The Princess

And The

New Type

**By**

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1. Cold Freeze

“After a cold shower in the morning   
you feel much more centered during the rest of your day.   
Try it out and see what it does for you.”

-- Wim Hof --

Leah Musk sat in a passenger seat of a cargo plane as it zoomed over a desolate iceberg-clogged sea. Winter break started the day before and she was restless to start her once in a lifetime experience.

The frozen desolation of the Antarctic Ocean filled Leah with wonder for the tenancy of life to thrive in such hostile conditions.

Soon enough, the exhaustion of flying 9 hours straight, the monotony of endless ice and the sound of Britney Spears put Leah to sleep.

“We’ve arrived, Leah,” a man whose name Leah forgot announced. “We’ll put your stuff in your room.”

“Thanks,” Leah said with a smile as she donned her winter clothes.

Outside, the evening sun shone on the Antarctic landscape.

“It’s freezing,” Leah grimaced as a gentle Antarctic breeze sliced through her body.

“You’re lucky this is summer,” the guide said with a laugh. “Wait till winter.”

Up ahead was the science station built on stilts. The seemingly tiny structure was massive up close. The inside was pleasantly warm and spacious.

Upon arriving, her guide took her to the command area, where a bearded man greeted her. “Welcome aboard Leah. I’m Rob Lee, the commander of the station. What made you decide to come to such a desolate place? My daughter is sixteen, two years older than you. She would never come here.”

“I will be fifteen in January,” Leah said with a frown. “This is a…”

The communication system buzzed, interrupting Leah. It was her uncle.

“Hi Princess, I was told you just arrived,” the voice on the radio said. “How was your trip?”

“It was okay Uncle Elon,” Leah said. “And thanks for the Christmas present. I can’t wait to spend the next three weeks studying Antarctic marine biology.

“This will be good experience for me, if I want to become a marine biologist. Only research and public awareness can save the planet from global warming.”

“I wish you would study space science or become an engineer. I need hard-working, intelligent people on my team,” Elon pleaded. “More importantly, even if global warming was fixed, it still wouldn’t protect us from a dinosaur-class meteor, or a mad dictator with a trigger-finger.”

Leah sighed. Her uncle was obsessed with making humanity multi-planetary and wanted her to help him realize that dream. “Say Hi to mom and dad for me.”

“Bye princess,” Elon said and hung up.

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Days passed as Leah settled in. The work was fun, and she had plenty of music. Unfortunately, internet was crap and contact with her friends and relatives were unreliable. Her uncle was planning on creating a global internet service, but that was still just a dream.

“Commander, we need to get the experimental drugs to the Sidney station before the storm hits,” biologist Dr. Harry Jones argued. “Otherwise, the storm will delay the project by weeks.”

“I’m sorry but I can’t spare the personal now,” Lee apologized.

“Can I deliver it?” Leah asked. “What’s so special about the drugs?”

“No way,” Lee declared. “A young girl out there alone is not a good thing. Your uncle would kick my ass if something happened to you.”

Leah got angry at the commander’s comment. She wasn’t a child, and girls were just as capable as boys. Her anger turned to determination. “The station is only 347 KM away and the storm is over a day away. I could get there in two to three hours at most by snowmobile. If there is a problem, I’ll call, and you can pick me up.”

The average top speed for snowmobiles was over 150 mph or 240 km/h.

“We need this tested ASAP,” a colleague named Mr. Jackson demanded. “This is a huge business opportunity we can’t lose. Also, our company is partially financing this operation.”

“Very well,” the commander relented. “However, I want the request made in writing and signed by all concerned parties.”

“As you wish,” Mr. Jackson agreed and exited the room.

“My dear, you asked what we’re testing,” Dr. Jones said. “It’s an experimental drug that will allow us to freeze the human body without the fear of ice crystals destroying the internal structure of cells,” Dr. Harry said. “It’s already lab tested. However, there are some tests we can only do here in Antarctica.”

“So, you want to preserve your body like a pickle and revive in the future?” Leah asked, frowning.

“You don’t approve, I see,” Dr. Harry noted.

“It seems unnatural,” Leah confessed. “However, it makes more sense than the fools who want to copy their memories to computers. Just because your memories have been copied, doesn’t mean you won’t die. Well, to each their own I guess.”

Mr. Jackson arrived with the paperwork.

“Actually, it has practical medical benefits,” Dr. Harry said. “We intend to use it to preserve human organs. That’s a major problem right now in transplant medicine, since organ shelf life is so short. Please follow me.”

In the medical lab, Dr. Jones collected bottles, syringes and other items and placed them in a travel bag. At the same time, he explained the importance of his research. She ignored the scientist’s ramblings. She was only interested in nurturing life, not preserving it in bottles.

Lee was waiting for them in the garage module. “Better make a pit stop. It’s a long trip,” Lee warned.

Leah frowned but did as instructed.

Pit stop complete, Leah returned and donned her Antarctic clothes. At the same time Lee lectured her. “Pay attention to ground conditions. You’ve never driven this long before. And you’re alone. Also don’t drive too fast. An accident at high speeds can be fatal. You have 18 hours at least before the storm. There is no need to rush…”

Leah felt annoyed but said nothing. She knew the commander was worried for her safety.

Leah got on a snowmobile and zoomed off. Leah had no interest in the doctor’s research.

The first hour of the trip was uneventful. Leah entertained herself by listening to music as she zoomed over a frozen wasteland. The destination was a station on an unstable glacier.

Overhead, an aurora danced. As time passed, the aurora intensified, turning the perpetual evening of the frozen south into a winter wonderland.

“Amazing,” Leah murmured as she stared at the sky. She had no idea auroras could be so intense. Was that lightning in a clear sky?

Another hour passed as Leah enjoyed her music to a kaleidoscope of colors.

Leah’s radio buzzed. “Leah, this is Rob,” Lee said through her headphones. “We have bad news. A major storm, coming out of nowhere is brewing.”

“What should I do?” Leah asked in concern.

“We aren’t sure,” Lee said. “You are less than 65 KM from the Sidney station. However, the going will become more treacherous. If you fall into a crack, you could be lost forever. However, if you return, you face the full force of the storm.”

“My uncle would never turn back, and neither will I,” Leah said confidently. “By the way, why is the aurora so intense? Is it related to the coming storm?”

“Of course not,” atmospheric scientist Dr. Brunel denied firmly. “There is no relationship between the aurora and the weather. It’s just hard to forecast the weather, which is why I’m working here.”

“Leah, if you’re in danger of freezing to death, inject yourself with the J47kSJ serum.” Dr. Jones gave detailed instructions. “Good luck dear. I hope you won’t be our first human trial.”

Leah signed off. A moment later she felt very cold and lonely. She was all alone in a desolate wasteland. Why did she volunteer? The answer was simple. Everyone viewed her as a useless child who was only there because of her uncle’s influence, and she wanted to prove herself.

The wind picked up and storm clouds formed overhead. Fighting panic, Leah opened the medical pack and prepared a syringe of J47kSJ and one of adrenaline. She prepared a second syringe of J47kSJ for good luck.

The winds howled around Leah as she navigated through a blinding storm. Just then the GPS gave out.

Leah slowed down to a crawl, wondering what she should do. She couldn’t set up a tent, since the winds were too strong.

Just then the ground gave way. Screaming, Leah plummeted hundreds of feet into a crack. She hit a river of freezing water and had the breath knocked out of her.

Struggling desperately to breathe, Leah held onto the snowmobile for dear life.

Pitch darkness squeezed in on Leah, only held back by the headlights of the snowmobile she clung to. Eventually the batteries would die, but not before she did.

After agonizing minutes, Leah finally overcame the cold enough to move. Resigning herself to an unavoidable fate, she opened the medical bag.

With barely functioning fingers Leah injected herself with the J47kSJ serum. Now for the scary part – she had to get rid of her clothes. Her core had to drop to freezing as fast as possible while her heart still pumped.

As Leah felt her consciousness fade, she injected the adrenaline to keep her heart going. That was better than a triple espresso. She then injected the second needle of J47kSJ. That bought her a few minutes of wakefulness.

As Leah drifted into unconsciousness, the cold disappeared along with her terror. She contemplated the meaning of life. You come out of nowhere at birth, you struggle and have fun, and then disappear into that sweet goodnight – as some long dead poet once said.

The last thing she heard was the sound of a distant owl, but that was her brain malfunctioning.

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The world of icy water and darkness gave way to light. Leah saw her grandparents. They talked to her. Other relatives came.

Weird creatures resembling kaleidoscopic mechanical organisms[[1]](#footnote-1) came to keep her company. They thought her how to create using her voice.

Within herself was a universe filled with countless creatures, which in turn were composed of countless other creatures. What was she but a bubble? Outside, she was but one cell of a larger organism. That other was part of an even larger organism. Fractal-like, her essence went on forever.

Concepts of linear time and space lost meaning as worlds beyond imagining opened up.

Just as suddenly the worlds of wonder wound down. The mechanical kaleidoscopic creatures called, “Déjà vu,” as they receded.

Revival

The country of the Future is beyond imagination,   
and yet the seeds of the Future are in the Present.

Leah felt warmth, like a cocoon of feathers engulfing her, and then light. Memories of her time Below faded, leaving only fragments. She opened her eyes.

“Welcome back,” a white plastic robot greeted Leah with a warm motherly voice. “Please rest. You are recovering from a massive amount of damage and need time to heal.”

Moments later, Leah drifted back to sleep. Again, she drifted into dreamland. This time her dreams were ordinary, as she travelled through endless vistas, underground labyrinths, city-sized palaces and mile-high skyscrapers. The people she met were also ordinary, like the type Alice in Wonderland met on her journey.

Leah awoke to find herself in the bedroom of a rustic cottage. Sounds of the ocean came from the open windows, as well as the smell of salty air.

Standing next to the bed was the white robot. The machine had a flange around its waist resembling a skirt and feminine curves.

“Good morning, Musk San,” the robot greeted in its warm motherly voice. “I am a member of the Robbie robotic series, part of the Nanny Collective. I have been assigned to you as your personal assistant or PA. What would you like to name me?”

Leah ignored the machine and examined her body. She seemed the same. After her self-examination she got up to a seating position and searched for her clothes.

The robot walked to a chair and retrieved Leah’s garments.

“Amazing,” Leah murmured to herself as she admired the machine. It seemed more like a miniature human in a costume than a machine. Then again, she was never into robots, so didn’t know what was possible.

“Can you understand me, Robbie?” Leah asked.

“Yes, Musk San,” Robbie said. “AI speech recognition capabilities exceeded humans by the year 2027. I can understand all forms of human communication.”

“First, my name isn’t San. It’s Leah,” Leah corrected. “Second, how long have I been asleep?”

“San isn’t a name, Musk San,” Robbie said. “It’s a gender-neutral honorific like Mr. or Mrs., originating in Japan. It arose in popularity in the early 2030’s and is universally used.”

Leah dressed in her old clothes and walked up to a mirror. She looked the same as when she got herself frozen.

Unfortunately, her hair was a nightmare. It was impossibly frizzy, making her look like the bride of Frankenstein’s monster. She vowed to go to the salon as soon as possible.

“Do you have to call me by my last name?” Leah asked as she brushed her hair in vain.

The door opened and a doctor entered.

“Hi Leah Kun,” the doctor greeted her. “My name is Dr. Barbara Cline.”

“Kun is also an honorific, intended for children,” Robbie explained, pronouncing Kun as kUHn.

Leah looked at the woman sideways. She seemed masculine, and her voice was rather deep.

“I’m almost fifteen,” Leah clarified.

“Sorry dear but in our world of super-centennials and super-duper centennials, almost fifteen is barely out of diapers. I myself am 87 years old,” Barbara said with a smile.

“The date is Friday June 22, 2125,” Robbie said.

“You’ve been frozen over 110 years,” Barbara said. “The last three months were in regeneration as we repaired the massive cellular damage you experienced while stuck within the Antarctic ice.

“Your hair became uncombable after your hibernation. We left it that way so you could decide. Don’t worry. Your roots are coming in strong. On the other hand, it’s a popular trend, so you might want to keep it.”

Why would anyone want to look like a giant light bulb? Leah gave up combing and stared out of the window. Off in the distance she spotted sail boats.

“On the bright side, you will be pleased to know you currently hold the world record for longest cryogenic and unintentional freezing and revival.”

Leah walked through an open door and onto a balcony. Fifty feet below waves crashed on a rocky beach.

Seabirds flew above the single-story cottage. The smell of a BBQ wafted from another cliff-side cottage to the left of them.

Leah breathed in the salty air as the ocean waves and bird calls made a gentle duet.

“This is so beautiful,” Leah said with a smile. “I’ve always loved the ocean and cliffs.”

“We know,” the doctor said with a smile.

“By the way, when can I see my parents?” Leah asked.

“I think I mentioned you’ve been frozen for over 110 years,” the doctor said.

“No way,” Leah exclaimed as the truth of the statement penetrated her brain. “Are you saying everyone I know is dead?”

Leah sat down on a patio chair as dizziness overcame her.

“Would you like a sedative?” Robbie asked. “Your heart rate is elevated, and you have high levels of stress hormones.”

“Of course I’m stressed,” Leah said angrily. “Everyone I know is dead, and I look the same as when I went to Antarctica.

“My family is gone. My friends are gone. My old neighborhood, my favorite actors and actresses – Everything is gone.” Leah wiped tears from her eyes.

Barbara sat on a nearby chair and went into psychiatrist mode. “Leah Kun, I want you to focus on your feelings of loss. Now rate your loss from 1 to 10. Ten is your brain will explode.”

“An eight,” Leah sniffled. “No make it a nine. My brain won’t explode, but it is close.” She wiped her tear-filled eyes. “Why did I have to go to Antarctica? Why did I take that stupid mission? If I had driven at top speed, I could have reached before the storm. My parents would have been so sad.”

“Now Leah Kun,” Barbara said gently. “Please focus on your feelings of loss. We will deal with guilt at another time. Do you understand me?”

Leah slowly nodded.

“Now focus on my two fingers as you focus on your feelings of loss,” Barbara said.

Leah watched the doctor’s two fingers as they swept from left to right. Finally, the doctor told her to close her eyes. The technique was repeated.

After each repetition Leah’s sadness decreased. The doctor continued the technique.

Feeling at peace, Leah closed her eyes and had the surprise of her life. She was at her summer cottage on the Mediterranean Sea. Surrounding her was her parents, relatives and close friends, as well as enemies.

The people came forward and greeted her. For several hours the reunion continued. She made peace with her loved ones, those she hurt, and those who hurt her. Finally, they said goodbye. Leah waved to them, knowing they were all fine.

Leah took a deep breath and opened her eyed. “Thank you,” she said. “First, I was at my villa…,” Leah began.

“It’s okay dear,” Barbara said. “I saw everything.”

“Just what did you do?” Leah asked in wonder.

Barbara glanced at Robbie and Robbie said, “The technique was developed by Dr. Allan L. Botkin starting in 1995 to help war veterans overcome their traumas. It’s called Induced After-Death Communication (IADC). The patients reported seeking their loved ones like you did. It was later discovered that others could participate in the vision by doing the same technique. However, this required that the observer establish an emotional bond with the patient.”

“So, did you see my loved ones?” Leah asked. “Does that mean that souls ex…I know they exist? Does that mean science accepts the existence of souls?

“No, I didn’t see anything,” Robbie said. “However, Barbara could participate since they emotionally connected with you. And no, the existence of souls is not universally accepted in the scientific community. The concept is gaining popularity, with the work of Professor Donald Hoffman and and others.

“Don’t you mean…” Leah paused, unsure if Barbara was a he or a she. Instead she asked, “Did you say ‘they’?”

“All gender specific terms have been removed from the common language,” Robbie explained. “’They’ is used instead of he or she, since it is gender neutral. He or she is now considered archaic, like thou and thy.”

“I feel old,” Leah said softly.

“Don’t feel bad,” Barbara said with a laugh. “Think of this as just travelling to a new country, with people speaking a new language. Like British English and American English – almost the same, but with plenty of differences.

“I’ve booked you out of the hospital. I hope you’re hungry, since it is lunch time. It’s time to go up.”

“Up where?” Leah asked. She followed the doctor and robot as they exited the bedroom.

Leah paused, feeling disoriented. She was in a cottage bedroom a moment before. Now she was in a hospital corridor.

“There is one more thing we need to discuss,” Robbie said as they walked. “We need to inform you of your legal status.

“You were born January 6, 2000. You froze on December 27, 2014. You were officially revived March 27, 2125. You were in recovery for almost three months.”

They stepped into an elevator and ascended.

Robbie paused, then continued. “In September 2037, J47kSJ became approved for general clinical use under the trade name Revivall.

“As a result of Revivall, cryogenic labs popped up throughout the world. This opened up vast legal challenges as to the legal status of adults on revival, and especially children.

“One major legal question was - what is the legal age of a minor who was frozen for medical reasons?

“After over a decade of debate the world came to a consensus. The time a person spends in cryogenic suspension will not count if the time is greater than five years.

“This was to acknowledge that a child’s brain is still a child’s brain, even after deep freeze.”

That statement annoyed Leah. She wasn’t a child. However, she held her silence.

The doors opened and Leah found herself in an open plaza. Leah paused to enjoy the sun shining down on her as people bustled about.

The two walked down a pedestrian street and Leah hurried to catch up.

“Therefore, according to legal fiction, you are legally fifteen years old. Furthermore, your legal birthday is now officially April 7, 2111.

“Finally, since you are still a legal minor, you are required to have a chaperone. It is my job to fulfill that role. Do you understand?”

Leah nodded.

“In my day people were worried robots were taking over all jobs. Did that happen?” Leah asked as she followed her guides through a world that had once again changed.

“No Leah San,” Robbie said. “Robots did not take over all jobs.

“Following a pandemic starting in 2019, people began reevaluating their relationship with work. As a result, the world had another crisis.

“Machines began taking over menial jobs, not because companies wanted to save money, but because no one wanted those jobs.

“Traditional jobs like stocking clerk and janitor no longer exist. That’s okay, since no one wants for anything, and AI ensures everyone is healthy and happy.”

“That’s creepy,” Leah muttered with a shudder.

“Is it?” Robbie asked. “Was it creepy to rely on Google, Netflix, or YouTube to curate your results based on your preferences? That’s what social media did in your time.”

“Yes, it’s creepy, and wrong,” Leah said adamantly.

“What do you wish?” Robbie asked.

“I don’t want to be limited by one point of view,” Leah exclaimed.

“I cannot fully comply with that request,” Robbie said. “Certain ideas and concepts are inappropriate at your current stage of development. This includes extremist views, and other adult related content. All these can be rather harmful to you.

“On the other hand, I can give you access to countless viewpoints and subjects. You can choose where to focus on,” Robbie said.

“Thank you,” Leah said, not happy that her life was an open book.

“It’s almost 1:00PM. Come Leah Kun, let’s have lunch,” Barbara said. “There is an excellent restaurant you will like.”

“I’m not hungry,” Leah said, feeling as if she was in a dream. Only in a dream did scenery change without warning. And what was with all those weird clothes and strange glasses people were wearing?

“Leah San, you need to eat,” Robbie said. “You haven’t eaten in over a century.”

Leah looked at the robot curiously. Did the machine make a joke?

As she followed the two, she noted many people had service robots. However, many people were alone, just like the doctor. The scene reminded Leah of the Middle Ages when the lords and ladies were accompanied by servants.

They arrived at a restaurant and entered. A robot greeted them and asked them to follow.

The first thing Leah noticed was that humans were cooking. They worked in islands around the restaurant.

“How come humans are cooking?” Leah asked.

“That’s because people come here for the human touch,” Robbie replied. “Being served by a robot is like being served by a toaster – not much fun.”

Again, Leah noted that odd sense of humor.

To the right, Leah watched as a woman held an animated conversation with no one. On second thought, the woman looked as if she was talking to a ghost. She wasn’t the only one.

A man to the left abruptly stopped, apologized, and side-stepped a vacant area. Apparently, half the people in this century were mad.

The robot led them to an island.

“Good day everyone,” the woman chef said. “I am Andria, your chef. Welcome to Chez Wok.” She began her performance.

“While we are waiting, perhaps we should order glasses for Leah San,” Barbara suggested.

“I don’t need glasses,” Leah said, watching as the chef tossed cutlery in the air. “I have perfect vision.”

“I suggest we put that off for a few days,” Robbie said. “They know nothing about the virtual world. More importantly, Leah San is already overloaded with new data, and will need to go to sleep soon.”

“Good call,” Barbara said. “All my other cryogenic clients were only a few decades out of time.”

“I need a cell phone and an email address,” Leah said, not understanding what the two were talking about.

They were interrupted when the chef brought the appetizers. Leah ate and found the dumplings were amazing. She washed it down with tea.

“May I ask when you were frozen?” Andria asked.

“December of 2014,” Barbara said. “Leah was caught in a storm in Antarctica and froze. Fortunately, they had Revivall. They are the first person to use the drug and are the oldest revival. They awoke this morning.”

“Amazing,” Andria marveled as she tossed noodles. “I always wondered what it would be like to live in that era. You were at the brink of changes the world could never imagine. Of course, I wouldn’t want to be around when that pandemic hit in 2020, or the race riots, or the ethnic wars or when the global economy crashed or when the Great Flood struck in 2067. On second thought, I’m happy in this era.”

The chef placed noodles in front of her.

“Robbie mentioned a pandemic,” Leah said.

“A corona virus pandemic named COVID 19 started in 2019. It was compared to the Spanish Flu,” Robbie explained.

“The second order effects of the lockdown caused supply chains to break, global famines and the reevaluation of work, among other things.”

“But America did well, didn’t it?” Leah asked.

“Only because of its unique position as a superpower,” Robbie replied. “A large part of the population refused to follow medical guidelines for various reasons. As a result, the virus hit the States unusually hard.

“The virus changed how people worked and interacted. For instance, it brought social media tools such as Skype into prominence. This was the first foray into the virtual world for the human race as a whole.”

“What about Zoom?” Andria asked.

“Zoom only became widely known in the spring of 2020, and so is unknown to them.”

“Why do you keep calling me them?” Leah asked, annoyed. “I’m a she.”

“I almost forgot English used to have gender,” Andria laughed. “I believe I would have been called a she, since I was born with the equipment to give birth. Would I be called a cheffess instead of chef?”

The conversation paused and everyone looked at Leah.

“There is no such thing as cheffess,” Leah explained.

“Why is that?” Robbie asked. “It’s because women started becoming chefs after attitudes started to change.

“Now, the name of a profession is not linked to the person’s gender.

“Gender identity is still important in some societies such as Islam,” Robbie noted. “However, they as a rule have rejected the virtual world and live predominantly physical lives.”

“My sibling Jenny is a neo-luddite,” Andria commented.

“A what?” Leah asked.

“Neo-luddites are people who only accept technology before the industrial revolution,” Robbie explained.

Andria served a chicken dish, except the chicken didn’t taste like any chicken Leah was familiar with. Nevertheless, the dish was amazing.

Feeling the need to make conversation, Leah asked, “Why did you ask if I need glasses?”

“It’s one of several gateways into the virtual world,” Robbie replied.

“You know them as VR glasses. Except these glasses use electric and magnetic fields, as well as microwaves to synchronize data with your brain.”

“Oh my God, that sounds dangerous,” Leah exclaimed.

“Regulation glasses hardware-restrict maximum power output,” Robbie assured. “Also, AI is constantly on guard for possible cyber-attacks. You are not ready for them yet.”

“I notice only some people are using glasses. How come?” Leah asked.

“Some people refuse the technology, while people like me have the tech implanted,” Barbara answered.

“Me too,” Andria said. “It’s amazing, but not for everyone.”

“You will need to know much more about this world before you can make an informed decision,” Robbie said. “Don’t worry. The tech is not required to function in this society.”

Desert was served. It wasn’t sweet but it was amazing.

“I wonder how much sugar is in this,” Leah mused.

“There is no refined sugar,” Andria said. “Without Big Ag manipulating consumers, we now know refined sugar is carcinogenic and causes multiple long-term diseases. This desert was made with all natural ingredients such as sweet potato, combined with techniques for manipulating taste.

“I don’t use any particular recipe. Instead, each meal is different, depending on seasonally available local ingredients, my mood, and what I know about my guests.”

“Thank you,” Leah said. “That was amazing. How much do we owe you?”

“The bill has already been paid,” Andria said. “I hope to serve you again.”

With that they stepped out of the restaurant.

With a full belly, the world didn’t seem as scary as it did before.

“Leah is adapting more quickly than our data indicated,” Robbie said. “Their sleep can be postponed.”

“So, your data about me isn’t as complete as you assumed,” Leah gloated.

“No,” Robbie corrected. “Data indicates the change in you occurred while you were frozen.”

“Come let’s go upside,” Barbara said.

Leah followed the doctor to a tube that seemed to shoot into the sky. They stepped in and an elevator rushed them upward. In moments they were above the city, then the view was cut off by a blank wall. However, the interior was well lit.

Half a minute later the elevator doors opened, and they stepped into an abandoned city overrun with jungle.

“Leah Kun, my work week is over,” Barbara said. “I would like to invite you over to my home in Florida. My spouse and kids would like to meet you.”

“I guess I have nowhere else to go,” Leah said, feeling a little lonely. However, her loneliness was overcome by the strangeness of the new vista.

“Everything will be okay dear,” Barbara said gently. “Think of this as a grand adventure.”

“Grand adventure indeed,” Leah laughed uncontrollably. “I first awake in an Italian cliffside villa. I enter a door and find myself in a hospital corridor. I ride an elevator and arrive in what looks like Paris. I then ride another elevator straight into the sky, then an underground tube. Now I’m in an abandoned city overrun with jungle.”

“You are starting to understand what it’s like to live in the virtual world,” Barbara said with a chuckle. “In time this world will become mundane and boring, if stability is what you crave.”

A vehicle pulled up next to them and the door opened. There was no driver.

“This is our ride,” Barbara said as she entered. “By the way this is a flying car. It will fly us to our destination.

Leah sat back, grateful for the explanation. She looked out the window as the abandoned city fell away from view.

Leah looked at Robbie sitting opposite her. A flat panel on Robbie’s chest lit up revealing a screen.

“This is a cross-section of the city we just exited from,” Robbie explained.

“Since before you were born, Chicago struggled with overcrowding. It was a dream of some architects to eventually create an underground city. In 2067 a huge cavern was excavated, and an underground city named New Chicago was built. That too became crowded, as the weather was better than Old Chicago.

“As a result, people began constructing reverse skyscrapers or ground scrappers. These structures went downwards, instead of upwards.

“One such structure was the hospital you found yourself in.

“Your room was designed to look like a home. The view beyond the balcony is a holographic projection, with accompanying sound, air flow, and scent. It was designed for therapeutic purposes.

“In short, you started your journey in a room in a reverse skyscraper, ascended to the ground floor of New Chicago where you ate lunch, then ascended an elevator to the ground floor of Old Chicago.”

“So why is Old Chicago overrun with jungle?” Leah asked.

“Old Chicago isn’t abandoned,” Robbie explained. “This is a style of architecture designed to combine the convenience of living in a city and the stress reducing qualities of green nature.”

Everything finally made sense.

The panel on Robbie’s chest went blank and Robbie said, “I need to warn you. Much of Florida has been submerged when sea levels rose 8 meters.”

One meter was approximately 1 yard, Leah remembered. Why couldn’t they have made 1 meter exactly equal 1 yard, or better yet, 1 foot? That was so annoying.

“Oh my God, how did that happen?” Leah asked.

“During your time Antarctica was starting to thaw. There were already liquid lakes with enough water to raise sea levels by several meters, though the exact amount wasn’t known. It was only a matter of time before the dam broke,” Robbie explained.

“The resulting tsunami was so great and devastating that it literally wiped countries out of existence. Millions of people drowned in a matter of minutes, leaving hundreds of millions of people homeless.

“The media likened it to the Biblical Flood that happened around twelve thousand years ago.”

“What Biblical flood?” Leah asked. “Isn’t the Bible just a story?”

“The Bible, like other ancient documents is based on source material from prehistoric times,” Robbie assured. “At the end of the Younger Dryas[[2]](#footnote-2), sea levels rose over 100 meters. This occurred over the course of a few hundred years.

“CO2 levels are returning to pre-industrial levels, along with global temperatures. However, the damage has been done.”

As if on cue, their flying car approached the sea. They zoomed over the water for several minutes, then approached a partly submerged city. Afar it was fine. Up close it was a disaster. Decaying buildings crumbled into the water as sharks enjoyed their new home.

Street signs poked above the waters, with waterlogged cars piled up in a disarrayed mess along the streets.

“It’s okay dear,” Barbara said, patting Leah on the back. “I know it’s hard looking at this.”

“I used to live here as a child,” Leah said softly. “All life is dust in the wind.”

“But out of this dust new life will flourish,” Robbie intoned.

That snapped Leah out of her reverie. “Okay so fairies transported me into the future. I will not bash my head in and die. I will start a new life.”

“That’s the spirit,” Barbara applauded. “Car, take us underwater.”

The car slowed down, and then sank below the waves.

They zoomed through waterlogged streets, lined with abandoned vehicles. Coral was busy covering every available structure in a blanket of organic stone. Far to the left a school of fish moved like a single organism. To the right thousands of jellyfish peacefully drifted around the dead branches of a cluster of trees.

“It’s so pretty,” Leah mused.

“Sea creatures love these structures,” Barbara said. “It gives the coral places to grow and fish to hide. Also, the coral has been specially bred to tolerate higher water temperatures. That was required to save the Great Barrier Reef and other coral reefs.”

Just then a shark swam by. It ignored them and chased after a turtle.

For the next half hour they traveled underwater. Then the car rose to the surface and then shot into the air.

Sprawling before them was a city sitting on hundreds of pontoons. Some only had small houses while others had huge structures. Beyond that were humongous oil-rig-like platforms containing towns. Small craft travelled between the legs of the platforms.

“Welcome to Cousteau city, named after Jacques Cousteau, and my home,” Barbara said.

They circled and Leah spotted pontoons dedicated to farms.

“The push to colonize the seas started in your time,” Robbie said. “A major player was the Seasteading Institute.

“These cities are designed to be non-polluting and in fact encourage the proliferation of sea life.

“It’s easy to care for the environment when it’s front and center of your life. Unlike 20th century cities which isolated people from nature.

“So it’s like a utopia,” Leah marveled.

“Unfortunately no,” Robbie said. “There are several mega-cities where the dystopian cyberpunk future has come into being.

“A perfect example is a mega-project called The Line in Saudi Arabia.

“I’ll tell you about them another time.”

“Why would people allow that?” Leah asked. “Have they been enslaved by machines?”

“It’s much more complicated than that,” Robbie said. “It’s the interaction between human nature and multiple AI systems that has created this world.

“There is no danger of Terminator robots exterminating the entire human race. Sufficient protections exist to prevent that, including AI systems such as the Nanny collective of which I am a member.

“However, that doesn’t mean AI systems won’t kill humans on occasion.”

The car approached a small island at the outskirts of the city. It landed and they stepped out. The car flew off a moment later.

“Welcome to my home,” Barbara said. “Consider this your home. Let’s go in and meet the family. Then I’ll show you your room.”

They entered a cottage and Leah found herself in a cozy living room. Two kids, a boy and girl lounged on sofas. They wore the strange clothes and strange glasses Leah saw before.

A bearded man approached and extended his fist, “Pleased to meet you Leah Kun. My name is Simon Cline.”

Leah looked at him. There was something off about him. She opened her mouth to greet him, but instead exclaimed, “You’re not human.”

The kids were off in a world of their own and ignored them.

“Don’t be rude,” Barbara said angrily.

“Now dear, be patient with Leah Kun,” Simon said.

“You’re right,” Barbara said. “I apologize for my outburst.”

“Yes Leah Kun, I am an AI spouse. I know this is foreign to you. However I do love my spouse and kids and will do everything in my power to keep them safe and happy.

“Our kids are biological, just like Barbara.”

The kids got up and grumbled. “I was in the middle of a hunt,” the boy said.

“And I was shopping,” the girl grumbled.

The reaction of the children made Leah happy. Finally she saw gender appropriate responses. It also made her want to go shopping.

Their annoyance disappeared when they realized she was there.

“This is ten-year-old Gilbert and fourteen-year-old Billie,” Simon said.

“You’re the popsicle,” the boy Gilbert said and extended his fist. Leah bumped his fist.

“Don’t be rude,” Simon scolded.

“Sorry,” Gilbert apologized.

Leah laughed and said, “I think it was funny.”

Leah fist bumped Billie and Billie asked, “What’s it like being frozen.”

“I don’t remember,” Leah said. “The freezing part was a nightmare. Then I felt I was carried away by an owl. After that I met my relatives. After that I explored endless world and had fun with my relatives.”

“Come on,” Gilbert said. “I’ll show you the house.”

Gilbert ran up a spiral staircase and Leah followed. “This is our parent’s room, that’s Billie’ room, that’s my room. That’s your room.”

They entered and Leah found a cozy room with bed and other furniture.

“We have clothes for you,” Robbie said and indicated the closet and chest of drawers.

Gilbert grabbed Leah’s wrist and yanked. Next stop wash the washroom. It looked pretty much like a standard American washroom, but with a separate shower and Jacuzzi tub.

Down to sea level, they headed for the kitchen. Finally they went down a spiral staircase.

Down below Leah found herself in a room made of glass. Below her fish swam among coral. About her vibrant life swam.

“Amazing,” Leah marveled.

“Why don’t you change into your swimsuit?” Robbie suggested. “Don’t worry about UV.”

Again Gilbert grabbed Leah’s wrist and dragged her up. He then shoved her into her room. “Hurry,” he said and closed the door.

Leah opened drawers. In the top drawer she found hygiene products. Next were undergarments. Next were shorts and t-shirts.

Leah found the swimsuit, quickly changed and headed down. She found the family in the back. Steps led into the ocean water, ending at a platform some 5 feet below the water.

“Leah Chan, let’s go swimming,” Gilbert called and jumped into the sea.

“Chan is an honorific intended for friends,” Robbie explained. “Don’t worry about sharks. A deterrent has been activated. Also, the ocean is warm.”

“You warmed the ocean?” Leah asked, surprised.

“No Leah San,” Robbie replied. “That’s just the result of global warming.”

“I love your clothes,” Billie said. “It’s so retro.”

“I’m feeling old,” Leah said glumly. Her clothes were the latest fashion trend for teenagers. Now it was so old-fashioned, it was new again.

“I know how you feel,” Barbara said.

“You’re also making me feel old,” Leah said. “I’m old enough to be your grandmother.”

“Don’t rupture about it,” Gilbert called. “I like you and that’s good enough.”

Rupture. That was one more word she didn’t know.

“It comes from rupturing your spacesuit,” Robby supplied as Leah allow Gilbert to push her into the sea.

The water was warm, almost hot. It was nothing like that freezing hell.

Gilbert splashed Leah, distracting her. Leah splashed back and chased after him. She then took a breath and swam underwater.

Tiny fish tickled her as they came to investigate. A crab sat on top of a toppled over car. At least this world seemed better than the dystopian movie *Water World* - Maybe.

Leah let her worries fade away as she splashed with the two kids.

“Why don’t you two come swim?” Leah called.

“Then who will prepare the BBQ?” Simon asked.

“Robbie can do that,” Leah replied.

Robbie took over and the adults jumped into the water. They were already properly dressed.

“Dinner is ready,” Robbie called.

On board, Simon said, “Leah Kun, think of us as your family. You can stay with us for as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” Leah said tearfully and hugged Barbara and Simon.

Gilbert asked, “If Leah is family, they why is everyone being formal?”

“True,” Simon said. “Leah Kun – I mean Leah, tomorrow is Saturday. We can have plenty of fun.”

“Okay,” Leah said with a smile. She stared at him for a moment before turning to the food. Why did she say he wasn’t human? There was nothing to indicate that. Also, would an AI make mistakes like he had?

The final nail on the coffin was when Simon ate a hamburger and chased it down with a beer.

Leah was distracted when Gilbert shouted, “Leah, what drink do you want?”

“A coke please,” Leah replied.

Gilbert tossed Leah a can. She looked at it and was happy that some things never changed. She drank the coke as exhaustion overcame her, along with a few tears.

“Come Leah San it’s time to go to bed,” Robbie said softly.

Robbie guided Leah to her room and helped her get undressed. Leah slipped into bed and closed her eyes.

That night Leah dreamt of being an old lady as kids ran around in circles making fun of her. She was too young to be having a mid-life crisis.

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Saturday June 23, 2125

After a tortured night, Leah finally woke.

“Morning Leah San,” Robbie greeted. “I took the liberty of extending your rest period. It is now 10:00AM.

“The schedule for the next week is to swim and rest.”

Leah wanted to argue but didn’t have the energy. She was feeling burned out.

Leah dressed in her old clothes, wondering where her clothes came from. They should have all been gone shortly after she was declared deceased.

And yet there was that stain from when she ate burritos and the sauce stained her blouse.

“Morning sleepy head,” Simon greeted as Leah entered the kitchen. “Have a seat and I’ll serve you breakfast.”

“Thanks Mr. Simon. I mean Simon San,” Leah said.

“Just enjoy your rest dear, and then we can tour the city when Robbie gives the signal,” Simon said.

Leah spent the rest of the day snoozing and swimming.

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Sunday June 24, 2125

Leah greeted the family as they ate their usual breakfast.

“What would you like for breakfast dear?” Simon asked. “We have eggs, salmon, nut butters, keto bagels and sliced bread, moo juice, coffee and tea.”

“What’s moo juice?” Leah asked.

“It’s basically milk, but grown in a genetically engineered plant called the moo plant,” Robbie replied. “It’s missing certain chemicals such as lactose, and has added vitamins and minerals. It grows well in sea water and there are some in the back of the house.

“It’s been studied for over 83 years and numerous meta-studies have shown it to be healthier than real cow milk.”

“I was always thought genetically engineered food was bad,” Leah said.

“In a sense it is,” Robbie replied. “In the past, food plants were bred to tolerate high levels of herbicides and pesticides. The end result was that consumers were eating high levels of herbicides and pesticides.

“In the early 21st century blood tests showed high levels of Roundup in the blood of children and adults. In fact you had excessive levels of such chemicals in your blood.”

“But I was eating healthy,” Leah objected.

“Farmers such as Gabe Brown started a revolution showing regenerative agriculture practices are more profitable than traditional farming,” Robbie explained.

“Unfortunately, that took decades because of massive farm subsidies, as well as because of negative propaganda from chemical companies such as Monsanto, a subsidiary of Bayer.”

The conversation turned to general topics as Leah ate eggs and salmon on a bagel. The milk tasted like the real thing, almost. Without lactose, it didn’t taste quite like real milk.

“Gilbert San, would you like to take Leah San on a tour of the city?” Robbie asked.

“Okay,” Gilbert replied happily.

“Leah San, the Clines are on your contact list,” Robbie said. “You may contact or text them whenever you want.”

“How do I do that?” Leah asked. “I don’t have a cell phone.”

“What’s a cell phone?” Gilbert asked.

That question didn’t bother Leah. Gilbert was just a kid. Well maybe just a little.

“Cell phones are primitive versions of glasses or implants,” Robbie replied. “Leah San, I will act as your cell phone. Just tap on my screen or give me commands. For example, call Gilbert or text Gilbert.”

They stepped onto a moored boat and sat down. Once comfortable, the boat took off.

The boat treaded its way around floating structures and finally arrived at an enormous floating structure.

The structure consisted of hundreds of pillars going into the ocean. Above was an enormous platform.

“You can’t build large rigid structures in the ocean since they will just break,” Robbie said. “Instead the platform is raised, allowing waves to pass through without impedance.”

They stepped off the boat and the boat sped away. A short walk brought them to an elevator.

Leah looked out the windows as they rose 8 stories to the main deck.

“I feel like I’m in a sci-fi movie,” Leah muttered.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” Robbie replied.

Leah looked at Robbie in surprise and laughed.

They stepped out of the elevator and a bustling city greeted Leah.

“Let’s go shopping,” Billie suggested.

“No way,” Gilbert objected. “You can go shopping anytime. Let’s go to the Gateway. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Robbie said. “From Leah San’s point of view, there is no difference between there and here. Everything is new. However we should walk there.”

Walking, Leah noticed the largest buildings were only 5 stories high. However, most were between two and three.

The architecture was rather eclectic, ranging from futuristic to medieval.

“Come on, Leah, that’s one of my favorite stores,” Billie called and almost dragged Leah in.

“Oh man, now the day is ruined,” Gilbert grumbled. Never the less he followed. Inside he sat on a comfortable chair, closed his eyes and entered a world of his own.

For the next hour Leah enjoyed herself trying on clothes, eventually settling on a new outfit.

Robbie informed Leah that she handled the transaction, and her old clothes would be returned home via currier.

Gilbert woke up and followed the others out of the shop.

“There’s the entrance to the Gateway,” Gilbert called excitedly.

In front of Leah was an ornate building with turnstiles in front of it. People lined up waiting to pass into the building.

Beyond the turnstiles were archways obscured by what looked like a wall of fog.

Looking at the large sign saying, Gateway, Leah asked, “What is that thing?”

“Don’t spoil the fun,” Gilbert said hastily.

They entered a line and advanced.

Finally Leah stepped through. She waited for Gilbert, Billie, and Robbie. Gilbert grabbed Leah by the wrist and dragged her into an archway.

Leah was reluctant to pass the weird fog wall, but Gilbert pulled her in.

At first all Leah could see was a white fog. Then something pressed against her head. A moment later she felt vertigo.

The vertigo and sense of pressure on her head disappeared. They continued walking and the fog dispersed.

Leah exited a tunnel and found a sign in front of her. It read, “Welcome to the Gateway, the portal to other realities, and Earth’s digital twin.”

Gilbert continued dragging Leah forward.

“What did that sign mean by digital twin?” Leah asked. To her eyes, she was back outside.

“This world we are in is not the Earth,” Robbie said. “Instead this is a digital copy we are now in. I advise you not to bump into people who are grey in color.

“They are people in the real world who don’t have glasses or implants. As such they can’t see you. Bumping into them will be like bumping into a brick wall. You will better understand in time.

“This is called the Gateway because this is the stepping off point to other realities.”

“You see that manhole?” Gilbert asked. “If you go down, you might meet zombies and other undead.”

Just then steam escaped the manhole and the cover rattled. Leah screamed in fright.

“You see that abandoned building?” Gilbert asked. “There could be ghosts there.”

A shadowy figure passed behind the curtain.

“Stop it, you’re scaring me,” Leah screamed.

“Stop teasing Leah,” Billie scolded.

“Sorry,” Gilbert apologized.

“Don’t be afraid, Leah San,” Robbie said. “I will protect you from all harm.”

“Where should we go first?” Gilbert asked. “We can go to the past, present, future. Do you want to play as a space pirate or fight in a cosmic war? Do you want to go to a fantasy world and cast spells? How about becoming a barbarian?”

“What do you mean, past present and future?” Leah asked. “Isn’t time travel impossible?”

“You are correct,” Robbie said. “However here, we can visit a recreation of any recorded time period.”

“Please tell me what’s going on,” Leah demanded.

“When you stepped through the fog wall, a VR device was placed on your head. It linked with your brain and took control of your body,” Robbie said.

“Your body is now resting in one of the beds in the Gateway facility. Robots will take care of your body and keep it healthy, no matter how long it takes.

“Entering is relatively quick. However, exiting can take time, since your body needs to be retrieved.”

Leah calmed down and closed her eyes and relaxed. “Yes, I can feel myself resting in bed. That’s so weird. This place feels so real.”

“No way,” Gilbert exclaimed in astonishment. “You can actually feel your body?”

“Sure,” Leah replied. “It’s like when I go to sleep and dream. I’m always aware I’m lying in bed. Although when I fall asleep, I lose all sound and hearing. At first I thought I had insomnia. So nightmares never really frighten me, though they are still unpleasant.”

“Your neurology is unusual, affecting less than 1 in some 600 people,” Robbie said. “However, the condition is harmless.”

“But what if I need to use the washroom?”

“All biological needs are met by the maintenance equipment. As a result you don’t need to worry about bodily maintenance,” Robbie said.

“However these functions can be simulated to give a more immersive experience.

“The only absolute is the need to sleep. Even full-timers, those who give up their bodies for an eternal digital existence still need to sleep.”

“Why would people want to give up their bodies?” Leah asked, surprised.

“Such people never get sick and their brains are always maintained at 100% efficiency. Second, their brains can grow beyond the scope of what’s possible for a human. Third, their brains can use much more energy, because of superior heat management and more available calories than what’s possible in a human body.

“All combined, it is described as waking up from a dream, like someone with brain damage finally being able to think for the first time.”

“It’s like the Matrix,” Leah said, marveling.

“It’s more than you realize,” Robbie said. “This is Earth’s digital twin. Some people call it the real world, while the world you are used to is called the mortal world.

“Many choose to live lives here that are identical to lives lived on earth. This gives them a sense of stability. And then they step through portals for some fun in other realities. But they eventually return to their day to day lives.”

“Are you serious?” Leah asked.

“Absolutely,” Robbie said. “Most people can’t tolerate living in Wonderland all their lives, which is why fully grounded communities in the quote real world exist. These communities are no different than the communities you grew up in.”

A doorway rose up from the ground. Robbie opened the door and they stepped through.

The other side was a plaza filled with people socializing and enjoying the summer sun. Across the street people ate at a restaurant named 5 Dogs Burger Bar.

Leah looked back and found the doorway was part of a brick building. The previous reality was not visible. Instead a corridor greeted them.

Just then Leah smelled the burgers and French fries and her stomach rumbled.

“That smells nice,” Leah said.

“Why don’t you eat?” Robbie asked. “In the real world you can rent an apartment, get a job as a marine biologist and earn money.”

“But this is not real, isn’t it?” Leah asked as she followed the others. She then stubbed her foot on the lip of the sidewalk and screamed in pain. She hopped around until the pain faded away.

“What is real?” Robbie asked. “Your pain is real, isn’t it? People like Donald Hoffman showed, evolution doesn’t seek truth. Instead it optimizes biological entities for what best allows them to survive.

“His theory of Conscious Agents is a leading theory of reality. However it’s still not fully accepted, since its implications are terrifying to most people.

“Unless you’re a scientist or a world creator, it’s best to accept all these digital worlds as being real. Then live your life as you see fit.

“Why don’t you buy something? This is the States, so they accept US currency.”

Leah realized she had her purse on her shoulder. She pulled out her wallet and found she had her credit card as well as money.

Leah walked up to the cashier and ordered a burger, fries and a drink. By the time she was finished with her order, the others were waiting at a table.

“Will I get fat?” Leah asked.

“Your body in the mortal world will not be affected, no matter what you do here,” Robbie said.

“However, your avatar will be affected here depending on your level of immersion.

“Immersion can range from casual, like playing a game on your computer to a full dive. Full dive is what you have experienced all your life, starting from when you were born.”

“No way,” Leah exclaimed. “Are you saying my entire life has been some sort of video game?

“I have memories of going into crazy worlds when I froze. Was that real?”

“That is what several theories claim,” Robbie replied. “What is reality? This question has been debated throughout human history. However, science started seriously looking into this hypothesis in the mid 20st century.

“That’s enough philosophy for now.

“After lunch would you like to play a casual game, or would you like to play with world building?”

“Do world building,” Gilbert suggested.

“Sure,” Leah replied and concentrated on finishing her meal.

After lunch, Robbie opened a random door. The other side was a nondescript room.

They stepped in and the door closed. “I’m turning off the lights.”

Leah was plunged in complete darkness.

“Now describe any scene you would like to see, for example, 19th centenary Paris or Jesus’ Jerusalem. You may also describe any arbitrary scene from your imagination.”

Leah asked, “How about Noodle’s flying island, minus the evil planes?”

Leah found herself on a flying island in front of an old windmill. Below them was an endless field of grain. Far in the distance was a mountain range. Above, the sun shone in a sky scattered with clouds.

“You can replace the grain field with a forest or sea or canyons,” Robbie suggested. “Or you can modify the island.”

“Put scary canyons,” Gilbert suggested.

Below, the fields were replaced by a shattered landscape of black canyons and flowing rivers of lava. Amidst banks of fog, demonic creatures swam in the lava pools and prowled in the rocky canyons.

“Once you finish customizing your scene, I will save it so you can view or modify it later,” Robbie said.

“Can I have a castle?” Leah asked.

“Yes,” Robbie replied. “Here are some randomly generated castles. Just say next, until you find something you like. Or you can be more specific, such as Dracula’s castle or Buckingham Palace, or styles such as Disney, gothic, historical, and so on.”

“Fantasy castle with dragons flying,” Leah suggested, looking at the windmill.

The island expanded and a massive castle covering over an acre appeared. Overhead, dragons circled castle towers.

“Ooh nice,” Gilbert said, happily. “I wonder if you have scary dungeons below.”

“No scary dungeons,” Leah scolded.

They walked into the castle. “Disney’s Beauty and the Beast castle,” Leah exclaimed.

The interior transformed and a candlestick walked in. The candlestick bowed and said, “Welcome home Princess Leah.”

“Hi Princess,” a cup with a chipped lip and a slight lisp called happily. Other animated items appeared. They were all happy to see her.

“I like it,” Leah commented.

“Care to give this place a name?” Robbie asked.

“Chip’s castle,” Leah replied.

“You may use this flying castle as your staging area,” Robbie said. “And you are free to customize it as you see fit.”

“I’m not sure how to improve it,” Leah said. “I assume there are gardens and ball rooms and hot springs.”

“That and many more things,” Robbie replied. “However, it is past 5:00PM. It’s time to return home. I took the liberty of recalling your body.”

They walked up to a door and Robbie opened it. Beyond was a fog wall.

Leah stepped in and walked a few steps. The fog cleared and Leah found herself back in the floating city.

“Freaky,” Leah muttered as she looked at the setting sun.

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A flying car landed in front of them and they all entered. Off they went back home.

Upon arriving at the Evans houseboat, Leah greeted Barbara and Simon.

“How was your day?” Simon asked.

“We went to the Gateway,” Gilbert replied.

“First Billie helped me buy this outfit,” Leah said. “Then we went to that…digital twin place. Then we had lunch. Then I got to create a flying castle. It was a lot of fun. However I can’t tell what’s real and VR. I feel as if I’m in a video game even now.”

Barbara laughed and said, “It’s impossible to tell if we are in base reality or if we are in a VR simulation. What is reality? Who knows?”

“Here’s a fun fact,” Simon said. “Orthodox science has yet to find signs of intelligent life out there. However, people think we have already contacted aliens through the Gateway and the virtual worlds.”

“Can I meet these aliens?” Leah asked, fascinated.

“Perhaps later,” Robbie replied. “Meeting them can be a jarring experience. Some aliens are friendly, while others are rather hostile. Many are incomprehensible by human standards.”

1. Reference to Terence McKenna, who met kaleidoscopic mechanical organisms in his psychedelic experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-younger-dryas.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)