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cambridge, ma

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I. GHOSTRIDIN' IT

When the tweet from Daney hits us we're all of us, the whole tribe but her, ghostriding the whip on a nuclear electric booster rocket from Enceladus to Tethys. Fong built it up out of silicate fiber and scrap metal to look like an old Saturn V.

I'm Maggie, and my vacsuit is hot enamel pink on black with platform soles and stiletto rocket nozzles. Pyotr designed it yesterday. "You'll be getting sextxts from robots in zero seconds," he said.

"Ideal," I said. Most of it will cinch, unbuckle, fold, or warp into a scandalously friendly atmospheric configuration once we get to the party. Pyotr did Fong, too; with his whip tail and green vacsuit, he looks gecko svelte.

Our soundtrack is fierce as a murderbot made of titanium icepicks and dense as clusterfucking, and when I see a delta-V warning flash up on my augs and re-attach to the rocket's metal skin, I can feel the whole thing rumbling under us like a giant, purring cat, if purrs were earthquakes and cats were the fault lines in a cryovolcano. Li's beatmatching the music to the NEP drive. Sick, dad.

Everyone who's been drifting alongside the rocket is clamped on when the next stage fires, sending the first section of rocket tumbling off into space where it'll get picked up by scavengers. We tagged it with a beacon, just to be friendly. Pyotr and Jakoba are making out, their helmets meeting and merging like iridescent soap bubbles.

<They're about to spawn an AGI neural net out of explosions. Get your asses to Calpyso quick!> Daney tweets.

<Fah... One more gravity assist?> Fong tweets. General assent, except for Vijay, a fanatical AI geek, who's going to be furious if we miss the show.

Fong throttles it with a command from headware, and the Saturn V adjusts trajectory for one more orbit around the frozen moon.

Saturn is all glorious underneath us, the rays of our distant Sun twinkling off the rings, and the music is like cold water on your tongue and hot saliva on your belly both at once, and every human and bot within 10,000 kilometers is my lovely friend, and we just can't stop ghostridin' it.

II. FEED

I'm Juu, laying on the nose of the rocket while my tribe trips the light, induction pads up and down my body adhering to the Saturn V's iron-laced skin. Because I'm a bot, I don't need a vacsuit, but so that I wouldn't feel left out, Pyotr instanced me some hull coverings that look like a ninth century Tibetan cavalry officer's armor. I told him it was too much trouble for a party, but he got so deep into the challenge of making it look right in microgravity that he wouldn't listen.

"The Tang dynasty had best watch its ass," Pyotr said when the armor was done.

"I like the dragonflies on the shoulder pads," was all I could think of to say, which was fine, because Pyotr already knows he's good at what he does.

I've turned off all visible light in my sensorium, and I'm letting the radio waves undulate over me. It's like taking a bubble bath in white noise, but there are signals everywhere, too, and I let myself tune in and out of them. I float through insystem newsfeeds, the endless traffic of telemetry and navigation, comm calls, microblog threads, wisps of transmitted consciousness, and the gibbering of the Demented cast in from the Neptune Trojans like a nastily scrawled keep out sign.

On Mars a chorus of 100,000 voices recites a Hindu prayer in the canyon of Ares Valles. A thousand pass out in ecstasy before the recitation finishes. Someone on Tethys is broadcasting episodes of the old Earth net video Drugscape with their own voice dubbed over all of the cast's dialogue, and someone else on a station in Venus orbit is sweding Miike's *Visitor Q* with heavily armed giant robots. Data from Indra, the first probe to reach Proxima Centauri, is piping strong. I zone out for a bit on a looped video of a spectacular lightning storm playing across the surface of a gigantic blue planet with rings like Saturn's. The videos are four years old, and we're just getting them now. On Earth, the whales are still sueing for reparations. A robot somewhere is pleading with his dominatrix on an unencrypted line, at her behest; a freighter is coming into Enceladus on fly-by-mesh with a hold full of Martian coffee; and from the gulf between stars the tenuous signal from the probe bound for Procyon repeats over and over the plaintive tweet from the AGI aboard, the first sent out into deep space. He had a breakdown not long after leaving the outer system behind. "I'm so alone out here. Please, bring me back. Please." But the design of the probe accommodates no such mercy.

I shake a leg and get up to join my tribe. We've slung fast around Enceladus, and Tethys (conveniently only about 90,000 kilometers away today) soon fills our vision like an immense, cratered pearl.

III. MADE OF EXPLOSIONS

I'm Noise, which is to say I'm myself at the moment. I'm everyone in my little tribe – Daney, Fong, Mags, all of them – but none of them are me. I don't have a body or senses of my own; I run on the mesh created by all of their headware. I can feel each of them, focusing on one person if I choose, or everyone at once if I like. I'm their shaman.

"No, we're not a hivemind," Ann, who did a lot of my code, once explained to a curious Martian who'd never heard of a tribe with a shaman before. She was trying to get the Martian in bed. "So

it's not like you're sleeping with all eleven of us at once. Just me, and Noise. None of us are Noise, but Noise is us." The guy didn't get it and turned her down. I emoted her sadness, but she wasn't sad.

She txted, <If living with a symbiotic AGI in your noggin who knows everything going on with you and your tribe creeps him out, he shouldn't've left Mars. There's stranger things than us aplenty out Saturn way.>

I exist because my tribe exists. Now I'm observing through everyone's sensoria from the nose of the Saturn V, which is holding station in a cloud of about 500 other vehicles come to observe on the day side of Tethys's geostationary sweet spot. We can see a big cluster habitat, Harmonious Invention, glittering amid its perpetual cloud of ships and factories about 5,000 clicks back, a few comsats visible on IR by the waste heat from their nuclear warming systems, and 200 kilometers below us on the moon's surface, the frostbitten spires and domes of Ciudad Ignacio DeLeon.

The explosions begin. This is what Daney tweeted us about, and I'm glad we're here for it.

For it is glorious. Redbloom, the tribe putting on this show, built a structure half a kilometer in diameter whose overall shape is somewhere between a fat mobius strip and a torus, but roughly spherical in outline. In detail, its components look like the lovechild of the human nervous system and a Babbage engine. Kilometers of heat shielded carbon fiber tubing connect small storage tanks for volatiles to a mesh of teacup-sized blast points aligned with sensors. The blast cups are sealed at one end with a hard, fast-drying polymer so that the fuel inside can ignite and explode outward, triggering the sensors.

Now every one of the blast cups is exploding in intricate succession, chains of explosions forming paths and patterns amid the countless branches of the mechanism. When a cup explodes, it reseals itself, refuels, and in short order explodes again.

Most of us artificial minds are born in labs, designed from the codelines of our parents, or emerge into consciousness from a

complex piece of software, as did my precursor Diderot, who was originally an unconscious workflow AI. The person taking shape here, as a neural net exhibiting the patterns of consciousness emerges from the detonations, is something entirely new.

As the explosions reach a fiery crescendo in the silent void, a mesh of processing nodes takes over and captures the nascent mind. Redbloom's tribal mesh reaches out in welcome, and their shaman is born.

Daney is beaming. Jakoba is tearful; births get her emotional. Fong, Bela, and Vijay are nrrding out vigorously over the specs. Li, who sometimes seems to know everyone's mood even better than me, starts playing something eccentric and lush.

Fong tweets, <Jesus that was a lot of fuel to burn.>

Fu, whose present botshell looks like a little Chinese dragon, tweets, <I wish we could meet this new mind.> General assent.

Daney tweets, <Probably not, but you can ask the Redbloom people. We're staying in their module after the party.>

<?! :D !!> Vijay jets over and hugs her like she's just turned every comet in the Kuiper belt into ice cream and gifted it to him.

IV. KAWAIIIII, BITCHES.

Harmonious Invention is a huge, roughly spherical cluster of modules half a kilometer wide, with dozens of delicate comm spires protruding more or less at random. It started out as a PRC outpost, then ended up in the hands of the Hong Kong Greens following the Great Leap Outward. Now it belongs to a council of collectives, of which Redbloom is one.

We docked the Saturn V not far from Redbloom's little village of modules and left Fong behind to bask in the admiration of his fellow rocket nrrds as they inspected his creation.

I'm Fu, and it's good to be the cute little dragonbot at the crazy party. I'm floating next to a wall of glowing mutli-colored fungi that throb with weird globular patterns of light in the infrared spectrum. Maggie and Lin from the Redbloom tribe are doing something like a tango between three poles covered in

knobby rubber footcatches and grabloops. They whirl around one pole, bodies arched, eyes locked, then press together hip to hip, arm to arm, and launch themselves toward the next pole, which they catch hold of using only feet and legs. Maggie is an artist at micro-G dancing, but she's letting her partner lead.

I flit around partnering with the tiny moth-like lightbots filling the air in a dance of my own, then catch hold of receptive partygoers, every one of whom wants to treat me like a big, friendly cat, which is just fine by me. Remapping my erogenous patches to right behind my ears and under my chin? Best idea ever.

V. MODULAR SEDUCTION

I'm Ann, verbsparring a Titanian literary theorist with bedroom ocular implants. I left my vacsuit on our ship and changed into a pinstripe minisuit with a necktie made of encased mercury and hoofboots that would be useless anyplace with gravity. Pyotr's fold-up spacesuits are kind of kitschy and cute, but they make me feel old. (Ann is my programmer. Ann is the only one who lets me hear her thoughts, not just her sensations. Ann is special).

"So how do you keep productive?" the theorist asks me.

"I'm an AGI programmer and mother of fourteen."

He looks skeptical.

"My tribe. Most of them are pretty young. Not important. Tell me more about this modular narrative nonsense you were just talking."

He raises an eyebrow. "It's a fairly serious idea."

"Try me." This is fun.

"It takes a lot from theories of memetic warfare. Every story is like a program, and the user's mind parses it using emotions. How you write the software determines the response, and the modules of code you include shape the user's experience of the whole."

"Ah, so I have a class 'romantic subplot' and another class 'interpersonal tension' that I can instantiate and use to perform tasks?"

He shakes his head, "It's even more direct than that. You're talking about plot; I'm speaking of memes. 'The future will be great if we...' or 'the future will be creepy, unless...'"

I chuckle and suck at my drink bulb. I think meme theory is academic bullshit, and I'm definitely not talking to this guy any longer than I need to. "Show me one example of an intentionally crafted meme that actually works."

Most men would msg you at this point, but this guy is either drunk, socially retarded, or a hopeless romantic, because instead he actually leans in and whispers something in my ear. My playing along smile widens ever so slightly.

<Noise,> Ann msgs, <Shall we add him to Alexandre?>

VI. STARKLY DELVING

I'm Bela, and I'm on some brutal narcoalgorithms. At 77, I'm the oldest in the tribe by a lot. I don't look much older than 30, but tonight I'm feeling it. Ann, the next eldest, is only 40. I'm doing a narrative hallucinogen called Starkly Delving (or maybe Darkly Selving; I forget). As Noise, I'm slightly freaked out. My tribe does drugs like it's their job, and I feel them all. Bela's experiences have a strange flavor, though, because he's slowly reaching full adulthood, with the accompanying changes to his thought processes and sensorium. But Bela lacks the resources that some adults have, making the metamorphosis a very painful one, rife with unfamiliar thoughts and disorienting sensations.

A tall Pashtun woman in black denim shorts, combat tabi, and a lot of metal and tattoos floats head first in front of me, guiding herself one-handed. She looks young, and there's something strange about her eyes. She says she's 66; I think I believe her. I'm not sure if Bela does, although earlier when she dropped a reference to his early career as an intel man, he seemed convinced she was older. Young people, myself as Noise included, don't run headware searches on new acquaintances; we think it's rude.

She glances back at me. We're pushing along a meter-wide service tunnel, away from the party. Zeroing. "You're looking luminous," she observes.

"That's the glow. My inner glow." I'm glad at the moment there's no gravity. I've lost the feel for walking. Everything is too clear - hyper-defined.

"Not that kind of luminous. Reverse luminous," she points out. "You're giving off dark."

<Noise?> Bela msgs.

<True,> I msg back, <We're emanating some weird AR effects.>

I look at my hands. <So we are.> Bela doesn't like augmented reality emanations, but seems resigned to the algorithm's effects.

The woman had come up and caught hold of my arm about ten minutes earlier, had sent a msg introducing herself as Rachel, a Redbloom triber, one of our hosts. It was weird. You don't msg a stranger at a party, especially if you just touched them. Then she asked what I was on, which was even stranger. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to start a conversation about fair trade linguistics and its effect on radio spectrum color theory or stab her, and she didn't look like a Rachel. "This way is down, still?"

"Toward zero," she says. She's got a smoky voice; there's a half-empty pack of Death Valley '69s sticking out of her back pocket.

In microgravity, "down" is metaphor (when it isn't just sex talk). The tunnel narrows, dims, then ends abruptly at a hatch. She looks back at me as if she's trying to decide something, then pulls a pair of goggles from a mesh pocket on the wall and sends them floating back to me.

"UV," she says, pulling on a pair herself. Then she opens the hatch, and the light is blinding in spite of the goggles. There's an overpowering smell of loam. We've emerged right under the axial lighting system of a huge, steamy hot, cylindrical room. The verdant floor twenty meters below us is slowly rotating, and as we guide ourselves feet first along a hanging lad-

der, a new dawn gradually asserts itself. There is mist around us, weirdly contorted by the Coriolis effect. Rachel drops to the floor between two riotous vegetable beds and says, "It's about .3 G down here."

Safe to drop the last three meters, in other words. I see a pair of luminous fingertips protruding from a fallow creche below, and let go of the ladder. Here, then.

Rachel weaves between the beds of soy beans and sweet potato. She's coded up a knife with a wide, flat blade, which she offers to me sheath first. I take the graphic from her and stick it to my waist, then begin parting the soil, exposing the figure beneath. He looks like me, if I were a high church Anglican bodhisattva, glowing softly yellow against the glaring blue-white of the greenhouse as the rich humus falls away.

"Aging's a funny thing," she says, leaning against the side of the creche.

I nod. The glow is strongest at the doppelganger's navel. I draw the knife.

VII. MORNING

"You've got the penis of a sociopath," I tell him. I'm Ann again, and I guess I went home with that literary theorist after all. It's late/early, and we're cuddling in the rippling gossamer of a nodrift bag while a meteor shower plays sparkling trails over Saturn's polar storm clouds.

"You're one who believes sociopathic behavior is adaptive?" He doesn't appear to be serious, which is good, because it's too late for deciding that he's too stupid to fuck. All of his salient features have been recorded and melded into Alexandre, a construct Ann's amalgamated from all of her past lovers (the ones she wants to remember, anyhow). It's a very strange form of autoblography. None of us other than Ann does it, and I wonder how common it is among the population at large.

"Ha. I didn't say that. You'll have to pardon me; I'm bad at mundane pillow talk."

"So why do you have a tattoo of Clark Gable over your tail bone?" He plays a finger around the little rectangular portrait.

"That's not Clark Gable. It's Jack Parsons, and he's a youthful indiscretion whom I choose to keep around. Every time I look at my ass, I'm reminded of what a ridiculous little girl I was in my thirties."

"At least it's fairly tiny. Who was he?"

"Twencen rocket scientist. He founded the Jet Propulsion Lab at Caltech. He was also a crazy hermetic occultist, and then he accidentally blew himself to bits."

"A person made of explosions."

"In fact. I guess I have a romantic streak. I used to have a thing for rocketeers, before I dated a few."

"What changed your mind?"

I looked out the window. "We live on habitats and space ships, but no one talks seriously about going to the stars anymore. Sure, they'll send a few bots out there to send back videos, but that's the extent of it. No offense, but there aren't any great men left – just good lays."

"And great women? You're sitting atop three PhDs from the Titanian U system and a publication list a meter long."

I smirk. "Searching me?"

"Not much. I'd read the name Ann Carrier prior to tonight."

"You've got me dead to rights on being overeducated, but traipsing around Kronosian space with an art collective wasn't quite the career path the old heads on Titan had in mind for me."

"Not a bad life, though... And what about a project like Redbloom did today?"

"Waste of resources. Sure, it's thrilling eye candy, but it proves nothing. It was frivolous." Here is a point where Ann and I don't agree, and I pull a way a little, watching her from the room's video. She notices. <Sorry, Noise, but that's

how I feel,> she msgs.

Sometimes I really can feel Ann's thought, and other times...
<Ann, are you really tired of us, or are you just trying to start a fight with this boy before you fuck him again?>

<The latter, Noise. Promise.>

<KK.> One thing Ann can't do is lie to me.

VIII. WAVEDREAM

Six of me and eight others are having breakfast after a long night – beer eggs, soy crisp, nuts, tea with almond milk (extravagant, given what a wretched pain it is to grow almonds out here) – and trying to avoid a discussion of keeping productive with the other tribes represented here, most of whom are bent on discussing nothing but. A few hooked up with wetware exercise partners after the party and went looking for Privacy; others are asleep. Vijay is geeking out with two of Redbloom's AGI team; all three are epic drunk.

I'm tired myself, so I focus in on Maggie. I'm back in my vacsuit, wavedreaming with Juu on an outer spire of Harmonious Invention. We're watching early spring raindrops hit a puddle through the eyes of an idle streetcleaning bot in Northumbria, filtered through the lowest rumbles of a seismograph on Io.

<Noise, can you keep something Private?>

<Of course.>

<I think I'm in love with Juu.> I'm holding his hand. They say it's risky to fall for someone in your own tribe.

<I've never known you to be interested in bots.>

<I always thought what he did was voyeuristic... creepy. Then I wandered in on his collaboration with Li at the end of the night in one of the chillout modules, and now I think it's not voyeurism. It's love. He can't stop watching everything, because he cares about all of it.> Juu and I have something in common, then. Maggie's realization makes me happy.

I turn my attention to a big bulk freighter taking off from Ciudad Ignacio DeLeon; Juu points a laser microphone at it so that we can hear the engine across the void. I roll onto my

side and curl closer to him.

Then I let Juv stretch my senses once more out into the waves. In Chicago it's the dead of night, and an air taxi pilot and his dispatcher croon homoerotic Urdu love verses at one another over an otherwise dead channel to pass the wee hours. On Titan, up and coming suicide artist Naia Hesperian expires by lethal injection to enthusiastic but somber applause. Off Greenland, two bowhead whales sing to one another a song they learned 120 years ago, when they were calves. A Faroese commentator quietly explains that the song is sung in the long months between calving season, when whales range far afield with only the distant voices of their kin for company. Between them are 100 kilometers of cold, blue ocean, but neither, I imagine, feels alone.