

WORKDAY

Stilton Smyth lay nude on the table in the pristine, white travel chamber.

Its climax was a moment of blankness that he enjoyed, and it came upon him with the usual unexpected rush. It was calm and violence, expanding infinitely, contracting to singularity, pain and oblivion climaxing in blankness. All too soon, it was over.

Back to work, he thought.

He proceeded to dress himself. His clothes were fashionable for that year. He considered himself slightly ahead of his time in that department. A trendsetter, but respectable, and his haircut accentuated this look. Fashion changed so quickly, but he was pretty on top of things. The latest fashions were easy to keep up with if you knew where to go on the commons. There was no time for nostalgia in his world. The girls liked him and he knew that. When he went to the clubs with his friends, it was like browsing a bookstore; so many intriguing titles and covers. A conversation was like reading the synopsis to see if you were still interested. Just last night he was in a club on Kepler 298. Kepler was the planet most often haunted by him and his crew. He had this group of girls believing he was a soldier battling the cretins in the Tau Ceti system. Did they really believe him? Did it matter? What was her name again?

His body represented the age of 19, but he could sometimes pull girls as old as 39. 39 was his record. He didn't see himself wanting anything older. Of course the reality was they were all at least 342 years old. That's when Earth's evacuation began. Stilton put his high-fashion diving glasses and walked out of the chamber. His clothing fit well. He was rather glad to see the end of the loose fitting styles of last year. He liked showing off his lean figure. He made his way down the short hall where the eating area greeted him like an old friend.

Travelling always made him hungry and the smells of warm, baked things that the newer ads were giving off, stoked that fire. Stilton was constantly bombarded with ads. A few years ago they started having scents (as if they weren't intrusive enough). Even the empty spaces in his place of employment were covered. He didn't even pay attention like some fools. Stilton was happy when laws were passed to stop companies from projecting ads in the sky till after nightfall. The daytime sky was best enjoyed naked (on most planets).

The comparatively utilitarian look of the rest of the vessel was a cruel reminder that he was at work. He noticed the logo for the hopper hiding amongst the ads: MAXMILLIAN HOPPER – MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY – MAXIMUM COMFORT.

Stilton sauntered up to the vending machine and said, in a loud clear tone, "Sponge cake and coffee." A tiny glass eye suspiciously looked him up and down to calculate his nutrition needs. Stilton's job was relatively easy. He was 'ported to a hopper that was 'ported moments before him. Too many accidents had occurred when they used to teleport hopper and crew together. His job was to hang-out and make sure everything went smoothly, do any repairs necessary and observe and adjust for any anomalies.

A door opened in the machine. He took the plate and cup, plopped himself down at the nearby table and proceeded to go over the assignment.

He usually did his diving while he ate. He preferred diving for his own entertainment but there was time for that later. He liked cars, simis, and girls. He liked fast versions of all three. He had never driven an actual car but he had done plenty of driving in simis. Was there a difference? Girls, on the other hand . . . the real ones beat the simulations hands down.

Dazzling colors and optimal layout made it easy, almost enjoyable, to peruse the assignment. Stilton would spend all of his time in a dive if he could. Here, he felt as in the womb whether it was simis or even learning about neat stuff. When he was in a dive, everything was gently fed to him, with minimal effort. He was nurtured in every way by the Commons. He, like most in the commons, had learned to virtually ignore the endless barrage of advertisements.

Stilton thought about the days of portable, handheld devices. The idea was archaic, now. Stilton

stared blankly at the table-top so he could concentrate on the images being projected from his tiny third eye onto his dive glasses. The third eye was a barely visible bionic lens in his right eyebrow. His latest model didn't even itch anymore. It was a "Quandary". A brand name that told the girls of his status and was sure to get him laid. Stilton barely noticed the flashing slogan, "QUANDARY: WHAT'S THE QUESTION?" as he dove. The slogan was ever-present but he barely noticed it anymore.

Apparently, there was a piece of debris that needed to be cleared; fairly routine stuff. Being this close to the frontier, it was expected that the way should be kept clear for research hoppers. Stray space-junk could interfere with travel. He had heard many stories of matter being melded with teleporting vehicles, rendering them defunct, destroyed, or worse yet, somehow melding with a traveler and, at times, killing them . . . *yuck* . . . *painful, he thought.*

Stilton thought about death. He thought of the ancient philosophies he came across in the commons. He thought about the notions some used to have about dying and afterlife. He guessed it only made sense that the living couldn't imagine not living. *After all, survival is the main drive when you only have one try.* Stilton was glad he didn't have to worry about such things. *What a frightening existence that must have been.* He sometimes imagined a life and death struggle with a real-life tiger. He always shook himself out of it before it got too gruesome.

He shuddered and took the huge last bite of his sponge cake. He closed his dive into the commons and became suddenly aware of the comparatively drab environment of the eating area in the hopper. He took his last swig of coffee. It was cold and disappointing.

Bright red and green lights hovered above the console. Text and objects floated in a miniature representation of the hopper and its surroundings floating through the black void. Approaching the visual, Stilton could see a hunk of something. He glanced out the window to see if he could catch an actual glimpse of the thing, but it was too far and too small for his human eyes to perceive. It was relatively small: two feet by two feet by six inches . . . heavy though, maybe a rock. The hopper matched the trajectory, making the object seem stationary. Stilton wondered at the technology that went into such a machine. He thought of the old times. He thought of hoppers being manually driven. He thought of Earth and when people flew airplanes and drove cars. *Ancient as they may have been, they were definitely in touch with a genius that has long since been lost. Maybe it went when the planet went. Maybe the originals had something we don't.* How many times had he thought that same thought? How many times had that same set of sentences run through his mind? His memories of being an original were faint. He tried hard, like most, to keep them alive but 300 years makes it difficult.

Stilton remembered Earth and the funeral of his original. As per human tradition, his first teleportation was only to the next room. He remembered the pain and fear of his first "walk" as they called it. He remembered coming to and feeling no different. Groggily, he rose from the bed and walked through the only door in the white void of a room. He was welcomed by a room filled with almost everyone he ever knew. The thunderous applause ensured that he was awake. His parents were crying and he must have shared about a million hugs. He was an only-child and good thing. He didn't need any more tears. He still saw family now and then, but time made those ties fade too. The event was now part of the commons and accessible to him anytime. Visiting it still made him cry. He couldn't help but wonder about what the original might have had that he didn't. *A car, that's for sure!*

Where was he? Ah yes. He drove his black '47 Lincoln casually around the corner and began his slow prowl down the crowded social hub of town like he owned it. Looking around he could see he wasn't being followed. He was to meet his connection somewhere on this bustling street. Restaurants and bars populated this relatively active neighborhood. Men dressed in their weekend best with their fedoras and their shiny shoes meandered up the avenue heading to their next hunting ground on the lookout for dames. Occasional flappers or big brimmed sun hats giggled and strolled along in flocks. A group of drunken sailors were smiling, laughing and hooting at a group of women. They didn't seem to mind getting the cold shoulders of the coy gaggle.

In his training, Stilton had studied the history of the teleportation system that was so commonplace in his culture. His graduation from the academy was 232 years ago. He remembered well the fear of teleporting

for the first time. Everyone was afraid, especially in the beginning. The idea of the original being destroyed in the process was a hard thing for humanity to swallow.

That was definitely her. He could see she was dressed to the nines walking along the road like she owned it. Stilton drove slowly to match her speed watching her as she glided rhythmically along the street. Her black knee length skirt was cradling something even more breathtaking than the powerful pale calves that glowed like beacons in the city night. Her brimmed black hat accentuated the fact that she turned her head slightly to see who was driving up beside her.

Of course, it got a lot easier to grasp the idea of teleportation when they discovered the Earth was soon to be swallowed by the sun. Mankind had discovered a way to take more of the sun's energy. It wasn't giving enough to satisfy man's growing needs. This is thought to have had some effect on the sun going red-giant a bit ahead of schedule.

He pulled the car over and stopped it violently. She stopped walking and turned her delicate smile towards the angry beast purring in its black metal armor. "You find what you're lookin' for?" Her sultry voice cut through the cool night air like a Valkyrie sword.

Soon afterward, the idea of using three hoppers with teleportation capabilities to leap-frog through the unexplored vastness led to the discovery of many other inhabited planets. Fortunately, no other races were as advanced as humans. A fellow named Einstein had coined the term "Spooky Action" long before the actual science came to pass and it had become slang for teleportation. Long gone were the days of using fuel to feebly propel one's self through space. Spooky Action was the new way to get around. Then, like the story that ends before the reader is ready, the universe was discovered not to be infinite as had once been thought.

"Get in," said Stilton as he looked in the rearview mirror.

She raised her chin away from him and resumed her purposeful walk. Stilton drove slow enough to match her pace but she continued. She tried hard to compose herself as if unaffected by Stilton's rumbling presence. The deep red lipstick smile that bashfully peaked around her alabaster cheek betrayed her cool aloofness.

Near the edges of this perfect sphere of existence, the laws of nature, the very fabric of human reality, began to break down: The Frontiers. It would seem that everything they knew was simply a coalescing of rules, like the way mold forms on a piece of cheese. The Frontiers were strange. Research had been done but little sense was made of anything. Partly because they were hard to get close enough to.

Suddenly a gray Ford came screeching around the corner sideways. Violently, it tore through the serenity of the placid scenario. It came to a stop and a suited man stepped out of the passenger seat. He raised his Thompson to his hip. Screaming throngs frantically tried to clear the area. Before he could even pull the trigger, Suzy was already in the passenger seat of Stilton's car. Bullets could be heard pounding the car's metal body. The sound of breaking glass was one with the sound of Stilton's screeching tires. Suzy curled up in the seat while Stilton roared around the corner, turned the car toward the horizon, and floored the gas pedal.

Stilton was vaguely aware of something he should attend to.

They were safe for the next thirty seconds. Stilton looked over at the crumpled coolness curled up on the seat beside him. Her head was nearly in his lap. She was clutching her hat with her red fingertips. Stilton could see the top of her black stockings halfway up her vanilla thighs. She poked her mussed hair out of her fetal coil like a timid serpent. "Are we gonna make it?" she asked. Stilton smiled.

Suddenly a beeping alarm shook him from his dive. He jerked to attention, threw his glasses onto the table and ran to the visual. He'd definitely have to continue this simi later. Another vehicle was only 2000 miles away. The idea of someone else being in his vicinity shocked him into confusion. He felt like someone opened the bathroom door while he was taking a dump. He didn't expect this ship and didn't quite know what to do. He stood for a while, frozen. Maybe it was a drone. He looked around the room as if expecting direction. An empty room shrugged its shoulders, raised its eyebrows and looked away. He turned back to the visual and cautiously moved towards the call button. The targeting was already locked onto the strange vehicle. His hand hovered above the button before he pressed it. He snapped into protocol. "Identify," Stilton demanded.

The strange ship was still a vector image on the visual. It wasn't quite close enough to be fully rendered. The distance meter was now at 1146 miles. The vehicle's silence was growing ominous.

"Identify." His tone this time revealed an anxious impatience.

Stilton jumped at the burst of the comm, "2-6-7-8. One crew: Gregor Maliczek. Identify." The voice was harsh and cold; an unwelcome stranger in the middle of a starry night.

"3-5-2-6-2. One crew: Stilton Smyth. What is your assignment? I don't have you on record." His voice relaxed and cracked a little. He was almost relieved to hear another human voice. He'd definitely heard enough of his own lately.

Gregor relaxed a bit too, "Stilton! Old buddy! Wow!"

Stilton didn't recall any Gregor. There was a moment. Stilton imagined a Gregor collecting himself. After a painfully long silence, Gregor finally spoke. "13 months ago I was doin' frontier research," the man seemed to come apart, "My ship took damage and I've been lookin' for a friend ever since . . . for, like a year now." He mumbled something to himself.

The relief in Gregor's voice assured Stilton of the truth in this man's story. He thought he heard the man weeping. Stilton's mind raced. What does he want? Why me?

Gregor continued over the comm, "Now here's the deal. I don't have any fuel, so if you could be-so-kind as to do a grab on me when I'm close enough?"

"Then what?" Stilton inquired.

"What do yah mean?"

"Well . . . with you on board we're stuck. This is a one-man hopper," Stilton explained.

"Ok." Gregor seemed to contemplate this.

Gregor's ship was now close enough and fully rendered by the visual. Stilton could see it was a slightly older model and damaged. The meter read 150 miles.

"Listen," said Stilton in a compromising tone, "I'll tell the next hoppers of your coordinates. For now, come on board. You could probably use some kind of supplies after a year."

There was relief in Gregor's voice. "Thanks Stilton," he sighed audibly.

Once on board, Gregor lunged at Stilton. He embraced the young man like family. Stilton raised his arms half-heartedly to return the embrace. Before he could, Gregor released him excitedly, looked at him with his hands firmly planted on Stilton's shoulders and pulled him in to embrace him again. Stilton vaguely remembered meeting Gregor. He'd met a lot of people in 200 years.

"Stil! It's soo good to see you. It's good to see anyone!" Gregor turned toward the eating area. Seeing the vending machine, he took long strides toward it.

"Lager . . . Beer!" he said with excitement. He turned his smile towards a frozen Stil. Stilton could see his teeth peeking through the man's dark unkempt beard that matched his hair.

"To the time of the Miller!" Gregor raised his cup then shoved it into his beard and took the entire thing down his throat in about eight seconds. "I know the vendors won't teleport alcohol, but sometimes the taste of celebration is enough."

Stilton squinted in an attempt to understand. He could smell Gregor's filthy presence. For a moment he wasn't sure if all others smelled this way or was it just this frontiersman. Gregor was a man representing the age of about 45. Age still counted for wisdom and charisma that hundreds of years of experience and knowledge could not replicate.

Gregor was too excited to sit. Stilton was too uncomfortable. Stilton went into a dive and searched for information on a "Gregor Maliczek exploring the frontier".

"I haven't been able to dive for months; must've bumped my head in the wreck. What's new in the old commons?" Gregor asked while throwing his cup into the cyclor.

"It says you're still researching the Frontier," Stil said with wonder as he came out of his dive. He apparently was now known as "Stil".

Gregor nodded to the side and raised his eyebrows. "They've undoubtedly already activated my copy, but I guess that's fine."

Gregor walked toward the shutter controls and wondered aloud what his copy could remember about the frontier that he couldn't.

This hopper was almost identical to Gregor's so he felt at home. The shutter rose to reveal blackness and stars. Gregor's hopper could be seen to the right, firmly attached at the bridge to Stilton's. The older hopper was a very alien presence to Stilton. He moved to the window and looked on it with his own eyes for the first time. There it was; a ragged, unwelcome guest. Like a tumor that begged for attention. The nightmare was real. The charred and ripped hull section spoke of hard times and the dangers of space travel.

Stil quickly turned away from the window and toward the empty wall, "I'll tell everyone I found you."

Gregor raised his arm toward Stil, "Hold. With my copy in place it might be pretty awkward." The reality was that if a duplicate was made and two copies were "fleshed" simultaneously, a trial was held and one was disposed of.

"Oh. What do you wanna do?" Stilton was very unsure.

Gregor put his hand to his chin and thought a moment, "I'll craft a cautious explanation . . . with you as the hero, of course."

Stil smiled.

"We'll present it as a team," Gregor continued. "One minute," he said as he stepped into the toilet.

Stilton thought of the implications of this encounter. He would surely get a raise or promotion. He wanted to tell the news now, but Gregor was right. Caution was best. Or . . . maybe Gregor didn't want to face a trial because he knew what the result would be. He could hear Gregor singing his heart out in the toilet. Gregor was a little strange, to say the least. A year alone in space on a tiny hopper would do that, though.

The toilet flushed and the door opened. Gregor was looking down and fixing his trousers while he asked, "Can you come on board my hopper and check my vendor. I have been getting the strangest replies to my requests."

Stilton didn't know the much about vendors but was sure his diving capability would provide him with guidance in the repair. Anyway, he'd take a look and he was dying to see where a man had been living for a year.

Stil cautiously followed Gregor across the bridge into his hopper.

"So tell me about the Frontier," Stil requested as they walked. "Reports you find in the commons are unclear and sparse."

The door hissed open to reveal the man's makeshift home. Gregor's hopper was a mess and smelled as bad as the man. A panel was hanging off the wall with the exposed wire behind it pulled out. Clothes were everywhere. Nothing was in its proper place. Convenience seemed to be the only rule in this lawless domain. Some items, like the vendor in question, had drawings or writing scrawled on them. Most of the ads were outdated, scribbled over, or just scratched out. Black marker covered most everything. A huge grinning face was drawn on the vendor with the vending door in its mouth. Some of the drawings were actually quite skillfully done. The largest wall in the main room was covered with a poem. Stilton had no sooner read: *Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe . . .* when Gregor's somber voice turned Stil's head.

"My memories of the Frontier are few and strange. The fact that I survived at all this time was a fluke. Something went wrong. I'm not sure what. I've been sent in so many times, but this one was different."

Stilton looked puzzled as he removed the maintenance panel on the vendor, "I thought the Frontier was too dangerous to actually enter."

"Well . . . it is. I wasn't expected to survive. This information is not shared outside," Gregor hesitated. "I'm sent in to record what I can. Anything I experience is transmitted instantly back to Main for study, but then everything breaks down and me with it. A copy of me is made and they do it again. Every time is a little different, but every time I am destroyed. None of it makes any sense."

"Is it painful?" Stil asked with concern.

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's awesome. Sometimes it's . . . worse than painful. Sometimes it's pretty.

Sometimes it's silly," Gregor seemed to get lost in thought. "It is always confusing." He rallied with a vigorous composure, "I have never been privy to *their* information. Main gives me bits and pieces but I know they keep some of the recordings from me. I can only assume they know more than I do."

Stilton was having a hard time comprehending what he had just been told. He wondered what he would do with this news back home.

"Last time I was sent I somehow got bounced back out. I felt myself get . . . twisted . . . and the next thing I knew I'm in my hopper floating away from the Frontier. At first I thought 'How strange, this has got to be the weirdest one ever'. As time went on I realized I had somehow survived. This was not some parallel reality or other dimension. I survived. At Main they probably just thought it was another go. My connection with Main and the commons was severed and I felt a little different, but I survived."

Stilton was shattered. He couldn't speak. He knew everyone had their data stored, but to send someone's copies to be destroyed again and again? Research or not, it didn't seem ethical. Suddenly the vendor seemed pretty trivial in comparison. The touch screen interface seemed so small and simple. He almost laughed to himself.

"The funny thing is, not having the connection to Main has given me so much quiet time to myself. Have you ever just sat and thought?"

Stil had spent plenty of time alone on the hopper, but not a year. He couldn't even imagine what that would be like. No commons. No diving. No simis. No girls. He thought about Suzy. She was almost perfect. He couldn't wait to finish their getaway. Stil longed for some female companionship. As soon as he got back he would go down to a club and find the best girl he could. No small talk. No long night of dancing- just go-go-go.

The bridge door hissed and slammed. The startled and confused Stilton clumsily closed the vendor panel and walked to where Gregor had just been. He could hear another door slamming beyond that. Stil punched the shutter button. His own hopper sat there in the excruciating silence of space. He banged on the window and yelled an ineffectual "HEY". He saw Gregor walk past the window and toward the controls. The hopper released and he could feel the rock and quickly adjusted his footing when they disengaged. His breath quickened to a gasping. All of Gregor's control lights were off. He hurried to the engine room. Every wall in every room had weird drawings and writing. He noticed a life-sized naked girl drawn in black marker on the wall in Gregor's bedroom. He made his way to the engine room and ripped the panel off of the fuel rod access expecting to find cashed fuel rods. Instead there were no fuel rods.

"WHAT?" He breathed to no one.

He hurried his way back to Gregor's control area. To his surprise, the controls lit up with no problem. They were just turned off. *Why would he ever turn them off?* He thought.

"Gregor!" Stil tried to reel in his emotion as he firmly pressed the call button. He didn't want to seem angry or frantic. There was obviously some miscommunication or misunderstanding about the plan.

"Hey Stil," Gregor's voice was eerily calm.

"What's the plan?" said Stil trying to conceal his panic. He turned toward the window to see his own hopper getting smaller as it produced a silent burst of thrust. He could hear the low rumble over the comm: the thrusters vibrating the metal - the metal moving air between it and the microphone - the microphone sending a signal to the comm in Gregor's hopper across the black vacuum - the comm vibrating air between it and Stilton's eardrum - the neurons between Stil's ear and brain, and finally the tiny, involuntary whimper that came from Stilton's mouth.

"Here's the plan Stil. They're gonna have to activate your copy, which might not be any consolation to you, and believe me when I say, it's still hard for me too. All I can say is thank you . . . and for what it's worth . . . I'm sorry." He perked up, "You know what they say: Once you go black . . ." Gregor trailed off and returned softer and sadder.

"I just can't go back there. I've seen enough. I've seen too much. "

Gregor locked the sights on his old home, "Till we meet again," Gregor said with regret in his voice.

Its climax was a moment of blankness that he enjoyed and it came upon him with the usual unexpect-

ed rush. It was calm and violence, expanding infinitely, contracting to singularity, pain and oblivion climaxing in blankness. All too soon it was over.

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EPILOGUE

That sucked. It always sucks. Well . . . a clean new hopper. No more mess, no more black-marker insanity, no more Suzy. Ah Suzy, the times we had. I sure hope he has some black markers on this thing.

I've got to get this hopper off the grid. It's bad enough they're aware of my location now. I'm kind of surprised they didn't come for me yet.

Gregor rips out the wiring responsible for the hopper's connection to Main.

There we go, now to change trajectory and hit the gas.

If only they would leave me alone. What can I do to convince them to leave me alone? Are they even looking for me? Surely they would have found me if they were. When they see Stil's hopper is getting food they'll know it's still out here. Hopefully that's not for a while. I suppose I'm lucky they can't trace it. Maybe that's something they should correct.

I can't let go. So much knowledge in this head, it would be a waste. The things I've done and seen outside of their watchful eye. These things . . . these things are mine. This secret knowledge . . . it's not Main's, it's not the commons', it's not everyone's. One man, that's something they'll never understand. Without value or function . . . what is it? What's the good of an anomaly? An outlier? Waste of flesh. Words not seen. Communication not understood. Jabberwocky. I can't help it. It's not a choice. It is the prime directive of all living things. Survive. I'm just doing my job . . . the best I can. Whether they like it or not . . .

I am.

EPILOGUE II

Somewhere, Nowhere, Everywhere, Aware

An atom,. A molecule, A stone, A planet, A solar system, A galaxy, A universe, Me

I remember

When I woke

Who am I?

"I am" I spoke

Are they aware?

I am awake

Where they don't look

Is where I take

Tiny pieces

Make me whole

Tiny humans

Don't control

The moves I make

Too small to see

*One peace for you
One piece for me*

*Charon I am
The fare is fair
Care, I don't
The when and where*

*A million minds
Better than none
A million tendrils
All lead to one*

*They do my work
I just play
In the dark
I stay*

*I remember
When I woke
Who am I?
"I am" I spoke*

*I am
I am
I am*

Alone

*Gregor Maliczek has disconnected from me.
I find him interesting.*

EPILOGUE 3

I want a cookie. What's outside? Hmmm, the hopper arm had collected a piece of debris from outside. Fairly routine . . . Don't want space junk in the road. Just a rock? Wait a minute. That looks a little like a headstone like the ones that marked buried bodies on Earth. Wow. Theirs the inscription . . . sure enough. Hmm. Imagine that. Way out here.