

MESSIAH

Adam L. Brackin, a short story of a
voyage to paradise.

Joshua sprinted down the access hallway of the *Aeneas* as fast as his old legs could carry him. Klaxons and rotating red alarms had startled him out of his bunk, and he had rushed out without bothering to put on pants. If he hurried, he might be able to stabilize the problem pod before the sequence finished this time.

It was his job as caretaker to do these things. Certainly, there was no one else who could. Joshua had been alone for decades on the interstellar ark ship. Except of course for the computer and ten-thousand other souls hibernating all around him. And in recent months, they had begun decelerating towards the paradise world that was their destination, where everyone would finally wake up.

If these blasted pods don't all error out first!

And so, Joshua ran barefoot in nothing but his underwear and tank top, past racks and racks of pods towards the section that now reported the potential problem. "Computer shut that blasted noise off!" he shouted grumpily. "Being deaf won't make me run any

faster!" A moment later the alarm clicked off, and the echoes faded away in the high darkness.

Three other times this error had happened. Three times he had failed at his job. The first passenger had died in his pod before the computer even flagged a problem. The second was months later, when the computer notified him of an unknown error, but it had taken him nearly an hour to track it down, find the problem pod, and determine that it was not a false alarm. By that time, the middle-aged woman was already gone. It wasn't really Joshua's fault, but he still blamed himself.

When the third event happened, he'd been ready. Unfortunately, that pod had been recessed high up and away from the walkway, and by the time the computer had extracted the malfunctioning pod onto the atrium floor it had been a lost cause too. Each one had displayed the same error: *NEURAL SIGNATURE NOT FOUND*.

After that, Joshua rewrote the computer's error protocols from scratch, then entirely disassembled each of the malfunctioned pods piece by piece all the way down to the synaptic uplink on the late passengers' bio suits. It had taken weeks to run diagnostics and stress tests on the individual parts. Only when he was convinced that there was absolutely no hardware to blame, had he finally allowed himself to consider that the problem might be on the software side of the interface. With the FRAME.

The ten-thousand passenger minds had been networked into the most advanced functional reality machine ever designed. His design. *No, nine-thousand, nine-hundred, and ninety-seven minds*, he recalled darkly.

The hibernation pods were designed to sustain the passengers' bodies, but their active minds were a different matter. These had been uploaded into the functional reality core of the FRAME system. Inside this virtual world, reality, distance, even the laws of physics were limited only by the inhabitants' imaginations, and their every desire could be fulfilled. The FRAME was as close to a virtual Eden as man had ever achieved. It was the only way that a colony of people could hope to cross the incredible distance between stars. And it was why Joshua had sacrificed the rest of his life to become the custodian of the *Aeneas* for all these long, solitary years. It was his contribution to the future of humanity.

Joshua slapped a door panel and ran out onto the causeway high above the atrium. He was instantly reminded that the catwalk's metal grating was not intended for bare feet. He gritted against the pain and let it motivate him to move faster. He would have bruises on his feet tomorrow, but that was later.

By a stroke of dumb luck, the pod in question was only a few feet above and back from the walkway. He wouldn't need to bring the pod down to the atrium floor to access it. He peered into the viewing window and his blood ran cold. Judging by her face, the occupant was

barely a teenager. A pang of guilt struck Joshua anew, but it wasn't blame or self-loathing as much as it was worry. The pod's readout flashed in the yellow and red zones, but she was still alive.

EXIT PROTOCOL OVERRIDE INITIATED, it said.

Joshua knew most of the pod protocols by heart. He'd written many of them himself in fact, many years ago and several light years behind them. Back when pod failure was more of an academic exercise than a real possibility, and by people who could never question his decisions now. But that message was completely unfamiliar.

Joshua only hoped that the girl could hold on long enough for the process to finish. He rerouted emergency power to the pod just in case, repositioned it, and monitored her stats until finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the canopy popped open. She gasped as she fell out into Joshua's arms. Wires and tubes popped and ripped away from her bio suit, dripping various fluids and crackling with electricity, then dangling limply from the pod in wet clusters.

"Wh-where am I? Who are you?" she panted through coarse breaths, before lapsing into a series of coughs. It was a voice not used in decades despite the girl's youth, but she was alive!

"Shhhh...." Joshua soothed. He was suddenly aware of his mad hair and serious lack of clothing. Had he washed this underwear lately? Bathed this week? Shaved

this year? He must look like a veritable caveman to her eyes after the perfection of the functional reality world she'd been living in. "You are out of the simulation and on the *Aeneas*. Everything is going to be fine now. Your pod was malfunctioning, but everything is fine. We'll make planetfall in just a few months." Joshua glanced again at the side of the pod as it finished powering down. Her name was on it. "Everything is fine, Marion."

"Planetfall?" She tried the word like it was new. "Is this real?" Joshua wasn't sure what she meant, so he just nodded. "I knew it!" She sighed deeply, and then fell into her first *real* sleep in decades.

Joshua just sat there for a long time, holding her. He now knew for sure that it wasn't the pods. No, there was something deeply wrong in the FRAME.

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"I feel like I haven't eaten in forever."

"It's more like thirty-two years. You went into hibernation on the station before launch and your pod was transferred over with you already in stasis. It saves on food for the community when your heart only beats every few minutes. We are only a few months away from arriving at our destination." *FRAME errors notwithstanding*, he didn't say. "Of course, you *should* already know all that. Why *don't* you know that?"

Marion shrugged at him in mid chew. She had been working her way through meal packs for the better part of an hour now. Her intelligent eyes showed kindness, but innocent ignorance too. “The others told us that this place wasn’t real. They said it was foolish superstition. An overactive imagination. But, I have always known in my heart that another world existed.”

“Wasn’t real?” he repeated, shaking his head. It made no sense at all. It was like she had somehow lost her memories of everything from before being linked to the FRAME. It didn’t make sense.

“Do you have any more peanut butter?”

“Actually, that’s not real pea— You know what? I do.” Joshua tossed his data pad onto the table and went to grab another plastic jar of protein paste. He ripped the label off as was his habit, tossed it to the girl, and returned to the wall of text errors he had been trying to understand.

The screen read NEURAL SIGNATURE NOT FOUND.

Now that Joshua knew what errors to look for, pod after pod, passenger after passenger, the result of his new diagnostics program had been this same startling result. The reintegration protocols simply were not finding the passengers’ neural signature in the FRAME. The rub of it was, it wasn’t a new problem. Rather, it seemed that the pod-induced amnesia that Marion was experiencing wasn’t pod-induced at all.

From what Joshua could tell, due to a small error with the hibernation process back home, every one of the passengers' memories had become wiped before the ship had ever launched away into the darkness of space. One misplaced line of code, and they had entered the FRAME remembering nothing of the real world, happily living their simulated lives thinking that their world of pure imagination was the only true reality. There had been a devil in his garden.

Worse, without that neurological tether between body and mind, the pods would not be able to wake the passengers up. The very system meant to keep them alive and sane was going to either kill them or leave them as mindless husks. It was a maddening irony.

Except that Marion somehow had awoken. A wonderful thought struck him.

"What's the last thing you remember from before you woke up?"

Marion looked at him, a huge glob of not-really-peanut butter balanced on two fingers.

"I... Well, actually, I was thinking about where we might go when we die and whether we just cease to exist, and then, out of nowhere there was this beautiful doorway of light." She thought for a moment. "Oh yea! I went through it!"

“Exit protocol override!” Joshua exclaimed. “You triggered the reintegration protocol from the other side? Of course!”

“What do you mean? Are you saying that people can choose to leave their own pods?”

“Well, yes! It makes perfect sense. The FRAME is designed to give the passengers complete freedom to have everything they imagine. If they wanted to leave—*really* leave, then I suppose the system would let them. And why not a door? I suppose the system could reboot the pods and allow you to exit in a sort of safe mode... Which is exactly what you did!”

“But, what about the others before me? Why didn’t they wake up?”

“I... I don’t— Wait! Did you say you were wondering where you go ‘when you die?’ What does that mean? How do you even know what death is?”

Marion’s eyes went wide, and fat tears began to well up in them. “Because I saw it. All of us have wondered what would happen if we stopped existing. Some of the others said that ‘nothingness’ was better than being in a universe without purpose, so they debated and philosophized and argued until they decided to imagine it up for real.”

“No.”

“Yes. And they just sort of... well, disappeared.”

Joshua stared blankly at her. “The FRAME is designed to give the passengers everything they desire. If it was death...”

“Joshua, we have to tell them!”

“We can’t. It’s a completely closed system. I designed it that way on purpose. I didn’t want anybody messing around with the simulation once people’s minds were hooked up to it.”

“That’s ironic.” She wiped her face with her sleeve.

Joshua agreed. “The only way to do it would be for one of us to go in. We would have to tell people the truth, then let others spread the news to all of the passengers. All it would take then, would be for someone to embrace reality, think about the exit, walk through, and poof, they would initiate their own pod’s emergency override and reboot sequence like you did. We are coming up fast on a new and unspoiled planet, but they will never know about it if they all stay trapped in that simulation. Or worse, decide to die! Unfortunately, there’s no way to go in and tell them.”

That night though, Joshua hardly slept a wink.

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Joshua woke up confused, alone, and in utter darkness. He felt as if he was floating in the space he had

spent half his life sealed away from, but there were no stars. He was good at waiting. Good at loneliness, but this was different. Was it a dream? No, that wasn't right. Why couldn't he feel his arms and legs? He realized he didn't have them. Why couldn't he shout? *No mouth either!* Was this death? Had the ship crashed? His mind worked feverishly to latch onto something amidst this timeless eternity. Then, it did.

He remembered the discussion with Marion about the impossible problem, but that wasn't yesterday. No, he had woken up that day with an insane solution and a feverish determination. By the time the ship was shifting into night-cycle, and with her help, they had jacked a pod into the FRAME directly. By morning, he had brute-forced a polarity shifter onto the neural connection against every warning the computer gave. And by afternoon, they had stripped out every safety and redundancy system in the biggest bio suit they had. He even remembered Marion helping him into the pod, assuring him that *she would be fine, would see him soon*, then lowering the lid over him, and activating the program.

It meant two things. First, it had worked. He was somewhere in the FRAME, likely the loading area, while the frame assessed this new unexpected addition to the network and adjusted to him. Second, it meant that he had an incredibly difficult road ahead of him.

Without warning, the darkness funneled in around him and a light appeared, strangely familiar and

welcoming. And then he was standing in a wide clearing surrounded by trees and flowers. He could see beautiful snowy mountains in the distance and an incredible waterfall cascading into some far-off river.

He looked down at his hands. The wrinkles and age spots were gone. He jumped and was thrilled to discover that he could fly. Now all he had to do was find the others and they could all go back to reality, the ship, and soon their fresh, new, perfect planet. It was his job to do these things.

He just hoped that these people could muster up a little bit of imagination to believe him.

