of the game, adapting to player action—that sort of thing?’
‘Partially’ Lisa began, ‘but it goes much further. The GM does all those things, but it also extracts potential game data from players, implementing

each thread into the overall weave superimposed onto the foundational canvass it generates.'
'I don't follow' Mathew reluctantly admitted, challenging Lisa to come up with a way to best illustrate the set of roles bestowed upon the GM.
'Alright, I think I got you covered—by using a live opera performance as an analogy' she began, checking first to see whether Mathew was on board, and a simple nod indicating that he was.
'Okay now think of the Gamesmaster as a combined systemic entity that expresses the role of composer, conductor, the cast of singers and the orchestral performers into one gestalt, while taking inspiration from the audience's feedback as it performs.'
'It's a two-way process then.'
'Yes! It uses the feedback of triggered thoughts and feelings collected from the initialisation scan routine to generate narrative pathways.'
'So the audience acts as a muse for the amalgamated "composer-performer" unit by subconsciously participating in crafting the scenario and score as they play out' Mathew said, now fully grasping the concept. It vaguely reminded him of the Who's Lifehouse project, which—while ultimately considered a failure—was ahead of its time by involving an audience in shaping the music during concerts, with the goal of reaching a kind of soul unifying transcendence likely responsible for the concept ending up being largely dismissed. Generative creation though an Iterative process of incorporating feedback loops was however an interesting idea in its own right, and it appeared to have found its way into the process of stringing Hypergame runtimes.
'Every session is different' Lisa continued, oblivious to Mathew's pondering, 'but always the entire sensorium of every player is involved. Likewise cognitive projections are consistently integrated into the process and subjected to the causality driven feedback loop—input driving output over and over again—until the endgame conditions are met. The GM is the critical component defining the Ersatz-Rekall principle, representing the identity kernel that makes possible the full Spectrum Holobyte essence of a HYPER game.'
'It sounds almost alive when you say it like that' Mathew joked, or so he thought before realising he was actually serious about the sentiment. Lisa tilted her head this way and that as she carefully considered the idea Mathew had presented.
'It's not alive per sé' she concluded, 'but without the GM kernel ER-Hypergames would just be very advanced highly immersive virtual reality. It's a similar leap in processing sophistication as BBs provide for ASMLs—take away the Blue Box construct and the AI reverts to a baseline sub-Turing automaton. In the context of every Hypergame it's the complex interactions, the intuition, and inspiration brought forth by every particular GM that make the experience so different.'
'Something more than first meets the eye' Mathew offered.

‘Much more, yes. Hypergames transcend what's possible in even the most advanced VR because the exchange of data is much more involved, which in turn makes it possible to accurately simulate even the intricacies of actual reality.’
‘And that includes the stimuli that consciously influence perception, but also those that allow the simulation to pass the persistent undertow of subconscious intuitive self-diagnostics.’
‘Exactly, for it to work convincingly every facet of cognitive verification and validation processes have to be flawlessly satisfied. In ER everything you can see, hear, feel and touch provides expected real-world logic based interactable parameters, and the GM adds a layer of thoughts and emotion on top of that baseline to increase uniform event resolve at maximum resolution.’
‘Aren’t those terms reserved for optical inputs?’ Mathew asked, associating them with CRT monitors and VGA cables most of all—and by extension remembering playing Half-Life at 1024 by 786 pixels for the first time using a state of the art 3DFX Voodoo graphics accelerator card. Good memories, of a time when technology still inspired a sense of wonder and optimism.
‘Conventionally speaking resolution and resolve concern video, but the same principles apply to any parameter that can be variable in terms of perceived quality. In the end every sensory parameter is about constructing the highest fidelity interactive mental projection possible. The more feedback cycles are run per second, the better players can be manipulated, and the higher the fluidity of perception—so bandwidth is likewise of key importance to avoid latency and performance drops. Populating the projected world with convincing simulacra rounds out the experience for optimal experiential fidelity to best suspend disbelief.
‘Like NPC bots?’ Mathew said, prompting Lisa to very adamantly shake her head.
‘That’s far to crude a comparison. In truth each simulacra is a full ASML routine, involving far more than simple algorithms dictating activity routines. The GM kernel provides personality and character, it isn't just fixed code and programming, it learns and adapts following internal preferences and bias configurations, and in doing so the populace of Simulacra behaves with corresponding agency and backstory.’
‘So in that sense they *are* like Dungeon Masters?’ Mathew suggested, more hopeful of that particular comparison to hit the spot. And indeed it did, as Lisa gladly admitted after a chuckle.
‘Okay you got me there—yeah they’d be like very good DMs if I did a good job.’ Lisa paused to think about how to be more specific about the programmer’s role in creating not just a functional, but rather an exceptional Gamesmaster.
‘Given the GM is the primary game driver, it constitutes the essence of what lead programmers like me actually code. This involves creating a framework of mechanistic control routines, as well as erecting boundary surfaces—

both of which are operational layers consisting of actual lines of programming language. Once that groundwork is finished the coder guides further embodiment by utilising nudging prompts, until the fledgling GM-core Persona flourishes into the full-blown pattern of a Gestalt.'
'Then it's starts as a Persona and—it grows?'
'Yes, a MAC offshoot provides the functional engine on top of which it develops under the programmer's influence and a random factor.'
'So there's an element of chance too?'
'Absolutely, the process is—' Lisa began, but struggled to put into words what it was like.
'The process is what' Mathew asked, feeling a mix of amusement and appreciation at seeing her put such remarkable effort in translating specialised expertise for him. Having found an image that she deemed properly conveyed the nature of GM developed Lisa happily raised a finger. The process—like amazing swathes of technicolour proliferating in a receptive medium, emerging from dashes of aquarelle paint in water, the trailing and drifting drops fast shape into a pattern, until becoming the envisioned spectral entity' Lisa said and when nothing but silence followed she asked: 'how's that?'
'It's very poetic.'
'Should I stick to programming?' she asked, bumping him with her elbow.
'No' he laughed, 'honestly I'm actually picturing the swirls of colour in water—a pattern made by choice, through selection of colour, and the element of chance as the paint finds its way through the water.'
'Right' Lisa said, not completely sure Mathew wasn't taking the piss with her, '—so eventually that patter resolves to solidity. That's the personality construct guiding the Hypergame. That's what drives the dream, spins the yarn so to speak.'
'So the title of a game—'
'—is actually the name of the Gamesmaster at play, yes' Lisa finished, beaming at his incipient understanding of the kernel's significance. Another pause followed, and again it was Mathew who broke the silence.
'Let me get this straight, and do correct me if I'm wrong—when designing an Existenz-Rekall Hypergame you primarily shape the development of the Gamesmaster, the core or infrastructure that provides the means to use the players' input' Mathew carefully recapped. Lisa nodded, which he took to mean he was at least close to being right.
'Together with the settings and the parameters the GM uses that's it effectively—and it constitutes quite a task as you can probably imagine. The parameters the Gamesmaster uses determine what kind of game it becomes, or in other words what genre it adopts. Once it starts and has taken note of initial settings however, the GM determines the ride all the way, there's no tweaking or moderating an apex tier Existenz-Rekall game once it plays out.'

‘Unless it misbehaves, which is when a reliable failsafe has to kick in’ Mathew reminded Lisa.
‘Yes, yes—in that case the game undergoes a forced shutdown, which naturally quits the players back to actual reality.’
‘What does it look like?’
‘The GM kernel you mean?’
‘Yes, the nugget doing all the work while the Players are under—I imagine it’s a little mechanical walnut hidden away somewhere deep inside the Machine.’
‘Uhm, no—it's actually physically manifested inside the runtime platform as a tiny strip, about the size of a capsule.’
‘Is it blue or red?’
‘Neither, the base quantum PCB is green, but not for artistic reasons.’
‘Pity, blue would have been a nice touch.’
‘This time it’s me who doesn’t follow’ Lisa said.
‘Never mind, inside joke—still, it does occur to me “Dreamweaver” would have been a more apt name covering the romance of it all.’
‘Instead of Gamesmaster you mean?’
‘Yes—Dreamweaver exudes imagination at its peak form, and it denotes extraction of essence from players, which are projected back into them after being recombined into a new tale.’
‘Maybe, yeah…I like it too when you put it like that.’
‘So, why not change it?’
‘Never mind Mathew, you can't have everything.’
‘You can't huh—not even now? It’s “Initial D” abbreviated, how cool is that?’
‘In dunno. Somebody thought of Gamesmaster once and it stuck. It’s fine by me.’
‘Did you at least name your game label?’
‘I sure did; Lisa Mantel Connolly’s Saito Gemu’ Lisa replied, ‘or Saito for short.’
‘Sounds pretty cool, and the Initial D would surely fit.’
She eyed him again, looking smug. ‘I heard you the first time.’
‘Alright fine’ Mathew said, giving up on convincing her of pushing for a change. ‘So what place do Hypergames of the Existenz-Rekall type have in the entertainment sector?’ he asked instead.
‘Well, over the years these alternative realities have become the primary medium to express music and narratives from home, partially replacing flat screens and Holos.’
‘But not live performances?’
‘Only their recordings—shall we get going again?’ Lisa suggested. Mathew nodded agreement, feeling quite recovered if a little uncertain how long that would last.
‘I suppose movies still exist as well? You know, film?’ Mathew asked, recalling the vast collection he left behind as they slow made their way along the loop.

‘Oh sure—drama, thrillers, adventure, fiction, comedies, everything is still the same in that respect, although most of it is legacy material from old Earth. In fact you probably have some classic media stored on that Hap’ she said, pointing at Data’s wristwatch platform.
‘Oh yeah, Data has almost everything I used to have on Earth, and music as well’ Mathew said, realising he’d re-obtained his movie collection a few days back and quite some more at that.
‘Data?’ she asked tenderly, her interest piqued.
‘Eh, yes, I named him Data. Maybe it’s for the best that you don’t ask.’
She didn’t, but giggled anyhow, which might have been her way of dealing with the quirky habit.
‘I suppose every friend needs a name’ Lisa conceded anyhow, ‘even when it’s a Persona’ Lisa said, reassuringly patting Mathew’s tensed-up back as they walked along path.
‘Don’t worry—I know he’s not a real boy’ Mathew said, smiling at her. It clearly warmed her.
‘You have a nice smile. You should show it more often’ Lisa suggested. By her implicit command Mathew produced his most awkwardly scary Cheshire grin.
She laughed. ‘Not like that—a *normal* smile.’
‘Well, I thought that was a good smile.’
She held up her hands as if to say “whoa” or the like.
‘What?’
‘Sorry, you don’t get to judge your own smiles’ Lisa told him, shaking her head.
‘I don’t?’
‘Definitely not, believe me it’s for the best. Tell me though; do you also talk with “Data”—ask for advice?’ Lisa teased.
‘I’ll show you. Data: *activate please.*’ The machine blinked to life and Mathew looked at Lisa as if especially confiding in her
‘Data here instructed me on a wide variety of topics concerning life on Mars, much like Jasper aims to, but in most cases its manners make it more pleasant to interact with.’
‘He’s—I mean it’s, or well whatever—Data is a nicer personality to interact with than your human supervisor?’
‘Well, Data certainly has a better sense of humour, is it so strange then it might also have a more developed personality?’ Mathew said with only slight irony.
‘Yes that would certainly count as strange, or pretty odd at the very least. Wouldn’t you say so too?’ Lisa asked him earnestly.
‘Well, I tend to exaggerate of course. Anyway Data constitutes the best piece of technology I’ve ever owned—never crashes, offers good answers to any question, always there when needed. Now that should be enough to satisfy even the most demanding of people, right Data?’ Mathew asked the

Persona, lovingly addressing the little iWatch wrist Hap manifesting the physical part of his exclusively paired familiar.
‘Yes Mathew, even the most diehard cynic would be hard-pressed to find faults with the likes of me. Even so—driven by appropriate modesty—I should thank you for the compliment as befits my station’ Data replied with carefully subdued cheer.
‘See how awesome this is? Mathew told her, his open palm proudly presenting the Persona. Lisa narrowed her eyes looking at the iWatch, finding its reserved and mechanically stiff response to deviate from the norm. She shook her head dismissing the idea and just enjoyed seeing Mathew look so happy with his ASML buddy.
Lisa slipped her hand in his, and squeezing it lightly first she then gently pulled him in for a brief hug.
‘You’re cute’ she told him, ‘but—in a manly sort of way, don’t worry’ she said, putting her finger on his lips before he could protest.
‘Well I suppose I’m the real boy when it comes to my friendship with Data’ Mathew shyly admitted and let the matter rest.

Soon they were almost a three quarter ways around the garden and looking up and ahead Mathew could see they were nearing their original starting point. Given their slow pace he estimated it would take them another twenty minutes to reach it.
‘Isn’t it hard to keep coming up with new ideas? I mean, I’m not implying you lack creativity, but topics—song lyrics, film screenplays, novel plots, you name it—used to be inspired by struggles, love or both, the first of which might be on the back-burner.’
‘You’ll have to judge that for yourself, but there’s a key difference with respect to the necessity of genuinely new material for entertainment purposes. We hardly forget old media, and we don’t discard it either. The entirety of old Earth music, theatre, games, film and general audio-visual databases was safeguarded from destruction and safely made the crossing to Mars. That’s at least four centuries worth of composed documented and even recorded ideas to learn about and incorporate into new creations.
‘You salvaged the original sheet music, and film negatives?’ Mathew asked hopefully.
‘Goodness no they were all utterly destroyed in the nuclear hellfire and radioactive fallout that followed, but prior to the exodus countless data drives were packed to the brim with petabytes of information extracted from servers. The Eclipse old Earth repository also includes scanned negatives and copied sheet music though, but not the originals. Likewise, literature and any kind of scripture bound to paper were lost in its original form, on account of it taking up to much storage bulk.’
‘I understand conserving space and weight is critical when leaving a planet, but still I would have thought some exceptions were in order, documents of significant historical value perhaps.’

‘Their theft would have likely led to the premature exposure of Leap02 Exodini.’
‘I doubt anybody would’ve taken accusations of any group planning a planetary exodus seriously, let alone when it should involve a critical mass of humans and the establishment of a full-blown terraformed off-world colony.’
‘Evidently they didn’t want to risk getting caught and have key personnel locked-up on account of larceny during phase of the plan. In any case none of the originals survived, whether it concerns art, relics and other cultural treasures, regardless of where they were kept. Nothing escaped the Armageddon, not even the most fortified museums and libraries.’
‘What a shame’ Mathew said, thinking about whether some items couldn’t still be rescued to this day. Stone tablets, jewels, and pretty much anything not made of material that would have burned to ashes. It had been over two hundred years; surely it would be safe to collect a selection assuming the planet hadn’t been reduced to flats of glass. Who knew what treasures were still around, perhaps elusive but all the same ripe for the picking, kept hidden away in subterranean private collections of the former ultra-rich?
‘What I was driving at though’ Lisa said, popping the bubble of his scheming reflections, ‘is that after such a long time of creativity the chance of an original idea arising is next to nil. Making new combinations of past ideas are what drives innovation, and has always done so. We build upon prior inventiveness, sometimes iteratively, moving forward with baby steps, and other times in bigger leaps that may signify a revolution. The ASMLs aid tremendously in accelerating checking merit of new arrangements ever faster, suggesting outcomes of additive permutations, each filtered by merit to be selected for further amalgamation. The possibilities are nearly endless, but in the end there are only so many melodies that sound good to human ears, and only so few stories that resonate with our hearts and minds. In that respect technology is just a tool allowing us to scrape every last bit of value from the sources of creation.’
‘Not scraping the bottom of the barrel I hope’ Mathew joked, and put his finger on her upper lip before she could protest. The gesture made her laugh instead.
‘I guess I had that coming. I’ll just say inspiration hasn’t faltered yet, and in truth there’s so much to enjoy it’s not always needed to make anew what’s already there to witness repeatedly.’
‘Does that mean you won’t need me for your game after all?’ Mathew asked, winking.
‘I do absolutely require your input’ Lisa hastily said, ‘after all an ER Hypergame set on old Earth wouldn’t be the same without it. I think the audience is just about ready for a journey taking them back to where it all started. Would you please allow me to pick your brain your brain to make it as authentic as possible?’

‘Absolutely, when the time comes I’ll be your Guinea pig, as long as the picking doesn’t involve scalpels and clamps.’
‘It won’t’ Lisa said, ‘and I’ll pinkie-swear to that.’
‘That’s okay, I trust you not to leave me an empty husk after extracting the information you need’ Mathew said. The deep breath and sigh that followed made him sound exhausted. At first Lisa thought it was due to the physical toll the Ring was exerting on him, but then saw he looked troubled, something weighing him down to make it so.
‘What’s on your mind?’
‘Jasper Vincent Perry is, to put it into three words.’
‘You have to go back?’
‘Sort of—I’m expected to join him for the final leg of his tour. Apparently we’re to visit an Autofac, have you been?’
‘Sure, interesting places.’
Mathew grunted non-committedly.
‘And after that you’re free to do as you please?’ Lisa asked.
‘I believe so yes. Otherwise I’ll have no choice but to write a strongly worded letter to the Senate’ he said, sounding a little more self-assured again.
‘I could put in a good word for you’ Lisa offered, ‘about how kind and gentle you are, and not a homicidal maniac at all, probably.’
Mathew laughed. ‘If anything that’ll make it worse, but thank you for the suggestion. I’ll certainly take it under advisement.’
‘Just take your time, I’m not going anywhere’ Lisa told him, laying her hand on his shoulder.
‘That’s more reassuring than the warning of having you slip through my fingers when I leave.’
‘Hmm, well you did need an incentive to return’ Lisa said and when he didn’t reply she pinched his bottom, ‘and now you have it.’
‘Gosh you really know how to make a man jump’ Mathew grumbled, rubbing the affected butt cheek.
‘You know it. And I think you like it too.’
‘Bad girl—not good’ he disagreed.
‘I maintain you like my attention in any shape or form.’
‘Well you got me there. Anyway the visit should take only a day or two at most, but there’s another thing I have to take care of afterwards—to rectify some issues’ Mathew added cryptically, not wanting to elaborate at this time, which was of course exactly what Lisa asked for in the face of a mysterious extracurricular activity.
‘What kind of issues?’
‘The medical kind’ he sighed, ‘I’ll tell you about it later.’
‘Alright’ she said, knowing when to stop asking. Still Mathew felt bad after a fashion about having to withhold information, assuming the results of his imminent Doctor’s appointment wouldn’t be pertinent to their relationship.
‘It won’t take long—at least I hope it won’t, but it’s important, also in light of my prospective liberty. Give me two days, tops.’

She nodded. They looked around the curved Ring a final time for now. Mathew had enjoyed visiting it despite the physical challenges it had posed, and in the roughly two hours they'd spent here he could honestly say the negative effects had diminished substantially. Close to the end he could finally enjoy the beauty of the parkland mostly without any distractions of discomfort, and so he decided a return was in order sooner rather than later. Lisa squeezed his arm.
'When you come back I suggest we have some fun together. It sounds like all you've done and seen so far has been about becoming acquainted with societal and technical operations.'
'Well I have.'
'That's all good and well, and I have no doubt the string of visits to the syndicated enterprises can only have been functional in a rationally practical sense. However, you are—first and foremost—a man of emotional needs as well that seem to have hardly been taken into account.'
'I had no idea' Mathew said ironically.
'I'm serious! All those additional impressions are added on top of the experience of enduring a challenging corporeal revival and unique update process. You should be allowed the time to settle in a bit, get used to the idea of being alive again in a whole new context. Don't get me wrong, I understand the urge to get you up to speed with the systemic mechanics of our world, yet I wonder—why so serious? After all, there's more to our culture than scientific and technical advancement' Lisa vividly argued, 'and as it happens, yours truly is a bona fide expert on all things entertainment and pleasure.'
'Are you now?' he chuckled.
'Okay that didn't come out as intended' Lisa said rolling her eyes.
'You're not wrong though' Mathew said through his teeth, remembering last night
'Uh-huh, but besides booty and nookie I can introduce you to the more enjoyably engaging side of our Martian Nova society.'
'I'd love that. Got any thoughts on where to start?'
'I certainly do, and it involves great speed' Lisa suggested cheerfully.
'I think I've had my share of elevators after our return trip' he mumbled.
'You only have to watch this time. Participation is entirely optional.'
'Well that makes all the difference. I like to watch.'
'Do you now?' Lisa chuckled.
'Yeah, you got me this time. Not what I meant' Mathew assured her.
'I suppose only time will tell how your participation will evolve' Lisa said.
'Are we talking about your surprise, or sex—or both?' he asked, and glancing at her, Mathew found Lisa doing the same. Suddenly she pulled him to a halt and made to stand right in front of him. Throwing her arms around his neck, Lisa fixedly looking Mathew in the eyes. Without saying another world they kissed, losing themselves in each other's embrace, as if

this would be their last shared moment together. When finally their lips parted he gave her a big infatuated smile.
‘What was that for?’ he whispered, flustered.
‘Do I need a reason?’ she asked, her expression almost taunting.
‘You’re used to being in charge, aren’t you?’
Ignoring the remark she instead informed him of the reasoning behind her kiss.
‘Consider it something to hold you over as you brave the single factor over the next few days.’
‘Then I’ll admit as far as calling cards go yours is especially memorable.’
‘I'm all about being memorable’ Lisa said without irony. Mathew saw another twinkle in her sea-green eyes, showing him she was up to something.
‘You’ve *planned* something already, haven’t you?’ Mathew asked shrewdly.
She just cocked her head and touched his nose with the tip of her finger.
Taking him by the hand again they walked towards the turbovater entry. It was just after helping him into the cradle when she said:
‘Maybe—you’ll just have to wait and see.’
‘I knew it’ Mathew said and heard her laugh.
‘Get ready for a surprise!’

22 – Chapter
Self-replicating miniaturised creative destruction

AI narrator marker [Alexa Initialised]

The largest Cloud Atlas Autofac is located in Amazonia, where an entirely robotised automated assembly system provides over 50% of all the material goods consumed by humanity. It's a giant industrial centre of production. Its name? Why, Autofac Prime of course.

'Without the predetermined obsolescence of your time, you'd be surprised how long things last and can be intrinsically improved when there's no business behind consumption' Jasper told Mathew after being informed of material longevity by their host.
'I see, much like the original lightbulb—I recall that supposedly lasted all but forever.'
Javik Mustafar Oparei, a dark skinned broad shouldered man with jovial countenance and baritone voice—who had graciously offered to navigate them through the facility—deeply furrowed his brow upon hearing the archaic words "lightbulb".
'You really are from old Earth are you not? I thought I was being pranked, and still do as a matter of fact. I was told no Standard humans lived through the end war, yet here you are—a survivor.'
Mathew smiled. 'At least that means you're not gullible, but I really am from Earth, believe it or not. Javik simply nodded in acceptance, as if regarding the matter of only minor importance, while secretly still imagining somebody was pulling his leg and didn't want to overtly admit falling for it. Instead he recommenced the excursion, his deep booming voice blanketing the audience as he clearly took surprisingly great enjoyment from this rare personal visit.
'Autofac Prime's operation is completely autonomous. The process flow control and planning are carried out by AI. Therefore, not many humans visit the place, which lends it a somewhat dark and foreboding ambiance. Much of the construction yard—including the numerous linking catwalks and corridors—is illuminated only sparingly. In fact, lighting is a basic feature initiated exclusively through combined motion and infrared sensors, which together detect movement and verify humanoid presence' overseer Javik

Mustafar Oparei clarified, upon which sliding doors opened before them allowing them access to one of the main facility areas.
‘You may enter’ Javik said, gesturing them forward.
Within the giant halls that extended down to six kilometres underground, looming pre-fab shapes of gargantuan proportions were made ready for further assembly, each languidly emerging into being from within the smouldering orange-glowing basins of liquid FibreSteel primer — the Imulsion. Everywhere around them the presence of newly forged objects solidified into existence, restoring on the face of it the inceptive art of photographic development juxtaposed with the pioneering technical prowess of 3D printing.
The impression gleaned was that of a lost xenoc world, a forbidden planet discovered quite by accident by human Surveyors, one that was found to be solely populated by still active alien machinery resting deep within its subterranean catacombs. Treading further into the manufactory, Mathew imagined the emerging vault being a mausoleum to the alien civilisation, revealing evermore series of conjoined colossi that mysteriously refused to lay dormant even without oversight. Instead these engines of creation subserviently indulged in unending operating of its own volition for millennia until told otherwise, producing terrifying machines of war for their masters — a race that had no doubt long since suffered complete genocide by the very armaments produced here, perhaps even at hands of intelligent robots. The only thing missing to complete the picture was a twilight landscape surrounding the hidden entrance, littered with dust-laden crashed spaceships of sleek designs.
‘Now let us take the transport, so we may view the site from above and through’ Javik Mustafar Oparei duly noted. The transport in question turned out to be a MagLev system separated from the main tracks. From the vantage point of the speeding iPod the Cloud Atlas Autofac Prime facility conveyed as much of an extraordinary sense on the outside as it had from within. The technodrome exhumed a larger than life feel, with megastructures akin to oil rigs, super container platforms and conveyors giving the impression of being cogs in a much larger machine. Mathew’s glance passed the exteriors of vast domes, storage areas, intralink trains, mammoth dispatch locations, and countless rows of distribution nodes. As the iPod tumbled and coiled between the structures, it emerged above a parking space for enormous waiting parts. From here goods were dispatched to final delivery areas, or elsewhere inside Autofac Prime for further processing, or final implementation. It prompted Lance to comment from the middle seat, behind Mathew.
‘Autofac Prime is in essence a single device of spectacular proportions with a production capacity of unequalled magnitude and multiplicity. However, what you see is only a fraction of its full size because most of the fabrication activity occurs in sealed top side bays or in underground silo areas. External

assembly is reserved for mega scale projects, which are either carried out in open air, or beyond these groundside yards—off planet within orbital bays.'
Mathew meekly nodded, gazing at the industrial eye candy, fully absorbed and mesmerised by its grandeur. The ultra-dense labyrinthine realm of hypertech made for a truly uncompromising industrious district — an all function no pleasure land where technological dreams come true, or a piece of Coruscant on Mars. The zeal on display was nothing short of stunning.
'In case of a theoretical extra-terrestrial assault scenario, including one from a resurrected Earth, all production and power capacity is directed towards safeguarding Source and Syam Foods.'
'Don't worry, I'm the only one left' Mathew laughed uncomfortably.
'I hope so, although you seem—mostly harmless. Irrespective of that appearance, I shall inform you what will transpire if we are faced with aggressors; consider this a cautionary tale. Cloud Atlas RealTech Drive Yards, the Space Exploratory Combat Association, Prometheus and Tyrell Kuatt Omniflow all merge to form the combined entity that is the MDI—our Martian Defence Initiative' Javik proudly boomed.
Far from impressed, the perceived absurdity made Mathew quietly scoff, but he conceded at least the one positive point about the event occasional task force.
'Well I suppose it's easier to remember than CARTDYSECAPTKO club' he said after carefully visualising the letters to line them up.
'You feel it is right to mock the MDI?'
'Yeah I do as a matter of fact. They could've combined to form—Devastator, or Superion, or even Menasor—but no, MDI is what you came up with'
'I do not understand. You speak nonsense, do you not?'
'Yes, because come on—seriously, there's an actual planetary defence initiative? Does that mean you consider an alien invasion more likely than a civil war?' Mathew remarked, looking over his shoulder at Jasper.
'Absolutely' Jasper replied, without even a trace of hesitation.
'Okay—so what happens exactly, when the MDI is formed?' Mathew asked shaking his hands like an overenthusiastic preacher calling for salvation.
Javik interjected to explain. 'This involves a full scale red alert situation for all 500 million people and the MAC, signalled across all Eclipse broadcasting capabilities. Simultaneously the advanced warfare and weapons research divisions are mobilised, Tyrell coordinates material and personnel deployment efforts, and assumes direct overriding control of global manufactories. All nonessential orders for Cloud Atlas capacity make way for production of necessities that align with the given emergency. Source doubles down on initiating faster backups and commences the growth of generic replacement vessels to temporarily revive casualties for hands on operations. Syam safeguards the food supply stockpiles and prepares bulk shipments for delivery to both earthbound locations and to space docks, orbital habitats, moon stations and in any transiting ships. Yet

before any of this occurs, the full potential for destructive wrath at our disposal is primed for engagement. Be informed Earthman, that our planet is littered with concealed weapons of the most cataclysmic forms of mass destruction ever created by humankind, as is every other planetary body in this solar system. At the push of a button our species may unleash the type of hell class power upon any external threat that rivals the civilisation ending destructive force of a moderately sized black hole' Javik promised.
'Holy shit man, sorry for asking.'
'Admittedly, the chance of a natural disaster that requires intervention is a more likely scenario than blasting city sized UFOs of out the sky, especially on the anniversary day of our exodus' Jasper remarked dryly, his stoic expression belying the amusement experienced at Mathew's shock and awe.
'That is indeed so' Javik Oparei agreed wholeheartedly.

AI NARRATOR MARKER [ALEXA UPDATED]

Like Lambert had before, Autofac Prime made a big impression on Mathew from any vantage point, and over the course of the visit he was brought up to speed about the ins and outs concerning the predominant advanced construction material of Mars—FibreSteel. Sometimes dubbed FS (pronounced "effess"), the acronym actually stood for "Filamateria Sententia", which roughly translates to smart fibrous material, attesting to it originally being the product of true engineers lacking any excessive affinity to marketing—rolls right of the tongue doesn't it? FilAmAteriAsententiA—whoops, but wow, what a time to be alive.

'FibreSteel is serious stuff not to be frivolously labelled' Javik clearly agreed with its inventors, 'it was developed to be the latest and greatest evolution in materials, finding its technical origins in the know-how regarding fabrication of carbon fibre, titanium, carbotanium and transparent aluminium. The latter of those essentially consists of aluminium oxynitride arranged in a polycrystalline lattice structure. FibreSteel can adopt similar properties as the highest grades of each of those single materials and its application scope is vast, not in the least due to the ease of designing with the material in mind. If an object can be envisioned and translated with software, the corresponding machines can make the required parts.'
Oparei guided them to what appeared to be a metal smelting furnace, except there was no heat.
'In its mouldable primer form' Javik told Mathew in particular, FS appears as an orange luminescent waxy polymeric liquid. This primer—referred to as Imulsion—has the texture of honey and the luminescence of lava at relatively low temperatures. Observe the Imulsion baths.'

‘So it starts as a liquid, and then what?’ Mathew asked, mesmerised by the flowy glow of the light emitting viscous liquid.
‘After initiating a specific cross-linking reaction corresponding with a laser of specific energy frequency, the touched Imulsion solidifies into one of a wide range of foundation substances. During the reaction, a long chain molecular polymer structure is formed that entwines to form a highly impact resistant framework lattice akin to a nanoscopic honeycomb. The lattice foundation itself is more resilient than carbon fibre and more flexible than epoxy resin, but further comparison ends at this formative stage. Metallic alloys and select polymeric agents can be locally injected into the semi solid suspension during the solidifying process to alter the final specification of the FS. Following such injection, the spongy lattice exhibits an osmotic effect that absorbs the available lacing agents into the branching matrix. As layers are stacked omnidirectionally to shape the intended 3D structure, the permeated reinforcing agents are interlinked throughout the nanoscopic framework cavities. The ultrafine coiled strands of metal and polymers weaved into the framework lattice give the material specific tensile strength. Further resilience can be forged by interlacing the FibreSteel matrix with Carbotanium or Duraminium nanothreading.’
‘Well I’ve seen it at work to speak, so I can certainly vouch for its power, reach and flexibility.’
‘It is indeed a mighty compound Javik agreed with Mathew, sagely nodding to indicate there was no doubt about it, predominantly utilised for its unprecedented strength and flexibility. However it can also be made to appear and offer similar touch properties to other common materials that may lack sufficient durability for the intended use; you may consider the vastly inferior materials wood, glass, plastics and rubber to name but a few. Even when the material requirements mirror the intent of being used as mere superficial trim—yet a specific tactile interaction or visual communication are expected of the finish—the attainable level of mimicry can be made nearly indistinguishable from said original references.’
Mathew raised a finger.
‘Yes—another question Earthman, speak to me Terran.’
‘Right, so you can call me Mathew.
‘This is acceptable, Mathew.’
‘Okay then, great. I was wondering how all this related to TransparaSteel.’
‘We prefer the term Hyperglass, but I will explain. By using localised nanotechnology to activate reaction enhancers, the molecular orientation of key areas can be polarised to create Hyperglass. Various light filters can be integrated if so desired. Styce conduits can be integrated within base FS to create protection sheets from the radiation of Space. The Styce absorbs radiation across the spectrum of wavelengths. It is used to absorb heat, infrared radiation, during atmospheric flight and when re-entering from the stratosphere. The charge uptake of the Styce tracing is converted to usable energy for motive power or life support.’

‘I have something in mind to print in the future—an automobile. Would that be possible?’
‘If we are provided with the design render we can print it.’
‘So what would that look like then?’ Mathew asked excitedly, already imaging his one off rally car being fabricated on demand.
‘When FS is printed each layer may hold a different degree of polymerisation and material intertwinement. To manipulate these differences a broad spectrum array of manipulation tools is employed, ranging from 10-15 Tesla magnetic fields, high voltage electric current, UV light, and X-rays. Together this manifold drapes, moulds, sheets, stacks, folds, carves and sculpts the material, connecting sections, and sealing parts together as required. Your automobile will seem to appear before your eyes as if by conjured intervention.’
‘I literally can’t hide my excitement to get this done.’
‘Hmm, your enthusiasm is noted. There is one more type of FS. By including conduits for Nanobot and Styce flow, the FS can be made to have “shape shifting” abilities. This is realised by programming a receiver-controller AI to direct the pre-injected population of Nanobots, while the Styce flow provides the energy to execute issued commands. Applications of shape-shift FibreSteel include flexible computer chip design, morphable construction panels, as well as the reshaping wings of Stratoplanes and UACs.’
‘And powered laces?’
‘No powered laces, but wrist or armbands can be made always fit—optimally.’
Mathew deeply inhaled and slowly exhaled with fulfilment upon being notified of such optima.
‘Neat.’

AI NARRATOR MARKER [ALEXA FINAL]

Sometime later Javik and Mathew were involved in a discussion about—hinges? Honestly, is there no end to this madness?

‘You must remember such compliant mechanisms have long since been the engineering norm, but you are perhaps only familiar with their non-compliant predecessors’ Javik Mustafar Oparei considered. ‘Mechanisms such as hinges and cranking assemblies used to be composed of rigid individual parts, but in contemporary compliant technology such items are far more flexible by nature. First of all every functional object can be comprised of a singular unit, each forming a unified array of flexible bending and connecting sections that together facilitate a systemically predetermined series of movements. You see, entire compliant mechanical systems may be cast from *one part*, and these manifold facetted parts can hinge, crank, fold, bend, and pivot on demand and with a precision that

rivals, or even surpasses the best obsolete systems. Furthermore, apart from excelling in sheer functionality, these compliant mechanisms offer many advantages over their traditional counterparts. For instance, they are neither as cumbersome nor as high maintenance, thus comparatively they are lighter and more durable by requiring neither axles, nor lubrication. In addition, consensus dictates that the sophistication greatly improves tolerances for fit and finish, which is ultimately evidenced by how they have a tendency to audibly snap as they lock into place. This is causes an enormously satisfying audible effect. Please try it' Javik stated and handed Mathew a complicated folded thing that reminded him of a Rubik's Magic sheet puzzle. Mathew took it in his hands and noticed Jasper looking over his shoulder. He folded the sections this way and that, and upon reaching a proper directional fold the material snapped into place despite being cast of injection moulded as a single piece.
'Oh, that *is* nice' Mathew said, closing his eyes in childlike wondrous enjoyment. Javik' face showed a similar pleasure upon hearing the snappy sound.
'It is most pleasant, is it not? Large scale applications exist aplenty, yet this is not their primary field of use. Compliant mechanisms can be easily scaled down towards the microscopic level, all the while retaining their macroscopic design and engineering philosophy.'
'What about nanoscopic, any uses there?'
Javik solemnly shook his head.
'Alas, it does not directly scale into the world of nanotechnology—this scale requires a vastly different kind of mechanistic operating system.'
'Still, this level of passion surrounding the world of hinges and cranks must mean it's quite the revolutionary development.'
'It is indeed most exciting, but there is more. I have yet to show you nanotech fabrication. Follow me to the Pod please, follow me, and do not dawdle.'
As they made their way to the next section Jasper trailed behind a little, equally fascinated by all the activity taking place on the other side of the stretched Hyperglass windows. It appeared an engine was being assembled, something immense and cone shaped anyway. Mathew more closely followed Javik Oparei, taking the opportunity to ask a few more questions.
'Javik, why do all divisions even still use more traditional technology, when almost every production system could be replaced by nanotech?'
'Because we do not want to be completely dependent on one technology type in case something does not go entirely as planned; basically it is a form of hedging the risks of progress. Investing in multiple approaches to manufacturing and various forms of matter manipulation, gives us a safeguarded insight in the whole pallet of available options.'
'I see. So technology exists in several orders of scale—macro, micro, and nano?' Mathew asked.

‘Yes but you must not remove the seemingly obsolete categories from the total equation. Consider the how old technology can be put into practical use for artisanal, artificial, biological and cybernetic ends. Keeping all paths active assures no craft and skills are forgotten, which simultaneously allows us to gain understanding of all their advantages, strengths and weaknesses in case applied on its own or when amalgamated. Omitting the use of biochemistry and organic processes would cut out a vital part of our way of life as well eliminate the ability to better understand what we might become in the future, or stand to encounter during exploration of space.’
‘Then it’s a matter of embracing progress, but also sticking with one’s roots. Is nothing abandoned when principally obsolete?’
‘Nothing is ever really as absolute as “objective obsolescence” Earthman Mathew, that is merely part of a mind-set cultivated to facilitate selling more “things” within a capitalist context of continuous replacement’ Javik explained, which clearly impressed Jasper. ‘Well said Mister Oparei, well said and well spoken.’
‘But surely you’d rather use a Persona Hap to listen to music via Skyflux, rather than dragging around a Walkman with a bunch of cassettes?’ Mathew challenged.
‘There may be a preference, or increased convenience, but that does not mean the discarded option did not do something in the right way in the first place. You would be surprised how often we return to basic technology—go back to the past if you will—rediscovering our technological legacy. That ironically happens mostly when challenged to innovate, because it helps us to look back in order to remember how to invent. Retaining skills and knowledge also has other benefits. In the unlikely event of electronic warfare or the destruction of communication satellites we would have to resort to communication lasers and Morse code. It is a hypothetical scenario of course—and would most likely involve hostile aliens—but there are many examples where it paid off recalling, and even cherishing the previous ways of doing things. Each path walked may still have some future merit, even when you least expect it. Do you understand?’ Javik asked kindly, though with a somewhat paternal undertone.
‘I understand first and foremost that you have a fascination with aliens and anticipate a less than friendly first contact situation.’
‘These fascinations are trivial; I consider them a hobby.’
Mathew suddenly grabbed Jasper by both shoulders. ‘I get it now. It all makes sense, why you decided to thaw me out!’ he exclaimed to a degree that Jasper protectively closed his eyes to prevent any spray from entering them.
‘Why do you say that?’ Jasper enquired, cautiously opening one eye.
‘I, Mathew—the sleeping common man—was reawakened to bring forth the tales of yesteryear, the wisdom of old. That’s why you need me! I’m the monkey with forgotten tricks up its sleeve. Tell me I’m wrong! I’m not wrong, am I?’