Greed still makes sense on a star-building spaceship. You want to ensure that you can live the life you want, do what you want, and not have to worry about constraints on your resources. If you’re personally generous, people’s gratitude goes in your direction, regardless of how the resources you’re being generous with came into your hands. The kids with the coolest toys are more popular. People who have been both rich and poor agree: rich is better.

I am greedy. Some people would say I’m exploitative and selfish. Alana said that once, but that was because she felt I was being insufficiently generous to her. She sure as fuck wasn’t saying that I should pull in less money on ethical grounds and expressing a desire for a more modest lifestyle. She’s way greedier than me, but because I do the dirty work, I get called names. Life is unfair that way.

My name is Joshua Mizuno. Born on Earth, boarded the fleet with my parents when I was 3 years old. I produce and sell a couple of drugs. I call them Stim and LoveBuzz, and since I market them with those names, other people call them that too.

LoveBuzz gives you the falling-and-being-in-love feeling. Like when you have a crush on somebody, and contemplating them makes you happy, and seeing them makes your heart go chunk-chunk. Depending on the dosage, that’s what you feel when you ingest LoveBuzz. It doesn’t make you fall in love with anybody, it’s just the being-in-love feeling.

If you’re already in love with somebody, LoveBuzz can supplement your feelings, which, let’s face it, can flag from time to time. If you’re not in love with someone, LoveBuzz can give you the being-in-love feeling. Many successful career-focused singles use LoveBuzz for that full-heart feeling without all the hassles of dealing with a whole other person with all the conflict and inconvenience and loss of autonomy and trials of your patience. All the upside of love with none of the downside, available in pill or drink format at whatever dosage level is right for you.

Withdrawal feels like heartbreak. Scratch that, it is heartbreak. Exact same set of neural pathways as when you contemplate your future without somebody who you are absolutely in love with. Some people use LoveBuzz recreationally and can stop anytime they like, but they’re a minority.

People generally prefer drinks to pills. Pills are used wherever the trappings of medicine are called for, or you need your LoveBuzz in a conveniently portable format. I sell most of it in a rich red merlot in glass bottles, available in both alcoholic and non-alcoholic varieties. Marketing genius on my part, I think – people associate red wine with romance. I’m a pill man myself.

Wednesday January 4, 2145

“Joshie, the LoveBuzz Addiction support group is meeting now.”

“Coming!”

I set down the puzzle I’m playing with, and sit down on the bench next to Alana. She’s already got the video stream projecting on the wall. I put my arm around her shoulder, and she leans into me and squirms contentedly.

The people on the screen are all faces I recognize. Seeing some of my best customers denounce my product is always interesting and sometimes amusing. I need to remain detached, so I don’t take the criticism personally. But that’s how you evolve and improve your product line, you look at what the dissatisfied customers have to say.

The group consists of seven people. I point at their faces on the wall, and call up their names in glowy green text beside them. They are Nina, Jeffrey, Zhang, Dirk, Shelley, Benjamin and Michael. They are sitting in a circle on nasty cheap-ass chairs. Michael, a relative newcomer speaks first.

“My name is Michael and I’m a LoveBuzz addict. Still consuming.”

“That’s an important realization, Michael” says Zhang. He exudes sincerity. He says obvious things a lot. I smirk.

“I’m going to quit. As of tomorrow. Cold turkey.”

Sure you will, Michael. You’re just low on money, looking to cut expenses. You’re not going anywhere. You might cut back a bit though.

Shelley’s the only one in the group who has actually quit, so far as I can tell. She never had that big a habit – about 80 mg a day, which is a couple glasses of my non-alcoholic merlot. People in the group respect her. Benjamin is trying to get with her, I think that’s his motivation in attending the meetings. Not gonna happen. After a bit, she speaks.

“It’s hard Michael. I think you know the withdrawal symptoms. I think you know how readily available it is. We’re here to support you. “

“My family’s very supportive. They don’t like that I’m a slave to the drug. My wife is going to monitor me carefully. She’ll know if I slip.”

“She might, Michael. But as addicts, we’ve become very good at lying. To ourselves and the people around us. As I was trying to quit, I slipped back quite a few times. The people around me didn’t generally know it.”

Zhang feels the need to add: “Having a family who aren’t users: that’s important.”

It’s always a shame to see a heavy user quit. Michael averages 300 mg a day. More on weekends, and then his intake is more regimented on weekdays and he spends Monday and Tuesday looking pretty glum. Slight lump in the throat. I know the feeling.

Alana says: “He’s not quitting. You heard it here first.”

Statistics suggest that she’s right.

Sunday January 8, 2145

Present: Councillor Mustafa Ismail, Dr. Cynthia Wong, Joshua Mizuno

Ismail: The reason we’re here and what sticks in my craw is that this drug is designed to be addictive. You went to a lot of trouble to give it painful withdrawal symptoms.

Mizuno: I wouldn’t put it that way.

Ismail: But I did. What you’re doing here is keeping people using your product by making it hard to quit.

Mizuno: Withdrawal symptoms play a role in customer retention. Doesn’t any business try to retain its customers? Have you ever tried cancelling a gym membership?

Ismail: So we have a bunch of people addicted to LoveBuzz. Am I the only one who has a problem with this?

Wong: The drug itself doesn’t have any physiologically harmful effects, apart from dependency and addiction.

Ismail: And then there’s the withdrawal symptoms. I’ve had people tell me it’s the worst pain in their lives, coming off of it. There have been suicides.

Mizuno: With respect, LoveBuzz doesn’t make anybody commit suicide, or even hurt anybody. What those people who are in pain ought to do is take their medicine, instead of quitting their usage of a drug which is clearly helping them cope and isn’t hurting them in any way.

Wong: Economically, that’s not an option for everybody.

Mizuno: If the council wants to provide maintenance doses for people who need it, I’d be willing to provide a supply at a reasonable price. It would take about 3 months to ramp up production. Make me an offer.

Ismail: That’s really rich. You create the disease, and then you try to sell the cure to taxpayers. I don’t think so. That’s not going to fly.

Mizuno: I’m proposing a sensible solution to the alleged problem. I’m sure we can work out a deal. You don’t even have to go with me; you can try to make the drug yourself, or find another supplier. I think you’ll find that I can do it faster better and more cheaply than any other option. As I said, make me an offer.

Ismail: We will meet again a week from now. I’m not going to let this rest. We’re going to solve our drug problem. That’s a promise. Joshua, your attendance is required.

Mizuno: I look forward to working with the committee to make people’s lives better.

Monday January 9, 2145

I first synthesized Stim when I was 18. We each get a growing facility assigned to us. We can grow what we like. It’s mostly a market system. The council taxes us for oxygen consumption and pays us a rate for oxygen production from our facilities. There’s also an automated system that taxes us on pollution. Though what constitutes pollution is a subjective question, and changes based on who’s on council. Do the aromatics from lilacs count as pollution? They do, because a petty-minded councilor didn’t like a lady who had a plot of HyperLilacCrabappleBurst trees. Sensors get deployed, and taxes are levied and bonuses disbursed based on their readings. We also have shared lands, which you’re not supposed to alter for private enjoyment. I follow the rules. All of my drug growing happens in my facility or in other people’s facilities which I rent. Willing owner, willing tenant. I’m not stealing anything from anybody. I pay people for the work they do, or for the use of their growing facilities. I pay my bills on time. I’ve never stiffed anybody. Seriously. How many businesses can say that?

I’m watching Michael on the VeloTrack; the image is projected on my wall, audio played using the LocalEchoEnhancedRealitySoundSystem we have. Biking is a common activity for people withdrawing from LoveBuzz. You get going, and there’s wind in your face, and nobody notices there are tears streaming down them, and if they do, it’s socially acceptable, because you’re biking and there’s wind in your face. He pushes out a couple of little cries when he thinks nobody’s going to be paying attention. A-hunnn! A-hunnn! Errrrrrggggghhh! He makes some really dumb sounds. He’s brought it on himself. He’ll be back.

Wednesday January 11, 2145

Alana and I are watching the LoveBuzz Addiction support group meeting. Six people, same ones as last week, except Dirk is absent. Alana says: “It’s hard to look dignified when sitting on a cheap-ass chair, and none of them are pulling it off.“ I demur: The chairs are working against them, dignity-wise.

Nina speaks up. “OK, let’s go round the group. How much consumption last week? I’m at 150 mg a day, pretty steady. I haven’t cut back at all, numerically speaking. It just doesn’t seem like a good time.”

Jeffrey says: “All over the map. It was a pretty good week, except for on Saturday, I drank a whole bunch. I hated myself for it the next day.”

Zhang speaks next. “It is a struggle. Self-discipline only goes so far. I’m always able to rationalize taking the LoveBuzz, even though I know it’s not good for me, even though I know I’m a slave to it. The fact is, my consumption level is 100 mg a day, same as last week. Realistically, next week will be similar.”

Thank you for explaining my business model, Zhang. Right on the obvious, as always. Even your consumption level of 100 mg is a dull cliché. Pills, because you’ve never had a taste for wine. You are the least interesting man in outer space.

Michael says: “My last usage was on Friday. I’m in a lot of pain. More than I think I can bear, it seems like. I can’t concentrate mentally on anything. It feels like all the hope has gone out of my life. I can’t see any prospect of experiencing joy again.” Matter-of-factly. He sighs a lot, and it’s kind of comical. “I believe that the way through emotional pain is to feel it. So that’s what I’m doing.” There are nods all around.

Shelley says: “Still at zero, I’m happy to report. If I can do it, so can any of you. It’s hard, it really is. But you’ll be free at the end of it. Not entirely free, but way more free than you are now.”

Benjamin’s turn. “I’m getting closer to freedom. I’m averaging 55 mg a day this past week, down from 62 mg a day the previous week. I’m doing fine.”

“You’re just making that up, Ben. You don’t track anything to the milliliter. You’re pulling numbers out of your ass” I say loudly. Alana turns off the feed, and projects some erotica onto the wall. She straddles me and says “Let’s get it on.” We do.

Sunday January 15, 2145

Present: Councillor Mustafa Ismail, Councillor Daniel Drew, Cynthia Wong, Joshua Mizuno

Drew: So I’ve drawn up a rule banning the production, sale and consumption of Love Buzz. I think it’s enforceable and manageable and I think it would get majority support on council. Problem mostly solved. You’ve all had a chance to look at it. Can anybody tell me why I shouldn’t introduce it?

Ismail: Not everybody is going to appreciate the Council telling people what they can and can’t ingest. You need a pretty compelling reason to do that.

Drew: I think the reasons are pretty compelling. Money and resources spent on Love Buzz are, at best, wasted. They don’t feed anybody, they don’t produce anything. This drug hurts people – it’s made to hurt people – as part of – what do you call it Joshie? Customer retention?

Mizuno: Customer retention is what I call retaining customers. I mostly do that by offering an enjoyable product at a reasonable price. The fact that most of my customers are repeat customers speaks for itself.

Drew: What it says is that most of your customers are addicts. Most of them would like to quit. The fact is, people get addicted. Essentially it’s a fraud. You’re selling something that seems really enjoyable at the outset, but then inflicts a lot of pain when you try and stop. I don’t see that pain mentioned in your advertising.

Mizuno: You realize that if you prohibit producing it, it will be produced in a clandestine way. And if you prohibit selling it, it will be sold in a clandestine way. And if you prohibit consuming it, it will be consumed in a clandestine way. All you will get out of that is corruption, waste and a loss of liberty. The product won’t go away because somebody makes a law against it. You’ll be changing how it gets produced and distributed, all for the worse. My products are clearly labelled, and I do a chemical assay and spectrometry analysis and subjective taste-test with every batch. If it doesn’t meet my standards, I don’t sell it. I have a reputation and a brand to consider. You’ll be exchanging that for something produced by people who want to keep their identities secret, and sold by people who work outside the law. That is a really dumb idea. Why would you do that?

Drew: I would do that because it would make it a lot more expensive, and less socially acceptable. Once that happens, the amount consumed will drop radically. I’m not stupid enough to think that the ban would be evenly applied and effective everywhere. But less availability and unannounced interruptions in availability will make addictions easier to break. There are a lot of people who have fallen victim to this drug. By imposing a ban, we’re doing the future versions of those people a favour. If they don’t have it so readily available, they’re less likely to fall into dependency. They won’t know to thank us, just as you don’t generally think to be grateful for all the injuries you didn’t get due to sensible regulations around things like product safety. This is a product safety regulation, and it’s a good one. There’s no non-harmful use of this product, and it doesn’t serve any real need. So we’re banning it. People who care about the kind of society we live in will thank us. Less insightful people will call us moralistic and overbearing, but they’ll mainly go along and their lives will be better for it.

Wong: By itself, Love Buzz isn’t doing any harm physiologically. Unless you count withdrawal symptoms. And even those don’t do permanent damage – you experience it as emotional pain. It’s unpleasant. But nobody’s ever died from emotional pain, not directly.

Drew: I do count withdrawal symptoms. How is that not part of the calculus? Withdrawal symptoms are part of how the drug works, they’re totally foreseeable and a big part of its business model. Anyway: I’ll be introducing the rule for consideration, with the aim of getting it adopted; I’ve not heard anything here that’s changed my thinking.

Wednesday January 18, 2145

“So, suppose they do ban it? What happens to us?” Alana is worried. She has the least to be worried about of anybody, but she is having a hard time with the prospect of not being wealthier than anybody else she knows. There are people who produce and package and market the drug for me, they have legitimate worries. But Alana doesn’t and neither do I. I make a mental note to do a meet-and-greet with the merlot producers, acknowledge their recent production work, and reassure them their jobs aren’t going anywhere. Maybe push them to try a WheatgrassAcaiBananaFicus blend, since that’s the trendy flavour this year; I think it would sell pretty well. Market it as fresh and wholesome, like falling in love is fresh and wholesome.

“They won’t” I say. “They won’t because it doesn’t make any sense. I produce something that people want. People willingly buy it with their own money. Banning means they’ll need a new branch of government, dedicated to stopping people from buying what they want. There’s a whole slew of problems with banning it. They won’t be that dumb.” I say this to reassure Alana, but also myself. They wouldn’t be that dumb. Would they?

“But suppose they do”, she presses. “What then?”

“We’re not set up to do lawbreaking as a way of life. Other people who are better at that will eat our lunch. I’ll sell my expertise and equipment and stock of product to the highest-paying customer that can be coloured as legal. I’m a good negotiator. I know the value of what we’ve built here. We won’t be poor.”

The Love Buzz support group meeting is set to start, so I project it on our wall. Alana is thinking about her non-poverty, but I’m paying full attention to my wayward customers in the projection.

Today, they are Jeffrey, Zhang, Dirk, Shelley, Benjamin and Michael.

Jeffrey speaks up. “Good afternoon. How are we all doing?”

“Miserable.” Michael volunteers. “It’s like my heart is being peeled. Like with a peeler, taking off thin strips. That’s what it’s like. And when I feel like it’s more than I can bear, sometimes it manages to get even worse. That’s my life right now, every day.”

There is some hesitation. Zhang says: “You realize that the fact you are bearing it means that you can.”

“You’re right, I can bear it. But I don’t want to. This is all I can see, stretching into the future with no end in sight.”

“But that’s not right” Shelley says. “That’s a cognitive illusion, that there’s no end in sight. Experience and physiology tell us that it doesn’t hurt this much forever. You’re not the first person to experience this, you know. I’ve been there, and it hurt a lot, and it felt like it would always hurt a lot forever, but id doesn’t.”

Michael gets defensive: “I never said I was the first person to experience this. I know I’m not unique, and this happens to a lot of people, and some of them are probably in more pain than me. Though that’s hard for me to imagine.”

“The point is, other people get through it, and so will you”, Shelley says softly.