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ROBOT LOVE - BOOK 1: ON STRANGER  
GROUNDS

by Karan Kamdar

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Prologue*

god.. as I choose to address Him has been questioned by a generation of intellectuals, from a time long long ago... a time when humans were still thinking of a means to preserve and pass down their life experiences until the end of the world. Some care little for their lives being spent in accepting what religion teaches, while some see it as a big deal. Still others see it as outrageously absurd idea for whom “he” who is called “He” seems nothing more than just another intellectual question, the answer to which lies in a deeply held scientific belief of a rigorous process of questioning Him and His creation.

Void of religion and the world that it describes, these so called intellectuals come from all walks of life. Scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, artists, normal folks.. you name them, each will have only a slightly different version of the same story. I call them “rebels of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. As I get into my thirties as a trained Artificial Intelligence (or “AI”) expert, I seem to

rather like their story for it gives me food for thought and a growing belief in the idea that this rebel group might be the first to catch the waves of where and how we are heading as a civilization into the future. I feel like I am almost drawn to speak about it in an intellectual way, seeking refuge on a blank page that's waiting for words to be written onto.

As I see it from the perspective of a writer, a word is written, is read and then hopefully remembered if it was carefully chosen by its creator. I am thereby sensitive to the fact that I better write something that strikes a deep intellectual chord with the readers of this novel. As much as I ponder over the destiny of our planet, I equally do about the erudite world of AI that I come from. This “relatively-infant-yet-mega-idea-world” that has brought some of the sci-fi into our lives (like who the fuck ever believed that we would someday create a robot sex companion for under 5000 dollars right? And folks would actually buy it??) suffers from a big debate. One half argues that it is impossible to artificially produce what we know as human consciousness, while the other half believes that it's just a matter of time that this mystical gift of humankind is tamed for eternity.

I am kind off leaning in favor of the other side as I ruminate deeply over the smart companions that we are creating... (Yes ‘robots’ if you thought of it is one of the many different brands of these smart autonomous creatures). I love debates by the way, but my 56000 dollar question is not if we can create consciousness or

not, the bigger question is “What will we do with the consciousness that we create in our labs? By that I mean will it be used for the good or bad? And will humans as a society fear and suppress the ultimate expression of this consciousness, a day hopefully still far away into the future where these “artificially-consciousness-beings-of-intelligence” (I am using hyphens here to sort of sound like the next AI visionary, just this line though I promise... LOL) will be a threat to our own survival? Or will this expression be our ally in fighting the doomsday?

This novel is a science fiction exploration of the possible repercussions of creating the magical, mystical and ever-eluding gift of humankind, the gift of our consciousness, intelligence and emotions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Beginnings*

The night was dark... dark enough for one to sense the eerie blackness that engulfed downtown Philly. Roger was working his night shift at the 7-Eleven that stood across Hamilton and Rose St. The digital clock that hung on one of the walls read 2:02 am, January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2085. The store seemed quite enough for Roger to hear the sound of his own beings, a sound that gave him a sense of feeling like he owned the store. “Argh... Who gives a damn to a 7-Eleven employee anyway?” he muttered to himself. Roger was a smart young kid just a little over 21 who had dreams of calling his own shots some day.

Owning a big mansion and having beautiful women please him all night were just a few of the many rides that he had crafted in his own little or well... a pretty darn big fantasy land that he had been creating since he turned thir-**teen**. Roger was a big mess at school, teachers seemed like dragons to him, not those fire

breathing ones that he had read about, but those that would make him pee in his pants by bleeding oodles of blood from their scary eyes. Plus the ADD didn't help either. The only thing that perhaps still kept Roger at school were the pretty chicks who seemed to find him rather cute. Ah... and the many things that came as a result of that. But that was 8 years ago.

For now Roger found himself in bed with Anne, a charming Philly girl with big jugs that he had skillfully managed to grab a hold of on their very first date. He found Anne at his previous job where they worked night shifts at a local graveyard. They had been in a relationship for almost 3 years and Roger wanted to move on, even though Anne was the longest that he had stuck around with any girl since Gina, his kind-of-sexy-but-a-lot-more-kinky middle school girlfriend. Roger often thought of Gina while he would sit idle at the store and all the fun they had together in those wonder years. But tonight he had no time to walk down that memory lane. He had a lot of stuff on his plate.

Roger was supposed to restock a lot of supplies in the store with the shipment that had come in that evening. He wanted to get going fast and get done with things. As Roger started walking towards the back room, he heard a sudden crackling sound with the panes of the frontside window flapping three times in an asynchronous motion. Roger momentarily stopped in his tracks. He had no idea of what just happened.

‘Jesus! What the fuck was that?’, he spoke to himself as he moved cautiously towards the window.

Roger cocked his head out and looked for signs of any flesh and blood on the street. Then grabbing the panes, he closed them in a hurried motion. Roger was clearly feeling his heartbeat ramp up, but he convinced himself to get out of the store on to the pavement. Scanning the street thoroughly, he yelled,

‘Helll...lo!! Anybody out there?’, but his sound just seemed to disappear in the darkness. He shouted one more time with a shaky voice,

‘Anyone.. um.. anyone around here?’. Still nothing seemed to come back to his ears that were alert and wide open. Roger went back inside, sat down at the counter and pondered as he tried to steady his brainwaves.

‘Hmm..might have just been the wind.. Those lazy-ass evening folks must have forgotten to shut that window. Well.. Ok.. that sounds like a reasonable explanation’, he told himself.

Things looked ok for a while and Roger was feeling his anxious nerves calm down a little. He took another deep breath and he felt at least half as better now; although something still didn’t feel right. It seemed kinda creepy. But Roger tried hard not to ruminate over that sound which seemed to still reverberate inside his

skull.

He proceeded to the back room and got some fresh OJ cartons. But just as he began to stock them in the third aisle of the store, he felt the floor underneath him shake a bit. Within half a second, he felt the tremor running up his spine to his hand eventually branching out to his fingers that were holding the carton which wobbled and nearly caused Roger to lose his grip on it.

‘What the...???’ he screamed.

Roger was definitely not liking this shit - that creepy sound, the flapping window panes and now the floor quaking. As he put down the carton on the rack, the floor trembled one more time, this time a little louder than the first one, then after a few seconds a third time and then a fourth. Now Roger was beginning to really feel it; a scary visceral feeling in his guts that definitely wanted him to get out of that store.

Roger brisked past the front door onto the street. He began to feverishly ping pong his head left and right looking for signs of anything that his feared mind was trying to imagine. And then... he felt a lump in his throat as his eyes widened to see it. Roger couldn't see it all that clearly but his mind was beginning to form this image of something huge approaching him from either side of that one way street. They inched closer and closer to where he was...



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Berkeley*

February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2035

Berkeley, California - USA

The spring quarter had just begun at UC Berkeley and classroom 451 of the Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) building was bustling with enthusiasm as students of the second and third year EECS program took their seats. These were wicked smart kids who were en route to becoming the best and brightest engineers of tomorrow.

‘Good Morning class!’, spoke a lean looking figure, six feet two inches tall who entered the classroom dressed in a white shirt and gray pants. Partly bald, he wore a slick white beard and big round glasses that were so retro 80ish.

‘Good Morning Professor!’, they responded together turning their heads to address him.

‘Well... its great to see that a lot of you have chosen to take this elective class with me. I am Professor Edmund Smith or just Eddy as they know me around here. Of course, those of you who took my class ECE 116 on

BioRobotics last quarter know me already.

‘If I can recall some faces here... Ah! David Rubinsky, glad to see you here. Looks like you finally managed to get that haircut after an exhausting last quarter.’

‘For sure Eddy!’, David chuckled. ‘Quite happy to have survived that one!’, .

‘Ha Ha nice! Good for you David! And... hmm... let’s see... Oh there’s Su...ssie?? if I recall you correctly?’.

‘Yes professor Eddy, that’s right. I am Sussie Goodman’, she replied promptly.

‘And who else?... I am sure I can spot a few more faces’, Eddy said as he scanned the classroom glazing over his thick glasses that seemed to barely hang on to the tip of his nose. ‘Hmm..’

‘Professor Eddy, I’m here too!’, said a voice from one of the back rows with a thick Russian accent.

‘Oh yes... Andy! Wow! Its wonderful to see you again. Pardon my ignorance here but even though I have always loved tongue twisters I still cannot pronounce your last name. It would be nice if you could introduce yourself to this class’.

‘Sure! Its Mieczkowska.. Pronounced with a silent c; Andrei Mieczkowska. But I am totally cool with Andy’.

‘That works just fine for us, doesn’t it?’, quipped Alisa, one of the handful female students in the class along with Sussie. There was a cheerful “Yeahhh” from the rest of group that made the atmosphere in the classroom relaxing enough for the folks who were taking professor Eddy’s class for the first time.

‘Alright then!’, said Eddy to refocus the attention of the class.

‘That sounds good to me.. And I assume I shall get to

know the rest of you as we progress through the quarter’.

‘Sooo... ‘, Eddy continued.

’As you all are probably aware of, the focus of this class will be on studying Advanced Machine Learning Techniques. This course requires that you are at the very least familiar with the basics of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.

I have structured the course in such a way that you acquire both a theoretical and hands on understanding of some of the advanced algorithms involved in Machine Learning.’

Eddy took a piece of chalk and started bullet-listing a few things on the blackboard as he voiced over, ‘We will cover a set of 12 chapters over the quarter and there will be a open-book test in the class on completion of every 3 chapters, that’s 4 of such tests. Then there will be 24 lab assignments involved, 2 per chapter for which you will make use of the computing resources available at the Student AI Lab on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of this building.

Finally there will be a written exam at the end of the quarter during your finals week. Your grades from each of the tests that I mentioned combined with your lab work will play a role in the final course grade that you get assigned.

The recommended reference books other than the material distributed in this class are.. Please make sure you make a note of these-

1. Machine Learning: An Algorithmic Perspective (Chapman & Hall/CRC Machine Learning & Pattern Recognition)

2. Building Machine Learning Systems with Python’

Eddy turned towards the class, put down the chalk and

punched his tipping glasses with his index finger.

‘Both of these books are available from the library or you can just order these online from Amazon and have their drones deliver them to your doorstep.’

‘Does that sound reasonable enough?’, Eddy concluded as he sensed a focused and serious mood in the class that he very much liked to experience after he was done with monologuing his students.

‘I know it probably sounds like a lot of work, but if you are regular with your coursework and assignments, you should be just fine. And trust me... its going to be a lot of fun too!’

Eddy looked at the class that still didn’t seem to catch the last line that he just spoke, except a few nods here and there that gave an impression of being in agreement with him.

‘Well... I believe that much information should suffice for this first class’, Eddy smiled.

‘I do however have one last thing to share with you for those of you who might find it interesting and relevant enough. As some of you might have read already, the San Jose based BlueSky Robotics Corporation has made a significant grant available to UCB in order to fund the development of Artificial Consciousness.

To keep it short, their aim is to build a new breed of intelligent and conscious robots that will be way smarter and efficient to work in places where they are deployed. Building a form of artificial consciousness will enable these robots to learn and understand things that has not been possible with the current state of artificial intelligence. The robots will however be always programmed to follow the three laws of robotics. In this

sense their intelligence and learning is intended to be harnessed for the good of humanity. I personally believe that if the result of this project is a successful one, it will be the next big leap in human evolution.

To this end, The Advanced Machine Learning and AI Lab (AMLAIB) under my supervision where this research will be conducted is in need of two undergraduate Research Assistants (RAs) for part-time work at the lab.'

Eddy paused and adjusted his glasses one more time.

'One of these RAs whom I have worked with before is Philip Franco.'

He fixed his glare on a short scruffy looking student dressed in jeans and a baggy T-shirt in the front row of the class to his right. Plus he wore those thick black framed glasses that gave him an impression of a uber-geek that the students expected to see. Gesturing with both his hands pointed towards Franco in a form of introducing him to the class, Eddy continued,

'Franco and I are in need of one additional RA to help us distribute the work load. I have already had a discussion with Franco on what we aim to achieve over the course of the next few months building on our lab's XMAC model that has been much acclaimed as the closest thing that the AI community has come to developing artificial consciousness in the lab.

So... those of you who are interested in applying for this post, please get in touch with Franco for more information and the qualifications and requirements needed for this research position.'

Franco turned his head around and raised his hand acknowledging the class.

Eddy continued, 'The deadline to turn in your

application is March 1<sup>st</sup> and I expect it to be around our 4<sup>th</sup> class that you shall be informed of your successful candidacy for this post. That way you have enough time to read on our lab's work and forward all your questions and applications including your bio-data and statement of purpose to Franco. He is quite responsive over email, but if you wish to interact with him in person you might want to setup a time and place that works with his busy schedule.'

'Well... that will be it for this class I suppose. I look forward to your responses and see you all in the next class on Tuesday. Have a great weekend!'

As Sussie saw Eddy walk out of the classroom, she stayed glued to her chair utterly fascinated by what Eddy had just described to them. Her eyes looked motionless staring at the clock above the blackboard which now read 11:02 am as her mind stayed affixed to the idea of being a part of the next giant leap for mankind. Although she had read up a few research papers describing theories of artificial consciousness, she had never imagined what it would be like to be part of a team that made this seemingly far fetched idea a reality. This was her opportunity to be part of something greater than she had ever thought her career as a mathematician would lead her to. And she just had to be a part of this...

Sussie snapped out of her day-dream at the tail-end of

that thought that lasted for approximately three and a half minutes. She scanned the classroom and realized that everyone except Franco had left the room. It looked to her like Franco was about to be done as well, as he shuffled through a few papers and grabbed his backpack. Sussie wanted to talk to Franco right away and she packed in her notebook and pen as fast as she could. She followed Franco out of the door and then called out to him from behind,

‘Excuse me Franco!’, she said with a buoyant voice.

Franco stopped in his tracks and turned around.

‘Yes???...’, he replied with a husky voice

‘Hi Franco, I am Sussie... um.. Sussie Goodman’

‘Hi Sussie, how are you doing?’

‘I am awesome Franco and you?’

‘Pretty good! How can I help you?’

‘Well..’, Sussie replied as she took a momentary pause to compose her thoughts.

‘I am really interested in the research position that Prof. Eddy mentioned in the class.’

‘O....K’, Franco said, ‘Do you mind following me to the Rudolph Building on the other side of the campus? I am in a bit of a rush and already late for class 101’

‘Sure!’, Sussie replied in agreement.

She followed Franco around the main campus area and before she could say a word Franco interjected her thoughts, ‘So... I can gauge by your enthusiasm that you seem quite thrilled about the RA.’

‘Oh Yes!’, Sussie replied almost instantly, ‘I wasn’t expecting to encounter something as interesting as this is on the first day of class!’.

‘Oh Ya?... hmm... so what makes this so interesting for

you?’ Franco asked.

‘Well... human cognition and consciousness have absolutely thrilled me since I first took a philosophy elective by Prof. Richard Bernecker on this topic in my freshman year. Being a mathematics major I decided to take a minor in cognitive psychology. I have researched extensively on Neural Networks and developed a few mathematical models for artificial neurons. I have been a strong proponent of Pentti Haikonen’s cognitive architecture which takes a bottom-up approach to produce higher-level functions using elementary processing units or artificial neurons, although none of his implementations so far have produced anything other than emotions. I do however see a strong potential in his idea and what’s required is an accurate implementation of the artificial neuron complexity in order to produce artificial consciousness.’

Franco looked impressed by what Sussie was describing to him.

‘Vow! That sounds pretty neat Sussie!’

‘Thanks!’

‘So... I assume you must have read up on our lab’s research work on the website?’

‘Well the last I read was sometime before the beginning of the last quarter, publication number 12, I believe. Have been involved in a few other things since then. Haven’t been able to keep up as much as I wanted to.’

‘That’s fine, but I definitely do recommend that you look up the latest publication, that’s issue 15. BlueSky Robotics has been impressed by the fact that our lab was able to propose and demonstrate a working simulation of robot reproduction’, Franco replied.

‘Robot reproduction?’ Sussie looked in complete awe.

‘Yes... It will be a significant step forward in helping us...’, Franco paused as his head motioned upwards to look at Wing A of the Rudolph Bldg..

‘Oh... Too bad but I’m afraid that we have reached my next class. I got to go Sussie, but it was great talking to you.’

‘Um.. Alright. No worries.’, Sussie replied feeling like someone had snatched an Oreo right out of her mouth.

‘Well...’, Franco replied with the pitch of his voice decreasing as he made a brisk headway towards the classroom door.

‘Sussie, why don’t you take a look at the website and you will know what I was talking about?’

‘Oh yeah, sure! It was great talking to you too!’, Sussie answered as Franco opened the door and disappeared behind the tinted glass wall of class 101.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Sussie*

Sussie could barely manage to put any of her attention in class 202 on Numerical Analysis, although it was really what she was looking forward to on her first day. She had instinctively taken a seat in one of the back rows where Professor Herman's mellow but sluggish voice could barely make it. She wanted to be in a zone where she was sort of aware of what was going on in the class while being in a parallel universe of her own. And she most certainly wasn't going to get herself a cat-nap, something that she usually did in classes that didn't seem to put her mind in top gear. Forget cat-napping, she wasn't even thinking of going to bed tonight until she had figured out everything that Franco had intrigued her with just a while ago.

There seemed no way that Sussie could control her mind from flooding with thoughts on artificial consciousness and robot reproduction. She was feeling like being flown to an island of utterly amazing robotic creatures who did everything that she had ever imagined

and things that were just freaking impossible. They were talking to each other, riding some crazy-ass cars, flying spacecrafts, working in factories like there was no tomorrow... hell even producing babies.

‘Robot reproduction?... What the hell?... Why would they want robots to reproduce?... I mean damn... aren’t we humans sufficient enough to procreate and move our civilization forward?’, she asked herself all the while being in her signature day-dreaming position that made her eyes stand still somewhere in the first quadrant of her imagined world. Sussie loved being captivated by an idea that took her in sort of a fugue state for a while, something that reassured that her mind was still sane enough when she snapped back to the real world. But hell this one seemed ridiculously endless.

A few classes later Sussie found herself walking out of Prof. Rudolph’s class on Calculus II. She had this wonderful feeling of having quite an eventful and productive first day even though she barely remembered anything that was lectured to her after 11 am. Nothing had gotten into Sussie’s mind more than that RA position. She was eager to get to her dorm room and look up the publication that Franco had mentioned. At this hour Sussie was usually programmed to grab a quick sandwich and protein shake from her favorite campus eatery and then head to the Berkeley Gym in her workout gear. But today that routine almost seemed non-essential to her.

Sussie unlocked her bike from where she had parked it and made a beeline to Palo Verde Housing where she occupied a one-bedroom apartment with her cute little kitty-cat named Apple. Nothing seemed to distract Sussie other than making sure that she had locked her bike

properly when she reached her apartment. Sussie had over the winter break managed to force herself into the act of locking up her bike every single time she parked it. She had been quite lazy on that front before and gotten a couple of her bikes stolen since she switched to her new housing this year.

Sussie walked a few stairs up to room number ‘607’ and unlocked the front door. She took out her shoes quickly, flung her backpack onto the couch and headed to the kitchen. Pulling out a bag of Friskies from the lower cabinet, Sussie restocked Apple’s food plate and recycled her muddied water. Then she grabbed a can of diet coke for herself from the fridge, pulled out her MacBook GS from her backpack and walked into her bedroom. Sussie’s desk was littered with books and papers. She hand brushed them aside and cleared out a little space for her coke and MacBook. Then she took a quick peep underneath her bed where Apple usually liked cocooning herself much throughout the afternoons and well into the late evenings.

‘Aww... I missed you sweetie. How’s my little furry burry doing?’, Sussie greeted Apple as the kitty looked back and mewed at her ever so cutely. ‘Its going to be a long evening for mommy okay, but I am right here alright? I have refilled your Friskies and your water. So go get it when you are hungry okay?’

Sussie sat down on her turquoise chair that matched the color of her desk. She laid her three fingers on her MacBook’s multitouch mousepad and switched across windows to activate her browser. Tapping her thumb once on the mousepad she got the cursor blinking on the address bar and then typed in [www.ucb.edu/amlaib](http://www.ucb.edu/amlaib). She

didn't have to type in the whole thing as her browser's history automatically suggested that to her. Sussie's anticipation began to surge as she landed on the AMLAIB homepage.

Sussie's iPhone X3 rang as she scrambled amidst her pile of papers to find it. It was her boyfriend Jason's picture with an Answer or Decline option on it. Sussie's thumb was leaning towards the red button but she answered it anyway thinking that she would only allow herself to be distracted for a couple minutes.

'Hey...' she replied wanting to sound busy.

'Hey Suss, how you doing?'

'I am doing great Jasie, and you?'

'I am awesome girl! Hows your first day?'

'Oh gosh it was mind-blowing dude! I have to tell you so much!'

'Oh yeah?.. That sounds amazing Suss. Hey listen, want to hang out for dinner and movies tonight?'

'Um... I wish I could, but I got a huge pile of ideas sitting on my head right now you know...'

'Ok forget the movie, lets just do dinner tonight and I will help you offload some of that pile... a beer to go along with it. Trust me you'll feel a lot lighter.'

'Seriously dude... but...'

'Common Suss, its Friday night! And finals week is waaaay too far off. Hell...looo??!! The quarter just started.'

'Oh well... OK, you maybe unusually right on this one... perhaps I am taking this a little too seriously.'

'You are... girly... you are', said Jason with a tone that

Sussie knew pretty well and too bad that she always fell for it.

‘Um... yeaahhh... but gosh I am soooo excited to get this going you know...’

‘I know your excitement levels Suss, in fact I know them pretty well by now don’t you agree?’

‘Ya dude... but this excitement feels different... I am kinda bit worried too this time. Um... I think I want to just...’

‘Hey Suss, you know something really cool?’, Jason interrupted as he tried to distract her.

‘Josh, my buddy and his girlfriend Arianna just tried this awesome new Mediterranean place off Culver Dr. All that Josh spoke when I met him today was how awesome those chicken kebabs were. Trust me you’ll love it!’

‘Oh yeah? Chicken kebabs huh? Gosh those are yum...!’

‘Yeah... exactly!’, said Jason sounding a bit more amped up now as he began to smell that victorious feeling of a trap well laid to lure the lioness.

‘And I promise...’, he continued, ‘I won’t bug you with aliens tonight.’

‘Hehehehe’, said Sussie as she burst into a laugh.

‘Damn Jasie! You know you are sua..ch a sucker at this dude! Um...OK. Where do you wanna meet up?’

‘All rightee! Yay!’, said an excited and much relieved Jason.

‘Well... just stay where you are and I’ll pick you up at the corner of University and Madison. Around seven-ish??’

‘That sounds ok to me but I assume your seven-ish won’t be much like eight-ish by the time you get here?’,

replied Sussie sarcastically.

‘Ohh no! No way... Common! I know I screwed up the last time around but...’,

‘Last time?’, Sussie interjected with her voice a lot more like a lioness who has been irked off.

‘You do that every single time Jasie!’

‘OK... Whatever... I promise to be there by 7:15... hmm... ok... 7:10 for sure.’

‘For sure huh?’

‘Yes promise, like promise promise. I swear it girl or...’

‘Well... Alright... but you are going to make me pretty upset if you screw up this time around.’

‘Common Suss... no... hell no!’

‘OK, get your ass in the shower then, its 6:20 already.’

‘Guess what? I am calling from my bath Suss.’, Jason tried to joke with a confidence that suggested he had got this all worked out.

‘Ha Ha! Nice. I am sooo impressed with your progress Jasie... Do you really think I am such a bozo to believe that crap?’

‘Common Suss... I promise I will be there.’

‘Alright! I am waiting.’

‘OK... Great! See you soon then Suss.’

‘Well... see you in exactly 50 minutes. That’s more time than what it takes me to get a shower, eat dinner and iron my clothes. Alrighty! Good luck!’, said Sussie as she hung up.

‘Aha! There’s one right there!’, said Sussie in an upbeat voice as she pointed left towards an empty parking spot in

between an old red truck and a blue Honda while Jason drove his Bentley through the packed parking lot of University Center.

‘Umm... Na...’, replied Jason coolly.

Sussie looked surprised, ‘Why not?’

‘Give me a sec Suss!’

Jason continued driving forward and then wheeled around at the end of the first lane into the second one.

‘Jeez! We had a spot back up there!’

‘Jason looked unperturbed as he tried to ignore Sussie and looked past her to the left and then to the right.

Then all of a sudden his eyes brightened, ‘OK...That one, right there!’

‘Ah... I see... you wanted to fool around with that reverse parking thing?’, said Sussie in a simmering sarcastic tone.

‘Suss... that’s not called fooling around. Its called...’ Jason paused and looked at Sussie as he motioned the middle and index fingers of his left hand to quote “saving time”.

‘Really? Hmm... I quite frankly don’t see any time savings here. Its the same deal whether you bust your goddam ass parking first in reverse or not’, snarled Sussie.

‘No! That’s not true’, said Jason as his left hand grabbed the back of Sussie’s seat almost in a motion that suggested her to calm down while his right hand dexterously manipulated the steering.

Finally making a few adjustments he switched into park gear, turned the ignition off and lifted the hand brake.

‘You must feel a lot better now, don’t you?’, said Sussie mockingly.

‘Hell yeah! I sure do!’, replied Jason with a confidence

that would belittle the most seasoned of pilots. He felt like a captain who had managed to take control of a crashing plane and land it safely to save a million lives.

‘Cool... good for you dude! Can we get out of this car now?’

‘Sure we can!’

Jason and Sussie walked past Trader Joe’s towards a strip of restaurants that showcased all kinds of Asian and Persian cuisine. There was PF Chang’s, Gateway of India, Cha for Tea, Yo Sushi and then there was Paradiso.

‘There you go, that’s Paradiso Mediterranean Cuisine. Although Suss there’s enough choice out here as you can see. So I’ll leave it to you. Your call!’

Sure this Persian place wasn’t as busy or big as Sussie had pictured it given how Josh was supposedly raving about it. But heck she was hungry and if this was possibly, even in the slightest sense, the awesomest place in town for exotic chicken kebabs then she couldn’t afford to miss it. Jason could imagine a momentary brain pulse in Sussie’s picky mind as her eyes alternated in between the Indian place and Paradiso and then they had finally settled on the one at the far corner of the restaurant row.

‘Yup. Just can’t afford to miss out on those kebabs. Let’s go there’, said Sussie pointing in the direction of Paradiso.

Jason played his man’s part of opening the restaurant door to let Sussie in first to get behind its black translucent glass walls. The interior of the place had a perfect Persian ambience and the smell of flavored basmati rice, kebabs, gyros and tzatziki sauce was all over the place. Sussie found herself being dragged towards the large display menu to the left of the counter that was embellished with gigantic and colorful images of kebabs, soltanis, gyro

sandwiches, flavored rice and meat plates. It seemed like yet another form of Persian seductiveness to her.

A Persian looking man with a blue cap and a black t-shirt which had *Paradiso* printed on it soon approached them from the right and positioned himself underneath a banner that displayed ‘Order Here’ in an *Italic red font*.

‘Good Evening folks! I am Fardad, this restaurant’s owner. How are you guys doing?’, he said with a hospitable smile and an even more hospitable Persian accent.

‘Great!’, replied Jason. Sussie didn’t seem to get her eyes of the menu although part of her was conscious that Jason was in a conversation with someone.

‘Very well!’, said Fardad, ‘What would you like to order?’

‘Well...’, said Jason as he paused for a few seconds trying to garner Sussie’s affixed attention.

‘Suss... you got something you wanna order?’

‘Huh?’, Sussie spurted as she turned to face Jason. ‘Ya... yes... for sure’, she replied fumbling, ‘Can I have a... umm... one order of that Kebab Jumbo Combo?’

‘You mean the Kebab Jumbo Combo Plate?’, said Fardad with a big smile that showed off all his three root canals on the lower palette which were more or less compensated by the sparkling white deck of upper teeth that he seemed to have diligently taken care of.

‘That’s item number 19. Comes with a side of gyro sandwich, fries and drink’, he said.

‘Yes please’, Sussie replied in her signature commanding tone.

‘You got it!’, said Fardad, a phrase that he had hammered somewhere at the back of his mind taking

orders for all these years.

‘And for you Sir?’

‘Well... Pretty much the same thing I guess!’. Jason had learnt to default to Sussie’s choice by experience when he felt too overwhelmed by the platter of choices available.

‘You got it!’, said Fardad as he zipped through a combination of key punches into the cashier’s machine. Finally he hit a key which most definitely looked like a 2’s multiplier.

‘Anything else? Maybe a side of salad or fries?’

Jason and Sussie looked at each other and then replied in a single voice, ‘Nope. Just a coke if you will.’

‘Sure! That’s two...?’, Fardad paused with a questioning face.

‘Two large cokes please’, answered Jason.

‘Oh! And can you add a baklava please?’, said Sussie.

‘That’s going to be just for her.’, finished Jason.

‘You got it!’, Fardad repeated as he punched in a few more keys, confirmed the final order and then pressed a key to print out the receipt. ‘That will be 35.25’.

‘Cool!’, said Jason taking a number 7 placard from Fardad.

‘20 mins. Enjoy your meal!’

‘Thanks!’

Sussie picked a table close to one of the side windows from where she could see a beautiful fountain that had water gushing out of a golden Manneken Pis at the center with underwater neon lights that switched colors between red, blue and green.

‘I’ll get some utensils and have that one filled for you’, Jason spoke as he grabbed Sussie’s soda cup and walked towards the drinks fountain.

‘Cool!’, replied Sussie while turning her neck sideways to look at the restaurant menu again. She wanted to make sure that she had picked the best meal from the lot. A few moments later she looked convinced and then switched to looking around the restaurant and then at the beautiful see-through kitchen behind a transparent glass. She saw one of the chefs working his knife deftly to slice a layer from the mounted lamb roll. She saw another grilling a stack of delicious looking kebabs. Things looked nice everywhere. The tables and chairs were well laid out and everything looked to be in its proper place and well organized. However, she did not particularly appreciate the pale brown color on the interior of the restaurant which she thought would have been much better in some light shade of green or just plain white.

‘How’s it looking?’, said Jason who had returned with the two cokes that he placed on their table.

‘Pretty awesome Jasie!’

‘Oh yeah? Well... I am glad you like it so far!’

‘Certainly!’, she said looking a lot calmer and relaxed now, ‘So how was your day?’

‘Oh not bad at all except between 6:30 and 7:10 when I felt much like a circus elephant being brutally ring mastered’, mocked Jason.

‘Oh my poor baby... was I that bad?’

‘Nah... not really you sounded very cute’, snickered Jason.

‘Hmm...’, nodded Sussie sipping some of her coke.

‘So...’, she continued in an attempt to get Jason out of his sarcastic mood.

‘How’s your work going on at the Wilkinson Lab?’

‘Its going very well! But wait, didn’t I promise you that I

wasn't going to talk aliens tonight?'

'Its ok Jasie. I did love to hear it.', said Sussie in a softer more likable voice, 'Alright I will say it loud, I couldn't have asked for a better place to dine out tonight.'

'Oh yeah? Are you sure you want to listen?', said Jason with a surprised look on his face.

'Yes of course! I really didn't intend to come out that hard on you. Plus I haven't talked to you about your new internship since you joined the Lab last week.'

'Hmm... Ok...', said Jason who was beginning to switch modes to his more normal self now, 'Fair enough. Well...the Wilkinson Lab'

Their conversation was interrupted by a restaurant server, 'Number 7', he called out, carrying their order. Right of the bat it smelled so good that Sussie could hardly wait to pick up her utensils and fork out a bite from those delicious looking kebabs.

'Oh my... that looks awesome!', said Sussie excitedly.

'I told you!', said Jason, 'You should agree that I have an awesome hangout that keeps me updated on all the happening stuff in Berkeley'.

'I sure do!', nodded Sussie in agreement. 'Ok so tell me what's the Wilkinson lab up to?'

'Well... they are a privately funded lab in Palm Springs started by the billionaire founder Bernard Wilkinson with teams that are working on two parallel projects. One of them is looking up aliens under the RESET group while the other team is into the construction of hyperdrive space vehicles or HSVs that will help massively speed up interplanetary travel.'

'Vow! And you are on...', she paused, 'the RESET team?', asked Sussie.

‘That’s correct!’, replied Jason, ‘You remember the SETI project?’

‘Yes! SETI as in Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence right?’, said Sussie enthusiastically. ‘If I remember correctly, the one that got shutdown way back in 2014 due to lack of government or private funding.’

‘Exactly!’, said Jason, ‘RESET is a resurgence of the SETI mission to find extraterrestrial life.’

‘Hmm...’, nodded Sussie, ‘I see.’

‘So...’, continued Jason as he gulped down a finely chewed piece of his gyro sandwich, ‘Mr. Wilkinson was on the original SETI team, but after the Congress wrote it off as not being worth any taxpayer money, Wilkinson continued to work under Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen who funded the Allen Telescope Array or ATA as part of SETI. That went on for a while but eventually Allen pulled out of the project as well since there were no publishable findings. The ATA has been hibernating ever since.’

‘Hmm... I get it’, said Sussie, ‘But tell me Jasie, do you really believe that there’s someone else out there in our galaxy who’s looking to find us the way we are?’

Jason’s hand that was trying to feed him with the remainder of his sandwich remained stationed for a few seconds as he listened to Sussie. Then he put down the sandwich, took a sip of coke and answered,

‘Well... not sure if the folks in outer heavens are trying to reach out to us or not, maybe they already did a long time ago but couldn’t get back any response or it could very well be that such alien transmissions to Earth are about to just happen, if we are good enough to listen and decode them. But quite optimistically I do believe in the

whole ET idea. Yes, I certainly do.

It was never science fiction to me after I had first studied the research behind SETI. It looks quite feasible if we humans put in a sufficient amount of time, money, intelligence and patience into it. I am not talking many years here, something like only a decade, maybe even less than that when we could expect to hear our first heavenly siblings. And I am saying this to you not because I think Mormon missionaries are cool, which I kind of do... but only because of what the Wilkinson Lab has produced so far.

‘Oh really?’, interjected Sussie who was feeling happily intrigued as she munched down her stack of kebabs.

‘Yup. The algorithms that the RESET team has produced on the farm of supercomputers connected to the ATA is a technological masterpiece that’s way ahead of its time. It would make any version of SETI look like a badly finished Do-It-Yourself project.’

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *G-Botics*

Some thirty-two hundred employees occupied the nine circular buildings on 330 Amphitheater Dr. of what was collectively known as G-Botics. If you hovered over the 2000 acres of this humungous corporate campus, you could see a group of eight circles laid out at the vertices of a massive octagonal structure, each of which was bridged to its neighboring circle and to the epicentral Mission Control Center or in more familiar terms the building that housed the CEO and Senior Management of G-Botics.

The architecture of the building signified dominance and growth of a robotics giant that began as a series of acquisitions by Google in 2010. The conglomerate had since then assimilated a host of revolutionary startups that hooted the coming of the ‘Robot Revolution’. Among these were Boston Dynamics, iRobot, Rethink Robotics and several others. Back in the day when these acquisitions first made news, the media published segments of debates that questioned their immediate value as part of the search giant’s growing arsenal of

companies. That if it really made any sense for Google to spend resources on robots which in the view of tech pundits was a huge distraction from the company's core business. However, the folks who called the shots at Google believed that the company would land a delayed footprint if and when the coming of robots really happened. And certainly there was no man today who would disagree to that. The much predicted and in many an opinion even feared of all revolutions had begun and it was here to stay for a long time. Robots were big business these days. They were in homes, in factories and they occupied a fair amount of airspace and radio frequency channels.

From its defense contracts to civilian drones that delivered stuff at your doorstep, G-Botics had seen even more expansion with Ron Nickelson at the helm of the company. This head honcho stood in a six foot 2 inch tall frame that weighed a little over 200 pounds. He was a fierce tech-savvy business leader who had started his career as a Googler back in 2001. From being one of the first employees at the company to the VP of Product Design, Nickelson had seen himself grow from a software development engineer to the CEO of GBotics, the subsidiary that Google's board of directors thought as deserving of its very own futuristic looking and expandable campus space. It was clear that the company held a dominating clout on the robotics business, but it wasn't exactly a monopoly. And this is what kept Nickelson and his crew on their toes all the time. There was one arch rival that haunted their dreams and their day-dreams.

As the March 2024 cover of Time Magazine had put it

— “Berkeley Robotics, the robotics company that might just be the game changer”. Above that caption featured a tall, lean, handsome looking man called Mike Wagner, its Founder and President who had single handedly taken Berkeley Robotics from a university startup to a billion dollar robot making machine that made it the fastest growing company in the history of the industry.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Flight from Earth*

SpaceBird blasted stealthily into thin air at 500 miles per hour hyper-driving its two passengers out of the Earth's orbit in less than 50 seconds. It was an unceremonious yet epic moment for the team, as SpaceBird became the first HSV to carry artificially conscious beings into ethereal space. The total flight time to Iridus was estimated at 7 hours 43 mins with the dashboard registering an altitude of 180 miles above Earth; communication with the Mission Control Center was impeccable.

With SpaceBird now cruising steadily, although still traveling at well over 600 miles an hour, the laws of motion allowed Stryden and Simona to relax their grip on the protective seat handlebars now. As they slowly opened their eyes to the magnificent starlit darkness surrounding them, a realization of having cheated death gradually emerged, which for a fleeting moment at least promised their non-threatened existence on a much safer planet. They had survived the ignominy of being terminated by their own creators. This feeling however was quickly

supplanted by their awareness of how frazzled this entire escapade had made them, one that was composed of a series of back to back events that had kept their amygdala in an alerted state long enough to have completely tuckered them out. And the journey was far from over.

Post this feeling was their quasi-human instinct of hunger and they needed to fuel up quickly. Fortunately the SpaceBird team had stocked enough supplies in the back room to sustain them the duration of the flight in addition to a brief overview of flight controls supported by a detailed manual before take off. SpaceBird was acting like a responsible Big Brother as it drove them through the sanctity of space giving an impression that some external almost magical intelligence was in complete control of landing them on better ground.

As the view of the world around her started to reorient a little, Simona turned her head sideways to look at Stryden who was somewhat in the same counterpart action until their eyes met.

‘Stry, you alright?’, asked a concerned Simona.

‘Eh... Y-y-yeaahh’, blurted an exhausted Stryden feeling a tad light-headed as he touched the metallic shell of his scalp with his right hand to make sure that there was nothing that demanded medical attention.

‘What d’you reckon? Do I look alright?’, asked Stryden.

‘You look great Stry! A little disconcerted, but nothing more’, chuckled Simona, their lips now parting into a synchronous smile as they looked at each other for a few seconds of undivided attention. Both of them could sense a glint of affection and mutual admiration in their somewhat fatigued silicon eyes. Then Stryden drew his left hand forward and stroked Simona's forearm gently which

drew a few goosebumps on her body. She blinked, then turned to look away to the left at a bright star that had now become visible at a distance. A sense of tranquility had pervaded with which she turned round to look back at Stryden who had drawn in her body vibrations, his smile brightening with the star, instilling a moment of calmness in the time and space between them.

‘Eh... Simmie, you hungry?’, he mumbled a bit in an attempt to sound normal although Simona was intuitive enough to not overlook Stryden's affected sense of self-consciousness.

‘Yes very much Stry!’, replied Simona with an affectionate smile, trying to rub some of her sense of ease onto Stryden who smiled back as he untethered himself from his seat. Experiencing a loss of gravity he recalled some of the instructions that the SpaceBird team had given them on Earth. Then taking a moment or two to get a hold of his bearings as he floated, he hovered comfortably behind Simona's seat.

‘Well, let me take a look at what the Bird's got in its pantry. You, just sit back and relax and let the SpaceBird do its job. I'll be right back’, he said assuringly appearing a lot more relaxed and in control of the situation at hand.

‘Sure! Not a hurry’, said Simona bracingly stretching out her legs, as she straightened a few knots in her back and hamstrings feeling a lot more comfortable in her seat now.

SpaceBird was cruising along at a steady 1300 miles per

hour. Stryden had gulped down a can of root beer and pork meat while Simona gorged herself on two big Turkey sandwiches. It hadn't taken too long after that meal that Stryden's body drifted into sleep mode. The exhaustion of an uninterrupted runtime of more than 26 hours was more than enough to wear him out, add to that all the psychologically demanding events that they had battled along the way so far and it wasn't even clear if those were the last they had to fight until they reached the promised planet.

Simona was equally worn out and seeing Stryden's body slouched besides her was just the right dose of sleeping pill that she needed. She did however take a final look at SpaceBird's dashboard to see if it was showing any signs of alerts as her eyes coalesced slowly into haziness and in less than a minute later into complete darkness.

Deep breaths of two completely frazzled bodies that had slumped into deep sleep were circulating through SpaceBird like clock-work. For over an hour and a half, it seemed as though not even an asteroid collision could wake them up. SpaceBird was moving as dependably as ever carrying them through the hallowed emptiness of space, serene and motionless.

But just when it had traveled another 35 miles or so, it experienced an external force that made it wobble for a couple seconds. Moments later it skewed all the way to the right then drifted heavily to the left and began alternating between this for another few seconds. Then all of a sudden the SpaceBird accelerated to nearly 2500 miles per second creating a G-Force that bolted Stryden and

Simona out of their slumber. Their eyes barely open, their bodies had triggered an automatic response to gripping the safety handlebars that were attached to a gorilla glass frame that quickly enclosed them with internal air-bags as a result of the sudden acceleration. Both the bodies which were in deep hibernation just a while ago were now in a complete state of alertness. The G-forces impacting their bodies were so strong that both Stryden and Simona emitted loud bursts of helpless shrieks that seemed to do nothing but just reverberate inside their protective enclosures, their heads buried deeply in those inflated air-bags. It felt like bungee jumping into the jaws of death all over again, but this time with no certainty that they were even remotely tethered.

A few more minutes in this deathly bungee jump, Stryden and Simona experienced gut-wrenching spasms as SpaceBird nose-dived 300 miles into the space below and then just when both of them began to realize that it was all over, SpaceBird made a vertical U-turn which now spiraled them upwards like a roller coaster that had risen past its lowest point on the ride. Their gut-wrenching was even more awful as these sudden changes in G-forces made Stryden and Simona want to beg the Lord ever so dearly to retire them out of this seemingly never-ending deathly game. But just when their desperation had come to its absolute limit, the SpaceBird leveled and operating on whatever consciousness that remained, Stryden and Simona found themselves surrounded by gaseous fusions of white, black, scarlet, lilac and magenta. They were inside some kind of a gigantic space vortex heading straight towards its core.

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The luminous green core looked like something in between a volcanic eruption and a dying star that was spitting concentric orange flames out of it in all directions. Frightened and almost petrified with terror, Simona emitted a loud shriek as SpaceBird started whirling round the inner walls of the vortex swaying side to side in an uncontrolled fashion. In an act of sheer helplessness, Stryden groped for the flight controls in the hope of steadying SpaceBird, but it only added to the plight as none of the mechanisms of operating the flight seemed to function. Everything from the control yoke to the center stick to the digital input and communications unit was entirely disabled as if someone had jinxed the spaceship altogether, Stryden now imagining the worst his terrified mind could - some kind of a demon or monster who had laid its grip on SpaceBird toying with it relentlessly to its heart content and darting it right at the dreaded core. Simona's shrieks had only grown louder and Stryden could do nothing except accompany her in this feat of utter hopelessness. Both of them had gripped firmly onto their safety handlebars, their eyes pressed tightly and their lips curled in a final attempt to block everything out of their senses except those last traces of intense fear and certain death.

But just then, as if the demon's grip was suddenly set loose, SpaceBird steadied again and rapidly decelerated. Then post a few wobbles it settled itself into a hovering position inside the vortex resulting in an unprecedented sense of quite. Still very much in a state post-trauma, disbelief and horror, Stryden and Simona opened their

eyes wearily. However to their surprise the erupting green core had now entirely vanished such that the very end of the narrowing circular vortex that they were in led into a long tube shaped tunnel.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Planet Stana*

Courtesy of the thirty three hour day cycle on Planet Stana, fifteen hours had passed between the events that unfolded that night and the bright morning sun; now replacing the two moons and casting a beautiful radiance across the ocean that flowed in a blanket of lilac flavored with a tinge of sparkling gold. About some twenty odd feet away from where the waves receded back into the ocean, two corpses lay covered with sand that was still water logged and beginning to dry. They hadn't budged an inch and were now ripe open and visibly game in the broad day light for any sort of creature on Stana who could digest synthetic muscle fiber, titanium and human organics.

With the sun glowering, temperatures were beginning to rise when one of the four hands between the two bodies suddenly twitched. It subsided back to its motionless state and then... twitched another time. Four such passes later it clenched some sand after several muscle groups had responded in a rise and fall pattern to activate themselves.

Then it squirmed a little with its forehead rubbing against the sand that led into a sudden gush of forced breath out of its nostrils. It coughed involuntarily and unsteadily in desperation; dispersing some of the surrounding sand as it pulled itself out of the depression that its face had created.

Then with great effort it swallowed a chunk of fresh air and brushed away the wet sand that had clung all over its face, ears and neck. Finally, using its left hand to forklift its left shoulder blade, the right hand followed up to push the body out of its prostrate position. The body crawled forwards a little on its forearms and then turning sideways round the left, its squinched eyelids parted slowly allowing for the first rays of sunlight to pass through. Stryden was alive...but he was in the most painful of all conditions imaginable.

Stryden could barely feel his feet, his titanium skin shredded and littered with swollen wounds as if someone had mercilessly struck him repeatedly with a piece of barbed wire. His guts experienced a horrible sensation of being fed with rotten fish and eggs that made him retch and cough uncontrollably. He felt his nape bulge out, the weight of which seemed like a ninety pound barbell glued over his back. The left half of his head was messed up and ached more than his right distorting his field of vision and sending undulating pangs all over his spine.

Stryden held up his left hand over his scalp in an effort to control the pain; but just when his neck turned sideways to the right a hazy image had appeared out of the corner of his eye. The image looked something like scattered blocks of rust iron buried in a pile of sand. Stryden rubbed over his right eye to frame a clearer image, his left hand still held over his head. This time he could associate

some pattern to the iron blocks, a pattern that looked more like a picture of his own self laying next to him.

With some of his focus dislodged away from the pain, Stryden's mind had now begun to subconsciously search for Simona, the pattern in his head making increasingly more sense to him as he crawled inch-wise towards it. And then... he had seen it. There was Simona laying prostrated; her legs separated by a good three feet or so. Her face was buried heavily in the sand with her eyes following her right arm that stretched outwards while her left hand had curled up backwards. She was motionless as if in an unsuccessful last attempt to hold onto something... someone for help.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Castle Athenisius*

There stood a futuristic looking building at the top of the mountain about a hundred odd feet from where the base of the desert was. The structure, a colossal castle with a wavering flag holding its missionary signage of a big black fiery animal, looked like it was made of a special kind of silica and steel combined with rocks. There was a big iron gate that was heavily armored with spiked rods and bearings making intruder entry a foreseen act of self-elimination. And if any creature was sane enough to be a trespasser of such sorts. Certainly Simona and Stryden were not close to being dare-devils soon after all that they had been through to escape Earth.

Stryden whose neural networks had begun to calculate the possibilities of entering this fortress had a more contemplating look on his face as opposed to Simona who seemed mesmerized with the colossus. Mixed feelings of awe and curiosity beamed from her three year old like eyes as she held Stryden's left hand with a grip stronger than what she had ever held before. Stryden could feel her

heartbeat through the pulse of her hand as they followed Orion 25 and 26 closer to the castle.

But just as Stryden was about to take his eye off the fortress, he spotted an extremely odd yet beautiful in its own way animal... no it was more like a bird which became visible at the right end of the fortress. It looked like it was circling the structure in some sort of an attempt to safeguard it. As Stryden squinted his eyes to look a little more clearly, he saw its huge wingspan, a Pinocchio snout and its glittering in a liquid of gold red eyes. It ricocheted left and right with its humungous flapping wings drawing in a caucus of air underneath where its belly would be and gushing it out of its tail end. It wasn't all that feathery and seemed to be operating its flight by some furtive means with its skin covered in a serpent's scale. It was a big beastly bird which hissed and drew itself in and out of its propelling snout. It briefed a look on the four of them and then drew itself back in its position. Indeed a petrifying bird, A BIG petrifying bird.

“What is that?” whispered Stryden. ‘Oh that.....’, said Athius 23. ‘Its the Gingrod, the castle guardian.’ We have two of those at our service. One guards from 2am to midday and the other the remainder of the time. They overlook the castle and keep unwanted precarious things at bay. You need not really be scared of them although these big creatures are actually very loyal and caring.

The quartet took more steps towards the base of the summit. When they approached the base, Athius 25 signaled a 3 motion something to Gingrod who turned its neck to the left, looked straight in Athius 25's eye and nodded a couple times. Then changing its course of flight it flew a little closer to the edge of the hill and swooped

straight down landing on the base with its thorned feet that were meant to kill. It flapped its wings and waited, dusking away some of the dirt that it had gathered.

‘Here we go Amigalos! Its time to saddle along’, said Athius 23. The Gingrod’s eyes winked once as it lowered its back on the ground. Athius 23 gestured them to climb the animal’s back. Stryden and Simona took some cautious baby steps keeping their eye fixed on Gingrod all the time. They looked mesmerized by the sheer length of this creature and fears lingered in their minds. Would it open its eyes and emanate a beam of red that would laser burn through their bodies or was it really being that hospitable waiting on them to mount themselves on its leather saddled back. The skin looked wonderfully scaly and exotic. It was riddled with colors of red, green and blue.

There was a flush of terror on Simona’s face when Gingrod’s limbs scrubbed the desert sand a little and she took a step back in a protective stance. Stryden looked a little startled too but he quickly stabilized Simona by holding her back. Athius 23 and 25 mounted the Gingrod’s left wing which was ridged in the form of steps and climbed one step at a time on the Gingrod’s hump. Simona and Stryden followed along these ridged stairs, then scouted themselves in the back row of two seats as the two doors forming the tube shaped glass enclosure closed like the doors of a Lamborghini. They were ready for their first ascending flight on Athenia.

The ascent took a little over a minute as Gingrod glided smoothly over the majestic ocean below that surrounded

the left hillside of the castle. The water was a lilac, crystal clear bed of steadily surging waves that hit against the wall of huge rocks at the foot of the hill, receding and then repeating the harmonious cycle again. The sun, a tad amber yet shining magnificently across the horizon, gleamed its golden rays through the water waves laying a silky golden sheet of covering against their rolling insides. Some of these golden beams shone right against the Gingrod's glass enclosure reflecting and refracting light creating the entire spectrum of rainbow colors, a sight so beautiful unlike anything that Stryden and Simona had ever experienced.

The Gingrod flapped its wings solidly and then leaned into a right circling turn around the hill, encircling it a few more times as it gradually reached the top, landing in front of the castle's heavily guarded iron gate. The glass enclosure's four doors opened Lamborghini style allowing Athius 23 and 25 to descend over the ridged stairs of Gingrod's right wing with Stryden and Simona closely following them, as they observed the silvery scaly skin of Gingrod that had picked up some coat of gold dust from the sunlight that had now gradually begun to fade away into the dusk.

Stryden and Simona sat in one of the seats in the circular lobby that surrounded the Hollax; a cylindrical glass dome structure at the center with 360 degrees of clear view space in between, void of anything except thin air. Alien Immigration was now at the right side of their field of vision. Their perspective was clear enough for them to get a grasp of how deep the Hollax penetrated or rather how

far up the hill they had been flown up to by the Gingrod.

Simona stood up and moved closer to the Hollax gently cushioning her nose against the glass to get a better look at the stack of different levels underneath. These circularly squirming levels bordered by ornate golden railings flowed seamlessly into each other; eventually terminating at the ground level at the center of which lay a wide circular opening that opened and closed its fanned cover periodically. Simona wondered if this was some kind of an underground hangar where perhaps the castle's air transport vehicles were being stowed away or repaired; her vision although really good was not acute enough to permit her see past the darkness underneath the opening when its cover opened. She gauged the vertical height between the level at which she was and the circular opening to be somewhere around a good five hundred feet.

While Simona delved further into the thought of making sense of what her vision had captured for the last couple minutes, Stryden was busy looking at the different kinds of species that were proceeding cautiously as per the Immigration Guards' orders. A few flashes appeared again and then a thunk of sound registered that put another Alien name on the live screen. Then a group of five aliens which looked like members of the same family or at least partly related to each other, took seat in the row behind Stryden.

As Simona moved her gaze upwards from one level to the other, she could not help but think of how oddly different these castle inhabitants looked from what she had seen of two legged creatures on Earth. There was a good amount of activity at each level. Her curious attention

moved instinctively towards a team of 4 inhabitants on the second level who wore dark black cloaks emblazoned with the same picture of the dragon-head she had seen on the castle's flag. Possessing long snouts and razor sharp teeth, they were carrying a large heavy trunk supported by their rather outgrown muscular shoulders and moving briskly down the ramp that led into the first level.

At the third level there were some even more weird looking creatures, this time bearing transparent jelly-like skins that exposed all of their internal bones and organs. Some of these types were stubby short limbed while some others had long droopy eyes with pointedly long and sharp elf-like ears. They motioned in and out of automatic doors with a variety of exotic tools, weapons and gadgetry which triggered images in Simona's mind of the short-lived time when she worked along side Stryden and other robots on the factory floor of NextGen Robotics.

She remembered how intensely mundane and monotonous her work was at the factory where she soldered electronic circuit boards round the clock interspersed by visits in and out of several storage rooms for unpacking, restocking, loading and unloading inventory. She instinctively knew then that she grossly disliked that work which was intellectually way below par, a feeling that was so palpable that she could still easily recall it from memory. But then she was born a gynoid too. Wasn't her sole purpose to do what gynoids were programmed to do? How could she ever think of breaking out of... Just at that moment a team of eight wall-climbing hexapods interrupted her thought as they sprang along the interior wall of the Hollax positioning themselves at well defined points on the surface such that

they formed something like an image of 4 geckos on the right side curvature of the wall and 4 on the left in a step up ladder formation so that they could function as a team to clean the entire length of the Hollax that stood eight levels tall.

As they moved circularly along their paths of curvature on the wall, they sprayed small amounts of liquid regularly wiping off any grime that had accumulated on the surface of the Hollax restoring the glass to its pristinely shining condition allowing Simona an even better clarity of the whole scene in front of her. Then the hexapods migrated their formation to the outer surface each having climbed up to the opening at the top which was designed for sunlight to penetrate the Hollax. They repeated their grind on the glass once again, spraying liquid and wiping it clean. Finally, a few minutes later they receded quickly along the length of the Hollax free falling towards the ground level until they had all disappeared in the basement underneath through specially designed hexagonal openings that they had initially sprung out of. And with that, Simona returned to her seat in the surrounding lobby.

An incredulous look had sprung upon Simona's face, her mind still taking time to process all of that visual feed as she sat down and turned right to face Stryden.

'Ekhoora! Trabedorus', King Athailus said beamingly to his First Commander who bowed slightly and then returned to his assigned position at the front line of the

100 strong army that surrounded Stryden and Simona.

‘I shall welcome our new visitors to the land of Athenia, the land of a Purposeful Civilization’, he continued in a commanding tone, setting his fierce gaze on Stryden and Simona who in complete awe looked round to fix all of their attention on the King.

‘It has been a revelation of our first inhabitants...’, he continued pausing for a couple seconds,

‘Life outside of Athenia and its two moons has been made for reasons unknown to those that it belongs to. As a point in case is what we call Aluna Emirapos or our friends from other parts of the Universe who have happened to immigrate to Athenia, either by accident like the two of you or by prior knowledge; some of which you may have already witnessed at the Aluna Hasphalat. By this, I mean extraterrestrial life that has gained protection from the People of Athenia, none of whom knew what they were meant to do with their souls. Some believed it was for battle, some for exploration, some others for sacrifice or redemption, but most of them thought it was for survival alone.

And survival was believed to be the ultimate call of nature until the explorers and founders of this planet decided to draw first blood on this hitherto irreproachable principle and the dynamics of natural breeding and procreation. They framed for every being of breath on Athenia either aboriginal or extraterrestrial, imprinting it in their genetic order, the immutable mission of their lives - a mission that will be explained to you in due time if you are deserving enough to be part of us. That’s how and why we are here. But you see... that doesn’t mean that we are slaves to our own rules of creation, nor does it mean

that we are stripped of our freedom, but it does remind of all of us that freedom comes at a non-negotiable price. Freedom for us means the fulfillment of our 'Illuhana Gophelkus' or life's ultimate purpose.

All of us including my wife - Queen Saphyna, my daughter - Princess Elfana, Commanders Golerum, Trabedorus, Rodrin were made inside Athenia's Tomb of Creation. Its where we were conceived by the principles dictated by the Illuhana Bidel, the principles of finest breeding in which two breeds that are considered to be the most compatible in making the best offspring are subjected to the act of supervised procreation, a complete disregard for the universe's measly affairs to create life out of love or desire. Love makes you weak and desire makes you weaker; for strong sustainable life you need to prune those out of the equation of procreation.. We tamed nature and it gave us life imbued with superior intelligence and strength; the hundred odd men who stand around you are a point in case. Their emotion of love being completely exterminated, shoving their emotional troubles for good and burying in deep hallows all of their fears, desires and anxieties. The only thing remnant are their strengths and capacities to fulfill their mission.

So you too for the needs of surviving on Athenia shall undergo a thorough assessment of your intellectual and physical capacities and if found to be worthy enough to belong to our land shall be allowed to sustain yourselves and your progeny. And so shall we on Athenia become immune to and knowledgable about every life outside the confines of our knowledge, amplifying your strength and pruning your weaknesses that will keep our land a ground for breeding the most optimum life in the Universe. And

none amongst us is unaware that life is untrustworthy, it can create a dark force capable of wiping out all trace of life if not combatted.

‘A d-d-dark force?’, asked Stryden with a shuddering voice.

‘Yes! A dark force that you will know if and when you have to know about it’, replied King Athalius sternly.

As he trailed off, the King looked even more piercingly with his big pouchy eyes, a look that he wanted to have seared right inside the very center of their skulls. As both Styden and Simona resisted the idea of even the minutest confrontation with the King, they blinked a few times, dislodged their attention to the surrounding men and then to each other, exchanged a blank stare and then reverted back to the King who was still in precisely the same unwavering stance with his head cocked down looking straight at them. It was as though time around Styden and Simona had frozen for those five odd seconds... until the King snorted, ‘So... Now that you understand us a little better, allow me to explain to you what we expect of the two of you’.