



UNUSUAL DAY IN THE ASTROVERSE

A METROPLEX ZERO SHORT STORY

I guess the one thing I always craved was some excitement. I didn't know it at the time, but it was all I was craving this whole time. Even as I walked through the field and approached the large brick structure, I felt the same as I ever had. The feeling of dread and the uncertainty of the feelings of my client, who stood waiting for me near the structure. She was a short woman, about my age. She waited patiently for me to arrive. Just like always.

"Welcome to the Astropol shopping center. I am Raelle, your guide to the Astroverse Virtual Reality shopping experience." I had recited this line at least a thousand times in my lifetime, each day with a different face, a different theme, a different shopper. I loved my job at Astropol. I practically lived there, ever since the Astroverse Virtual Reality system launched; all I did was work. Each client who installs the system into their apartment has access to non-invasive power suit augments that transport them into our virtual reality server, the customer chooses the theme of their worlds appearance and the appearance of themselves for a truly immersive shopping experience, most, like the customer I was meeting with today, opted for the ancient small town market, the virtual world was completely immersive, sight smell, touch, taste, nearly all senses were felt while in the virtual world.

I've spent twelve hours a day, six days a week, guiding people in virtual space, helping them shop, find chat rooms, and customize their experience with virtual augments and downloadable features for their world. It was like I was walking in a sea of conformity and endless grind, with no hope of return. Until I met the man who would change my entire perspective. It all started like a typical day, I had just entered the Astropol building and set up my office to start helping my client for the day, he was wanting to shop around for power armor augments and order a few things for his apartment, I placed my virtual reality goggles on my face, each set was custom made to fit your face comfortably and help with the immersion. After entering my login information on my holo-desk, I stood and waited as the Astroverse began to load in. The vast array of colored pixels began to change and warp the room around me, turning itself into yet another vast field of grass and dirt roads. My client stood in the distance, waiting for me.

"You're the guide right?" He began speaking before I could mutter out my greeting; it threw me off a bit.

"Yes, I am Raelle." This guy had his eyes fixed on mine and stood with such confidence, it was almost mesmerizing. He smiled at me before replying.

"Raelle, I am Maddax. I know that most people use your service for shopping needs, but I am not here for that." He sighed softly before continuing. "I am here because I want to get to know someone like they did in the old days. I want to go on lovely walks, and talk with you from time to time."

"You mean like dating? That's absolutely crazy! I have no idea who you are." I was flabbergasted, how could he be so bold? So confident? Am I really supposed to date this man in virtual reality? Who even authorized his application to the Astroverse? I was more than confused and a bit thrown off by his offer. He remained calm as if he was expecting me to freak out.

"You don't know me, that is true, but I'm giving you the opportunity to get to know me. I sure would like to get to know you" He smiled once more. And I let out a scoff.

"Who put you up to this?"

"If you're wondering how I found you. I applied and requested the one woman who has been working the hardest in the Astroverse, they assigned you as my guide. I want to give you a chance to relax and have fun while in this space, and maybe even in Metroplex Zero." He kept his stance. He seemed serious, but how could he? Was he seriously suggesting spending the day just hanging out and talking?

"Who authorized this?"

"Does that really matter? This is your chance to get paid while literally doing nothing, just hanging out. What do you say?" He held out his hand. I'm sure he was expecting me to take it, and I did. What did I have to lose? He gripped my hand tightly and we began to walk down the virtual street. The area had loads of cafes and restaurants, but Maddax led us to an area away from all the shopping, another open field that eventually led to a small park that held a single bench with seats. He held my hand until I took my seat and he sat right across from me.

I had to admit he was handsome, tall, with short dark hair, and practically glowing green eyes. I was grateful that the tech we had could only change our clothing's appearance, or else I would believe he was modifying his looks to get dates. He had a certain energy about him that made you want to stay by his side. It was intoxicating. We spent a few hours talking, getting to know each other; he seemed pretty sweet and looking for genuine conversation. It was actually refreshing, not having to walk for hours on end, helping someone go over the manual basics for the five millionth time. It was nice to actually sit and converse with someone that wasn't in a chat room or trying to figure out which power suit looked better on their body.

"I have to say, I'm glad I said yes, I needed this break." I let out a soft sigh, letting my shoulders rest and finally unclenching my jaw. This was the most relaxed I had felt in months.

"From what you told me, it sounds like you need it; why do you work so hard? It's not like you need the Metrocreds."

"It's a way to pass the time, sure, I have enough creds to stay home and enjoy myself, but I don't really have any friends to go out with, and doing things by myself just seems pathetic." I laughed nervously, this was the first time I admitted to anyone why I worked instead of staying home.

"Well, you have my contact link, now, let's meet out of this world some time."

"Oh, I don't know about that. This is fun, yes, but I have a job to do."

"Not this week you don't, I booked you this whole week." He looked at me with a sense of accomplishment, like he was waiting for the right moment to tell me his plan. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that for this whole week, we will be spending time here doing whatever it is you want, as long as it is not work."

"I can't believe you're serious." I was shocked, how could he be so bold? So confident? Something in me saw that as a challenge to be bolder, more... myself.

"Fine, impress me then," I said smugly, giving Maddax a sarcastic look.

"Well, why don't we race?" Before our eyes, two hover-cycles appeared before us. I snorted through my nose and quickly hopped on one, he soon got on his, and we rode off in the endless space the Astroverse gave to us; this was actually one of the features I was most excited to try.

We rode for what felt like forever, each getting just ahead of the other. After a while, we both stopped and began to laugh.

"What do you think? A tie?" He tried to get his words out between breaths.

"Nah, I beat you fair and square" We shared a laugh and spent the remainder of my shift talking, going on various walks in different environments. We even sat atop a lone island in the middle of the sea and caught virtual fish. It was a fun time, the most fun I had in a long time.

As the week progressed, I actually started to look forward to going to work. Every morning, I got up with a new sense of adventure and anticipation that I hadn't felt in years. Maddax always found new and exciting ways to spend time together; whether it was ice skating across a frozen ocean, or windsurfing on sand dunes; he always seemed to know how to have fun. It was a few days before my week with him was up and he decided we should have lunch atop a huge mountain range. I sat with him, and watched as the rendered clouds made various shapes, from time to time an advertisement from Metroplex Zero would pop up, but other than that it was heaven. "Raelle," He looked at me; his expression made it seem like he had something important to say. My heart held still for a moment as he continued.

"This time we've been spending together is some of the best I have had in a while, and I'd hate to see it end. I was wondering." He stopped for a moment, seemingly gathering his thoughts.

"I've had a great time too, Dax." I placed my hand on his shoulder; he let out a small exhale from his nose and placed his hand on my knee.

"Rae, I know I only said I wanted to simply hang out for the week and show you a good time. But the thought of not seeing you again hurts me so much. I hope we can meet in real life. I promise we could have just as much fun out there as we do here." He stopped again, seemingly to catch his breath. I could feel him shaking. I could only imagine what he was going through while being hooked up to the system.

"I would love that, I have loads of free time saved up. I can take some days off and we could meet in the shopping plaza? From there we can do anything." It took a minute, but Maddax agreed when we finished for the day. I put in for another week of time off; they could do without me for a week, and I knew I needed the extra break. Maddax helped me see that my life was more than just work, and I was so grateful for him showing up in my life.

That night, I set the mood in my apartment to relax mode, the lights dimmed and the smell of fresh rain spritzed out of my Crystal Industries multi-scent voice-activated diffuser, I laid on my bed, practically fantasizing about meeting Maddax, admittedly, I was waiting for the time to go by faster so I could see him, so I could hug him and actually feel him; like really feel his embrace. I could not believe how much I was actually missing him. Did I have feelings for him? I wasn't %100 sure, all I knew was I couldn't wait to see him. He was the only thing on my mind as I began to slowly drift into a deep sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, I was more refreshed than I had ever been. I hopped into the shower and asked my voice-activated coffee maker to brew some Flowerfly Hazelnut Coffee. The smell filled the air of my apartment and it made me feel extra motivated. Maddax messaged me and said he was going to grab us both Pekinpaw's breakfast burritos before meeting up so it gave me time to drink my coffee and enter the shopping center info into my power suits navigation system. It wasn't too long before I was out the door and on my way to the shopping center.

I slowly began to descend onto the landing pad that was at the west end of the shopping center and let Dax know I was here. He sent me his coordinates and I walked as fast as I could to find him. I scanned the area with my eye scanner and it quickly pinpointed his location. I activated my roller treads on my boots and rolled across the shopping center right to him. He turned away, looking in the opposite direction; once I approached him. I tapped his shoulder and he quickly turned around. He smiled and in a flash, he gave me a big hug. We stood there, embracing one another; it had only been one night since we said goodbye in the Astroverse, it felt like a lifetime. After we stopped hugging, he handed me a breakfast sandwich.

"I got us both bacon and ostrich egg sandwiches. I hope you don't mind." His voice sounded even more smooth and sultry and I nearly melted as he spoke.

"I don't mind at all. It's so good to actually see you, like, really see you." I could not contain my excitement; being able to actually be in his presence was like a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. We walked around the shopping center until we found an area that offered pop-up floating benches, so we decided to try them out. We went to a small booth that processed your payment and waited for the bench to pop up out of a small, circular hole that was on the ground.

After a few minutes of listening to the machines whirring, the floating bench popped out of the hole and assembled right before our eyes. We each took our seats and a small holo-screen appeared asking for our destination. Maddax was quicker on the draw and set it to roaming mode. After he entered the mode onto the screen, the bench floated up until we were high in the air and began to slowly travel forward, not really going in any particular direction.

We spent the whole day talking, laughing, and taking note of all the plazas that Metroplex Zero seemed to hold. As night fell, Dax escorted me to my apartment; we stood in front of my door, looking into each other's eyes.

"Raelle, I have to confess.." He paused for a moment and took my hand into his. My heart was racing.

"We've only known each other for a short time, but I can't imagine going a day without seeing you. Maybe... maybe we could be more than friends?" I could tell he was incredibly nervous. I was feeling more confident than ever, without thinking. I pulled him by the back of his head and kissed him.

It was as if the whole world had melted away.

As our relationship blossomed and flourished, I could feel the crushing weight of my work floating away. I was grateful to Maddax. I could never repay him for freeing me of my routine and showing me that life is more than work. I wanted the whole world to feel the way I did, to find a person who could make them feel how Maddax made me feel. It was then that an idea crawled into my brain. One that I knew could change the future of the Astroverse.

I had arrived at the Astropoly building, having called a few of my managers and co-workers for an important meeting. Usually, I would be nervous, nearly sweating, but this time I was sure they would love my idea. As everyone sat at the large table in the meeting room, I pulled up a few shots from my time in the Astroverse with Maddax on the large holographic wall. Each slide shows the several different settings we had been in during our time together in the Astroverse.

"Everyone, as we know, the Astroverse has been incredibly successful in bringing in customers and giving them a truly immersive shopping experience. But what I propose today could bring a whole lot more to the virtual reality we have crafted. As you can see from the slides on the screen, the Astroverse could become so much more than a complicated shopping network, it could be the place people fall in love." I paused for a moment to let everyone soak the idea in.

"We can create a dating service, Astrolove, and provide customers with profiles of other people and if two people match, they can go on a date in the Astroverse and have a fully custom experience, nothing is more romantic than traveling across the world, across time, in a matter of seconds. It could revolutionize the way people explore our virtual reality."

I wasn't expecting the response to be so positive; everyone agreed that this type of service could not only bring people together in new ways. but it could also entice new customers to buy our VR kits for their apartments and flats and bring more people into the Astroverse. It would take some time to integrate all of the changes, but they absolutely loved the concept. If this could bring Maddax and me together, imagine what Astrolove could do for the millions of people who lived in Metroplex Zero.

I was excited to get the project going, but most of all I was happy to have Maddax in my life; he reminded me that life is more than what I had made it out to be and each day I spend with him is better than the last. I'm not sure how it would go for us in the future, but I knew I wanted to be along for the ride. It's crazy how the want for something new could turn into inspiration, confidence, passion, and love.